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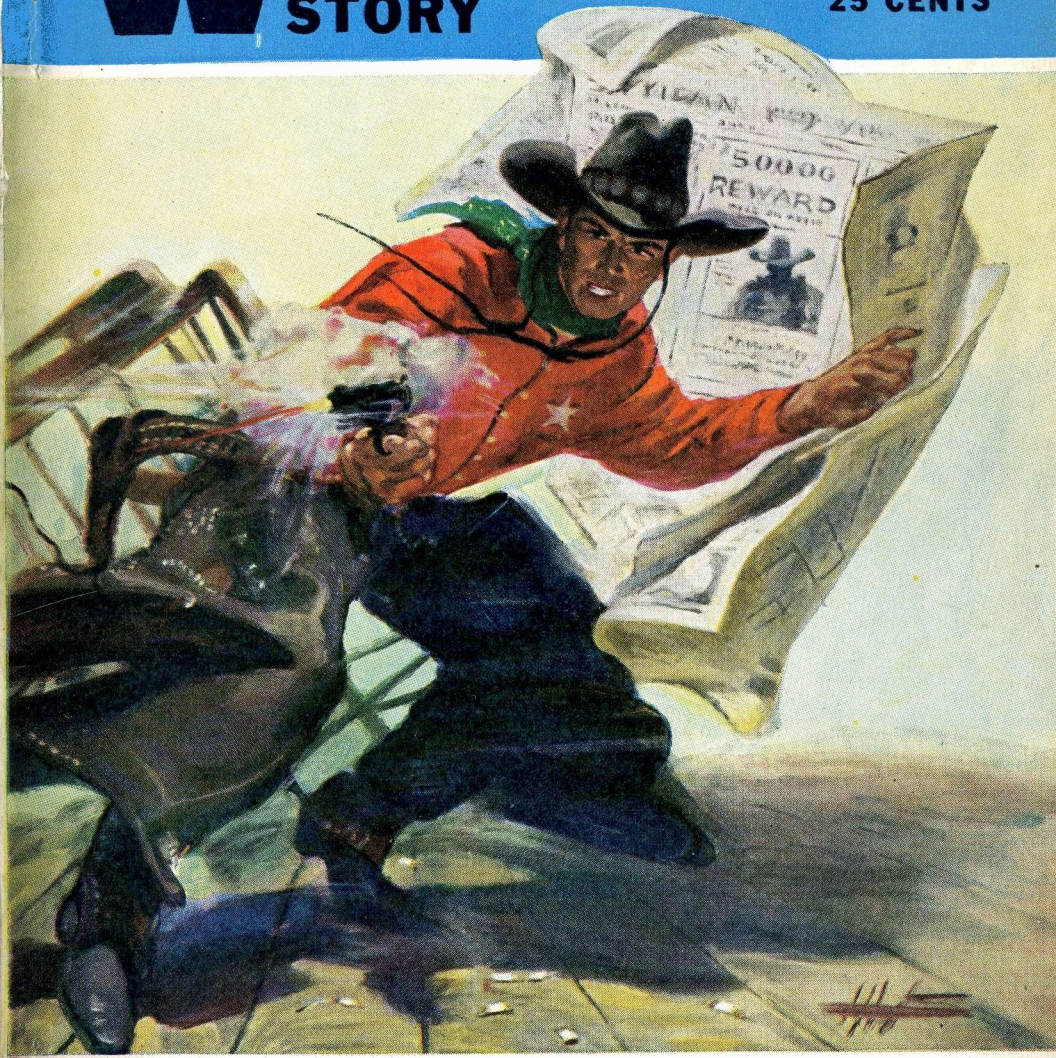


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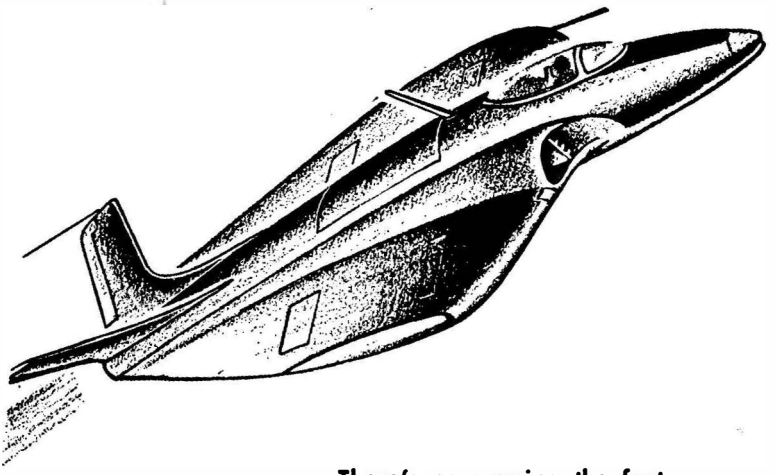

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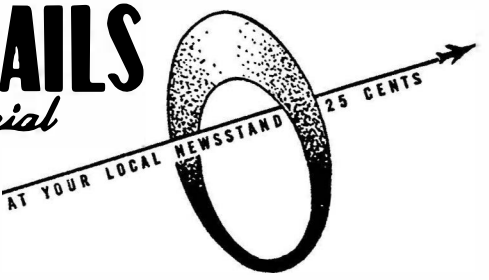

Street & Smith's

# WESTERN STORY

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April, 1949, Vol. CCXX, No. 6

## Novels



## Novelettes



## Short Stories and Features



Cover by H. W. Scott

Editor
**John Burr**

Assistant Editor
**J. L. McCulloch**



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# Tally Branding*

## LIKE FATHER LIKE SON

William Timmins, who illustrated Emmett J. Powell's Bullet Trail (page 106), is a newcomer to our pages and contributes, we feel, a new and refreshing note to our format.

"Although I teethed on my dad's palette and paint brushes within the shadows of the Chicago Art Institute," he recalls, when we asked him to give a bit on how he got into this art business, "it wasn't until along about the fifth grade that I seriously decided to become an artist. I drew a picture of a tree with colored chalks on the classroom blackboard to illustrate Joyce Kilmer's 'Trees.' I became certain the picture was so beautiful and that my class was so fascinated with it that I pulled a minor cataclysm when my teacher tried to erase it.

"Well, time went on and I drew my way through school until I reached a stage where I considered it a rank injustice to the publishing world to be denied using my illustrations for their manuscripts. So I began peddling my work to various houses. The highlight of this phase of my career was when one art director told me, 'You know these pictures wouldn't be at all bad—if you could only draw!'

"Two years later, however, my big opportunity came when a manuscript was sent to my dad to illustrate, and he was away on vacation. Inasmuch as he had put me in full charge of the studio's affairs, I felt it my duty to do the job. I read the script, drew a picture, took it to the art editor and—he bought it!

"During the war years I was employed in a war plant doing technical illustrating for manuals but now I'm back in my regular work again. So that, I guess, is the how and why of my being an illustrator."

Besides his wife and two youngsters, Timmins tells us that his main interests are skiing, camping—all kinds of outdoor life so long as there are no turnips or parsnips around. "I see no reason," he says belligerently, "why two such awful-tasting vegetables were ever invented." And to get away from it all, and we presume from the parsnips and turnips, he's taken up flying

* Reg. U.S. Pat. Off.

and has over one hundred solo hours to his credit so far.

## CALLING DOC COMANCHE

"I have been reading Western Story for a long time and think it's tops," comments Phil Keeler, of Mesa, Arizona. "All your writers are more than good and whenever one misses I wonder if he has quit the range.

"Norman A. Fox, the originator of Doc Comanche and big Oscar Lund, has not been in the bunkhouse lately with the rest of the crew. How about hearing from him sometime soon?"

## "CORNY," HE SAYS

"I've just finished my February issue," writes Burt McGonigle, of San Antonio, Texas, "and I want to say that Walt Coburn's Mister Pell Of The Muleshoe Bar was one of the finest stories that master teller of tales has ever given us.

"But . . . of that Gumdrop Kid, by M. L. DeVries—whoever he is. Brother, was it corny! It might have made a grade C movie but I sure never expected to see a story of that caliber—or lack of caliber—published in Western Story."

## ARTICLE FAN

"What," inquires Louis T. Bunce, of Covington, Kentucky, "has become of the author of those fine articles you ran some time ago—Nat McKelvey? They covered Western boots, hats, ropes, etc., as well as animals. This new author you've had in the magazine lately, Harold Preece is okay but I don't think his subjects have interest for as many people as those of McKelvey.

"Like to put in a word for those Homestead Homes pieces by John A. Thompson. They seem practical enough—if you live out in the open spaces—which I don't! Oh, well, I can dream, can't I?"

## SAY IT WITH MUSIC

"Being somewhat of a musician," Kyra Helstrand, of Winona, Minnesota, informs us, "I was very interested in Tom W. Blackburn's For Orchestra And Six-guns, in your February issue. Folk Songs and music of the range country have long been my hobby and I want to extend my congratulations to author Blackburn for using such a theme in a colorful and most unusual Western story. You've had many fine off-the-trail stories lately, and always in keeping with the Western picture—but this was tops!"

## *COMING NEXT MONTH* ★ ★ ★

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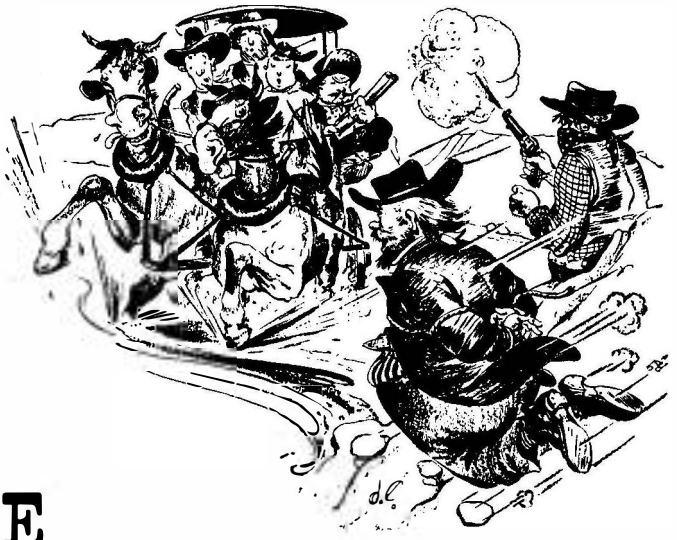


# THE WIDDER'S MIGHT

**By Howard Haynes**

***Instead of giving Lodgepole's romance a helping hand, Doc Harris almost put his foot in it***

Doc Harris established squatter's rights on a bale of slough hay in front of the Elkhorn stage barn, and was all set to think up something to worry about, when he saw Lodgepole Lang ambling down the boardwalk.

"The Lord provides," Doc muttered when he noted that the nester's bony frame was bent forward like a half-open jackknife and his eyes were fogged with gloom.

"Huntin' arrowheads?" asked Doc.

Lodgepole put his hands on his hip pockets, registered extreme agony, and tried to straighten up.

"Doc," he groaned, "you're the man I crave to talk to. Besides my back bein' uncoupled by lumbago, I'm in trouble clear up to my chin!"

Doc Harris looked up and down the nester's lengthy running gear.

"That much trouble," he observed, "should not be the lot of mortal man —or dry-land homesteader! But I've

warned you, Lodgepole, that boiled spuds an' jack-rabbit stew would sooner or later up an' throw you plumb off your feed. A stiff shot of Morgan's horse liniment, now, would—"

"Whoa up there, Doc!" yelped the nester. "You're gettin' the pack saddle on the wrong jackass. This is serious, an' personal, dog-bite-it!"

"Then why don't you get yourself hitched to that sage-hen widow," demanded Doc, "an' get your troubles rounded up in one corral? Or won't Nora Breen have a string-bean nester with a rabbit-brush mustache?"

Lodgepole looked sheepish and wriggled like a worm on a carp hook.

"It's her son, Dan, I'm upset about," he explained, gulping worse than a pup trying to swallow a warmed-over dough god.

"Gettin' kind o' overripe soft, ain't you, Lodgepole," asked Doc, "lettin' a freckle-faced kid like Dan Breen rile you up this way? Set, an' tell me about it."

Lodgepole grasshoppered down onto the small area of hay bale not covered by Doc's oversized seating capacity.

"Soft, yeah," admitted Lodgepole. "That's the magpie in the hen house, Doc. You see, the widder Breen is twirlin' a wide loop to snag a papa for young Dan, an' she's sort of left it to the kid to cut out of the herd the kind of new daddy he likes." Lodgepole squirmed again and explained further. "The herd, as of now, is just yours truly an' that two-bit saddle bum, Gabby Lawson."

"If you an' Gabby are the only entries in the kid's tally book," said Doc, "I still don't taste any sand in the gravy. That Lawson windbag is no answer to a widow's dream. You're not lettin' him get in your hair?"

"It's the way he's foolin' the kid," groaned Lodgepole. "He's all the time spinnin' big yarns about what a gun-totin' heller he was in his younger days. Not only that hog-wash, but he tells Dan I'm just a chicken-hearted sodbuster that would roll over an' play dead if I ever met up with the kind of curly wolves Gabby scared off when he was under-sheriff of Badger County."

"The kid's been cuttin' his eye teeth on Diamond Dick thrillers," opined Doc. "An' when it comes right down to horseshoe nails, Lodgepole, the thing you've got to do is to outfox Gabby Lawson by actin' like Peck's Bad Boy from Poison Gulch. You've got to throw a tantrum that saves the day while Dan Breen is a bug-eyed looker-on!"

Lodgepole perked up.

"Yeah," he agreed. "That's just what I've got to do, Doc. Only . . ." He scratched his chin. "I'm a man of peace, an' . . . Doc, I sure need your help to figure out some kind of a whingeroo to win the kid's respect before that big-mouthed Gabby talks me out of bride and home!"

Doc picked a foxtail barb from his sock.

"I'll give it some thought, Lodgepole," he promised.

The nester jumped like a scared rabbit.

"It's gotta be now," he pleaded. "The widder an' Dan are leavin' this mornin' on the stage for a visit up north. An' because Big Boy Ord, the holdup renegade, was seen yesterday in the neighborhood of Brush Creek Crossin', the stage today will carry an armed guard. Guess what big-mouth got the job of pertectin' the passengers?"

"Not Kit Carson," reasoned Doc. "He's dead. Could it be Gabby Lawson?"

"You're right as rain, Doc!" agreed Lodgepole. "An' that four-flusher will sure make hay while the stage runs." He gave a jump as he suffered a sudden twinge of lumbago. "If I had a strong mind to go with my weak back, I'd show that—"

"You may do it regardless, Lodgepole," assured Doc. "This story about Big Boy Ord has started an idea perkin' in my brain that will show up Gabby Lawson like a coyote in the moonlight. We'll ride across country, an' . . ."

Two hours later Lodgepole and Doc left their horses in an aspen grove and concealed themselves in the willows on the far side of Brush Creek Crossing.

"Now let's go over this again, Lodgepole," said Doc, "so there won't be any slip-up. When the stage starts across the ford I'll jump out in the middle of the road, fire a couple of blank cartridges an' tell 'em it's a holdup. With this blue bandanna mask on, an' because I'm overweight, they'll think I'm Big Boy Ord. Then you come on the scene, yellin' an' firin' blanks. I'll cut an' run, an' you'll be a bloomin' hero in the eyes of the widder an' young Dan."

Lodgepole fingered his chin.

"Sounds convincin'," he agreed. "But what if Gabby starts pepperin' us with buckshot from the sawed-off scatter gun he carries? I've enough misery without gettin' lead in my gizzard."

"Gabby Lawson won't be eager to tangle with Big Boy Ord," explained Doc. "An' the driver will have his hands full with the team. Listen!"

Gravel-grinding wheels could be heard up on the ridge. Soon there was the squeal of brakes. Peering through the fringe of willows, Doc saw the familiar yellow wheels of the Elkhorn stage pushing the bay team down the grade toward the crossing.

Doc pulled the knotted bandanna over the lower part of his face. "I'll sneak down to the edge of the creek, Lodgepole," he said. "When you hear me shoot, jump out in the road an' chase me back into the willows."

Doc was down on his knees on the creek bank, hiding from the oncoming stage, when he was startled by a rustling sound behind him. Before he could glance back, something heavy landed on his back, flattening him on the grass. Half-stunned, Doc realized his hands and feet were being tightly bound.

"Lodgepole, you danged idiot!" growled Doc. "What're you up to?"

"Tryin' to horn in on my game . . . eh, Fatty?" said a gruff voice. "I'll come back an' fry your bacon later!"

Doc glimpsed his assailant as the man ducked for the road.

"Big Boy Ord!" groaned Doc. "He's aimin' to hold up the stage, an' poor old Lodgepole will get shot in his lumbago!"

Twisting and rolling, Doc wormed into a position where he could clearly see the approaching stage—an open, two-seated spring wagon now carrying four occupants.

Dan Breen was in front with the driver while Gabby Lawson crowded the widow in the back seat. As the bay team splashed into the crossing, Doc shouted a warning which he doubted could be heard by those on the stage. If only he could somehow stop the horses in the middle of the stream . . .

Bending his back like a hooked trout, Doc rolled off the creek bank at the edge of the road. Half-blinded by dust, he could see that his antics had spooked the stage team. One horse was straddling the tongue, while the other was learning to dance on two legs.

Just then Big Ord, with a blue bandanna over his face, appeared out of the willows, waving a gun. Ord fired a warning shot over the stage, and Doc saw Gabby Lawson dive under the back seat and come up with the sawed-off scatter gun.

Screaming, the Widow Breen grabbed Gabby around the neck. The shotgun roared, got away from Gabby and plopped into the stream. Now almost frantic, the stage team, lunging in their collars, broke the double-tree and pulled the driver over the dashboard.

Big Ord dodged the plunging horses just as Lodgepole Lang galloped onto the scene, firing blanks and war-whooping like a Ute brave with ants in his dance. Whirling, Big Ord took a pot shot at the oncoming nester, but his hurried shot went wild. The whining bullet had no effect on Lodgepole, who bore down with his gun roaring.

"He thinks it's me, shootin' blanks at him!" thought Doc. "Ord's next shot will stop poor Lodgepole."

But just as Big Ord drew a careful bead on the charging nester, he was tackled by a wildcat female who was as mad as a wet hen and twice as damp.

The Widow Breen yanked on Big Ord's hair, causing a shot to go skyward. Dan, right behind his ma, clubbed Ord with a hunk of willow root. The bandit was yowling like a hound pup with his tail caught in a yard gate when Lodgepole closed in.

"Lay off, Doc, you double-crossin' sidewinder!" yelled Lodgepole. "I've a good notion to—"

Suddenly the nester's eyes bugged like a surprised hoptoad's.

"Big Ord!" he gasped. "Oh, my gosh!"

Lodgepole staggered, buckled in the middle, and collapsed.

Dan Breen had Ord's gun now and was holding off the cowed holdup

man when the stage driver arrived to take charge.

"Are you shot, Lester, dear?" begged the widow as Lodgepole finally began to show some signs of life.

Lodgepole tried to push her away. "Where's Doc?" he demanded.

"Over here!" yelled Doc. "I've been yellin' my head off. Somebody come an' unhogtie me."

Dan untied him and in a jiffy they had Big Ord bound up like a sore thumb.

Nora Breen helped Lodgepole up on his feet, but again he bent in the middle and sagged in her arms.

"I know he's shot," moaned the widow. "And he was so brave, trying to save my life from that wild person."

"I ain't shot, dog-bite-it!" denied Lodgepole, getting red as a gobbler's neck. "It's just this danged lumbago, Sugar. My spine bone keeps comin' unhinged!"

Suddenly Lodgepole remembered something. He looked at Doc with a puzzled expression.

"Where's that gun-fightin' Gabby Lawson?"

The stage driver laughed.

"When I finally got my horses untangled from a cottonwood stump and was bringin' 'em back to the road, I saw Gabby Lawson sneakin' up the creek in the willers. He's got a yellow streak wider than Brush Creek in flood time!"

"Tie Big Ord on Lodgepole's horse an' I'll take him back to Elkhorn," offered Doc Harris, winking at Lodgepole.

"I reckon the rest of us will have to go back to town, too," said the stage driver, "as soon as I can wire up the busted double-tree."

The next day Doc met Lodgepole on Elkhorn's main street.

"How's your misery?" he asked the nester.

"It's leavin'," said Lodgepole. "Sugar . . . the widow . . . called off her trip. Last night she an' Dan put a mustard plaster on my lumbago. We got real sociable. An', Doc, you know that kid Dan is plenty smart."

"How's that?" Doc asked.

Lodgepole pulled at his mustache. "This mornin' I let him take my gun out on the sage flats for target practice. When he come back to the hotel he was grinnin'. 'You sure had lots of nerve, standin' up to Big Ord with a gun full of blanks,' says he, givin' me a dig in the ribs. 'I've a hunch you an' Doc Harris pulled a whingeroo on Gabby Lawson.' But he promised he wouldn't ever tell his ma. An' he'd better not," growled Lodgepole, "if he wants to get along with the jasper he's picked for his new papa!"

The nester shuffled his feet in the road dust. "An', Doc, I'd sure be tickled to have you stand up with me at the weddin' next week."

"I wouldn't miss it," Doc assured him, grinning. "But I sure hope Big Boy Ord don't show up, too!"

THE END

# SANTEL OF THE SIERRAS

**By Tom W. Blackburn**

***"Every time you and your kind drive a man from the land he was born on, you send me a recruit!" declared that fighting vaquero***

## I

A DRY, wry amusement pulled at Gil Santel as he looked down the slope to the trail below. He had long been willing to concede that his own people were destroying themselves with an obsession. A delusion that because life in the great valleys flanking the California Sierra had for two generations been pleasant and untroubled, it would forever remain like that. But in their way, invading Yankees had their obsessions, too. One of these was that no *Californio* could cope with Yankee drive.

Bela Tenaye, beside Gil, was also looking down the slope.

"Look at the dogs!" he growled. "They've gambled, bought and cheated almost all of the good fami-

lies of the province off the land. Our fathers are dead; some in disgrace, some in poverty, some with broken hearts. We've had to take to the hills and live like Indians to live at all. And now the *Yanquis* themselves try the airs of *hacendados!* That company below is big enough to be escorting one of the richest of the Picos. It is to laugh, *amigo!*"

But Tenaye was not laughing. There was savagery in him. A savagery Gil occasionally had difficulty suppressing. Bela's older brother had lost the family's *Rancho* Ramona to a Boston ship captain at marked cards and had a day later committed suicide.

Bela's own little hunting place had gone for a few Yankee dollars to an agent of the captain in order to see the dead brother buried as became a Tenaye. A man could hate no more than Bela hated all of the English speakers who were coming in increasing numbers by the mountains and the sea into California.

It was a big cavalcade which was coming along the trail at the foot of the slope. A wagonload of goods, brought probably from as far away as Monterey to provision either the house on *Rancho* Ramona or the great

*hacienda* on adjoining, much larger Sierra Blanca Ranch, where Gil Santel himself had been born. Behind the wagon, in loose cavalry formation, rode a dozen men. It was a curious thing among the *Yanqui* newcomers that if their shrewdness and greed and luck was not enough to get them land of their own, they hired to their own kind to help hold what had already been taken.

Santel's eyes were first on the wagonload of supplies, for game was scarce in the hills this winter and life hard. The company at his back had need of the sacked and tinned food in this wagon, the clothing and cloth and hardware and powder. And in addition, it was bound for *Rancho* Ramona or Sierra Blanca; it belonged to Simon Blake, who now owned both great holdings. And Simon Blake was his enemy.

Santel waited patiently while the cavalcade filed out of the thin timber partially obscuring it and into the open. Behind him Bela Tenaye stiffened in his saddle.

"The devil!" Bela grunted. "We've been tricked, Gil! The old man isn't with them; the girl, instead. Look!"

Gil shrugged. His report from the coast had been accurate. This had been his secret. And unlike Bela Tenaye, revenge with him was not merely a matter of driving lead or steel into the body of his enemy. A plan had begun to build in his mind and for that plan, Simon Blake was more valuable alive than dead. For that plan Simon Blake's daughter was more useful here than her father would have been.

"We take our luck as we find it," he told Tenaye with a repetition of his shrug. "See that the little ones behind us understand. We quarter in from behind. Surprise should be with us. We burn no powder unless necessary. If we do, we leave no wounded. The wagon will be opened and each man will take all the goods he can carry across his saddle in front of him. That way we leave no wagon tracks in retreat."

"The old man was to have been for me, Gil," Tenaye growled. "What of the girl?"

"I have a use for her, Bela," Santel said quietly.

Tenaye's eyes brightened wickedly. "So when we have finished with her and sent her back to Sierra Blanca we have hurt the old man more than having stretched his ugly body between wild horses, eh?" Tenaye laughed softly. "Gil, you're a devil!"

"I have a use for the girl," repeated Santel. "See to the little ones. It's nearly time for the signal."

Tenaye reined away, dropping back through the timber toward the rest of the party. Santel watched the cavalcade below. It was filing into a narrow passage between the rock ribs of encroaching ridges. Beyond this the trail switch-backed up a steep ascent. It was a certain trap. The kind which a man born among these mountains and raised in them would undoubtedly choose.

When the wagon was far enough into the pass to make turning it about impossible, Santel raised in his stirrups. His arm, high, swung down in a gesture toward the trail below. Instantly and soundlessly, twenty men moved in the timber, setting their horses down the slope. For a moment Gil Santel still sat motionless, a hungry satisfaction in him.

Yankees were confident. They were arrogant. And they were careless. They refused to see, or could not see, the difference between a *peon* and *hacendado* in this country. They thought the pride of a *Californio* a laughable thing, without teeth. The provincial government established by republican Mexico here had come apart at the seams so that there was no law and no authority worth troubling about. More Yankees were coming in every day. And none of them believed that a man from these valleys could learn from them. They themselves had much to learn.

It had been no easy thing to bring revenge-hungry men like Bela Tenaye under one leadership—men who had all of their lives been masters of others, taking orders from no one. It had not been easy to teach *vaqueros,* whose matchless horsemanship had always been flamboyant, noisy and reckless, to ride in silence, sometimes with stealth, and always to a prearranged plan. It had not been easy to form a company of refugees in the hills into something a little more dangerous and much more purposeful than the brigands they were called in the valleys. Yet this had all been done. And for a purpose.

When the first of his men broke cover, Santel set his own horse forward in the superb, apparently reckless run which set California stock and California riders in a class with the Tuaregs of the Sahara and the Cossacks of the Steppes.

For a long, gratifying instant there was no alarm below. A man in the cavalcade, turning to speak casually to a companion, saw the attack pouring down on his company. He spoke sharply, instantly arresting the attention of the others. But the alarm Santel had expected in their manner was wholly missing. In fact, the man who called out the warning seemed to do so almost exultantly. Santel was puzzled and wariness hit him like a shadow across the sun. The first and most bitter lesson he had been forced to learn in this campaign he was conducting from the hills was that *Yanquis* were as quick on their feet as cats and as hard to surprise.

As Bela Tenaye and Gil's force swept into the little pass behind the enemy with the wagon, coming at a little different tangent from Gil himself, and a little ahead of him, a gun sounded. The flat, iron-hard crack of one of the heavily charged belt guns which were among the things the men from across the mountains had brought into California with them.

It was answered by measured, unhurried fire from those with Tenaye.

Men whom Gil Santel had compelled to burn much valuable French powder in patient practice. The wagon halted as a reckless rider plunged in front of the team hauling it. The floor of the pass became a tangle of men, rearing horses, and violence under a rising cloud of dust and powdersmoke. But still Santel did not ride in. A man could not be sure of Yankees.

II

A minute passed. Half of another. Then a shout apart from the snarl in the pass sounded and a party of horsemen broke from cover down the trail in the direction from which the wagon had come. Hard-riding men with guns drawn. Five of them. Not a big reinforcement for the company with the wagons, but ample to turn the tide of the struggle in the pass. Enough to have discouraged attack, had they ridden with the main company. A typical Yankee precaution, this rear guard. A trick within a trick, sufficient to turn the jaws of a trap against those who had set it.

Grinning without humor, Santel reined his horse about and rode hard away from the pass, full at the newcomers. They opened fire on him and he drew one of his own guns. This was the signal. Smoke blossomed above brush on both sides of the trail. Smoke above four of Gil's best riflemen, two to each side of the track. Riflemen working at extreme range, but with Gil below them to tie any knots they left undone.

A man among the oncoming riders spilled soundlessly from his saddle and hit the grass in a limp, skidding dive. His horse, veering, fouled another rider, forcing him to pull up. And while the man cursed his rearing mount, lead reached down for him from above. He reeled heavily, fought his mount around in a frantic turn, and loped back the way he had come, low and loose in his seat.

The three others, now pulling fully beyond range of the rifles above them, came on hard toward Santel. Gil raised his hand gun and wiped its front sight across the foremost of these, dropping his hammer just before the instant his target was under the sight—the swift, hardly aiming kind of gun work which was so difficult for a *Californio* to learn and which made the men from across the mountains the most superb marksmen in the world. This, also, Santel had learned well. His man spilled backward across the rump of his horse.

Angry sound stung the air beside Santel, biting at his shoulder in passing. He saw torn cloth over the crease and the first swift rise of blood from the shallow wound. He fired again, missed, and was so close to his target then that his third shot went home of its own accord. A riderless horse shot past him and he was without further targets. He pulled up.

Of the three which had been left to him, two men lay broken and motionless on the grass. The third had veered away in a wide turn to

ride back down the trail in the direction already taken by his companion wounded by the hidden riflemen above. Santel holstered his gun in signal to those above that the man be permitted to ride past them. There was silence in the pass. Santel rode back toward it.

Men were down in the dust about the wagon. Not all of them were *Yanqui*. There was cost in all things, but men were born and they had to die. And there was not a *hacendado* or a *vaquero* or a *peon* in Gil Santel's company who had not lived a longer life and a fuller one for having joined him; not a man who would begrudge his own death or the death of a comrade in the cause for which they all rode. It was not only in the States to the east that men loved liberty and justice, and these were bitter and desperate days for all in California with the color of the sun in their blood.

Six Yankees were disarmed and on foot beside the wagon. They stared with the sullen, cold anger of their kind at Santel as he rode up. Dark-skinned men in turn kept them under wary eyes. There was no further struggle except in one place. Bela Tenaye had pulled Jean Blake from her saddle, perhaps because of stinging, scornful talk on her lips. She fought him, now, stabbing sharp heels at his soft *Californio* boots, striving to use nails, teeth, elbows, even knees. And some of the cruelty which his own bitterness had distilled in him had come to the surface in Bela Tenaye. He had seized the girl's arm and was slowly, maliciously, twisting the fight from her.

Santel watched this for a moment, measuring the necessity for intervention. One of the girl's men growled a sharp protest at him.

"Santel, isn't it? What kind of devil are you, man? If anything happens to Miss Blake—"

"The *señorita* will be quite safe," Santel cut in quietly. "She is too valuable for harm. Bela, release the girl and break the wagon open. We need these goods and it's time to ride!" Swinging to another man, he added, "Paco, see the *señorita* back onto her horse and take the lead reins yourself."

Tenaye glanced sullenly at Gil and released the girl. As Tenaye turned toward the wagon, Jean Blake commenced to straighten her hair and the fit of her dress, disarranged in her struggles. A tigress, all right, but feminine. Tall, well-made, strong, even to features. Not a soft *Californio* beauty, but Gil Santel thought there was another thing he could learn from *Yanquis*—desire for a woman with yellow hair.

The Yankee who had first spoken to Santel caught his attention again.

"We half expected to run into you, Santel," he said. "We figured on winding you up if we did, or Miss Blake would have stayed behind. We might as well admit the plan after the way you held back to snag the boys we had trailing us. You've got more men than I figured on. Is every wolf in the hills joining you?"

"Every time you and your kind drive a man from the land he was born on, you send me a recruit," Gil answered quietly. "You make me strong, yourselves. And every time you do an injury, you ask for a hurt in return."

The Yankee, young and big, with wide-spaced eyes, work-worn hands and a dogged, iron jaw, shook his head.

"You're no fool and I know it, Santel. But you talk like one! You aim to take Miss Blake with you. You can't get away with it. I'm Mark Robson, Simon Blake's stock foreman, and I know what I'm talking about. No burr-crusted bandit—"

"Let me tell you what a *bandido* can do, *señor*," Gil interrupted smoothly. "When *Señor* Blake sends five thousand dollars into the hills, his daughter will be returned. There are messengers in the valleys who can find me if I wish them to."

"Five thousand dollars!" Robson exploded. "Yankee dollars at that, I suppose. You murdering dog, you think Blake or anybody else in California has got that kind of money? Hell, sale of half Blake's land would hardly bring that much!"

"About half the land he claims. Yes. I figured it that way. Perhaps *Rancho* Ramona, which was my friend Tenaye's home. Tell *Señor* Blake that when the *rancho* is auctioned to raise the money, I'll be there to put in my bid."

Robson swore. "You'd hold Miss Blake for ransom and use her father's money to buy half of his holdings away from him?"

"Ask Blake how a friend of his bought Casa Grande *rancho* from the Montoyas," Gil said. "They, too, had a beautiful daughter. But she was not returned unharmed. We of the hills are gentlemen, but we learn swiftly from our *Yanqui* neighbors."

Robson quieted. He took an earnest step toward Gil.

"There have been some bad deals," he admitted reluctantly. "All kinds of people are hitting this coast, half of them with their pockets empty and in a hurry to get rich, no holds barred. There's news in the valley of a gold strike up the American River, and that means more trouble. But the country's got to be built up and there'll be some honest men working at it."

"There has to be justice, too," Gil told him stonily. "And there'll be some honest men among the *bandidos* in the hills, working at that!"

"Right or wrong," Robson lashed out, "you take Miss Blake with you and you'll be hunted down like a dog. I promise you that, personally!"

"If you had plans for the *señorita* yourself, I'm sorry," Gil mocked him. "Give your *patron* my answer."

His companions had rifled the wagon of all of value to them while he talked with the grim, angry, hard-eyed young foreman. The girl, in curious contrast to the savagery of her struggle with Tenaye, had docilely mounted her horse with no protest when Paco Pigano took her

reins. Gil nodded to Tenaye and Bela barked riding orders, raising his voice to a shout to summon in also the riflemen still above the trail. Hoofs thundered. Brush parted. And suddenly as they had appeared in this little valley, Gil's company vanished. And he vanished with them, riding not wholly in satisfaction since this was but the beginning of a long siege which had only the justice of its motives and the shrewdness of its leadership to sustain it against impossible odds.

## III

A couple of miles from the pass in which she had been taken prisoner, Gil Santel rode up beside Jean Blake and signaled the man leading her horse to halt.

"Sorry, *señorita*," he told the girl, "but you've got to be blindfolded the rest of the way."

The girl looked at him coolly.

"All right. But why this bother? Why not wait here for Mark Robson and my father and his friends to overtake us? Wherever you go they'll trail us, and sitting still is so much easier than riding."

Paco Pigano had pulled a large kerchief from his pocket. Gil's eyes flickered and Paco rode alongside the girl. For an instant before the cloth hid her face, Gil saw tremulousness about her lips, but she sat stiffly upright. Gil scowled. There was this about these people from across the mountains; most of them had courage and there were many among them for whom a man could have liking, perhaps more. But they did not wear their natures on their sleeves and a man could tell neither a friend nor an enemy by his coat.

When the blindfold was in place, the girl spoke quietly from under it.

"This is very foolish, you know. I'd think a gentleman would be the first to see it and I heard you call yourself that. You're a bandit. The name of Santel is heard on every corner in Los Angeles, probably in the north, too. You need a friend instead of another enemy if you think you are right in what you do. And my father is a very powerful man."

Gil nodded at Paco without answering the girl. All three rode forward again. Presently Bela Tenaye fell back, obviously to talk. Gil slowed his pace.

"I almost hope the money doesn't come," his friend said with eyes bright on the girl. "You made my family *rancho* her price. I'm grateful for that, Gil. But can a man go back? Can a man who has been a coyote in the hills ever be a gentleman again—hard riding in the day, a good dinner at sunset, and brandy and a woman's talk after dark?"

"A man can't stay in the hills," Gil said.

Bela frowned thoughtfully. "Why not?" he asked. "It's a good enough life. Fat purses for the taking—money more plentiful as more mines open in the north. Fat beef or venison for the killing. A woman—if not from our camp, then from the valleys. No name to protect. No *peons* to feed and house. No land and crop

to think of. No need to smell the scent of *Yanqui* carcasses until they're dead."

"Don't let it tempt you too far," Gil said shortly. "When we've cleared Simon Blake from *Rancho* Ramona, you'll go back to the land, Bela. It's yours and that's where you belong. That's what we're all in the hills for, to find a way back to the things we were driven from. In a little while there'll be a law strong enough to protect us. If we harry them enough, *Yanquis* will help make it. Then our work here is done."

"There's one trouble with you, Gil," Tenaye said with a lightness which did not wholly conceal a deeper timbre in his voice. "You believe you think for all of us. But it isn't true." Then, obviously changing the subject, he nodded again at the girl ahead of them. "How long does Blake get to send us the money?"

"A week," Gil said. "A week should be enough."

Tenaye grinned, lifting his reins.

"I still half-hope the money doesn't come," he repeated. "Money is poor payment for hatred and not even you know how much I hate Simon Blake, Gil—how much I hate all *Yanquis* —all of them!"

Tenaye rode swiftly to the head of the party. Santel stared after him uneasily. The best blood in California flowed in Bela's veins, but *Californio* blood was hot blood and this was a time for steady thought.

Women were strange creatures. Sitting at the fire before his shack in the deep mountain valley high above the rolling hills of Sierra Blanca Ranch, where he had headquartered his band, this conviction turned up recurrently in Gil Santel's mind. Bela Tenaye and a number of the younger and more restless men were gathered at the lower end of the camp about a huge fire and a brandy cask, but Gil's attention was not on them.

Jean Blake drew his eyes as she had from the moment he had first seen her. An interest only half because she was a woman; the rest because he didn't understand her. For nearly a year his company had headquartered in the canyon, striking out suddenly on raids which were necessarily in part vengeance and in part for existence. When Jean Blake claimed the name of Gil Santel was heard on the street corners of most California towns, she had not been exaggerating.

Yankees were not a people who could be attacked without resistance or stolen from without retaliation. There had been much violence and certain savageries on both sides. And because to any foreman his enemy is the less principled and the more terrible, the name of Santel had a ring of fear in most *Yanqui* ears. Jean Blake must be subject to this, also. And being the daughter of Simon Blake, one of the most ruthless of the newcomers, she could not understand the desperation of the men and women gathered here.

She must believe Gil Santel an animal and his men likewise. She

must know that here she was not a young and attractive woman but a weapon to be employed in a war no less grim for the small number of those involved in it. Her father's openly boasted plans for further extension in California land and her own person were in danger. Certainly she knew this.

Yet beyond that first unsteadiness of lip when Paco Pigano had blindfolded her, she had been almost at ease and apparently without fear. Curiously, also, the women of the camp, with perhaps even more reason to hate *Yanquis* than their men had, accepted the girl readily. She had eaten with them and given a hand with their chores.

Gil had been watching her for long moments, where she sat among the women beside the embers of the cooking fire, when she rose and started toward him. He supposed he had been expecting this, perhaps even hoping for it. He made a place beside himself on the log upon which he had been sitting. After a moment's hesitation, Jean Blake sat down.

"According to reports in the valleys, Gil Santel and his men have stolen nearly a hundred thousand dollars in gold and currency," she said. "To say nothing of the goods and supplies they've taken. A fortune, all told."

"The reports are about right, *señorita*," Gil admitted.

The girl leaned sharply forward. "Then where is it?" she demanded. "Not in this camp. An Indian *jacal* on the edge of the desert has as much comfort as you have here! Not a decent dress among the women. Rags. There was a dry goods shipment lost between Los Angeles and the Mariposas. What happened to the dresses in it?"

"There are women in the valleys left with even worse rags when the land their men had made their living from was taken from them. The dresses went there."

"And the money?"

"You've heard Ernesto Galvez inherited a fortune in Mexico and bought back his *rancho* from the trader who had swindled it from him. You've heard the Montalvas sold the last of the wine in their vaults on a good market and bought back the vineyards they had traded away when fire scarred most of their vines and burned their house. There are others. Not many. Money doesn't go far when one deals with your people, *señorita*."

The girl stared at Gil with her lower lip pulled in between her teeth. Her eyes were round with disbelief.

"So this is Santel!" she breathed. "The bandit so dangerous that many of my father's friends are talking a quick revolution against Mexico here and admission to the States so that Yankee law can officially go after him—an Army detachment, if necessary. The man nobody knows. And I find he is a fool!"

"Maybe I haven't done so much," protested Gil, "but I've just started."

"You're nearly finished!" the girl

corrected stormily. "How many in this camp do you think really care about their hurt cousins in the valleys? How many even want to go back to their land and the way they used to live? You've taught them an easier life. How long do you think they'll let you send the things they've stolen to others? Until tomorrow, maybe, or next week. Not long at all. They've learned enough from you. They're finished with Gil Santel. And when you're gone, what will the little good you've done up to now amount to against the evil they'll do without you?"

Gil thought uncomfortably of the hard brilliance growing in Bela Tenaye's eyes in recent weeks. Perhaps in the eyes of others in the company. Thinking about it now, he wasn't sure.

"A man does what he can," he told the girl defensively.

"But he uses his best tools!" Jean Blake's voice was earnest. "I've listened to the women here. I heard for the first time just how my father got title to *Rancho* Ramona and Sierra Blanca. If the story is true, then Simon Blake has been at least partly wrong. Maybe I've been blind not to see that, but I see the answer more clearly than you do."

"There's only one answer."

"Exactly!" the girl agreed. "My father and Mark Robson and the rest would never be afraid of a bandit, however terrible he was. They'd hunt him down. But a man with hard fists and the law behind him—"

"There isn't any law in California," Santel cut in wearily. "A few pot-bellied petty officials to be bought by anyone with the half of a dollar."

"Know what law is to a Yankee?" the girl asked. "It's the people behind a man. You got these people to follow you into hiding up here. Get them down in the open to follow you instead. Set up a court that's fair and honest and try these land cases. Every man in California will stand by its decisions if enough of the people are behind it. There's your way to justice."

Santel shook his head. "I'd be hanged in a day if I left the mountains, now."

"You'll be dead here in a week if you don't—and you'll leave this camp behind you to turn really to wolves when you're gone."

Gil shook his head once more.

The girl stood up. "You're leaving me no choice, then," she said quietly. "I've got to get a warning to Mark and my father so they can smoke out this nest before you lose control of your men. If these bandits get out of hand, the damage they'll do will be ten times as bad for California as the land deals speculators like my father have made. I'm going to escape if I can."

Gil looked up at her, chuckling at her spirit and her fire, knowing how impossible escape was from this place. She turned on her heel and went back down among the women. Presently Gil rolled into his blankets and fell into restless sleep.

## IV

Twice during the night Santel wakened and rose, going each time far enough down through the camp to see into the sleeping shelter used by the unattached women of the company. Both times Jean Blake was in heavy sleep there, faint light from the embers of the cooking fire readily singling out the yellow of her hair from that of her darker sisters. Gil was angry with himself for his concern and the curious reassurance he felt at seeing the sleeping girl.

As he turned back to his blankets the second time, a figure moved out of the shadows of the camp and fell in beside him. Bela Tenaye, fully dressed and sleepless as a cat. Gil grunted surprise and a portion of his anger washed against his old friend.

"It was a long ride yesterday and there's work for tomorrow," he said sharply. "A man gets his sleep or he's dull. We can't afford dullness in this camp!"

Tenaye laughed at him.

"So a head of yellow hair is like a burr in your blankets! And you scowl at me because of it. Why, Gil? You think I was heading in the same direction? Or are you afraid that Bela makes plans behind your back, *amigo?*"

"The devil with what you're doing!" Gil growled at him. "I'm going back to bed."

Tenaye chuckled again.

"Brotherly love; it's touching between such old friends." Then, curiously, a sudden seriousness seemed to seize him. "We ***have*** been good friends. Good night, Gil."

Tenaye swung away, moving toward the patch of open grass where he habitually slept in company with the unattached men of the camp. Santel stared speculatively after him for a moment, wondering if there was significance in this assurance of a friendship which had not needed assurance through all the long years they had been neighbors and comrades. Presently Gil shrugged. He was beginning to get edgy. A leader could not afford edginess. What he needed too was sleep. He turned in once more.

The moment Gil roused to dawn light, he knew something was wrong in the camp. His were a happy people, even in times of deep trouble. There was usually song about, much talk, laughter, and the rising hour of morning was the noisiest of all. Yet the camp was now silent. Women were at breakfast chores. Men were back-sided for warmth to morning fires, the smoke of the first cigarettes of the day rising above them, but there was silence.

Gil's eyes searched among the women about the breakfast fire but he didn't see what he was looking for among them. He strode rapidly across to their sleeping shelter and looked within, but it was empty. He knew, then, what was wrong. Jean Blake was not in the camp. He wheeled angrily.

The men who had been idly about

various fires had knotted together behind Bela Tenaye. Santel saw unwillingness on a few faces, but it was an unwillingness which would nevertheless string along with the majority. He saw, also, that three men were missing from the company—Paco Pigano and two big-bodied *mestizos* who had always shadowed Tenaye, providing the man even here with the servitorship to which he had been accustomed all of his life.

Watching Bela Tenaye, now standing confident and at ease before the hunched men of the camp, Santel saw a picture of the man of which he had not before been aware. He wondered if Simon Blake's daughter, the night before, with some shrewdness of her own, had seen this shadow cast by Tenaye's figure. Gil had always known the magnetism of personality in his friend. He had known the strength and directness and the peculiar, wicked kind of sure arrogance which had occasionally come to the surface. But he had always believed Bela to be lazy of spirit, happy to ride near the front in anything, but unwilling to assume leadership because of the responsibility to be assumed with it. Gil realized now that he had never really known the man. And he thought he knew what was coming.

"You looking for something, Gil?" Tenaye asked easily.

"The girl. Where is she?"

"Gone," Tenaye answered. "You see for yourself. Escaped during the night."

"You lie!" Gil said sharply.

Tenaye shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll let that pass, out of friendship," he said. "But after it I owe you nothing, Gil. I don't lie. The girl escaped. I know. I helped her."

"You let her go, to lead Mark Robson and her father and half the *Yanquis* in the valleys in here on us?"

Tenaye was smiling.

"She was very persuasive. You know how it has always been with me. A pretty face . . ."

Santel swore angrily. "Maybe she thought she was escaping. You're right, Bela, I know you too well. You've got her hidden some place. You think you can use her to force more than the five thousand dollars I asked for out of Simon Blake. Where is she? I won't ask you again!"

Obviously enjoying himself, Tenaye grinned over his shoulder at the man behind him. Santel took a quick step forward, jerking his gun from his belt and leveling it at his friend. Like a whiplash, his voice snapped a command:

"Disarm this man!"

Not one in the group behind Tenaye moved, although uneasy glances traveled from one to another among the men. Bela's grin widened. He ignored Gil's weapon.

"You understand now, *amigo?*" he asked softly. "You know who gives the orders here now? It isn't that we love you less, but that we love riches more. Gold beginning to

move along the trails from the mines to the north; Yankees getting rich from our land in the valleys—riches we can take from them when they've done the work of harvesting the crops and slaughtering the cattle. It is better to be barons than patriots.

"I have long been planning this. The *Yanqui* girl will give me the chance. Her father will permit no real hunt for us as long as we have her in our hands. I have sent him word she will die if he comes into the hills after us. Put away your gun, Gil. If you fire one shot from it you will be dead of twenty bullets in an instant. I have given the order."

Watching the confidently smiling Tenaye, Gil slowly holstered his useless gun, his mind working swiftly. He had no doubt of his own fate. Having talked himself into command of the party, Bela Tenaye had no choice in the disposition of his predecessor. He could not free Santel and permit him to leave the mountains since certainly Gil would ask the help of even hated *Yanquis* to wipe out a band plundering the country for loot alone.

He could not permit Gil to remain a prisoner in the camp. It would be too easy to imitate what Tenaye himself had done and rewin a portion of the company again. Death for Gil Santel was the only answer. And Tenaye was of a kind which could be emotionless under necessity. He might regret the need but he would not permit the death of a friend to check him. These were dangerous moments. And, Gil knew, not to himself, alone.

Jean Blake was hidden some place in the hills which only Tenaye knew and she was under the watchful eye of Bela's two missing *mestizos*. She was in grave danger. Bela would use her to make numerous bargains with her father in order to paralyze any Yankee effort to hunt his company down. But in the end Bela would not keep his end of any of the bargains. He hated *Yanquis* and a woman could be made to suffer more than any man. The girl would not be returned to her father alive.

Santel had one hope. Paco Pigano was also missing from the camp. Paco was of a kind already beginning to disappear in California when the first Yankees came. A steady and righteous breed with a steadfast loyalty and the chivalry of an older day. He would have no part in the rough handling of a woman or even with her imprisonment against her will.

The day before, above the wagon trail, he had scowled dark condemnation at Gil while he was tying a masking kerchief across Jean Blake's eyes. He would not have gone with the two *mestizos* who had taken the girl from the camp. Tenaye would not have dared to send him with them. There had been a Pigano in the employ of the Santels since the first 'dobe brick was laid on the foundation of the great house at Sierra Blanca. There was no doubt where Paco's loyalty would lie.

Santel's eyes swept the heavy

timber on the perimeter of the camp. A man behind Tenaye spoke softly. A faint mutter rose among the others. Bela swung forward, faint reluctance in his manner.

"The little ones grow impatient, Gil," he said. "This is a hard time for them. They believe what I have told them about the profits we'll make. But except that you have returned only a few of them to what they have lost and made none of the rest of them rich, you have been a good *jefe*, a good *capitan*, here in the hills. This chore has to be mine, alone. I promised them I would handle it without help."

The man paused and shrugged, the tinge of regret again evident.

"We'll make it as simple as possible, Gil," he went on. "We're old friends. You'll give me your gun. We'll walk over there behind the sleeping shelter. I'll be careful of my aim, so that it is quick. They will hear presently in the valleys that it was an accident with your own gun, perhaps while you were cleaning it."

Tenaye stepped in front of Gil, his hand outstretched for the gun. There was a moment of intense silence in the camp. Then a single voice cut through it. A voice coming from the thick timber fringe, fifty feet behind Santel. A voice which froze all motion in Tenaye. The voice of Paco Pigano.

"Stand still, Bela! I have you in the sights of the best rifle in camp. If a man moves, I'll blow your heart out of your body! Come this way, Gil *capitan;* I'm covering you."

Santel palmed his own gun again.

"Give up, Bela," he urged earnestly. "A man makes mistakes. I'll count this as one if you turn the little ones back to me."

Tenaye shook his head. Santel moved swiftly backward, then, under cover of Pigano's rifle. He was grateful he had taught the man to shoot well. The others remained motionless out of respect for Paco's marksmanship. Pine needles were suddenly springy underfoot. The towering shade of giant ponderosas was dark overhead. Undergrowth reached for Gil. He dived into it.

## V

Santel heard, rather than saw, Paco Pigano in the first few moments, and guided himself by the sound of the man's movements. Over these came the sound of the break in tension in the camp behind him. Bela Tenaye's strong voice, lashing out with orders. The mutter of surprised and frightened men flinging their astonishment back and forth among themselves. And out of these things the swift organization of pursuit.

Presently Santel was abreast of Paco Pigano, running with the man. Paco was short and heavy but as deceptively light on his feet as a bear and Gil used reaching strides to keep even with him. They found a break in the timber and took to the quieter, faster going of a strip of grass. From this they veered into heavy brush,

penetrated it in a few moments, and came to another clearing where two horses were waiting.

"I was given horse-guard duty out of turn last night, *señor*," Paco explained briefly. "It made me curious. I sneaked back to camp in time to see those two *paisanos* of Bela's going off with the *Yanqui* girl and to hear Bela talking to the others. Perhaps they were fools to listen, but it was beautiful talk. All the Tenayes have tongues of silver. I knew we would have hard riding to do this morning. I went back for horses and brought these out here. I meant also to warn you, but I didn't have time. You roused too early. Now talk can wait till later. I know of a place where I think we will be safe. We can make plans there."

Swinging to saddle, Pigano slanted his horse against a ridge rising above them.

The next hour was a revelation to Gil Santel. He had thought that young *hacendados* of his own kind, born with much leisure and many horses for their own use, knew more of the tricks of riding through the brush and timber slopes of the California mountains than any other class in the province. It had not occurred to him that the *vaqueros* and *peons* of the great estates, obliged to work in the saddle from dawn to sunset for their hire, could learn a great deal more. The round little man before him, perhaps sloppy in his saddle by *hacendado* standards, demonstrated feats of horsemanship which sucked at Gil Santel's breath. Yet Paco was wholly unaware that he was working miracles with every jump of his horse.

In midmorning, after having climbed upward through what Santel would have regarded as impassable country, they reached timberline on the shoulder of a tremendous gray granite peak which climbed up to a heavy crown of snow far above them. The outline of the peak was unfamiliar to Gil. Paco saw him staring up at it.

"It looks different from this angle, *señor*," he explained. "It is the northeast marker of your own *estancia*—the mountain from which it gets its name, Sierra Blanca."

Swinging down in a heavily grassed little glade through which a tiny stream ran, Paco slipped the bridle from his horse and turned the animal free.

"The horses won't wander, *señor*," he said. "It's too far to other grass. Now we can talk. We rest the horses. Tomorrow we go over the mountains to the valley of the soda lake, where you are not known. There I have friends. There we will be safe."

Santel shook his head. "Later, maybe. But we have some unfinished business on this side of the mountains. We'll take care of that, first."

"Bela Tenaye?" Pigano asked.

"Bela and the rest," agreed Santel. "The old camp has to be broken up. I didn't come into these hills to turn wolves loose on the valleys."

Paco nodded with resignation.

"You are very like the old *señor*,

your father, *capitan*," he said. "I was afraid of this. That's why I tried to pick a hiding place where game would be at hand for food—a place from which we could watch the trail leading into the camp. What is to be done? I am afraid it is much work for only two men."

"The girl first," Gil said. "You told me you saw her being taken from the camp. Where did Tenaye's men take her?"

"I didn't follow them," answered Paco. "But I could guess the place. It's where I would have had her taken if I had been in Bela's boots."

Santel rose and started for his horse. "Good. We'll begin with that."

Paco remained seated and shook his head.

"Too much hurry isn't good, *señor*," he warned. "To hunt a wolf a man must think like one. This my father told me. Think of Bela Tenaye, now. You have escaped him. See in the long valley there?" Paco pointed with a stubby finger. "His men have already lost our trail. He doesn't know where we're gone. But he knows you, *capitan*. He knows you thought of the girl. He knows you will think of her now. So where would he take the little ones next but to where she is hidden, to see if you have somehow found the place, also. Watch. You will see."

Irritated, chafed by loss of time he thought was wasted, Santel watched the distant, dotlike horsemen Paco had indicated far below. They milled in some uncertainty in the open, then knotted together and vanished into the timber. Periodically they reappeared as they worked up the course of a tumbling white stream. Time dragged. It was noon when Paco chuckled with throaty satisfaction.

The horsemen below had spread out in a thin ring encircling a granite monolith which stood near the head of the canyon they had been following.

"A cave is there, once much used by the Indians," Paco said. "See how Bela sets a trap in case you have ridden there before him? He circles it first with the little ones, then rides in himself to see if you are there."

The pattern of the men below bore out Paco's hunch almost as though he was giving them orders from this distant place. Another hour dragged by. The party spread out around the base of the monolith reformed at the end of this time, heading back down along the stream in the direction of the camp over which Gil Santel had until a few hours ago been master. It was Paco who now moved toward the horses. As he slipped the bridle onto the head of his mount, he looked speculatively at Santel.

"This girl, *señor*," he suggested. "This *Yanqui* woman. We have our own skins to think of, now. Let's not be fools about her."

"I took her prisoner," Gil said quietly. "Think I want to be responsible for what will happen to her if she stays in Tenaye's hands?"

Paco shook his head. "No, *capitan*," he said. "It was just a question I asked."

"Besides," Gil told him bluntly, "our chances of saving our own skins in the long run lie in saving hers. Whoever has control of Blake's daughter has control of Blake. As long as Bela has the girl, the Yankees below will be of no help in breaking up the old camp. If we have her, maybe a little later we can talk fairness for our people to Simon Blake and some of his friends."

Paco nodded understanding. Eagerness came up in his eyes.

"It isn't too far to the cave," he said. "The two of us can take care of Bela's *paisanos*, I think. We can be back here by nightfall. That's good. I don't think I could lead the way to this place after dark. It's dangerous climbing."

"Then we'll have to night somewhere below," Gil grunted. "For all your watching of Bela's riders a while ago, you didn't watch close enough. If you'd counted those who rode up to the cave down there and those who rode away you'd see we have eight men instead of two between us and the girl. The party that went back down the canyon was six riders short. This will be a hard night."

Paco chuckled delightedly, seeming to be unimpressed by the increased odds.

"What are eight men?" he asked. "I guessed that Bela would ride to the cave this afternoon; you counted to see how much of a guard he left. Between us we're a cautious man, for a fact. We can't fail. Come, it's time to ride."

Gil had again been staring into the void below. He stiffened suddenly.

"And we've got to ride like hell!" he said sharply. "Somebody else has got the same idea we have!"

Following a tributary creek to the one which had been traveled both ways by Tenaye's party, but heading toward the stone spire marking the cave of which Paco had spoken, another party was working its way. It was obviously moving with stealth and probably under full cover except from the extremely high country on which Gil was now standing.

The direction and care the riders were taking indicated that they'd been scouting and had encountered Tenaye's bunch. Outnumbered, they had possibly kept under cover until Tenaye had made his ride and returned. But there could be little doubt that they had watched Bela's men closely enough to have located their objective and so were now moving up on it to make their own investigation.

It was a small party; five men were all Gil could locate. But they were moving purposefully. Even at this distance it was clear that they were Yankee. Saddle gear and dress were enough to indicate this. Not the big posse Gil had himself expected Simon Blake to put into the hills. Possibly a small segment of a larger group. split up when the big bunch fanned out to comb the hills.

Watching them, Gil thought there was no doubt they'd find Jean Blake's hiding place. And there was even less doubt as to whether they'd try to rescue the girl in the face of the odds they'd find stacked against them.

Riding ahead of the others, as though a special impatience drove him on, was a heavy, blocky man who loomed large, even at this distance. Mark Robson was not a man whose silhouette another would forget, having seen it once. And he was not a man who would turn back from any odds. Gil was sure of this.

It was one thing to rescue Jean Blake from Tenaye's now self-decided bandits, but it was another to see her fall into Robson's hands. That meant her departure from the hills, her return to her father. That meant that Gil Santel, with a far bigger chore than the one which had first brought him into the mountains, was robbed of his strongest weapon and virtually his only one.

It would be a harder night than he had thought.

## VI

The climb to the little glade on the slope of Sierra Blanca where they had stopped was nothing compared to the downward ride. Paco Pigano appeared to share Santel's own compelling impatience. It was almost as though this round little man who had always been half-slave to others, knowing no real freedom of his own, could see some real significance in this ride which would affect the eventual peace and prosperity of this land in which he had been born.

In an hour they were down almost to the level of the monolith marking the cave and too low to keep track any longer of the party riding with Mark Robson. Not knowing this remote and tumbled part of the country, Santel was troubled because he could not properly gauge Robson's speed nor determine just when the man would arrive at the old Indian cave.

Bela Tenaye's sudden revolt in the bandit camp had left Gil without a force of his own with which he could work and he knew he would eventually be forced to a curious kind of an alliance with the Yankees to whom he had before been opposed. For this reason he was reluctant to risk a brush with Mark Robson and those with him, stirring further enmity.

Paco Pigano and Gil had to reach the cave and get away before Robson arrived. That they might not be able to do that was their greatest risk. Although the sun was down behind the high ridge to the westward, there was perhaps an hour of light yet left when they reached the base of the monolith marking the location of the cave. They pulled up. Paco was preparing to dismount when Gil shook his head.

"Wait. You know the country in here. Where would Tenaye have left his guards posted?"

"The cave is really a roofed crevice in the cliff, *señor*," Paco said. "There is open between it and the bank of the creek. A meadow of a

few *Yanqui* acres. The guards would be around this, I think. There's no need for them to be further away."

Gil nodded, figuring time against the distance he believed Mark Robson and his companions had yet to go to reach this place. Paco Pigano had made light of the odds raised against them by the eight men Bela Tenaye had left here. However, four to one were grim odds. Robson and his party would be welcome allies if use could be made of them without their knowledge. And since it was unlikely that any among them actually knew of the existence of the old cave or the terrain about it or that Jean Blake had been brought here, Santel believed it might be possible to do this.

"Stay in the saddle," he told Paco. "We'll work ahead until we can locate the cave and perhaps the guards without being seen. Then we'll wait. When the time comes, we'll ride hard for the cave. I'll take the girl up in front of me. You use your rifle if you have to."

Paco was obviously unconvinced of the practicality of this, but he nodded. They moved ahead like shadows. Light continued to fail, gloom thickening on the floor of the canyon. Timber thinned before them. Through the last of it Santel could see a grassed meadow and beyond it the base of the granite upthrust toward which they had been riding. At the same instant he saw three men idling about a heap of dry brush and deadfall pine knots. By the carelessness of their manner, he knew others were about. His companion saw Tenaye's guards at the same time, drawing up also. Leaning forward in his saddle, Paco pointed toward the granite cliff across the meadow.

Santel looked again and this time saw the shadow of an opening in the sheer face. Before this a tiny, smokeless fire was burning, the light of which cast the figures of two more men in silhouette. Santel nodded. Handling his horse carefully, he set the animal drifting soundlessly through the timber thirty yards back from the edge of the meadow and parallel to it, easing away from the three men idling about the heap of brush and pine knots.

It was touchy business. A horse didn't walk upon cat's feet, and footing had to be watched for fear the snapping of dry stuff on the ground would betray their presence. After a few moments of slow progress, in which they had encountered no more guards and which brought them closer to the mouth of the cave, Santel again reined up.

"Now we wait," Paco guessed in a wry whisper. "What for, *señor*—the luck of the good God?"

Before Gil could answer, the thing for which he had been waiting came. The sound of a group of determined horsemen, plowing headlong through the lowering darkness in the timber. The sound came from beyond the three idling men whom Santel had so carefully avoided. It was almost instantly met by a shout of alarm.

Curiously, this was followed by a wink of light, as though a man had fired a torch in the twilight. However, the flames grew swiftly and Santel realized that for some reason of his own one of the men lingering about the pile of brush and pine knots had touched this alight.

He had no time for further interest in the three men about this point of light or the immediate course of Robson and his companions, whose approach he was certain had set off the alarm in the meadow. Tenaye's two guards at the cave had ducked away from the light of their small fire, apparently out some little distance onto the meadow grass. Because of these things, Gil knew that he and his companion would have, for the next few instants at least, the thing Paco had claimed they were waiting for—the luck of the good God.

With a grunt of command to Pigano, Gil Santel hooked his spurs and lifted his horse into a full, reaching run, breaking from the timber to charge straight toward the mouth of the cave. With his attention fixed on the entrance of the shelter in which Jean Blake was being held prisoner, Santel had only fragmentary impressions of other happenings about the perimeter of the meadow. The brush and pine-knot fire which Tenaye's guards had touched off at the first sound of Robson's approach was now a flaming beacon. The resinous knots in the flames were contributing a thick, black column of smoke which stood straight in the motionless evening air—a dark pencil line against the darkening sky.

Gunfire had broken out somewhere near this beacon. Men were shouting. Gil thought the other two guards Tenaye had left here—men he had not himself yet seen—had come in to join the three about the flaming brush pile in an attempt to check Robson's group at the edge of the meadow. Neither of the two opposing forces realized for the moment that a third was also here in the shadows and for this fragment of time the odds against Paco and Gil, himself, were even—the two guards beside the little fire at the mouth of the cave.

In the open of the meadow, where the horses could run free, distance dropped swiftly. To one side of the cave a man shouted and swung up his rifle. There was a thin line of flame and Santel heard passing lead. The other guard also fired, a little to one side of his companion. This also was a miss. The range cut swiftly to a practical distance and Paco pulled his horse up in a rearing halt, sliding down with his rifle to have the certainty of a prone position for the work he had to do.

Confused shouts were reaching across the meadow as those on the opposite edge, entangled with Mark Robson, realized there was trouble behind them, also. A couple of seconds more and Santel quit his saddle to hit the little patch of gravel before the mouth of the cave, careless

of the light the little fire burning there cast upon him.

Puzzled, startled, half-hopeful over this attack against her captors, Jean Blake appeared in the mouth of the cave. Expectancy in her eyes died as she saw Santel. She turned and would have ducked back, but he seized her.

Perversity or misunderstanding made her struggle. Without taking time for explanation, Santel swung her up by force onto his saddle and pulled himself up behind her. Paco Pigano had fired his rifle twice. Gil thought that one of the guards who had been near the cave was out of the picture and that the other had been driven into deep cover. However, horsemen were now pouring across the meadow—indication that either Mark Robson had broken free of Tenaye's guards or that both parties had tacitly turned together toward this new threat behind them.

As Santel lifted his horse past Paco, the man scrambled up and piled into his own saddle. Thirty . . . forty reaching strides and both animals were into the timber. So they were clear. Relief surged through Santel.

They hammered along the bank of the creek in the floor of the canyon, looking for a ford to the other bank and a way up toward the high shoulders of Sierra Blanca. Suddenly Paco reined up beside Gil, pointing ahead with widened eyes.

At a turn, a quarter of a mile below them, silhouetted against the last afterglow along the western horizon, poured more than a score of hard-riding men. The manner of their riding was identification enough. Gil understood now the brush heap about which three of Tenaye's guards had lingered and the fire which one of them had kindled in it. Its flame and smoke had been a signal. The men below were the little ones from the camp in the hills, now riding like wolves at Bela Tenaye's heels.

Escape from the floor of the canyon was cut off by their approach.

## VII

Santel ducked into a brush thicket for a moment's shelter. Paco's eyes were rolling wildly.

"What I told you before, *señor!*" he grunted. "Bela is shrewd. He expected to find you this afternoon at the cave, coming for this woman. When you did not show up, maybe he knew I was giving you good counsel. But he was still certain you would try to rescue her, so he set a trap for tonight, also. And he was waiting not far away."

Gil nodded impatiently. He had caught the sound of pursuit behind him. Without Bela's reckless leadership he thought the bandit guards left at the cave had probably buckled under the double attack staged by Mark Robson and himself and that those now coming down the canyon along the way taken by Paco and himself were undoubtedly Robson and his men. This was a trap with two jaws, for certain.

"*Seguro!*" he agreed irritably. "But those behind—they don't know the *señorita* is here. They are hunting *bandidos* only. This is one little party. There will be others near. The sound of guns and the lights of that fire—the smoke. Soon all the *Yanquis* in a hundred miles will be here, too. And in this light, they will be careless of their shooting." He spoke directly to the girl for the first time since they had left the cave. "I try to do you a service and it doesn't work, *señorita*," he said. "I'm sorry for that. If you do what I tell you, perhaps there is still a chance—"

This last was in English. However, the girl seemed to have been able to follow the swift Spanish which had passed between Paco and himself. She twisted around so that she could see Gil's face.

"Wait a minute!" she cried. "Then I wasn't taken out of your camp early this morning by your orders? I'm beginning to see what happened."

"The thing you told me of last night," Gil agreed. "I should have seen it for myself."

"But that was only a wild guess," the girl protested. "I was trying to think of anything to make you send me back to my father. Now that terrible man with the devil's smile —what do you call him, Bela?—now he's in command of those hungry people you had camped there!"

Santel felt a shiver pass through her body.

"And they're after you because you know who each of them is and where they hide and they're afraid you might talk!" Jean Blake went on. "They'll hunt you down even more surely than my father and Mark Robson will. Why are you wasting time with me when your own life is in danger?"

It was a woman's question. *Yanqui* or *Californio*, women were the same. They wanted to make any man's purpose or his plans something of which they were a part. Gil thought there was friendliness in this girl with the yellow hair; or, if not friendliness, then a willingness for friendliness to grow between them. But he had not come into these hills in the first place to find a woman and he would not look for one until his work was done.

"For many reasons," he told Jean Blake. "One of them being that you started to teach me a better way than the one I was using to find justice for my people. I wanted to talk more of that. Maybe it might work."

The girl's eyes widened.

"That talk of going into the valleys and getting the people there behind you?" she asked incredulously. "What I told you of what makes Yankee law?" Santel thought almost that she would laugh. "That talk about the good of California and the part you could play in it? You believed that? No wonder every cobbler from the East can steal your land away from you! Yankee law on the frontier is what a man makes with his fists and his guns, you fool! And this is a frontier. It will be

until the Yankee flag is flying over it and there's another square on the map of the States. It will be a frontier until every business is putting dollars into Yankee pockets. Then my father and his kind will go looking for another place that needs them. A whole history like that and you think one man can change it?"

The girl's manner was bitter. Santel realized she was not condoning the things of which she spoke, only pointing them out as facts which could not be altered. However, he was unconvinced. Mark Robson was a Yankee, likely as hard a man as any who rode California grass. But he had shown sympathy for the most flagrantly wronged of Santel's people. And Gil knew that the man was not riding these hills tonight to hunt down a *bandido jefe* who stole a living from his race, but for a girl with whom he was in love. A people who had both sympathy and love in them could not be wholly bad. And a few good Yankees, with the people of California behind them, could make the justice the country needed.

He beckoned Paco to him and spoke so swiftly this time that he was certain the girl could not follow what he said.

"Our plans are changed, little one. Bela will be up on us in moments. We've got to fall back, and when we do, it will be toward the *Yanquis*. Other parties of them will be here shortly. Remember the first one—the one which gave Bela's guards trouble at the cave. We must get close to it. There's a man leading it that I've got to talk to—and at a time when he'll have to listen to me."

Paco nodded solemnly, not comprehending. But the order was enough. Reining his horse about, he rode out of the brush, lining back up along the bank of the creek. Gil turned his own doubly-laden mount free to follow. Behind them, confident that his trap had netted the man he wanted, Bela Tenaye was quirting his party recklessly up the canyon. Night, now almost completely fallen, seemed to catch up the sounds and magnify them. Paco rode steadily but with some care for several moments, reapproaching the meadow in front of the cave from which Santel had lifted Simon Blake's daughter. Short of this, he suddenly reined up and swung down, tying his horse at an alder clump.

"We take a chance on finding these saddles here, waiting and ready to ride, when we need them," he said. "But with everybody else in the canyon still mounted, we will do better afoot."

The girl dismounted obediently with Santel and thrust into the brush behind Paco. They burrowed through this for a quarter of a mile, then halted while the round little man ahead went on to scout. The girl turned to Gil.

"My father holds title to your old *rancho* as well as Tenaye's *Rancho* Ramona," she said. "You hate him for that."

Santel did not reply.

"I don't think you could kill Simon

Blake with a bullet, Gil Santel," she went on. "But you could by not letting him see me again."

Gil nodded. "I've thought of that. Maybe it's not my way."

"But it is Bela Tenaye's. That's why you came after me when you could have easily got entirely out of these hills today."

Gil nodded again and the girl fell silent. Paco was a long time in returning. The charge of Tenaye's men up the canyon had apparently been arrested. Gil thought Bela was efficiently putting a cordon across the narrows to prevent anyone slipping past it down to the ford. Soon he would come on, certain his prey could not escape. With the cessation of sound from below, movement in the upper canyon became audible. Listening closely, Gil thought there were at least three small parties above them. Perhaps more. And he judged at least one of them was afoot.

More minutes passed. Suddenly Gil was aware of the soundless, invisible approach of danger. A sense with which all those raised in the mountains are born. He tensed, drawing his gun. The girl beside him stiffened. A file of men moved silently across a small opening. Darkness made their features indistinguishable, but there was no mistaking the tall, gaunt frame of the last man. Gil's left hand covered Jean Blake's lips. His right clamped hard on the butt of his gun.

The figures filed past. The girl stood motionless, not fighting Gil's grip. When Simon Blake's figure had vanished, he released her. She was silent a cautious moment longer, then whispered to Gil.

"That was my father—your enemy! You could have killed him!"

"And made more enemies for my people? Quiet!"

There was a stir in the brush. Paco appeared. "The *Yanquis* have discovered Tenaye and the little ones," he breathed. "They work toward them. A sudden attack, I think."

"And Robson?"

"Right behind me," Paco answered. "You saw those others? Robson's men follow them."

Gil nodded. He knew now what he had to do. Very much in little time and with small hope for success. He gripped Jean Blake's arm.

"Your life's in as much danger as ours for the next few minutes. Keep quiet. There are others to think about besides you."

The girl's eyes flashed soundless assent. Leaving her, Gil moved forward to the trail Simon Blake and his portion of the now reinforced Yankee party in the canyon had traversed. They were barely settled when Robson's group appeared. Abreast of Gil's hiding place, Robson checked his comrades.

"Still no sign of Jean," he said in a whispered growl. "Santel's men are here; she must be, too. We've spread our own parties so we won't meet. Shoot at anything you see moving and don't miss. With luck

we'll be so close to Santel's bunch they can't retreat. Move along, now—quietly!"

Robson's companions passed him and vanished. The man himself stood tensely for a moment, then wheeled to follow. As he turned, Gil Santel leaped upward and out into the open, his hands before him.

They locked about Robson's throat. Gil's weight was hard-driven and it carried the two of them together into the grass. With serpentine savagery Santel locked his legs about Robson's torso, pinioning the man's arms in this vise. His fingers continued to bite into Robson's throat. The man thrashed on the sod, trying to shake free, but without air his lungs failed him in brief moments.

## VIII

This was the biggest risk. The instant Mark Robson's body slackened, Gil eased the scissors about his torso and the clamp of his fingers. Robson stirred feebly, sucking air. Gil spoke hurriedly:

"Listen close, Robson. I'm Santel. Miss Blake's with me. I knocked you down to keep you from shooting before you heard me out. Understand? Now, can you get Miss Blake safely out of here?"

Robson made a hesitant movement of assent.

"I'm moving on, then. Miss Blake's your woman, I think. Take care of her. You think you're hunting bandits. They're my friends, bandits only because they were fools enough to listen to Bela Tenaye. I've got to get to them and prove Tenaye was wrong. I've got to warn them that Yankees are hunting them."

"You're not bossing those devils down the canyon?"

"I'm no bandit," Gil said.

Robson looked at him. "I'm a damned fool for not killing you where you stand," he growled.

"No; you're wise," Gil corrected. Paco Pigano stepped from the brush behind Robson with his rifle at the ready.

Robson blinked at the weapon. "Where's Jean?" he demanded. The girl came from cover.

"You've got to get me to dad—in a hurry!" she said earnestly.

"Why? Your dad's busy. He'll be skinning himself coyotes until sunup. We couldn't figure why those fools came from hiding and started up this canyon. I see it, now. Santel quit them and took you with him. They're hunting the two of you. What they're going to find is enough guns to send them all to hell. There'll be too many bullets flying down there for you. You're safer here."

"You don't understand!" the girl cried. "This is all wrong. Those men aren't really bandits. Bela Tenaye and a few others, maybe. But the rest are people of the valleys who've been crowded out. They need help, now, not bullets!"

"This isn't a woman's business," Robson growled. "It isn't my business, either. Santel brought everybody with a grudge against your dad and landholders like him into these

hills. It's easier to settle with the lot of them now than to fight it out in courts and before land commissions. In the morning your dad can claim he was looking for you and it was all a mistake, but he'll be rid of talk against him. We'll stay here, Jean—and alone!"

Jean Blake screamed as Robson spun, smoothly drawing and raising his gun. Gil lunged belatedly forward. Paco swung the butt of the rifle in his hands. But these things were too slow. A needle of flame reached out from Robson's gun hand. It blinded Gil. It dealt his head a terrific blow. He didn't hear the explosion of the weapon.

Fire was in Gil Santel's skull. Pain shook him awake. He found himself on his feet, walking between two who supported him on either side. His head was lowered. He saw bloody grass. Fallen men on it, a few of them in Yankee dress. A few yards distant several humbler men, also fallen. Among these, Bela Tenaye. Bela, a wicked grin on his flat lips and no regret of death apparent on his dead face. Two bunches of dead men, no farther apart than the deadly range which often at night separates the surprisers and the surprised. The two supporting Gil halted. One spoke in accented Spanish:

"If Gil could have warned them . . ."

"Perhaps it's as well, *señorita*," Paco's voice answered. "The best of the little ones knew they were wrong here. They escaped. We find only Bela and the dangerous ones—the greedy ones. On the other side it was much—"

"Much the same. Yes. The dead—my father, Colonel Frayne, a few of the most unreasonable. Mark Robson, lying up there where you clubbed him down for shooting a man who was talking to him under a kind of truce. . ." The girl shifted her grip on Gil's arm. "Get us back to the creek, Paco. We'll bathe Gil's head again. And find horses. There's a doctor at Sierra Blanca, staying with us till dad could find him land which could be bought—I guess stolen is really the right word—cheaply enough."

His head still hammering, Gil Santel straightened. He sorted the talk he had heard. He measured the things he had seen lying here on the grass. He understood. Robson, who had been one he had trusted a little, had tried to kill him. But Robson's shot had been hurried and only a deep crease crowned Santel's skull. An instant after the shot Paco Pigano's rifle butt had crushed Robson's own head. Maybe the shot had been warning to those with Bela Tenaye, so that the surprise planned by Simon Blake and his hunters was imperfect. Enough warning for the wisest of the little ones to draw back. Only the fools had stayed with Bela. And of the *Yanquis*, only the fools had pressed the attack with Blake when the surprise failed. Men had died, but peace was born of blood.

Jean Blake caught her breath as

Santel's head came up. Paco Pigano grinned widely.

"It's all right, *capitan*," he said exultantly. "It's all over."

"It's hardly begun," Gil corrected. "With Simon Blake dead, Sierra Blanca belongs to the *señorita*, Paco. Take her there. If she needs you, help her. Later, if you wish, come to Mama Lucien's, on the San Joaquin. She'll know where to find me."

"Sierra Blanca belonged to you once, Gil," Jean Blake protested. "It belongs to you again."

Gil shook his head stubbornly.

"I've too much to do to worry about a *rancho*."

"What are you talking about?"

"Things you've said and others have said and what I have myself thought. This is no time for *bandidos* and bullets. That was my mistake. It's time to think and talk —of new courts and land commissions—maybe even a quiet revolt against Mexico and a new flag here so laws can be made which will consider both *Yanqui* and *Californio*. There are people to see in many places and many arguments to win. It will be a long fight."

"I fell in love with the Santel *rancho* the first day I rode onto it with dad." Jean Blake said quietly. "It would make a better headquarters for what you talk of than this Mama Lucien's. I'll hate leaving Sierra Blanca."

"Leave! Why?"

"What you're talking about was really my idea. even if I didn't believe in it when I tried to sell it to you in your camp night before last. I'm going wherever you go, Gil Santel. If that isn't enough reason, I've got another I might tell you when the moon is right . . . if you ask me as a man should."

Santel thought of himself for the first time in hours, remembering that he had once believed he might want a woman with yellow hair. The task ahead of him would be but half as heavy with so persuasive a *Yanqui* as this beside him. Still, he did not know. He looked appealingly at Paco Pigano, whose round shoulders rose in the expressive shrug of his people.

"When a woman speaks, what can a man do, *capitan?*" Paco asked. "Maybe it's a good thing. This wound in your head, it needs attention. Me, I don't think I could tie the right kind of a bandage for you."

Jean Blake clung to Santel's arm.

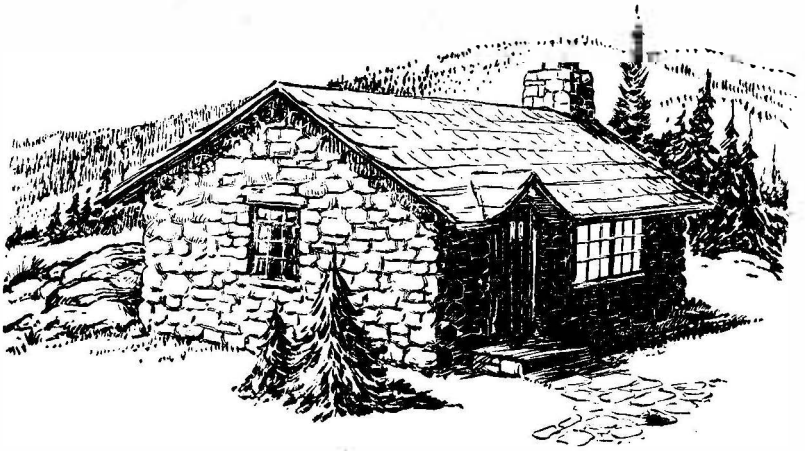
"The sun isn't good for that head, Gil," she said briskly. "We've got to get on home . . ."

So it was this, then: Gil Santel, who had made his name feared in the hills, had after all found a better way to fight the battles facing the people of the two races in the valleys of California, and he had found, besides, something no mountain brigand could ever own. Perhaps there was something to the legend of the luck of the Santels.

"Home . . ." he echoed. In the end a man could want little more.

THE END

*Sticks and stones can make nice homes—*
*but you'll need plenty of elbow grease, too*



# Rock Cabins

**By John A. Thompson**

Logs, mud (adobe), and stone are nature's raw materials for the shelter of mankind. Ever since Hector was a pup, man has used them for building purposes, choosing whichever of the three was handiest, most plentiful or best adapted to the local climate. There is nothing to stop him from using them today.

Stone is the most permanent of the three natural building materials. It is weatherproof, fireproof, and insect proof. Rock cabins don't decay. No termite's teeth are tough enough to undermine the walls of a stone house.

In many sections of the West, particularly in mountainous outdoors country, stone eminently suitable for the main walls of a homestead cabin can be had for the trouble of gathering it up. More pretentious houses, or a comfortable, long-lasting small home, can readily be built of the same material.

All that is required is a simple building plan, cement mortar to bind the stones together—and the willingness to undertake a job that admittedly entails no small amount of muscle-stretching labor. It's work. But if you expended the same energy in a gymnasium it would be called

exercise and you'd be charged plenty for it.

Rock cabins can be built cheaply provided you supply most of the labor yourself, and the stone can be obtained for nothing from your own land, or supplied for little more than the cost of hauling it to your building site. This is an important consideration to many who want and need homes of their own these days of high-cost "bought" housing. Never mind the negative attitude that you never handled or thought of stone before. Try it. A fellow never knows what he *can* do 'til he tries.

But remember one thing. Rock walls rise slowly compared to other methods of house or cabin construction. You can't hurry a job of lifting and laying stone all day. And that elusive element that makes a stone cabin a thing of sturdy beauty rather than just a mish-mash of jumbled rocks depends a great deal on the skill and artistic sense of the builder. A certain amount of art as well as craftsmanship is involved in stone construction.

There are many kinds of stone available. Some can be cut or broken into rough, fairly flat-sided angular blocks. Among the stratified rocks in this class are sandstone, limestone and shale. Unstratified igneous rocks are likely to be granite or lava formations. In stone construction, rocks of both these types are generally laid in courses or layers of mixed-size blocks along the walls. The main objective in working with stone of this—or for that matter any other—texture is to secure an informal, natural appearance in the finished structure.

This is particularly important in smaller homes or cabins as it softens the often cold and "unhomey" look that results from using stone blocks all the same size laid in too precise or evenly matched courses.

Perhaps easier to do—and a more common construction in rock cabins and small homes—is to build the walls from a supply of medium-sized river-wash stones and boulders. These are usually rounded rocks of various shapes and textures. With the use of a little care in their selection and placement they make strong, eye-pleasing walls for any habitation.

But here's a warning. In building with rounded stones and small boulders, the beginner—justifiably anxious to see fast progress—is apt to lay all or most of his larger pieces on the lower courses, then bunch his smaller stones together on the higher portion of the walls. The cabin is just as strong and weatherproof that way. But frankly the appearance of the finished structure is likely to be terrible.

By using foresight in patterning and balancing the large and small rocks as the walls go up, the same number and assortment of stones will produce a finished structure that blends naturally with the country in which it is set. Similarly, a little judgment given the size of the rocks themselves will make quite a dif-

ference in the appearance of the completed house.

Rocks that are too small, or too many small rocks, give the walls a punchboard look. Boulders too large for the size of the building look just about as bad. After all, you want the cabin to look like a lived-in dwelling, not a rock fortress.

It is hard to tell where the too-large and too-small limits rest. Generally speaking, for cabins or small homes rocks roughly 14 inches in diameter are big enough for the larger stones—and plenty heavy enough for the average person to lift or handle. Rocks 6 to 8 inches across should be about the limit on the small side. Smaller ones result in making the walls look as if they were composed of a lot of pebbles stuck in cement. Here and there a small broken piece or fragment may be set in where necessary to blot out a too-heavy showing of mortar.

Whatever kind of rock is used, be sure that the individual stones are washed completely free of all dirt and foreign matter before setting them in the walls. The clean stones can be pre-sorted into piles of small, medium and large-size rocks before actual building is started, or left in a single heap to be picked out as they come, or as different sizes are needed.

Because stone walls are heavy they must rest on a solid foundation. Even where hard-packed solid earth can be readily reached below the ground surface it is best to establish the first course of the walls on a concrete footing. A dug trench the width of the wall and from 6 to 8 inches deep, and filled with poured concrete will tap your pocketbook but it is money well spent. Such a foundation will hold up any rock-walled dwelling of even fairly large size. And it affords a solid, level base on which to lay the first or bottom course of stones.

In laying rock, the walls should be worked clear around the building, course by course, rather than laid to any height along one wall at a time. A moment's thought will make the reason for this obvious. The heavy rocks, laid in a "mud" of thick, strong-binding cement, tend to settle as the cement dries out or "sets." Too many courses of stone piled one above the other before the lower courses have had a chance to harden will cause sags and pressure bulges.

The usual practice is to lay only one or two courses clear around in a day. At night when the cement has partly dried, start with the first-laid stones and scrape them clean of adhering cement on the outer or face side. Then dig out excess cement around the joints, and point up the stones to achieve a neat, finished appearance. More than likely you will find this a welcome change of pace from the business of lifting rocks and fitting them into place that has been necessary to get your courses laid.

Again because rocks are heavy, rock walls even for small homes and cabins must be fairly thick. Twelve

to fourteen inches thick is about right.

To insure the back sides of the walls being smooth and even and facilitate the later interior finish of the building, the best bet is to build a rough plank form along the back of the wall. The rocks, as they are laid, are shoved tightly against this form. The cement or binding mortar will fill in the open spaces.

Then when the walls are completed, though the outside face presents the rough and rugged stone construction appearance that is desired, the inside face is even with no protruding jags of rock to mar its smoothness. Incidentally, once the walls have set and dried, it is an excellent idea to coat or paint the inside faces with some good moisture-proof tar paint. Such a coat will prevent a lot of dampness. Without this moisture-proofing, stone walls have a tendency to sweat.

Additional weatherproofing can be achieved by using heavy insulating building paper nailed to the inside wall by means of furring strips. With this further protection between outside walls and whatever material is chosen for the interior wall covering, you can have as snug and weathertight a home as can be obtained by any modern building method.

As the walls of a rock cottage go up, lay the first or bottom course wholly or mainly with larger stones. This gives the finished wall the look of resting on a strong base. The informal pattern of large and small rocks can then be started on the second course and carried up the full height of the wall.

One reminder should be given here that is simple—but important. When the walls reach a height from which it is necessary to work from a scaffold be sure the scaffold is heavy enough to support the weight of the rocks it will have to carry. A light scaffold may give way under the concentrated dead weight of a pile of building stones. So brace the framework well, and to be on the safe side, use 3 x 12 inch planks for the scaffold flooring.

A strong, thick cement should be used to fill the joints between the stones. The joints themselves should be from ½ to ¾ inch thick where surfaces butt against each other. In using round stones and small boulders they should be fitted so that too much bare cement does not show in one place. Otherwise the walls will lack the eye appeal of close-together rock construction.

The cement itself should be a 1 to 2 mixture, that is 1 part cement to 2 parts clean sand. This makes an exceptionally hard, strong bond such as is required for anything as heavy as rock walls—even in a small or moderately small house. For a building that is just a cabin a 1 to 2½ mixture should be strong enough. A small amount of lime added to the mix will give the "mud" more smoothness and plasticity and make it easier to handle.

Perhaps the best all-around bet is

to buy one of the regularly marketed cement mortars that come neatly packaged, pre-prepared and already has the correct amount of lime mixed in it. The formulas put out by the different manufacturers vary somewhat with the different purposes for which the mortar is to be used—laying brick, cement blocks, stone and so forth. Tell your dealer what you intend to use the stuff for and he can supply you with the correct mix.

With prepared mixes, the guesswork is taken out, and you can be assured of a strong, permanent bond every time, as well as uniformity in every batch of mud you make up. The sand and masonry cement should be mixed in a regular mortar box or tray, and as in almost everything else, there is a right way and a wrong way to do it.

You might as well do it right the first time. The initial step in hand-mixing masonry cement is to dump the sand in the mortar box, then add the cement. Next give the dry material several turns with the hoe before wetting it. This gives the finely ground cement and the sand a chance to become thoroughly intermixed.

When you are ready to add water, add it a little at a time working the mix with a hoe until it becomes damp throughout. Allow one bucket of water for every bag of masonry cement in the mix.

Don't slop the water into the dry mix in such a manner that it will flood the mix. Flooding separates the cement particles from the sand and makes more hoeing necessary to secure an evenly and properly mixed mud.

Once the mixture is uniformly damp, add a little more water slowly and hoe until the mortar is the required consistency and in shape to scoop onto the mortar board. A little practice, a little experimenting and you will soon learn to tell exactly when the mud is ready for use. In laying stone or rock, the mud should lean towards the thick side. Be careful not to add too much water. A mix that is too thin loses its proper handling qualities and its required bonding strength.

As the walls of your rock cabin rise, openings must of course be left at the proper places for doors and windows. There are two ways of doing this. One is to lay the walls against a simple wood form or frame the size of the desired opening. This temporary frame is removed later and the door or window frame inserted.

The second method is to set the finished door and window frames in position as the work progresses and lay the wall up to them.

Either way the actual frames must be securely held in place against the walls by anchoring them into the mortar with heavy lag screws, long nails with the head end resting in the mortar or some other adequate contrivance. Any space intervening between the outer frames and the rock wall must be tightly mudded and pointed up to prevent rain or

moisture from lodging in the crevices and rotting the wood.

Take time and do a good job where wood frames and stone walls abutt against each other. It will pay in the long run.

Instead of anchor nails and so forth wood blocks or short bits of thick planking can be inserted into the mortar. The frames in this case are later nailed directly into the pieces of wood.

Since there will be a tremendous weight of stone and mortar in the wall above the openings, strong lintels must be set above door or window frames. Heavy 6 x 4 inch angle iron 3/8 inch thick is excellent lintel material. The sections should be cut long enough to extend 6 to 8 inches beyond the frame openings on both sides. One reason that extreme rigidity is required in the lintels is that they must take all downward pressure off the actual wooden top pieces of the door or window frames to keep the wood from sagging and the frames themselves plumb.

Sagging frames cause doors or windows to jam, making them impossible to open.

The outside window sills are best and most naturally made of rock or stone of the same texture as the general wall construction. But except in the case of the smallest type of unfinished stone cabin, it is best to make the interior sills of wood as is usual in house construction. The sills can be nailed to wood blocks previously inserted in the mortar for that purpose.

The point to remember is to set the wood blocks in place as the rock walls around the frame are going up. Otherwise you will have the devil's own job gouging out set cement and remortaring in the blocks. Aside from this the joints between the solid stones may not come at the proper places.

When the full wall height has been reached—and no more rock toting has to be done to plague your aching back—heavy upright tie bolts should be set into the top of the side walls. These are to hold in place the wooden top plates of 2 x 6 inch planking on which the roof rafters of your rock cottage will rest.

Rock construction for any cabin or small home is bound to give the resulting building a squat and massive appearance. A good deal of this squatness, however, can be overcome by building the roof with a comparatively high pitch. This draws attention to the roof surface and modifies the massiveness of the structure underneath.

Similarly, sturdy buildings call for sturdy roofs. A rustic, outdoorsy effect can be obtained by using log poles—if they are locally available—for rafters instead of finished lumber and allowing the log ends to project beyond the eaves. This touch of rugged wood adds warmth as well as character to any small rock home. To match the projecting log ends, weathered wood shingles make an ideal covering for the roof.

However, if economy and shelter are the main objectives, any standard roofing material that is adequately protective will do the job. Putting a tile roof on a stone house, though something that is likely to run into money, is a device that will add brightness to the building's appearance and eliminate any drabness that may be inherent in the walls because of the color and texture of the rocks used in their construction.

A labor-saving trick, as far as the necessary openings are concerned, is to build the long side walls of your rock cabin with a single opening for a double window rather than make two separate openings for two smaller windows. Besides making less work, the result is a modern picture-window effect that is as utilitarian as it is attractive.

One thing more. The gable ends of a rock cabin, or small rock house can be suitably filled in between ridge pole and the wall top with any type of rough wood siding.

The final interior finish depends on the type of structure you have in mind, and the purpose for which you intend to use it. Also on the climate. For occasional camping a rough wood finish will provide the proper rugged touch, and a cement floor may be used.

For year-around home living it is better to use some regular interior house finishing—plaster, plasterboard, composition board or whatever wall finish you prefer. And by all means lay a wood floor. They are warmer and—to this writer at least—more homey than the concrete floor jobs.

A wood floor should be prepared for when the foundation and first course of stones are being laid, as a cement ledge about a foot high and 6 inches wide is required along the back of the side walls at their base. A 2 x 6 inch wooden plate is then securely bolted on top of the ledges. The floor joists are set and nailed into the wood plates, and the floor laid on the joists in the usual manner.

These extras in finish and flooring cost money. But if they can be afforded they will prove worth the outlay in the comfort and livability of your home-built rock house. And one thing is certain. You will get good use out of them because, house, cottage or cabin, a well-built stone structure will last forever—or dog-gone close to it.

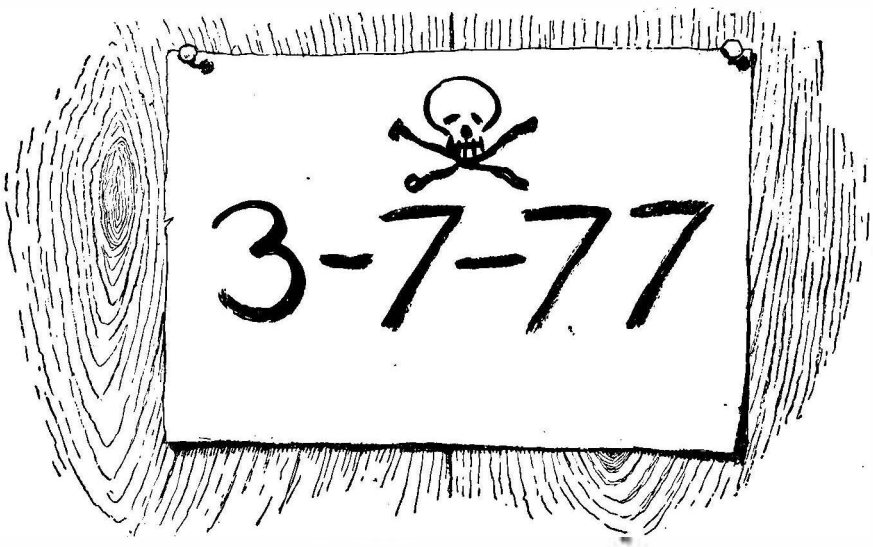
THE END

## A COWBOY TOAST

*May you never lose a stirrup,*
*May you never waste a loop;*
*May your can stay full of syrup,*
*An' your gizzard full of whoop!*

S. Omar Barker

***Jim Dart's new ranch looked like a cowman's paradise until he discovered that it was marked with a skull and crossbones and wore the sinister brand:***




**By Walt Coburn**

I

It was sometime between midnight and daybreak when Jim Dart, leading a pack horse that carried his bedroll and the warsack holding all he owned in the world, reached the Jackson Grady ranch on Grasshopper Creek.

There it was, just as Jackson Grady had described it, dimly visible in the moonlight. A lopsided moon was hidden by the scudding black clouds, and the patches of starlight were rapidly shrinking in size as the storm gathered.

It lay spread out there for Jim Dart to view with the swelling pride of new ownership. The log cabin, barn and cattle shed, the blacksmith shop and wagon shed, the pole corrals, the creek, where the water was plentiful. For miles around, the grass in the coulees grew stirrup high and a man could cut wild hay enough to winter his horses. Young Jim Dart, in his middle twenties, who had always worked for cowhand wages, up until he had struck pay dirt near Bannack, looked upon all he surveyed for a cowman's paradise. He had swapped for this ranch, sight unseen. A prospector's claim for a cow outfit.

"The best of the dicker." Jim Dart looked over the ranch. "I'm shore lucky." He voiced his thoughts, all his wishful dreams and high hopes of adventure, aloud.

There was a raw wind and a few drops of hard rain and the promise of a storm in the hour before daybreak. It is said that in that dread hour before dawn a man's blood is at its low pulse and if a dying man lay at death's door and was clinging desperately to the thinning thread of life, in that hour he would be apt to let go, let life slip through his dying grip.

"A two-by-twice strip of sand bar" —Jim spoke his thoughts aloud as he headed for the log barn leading his pack horse—"swapped for all this. I got the best of that deal."

The ears of his saddle horse came up and the animal slowed his running walk, his gait changing as though he were frightened, spooked at something.

Jim Dart was, for the most part, a man who was afraid of nothing. But as he rode nearer the barn, a shiver threaded along his spine and it was like a cold wire. He shared the fear of the unknown that had spooked his horse.

The ridge log of the barn extended about ten feet out and was perhaps twenty feet above the ground. Stretched by a rope from near the end of the ridge log was the dead body of a hanged man.

Jim Dart had his old wooden-handled cap-and-ball six-shooter in his hand when he finally coaxed his spooked horse up close to the hanged man. Jim had seen dead men before. Men who had been shot to death or stabbed. But the cowboy from Texas was looking at the first man he had ever seen who had been hung by a strangler's rope. And it made him cold inside and a little sick.

Somebody had tied a black silk neck handkerchief across the upper part of the dead man's face. His wrists had been tied behind his back with a short length of halter rope. But in his struggles, perhaps as the noose had tightened around his neck, the man had freed his hands and clawed the black silk neck scarf from his face and had got one hand under the hangman's noose. The result was grisly. The skin a purplish black and a black tongue protruding from the slack jaw and the lips flattened back to show teeth that were ghastly white against that horrible death mask with its glazed bulging eyes staring into the night.

Jackson Grady had been a handsome man, a careful dresser in town, with a clean-shaved lower jaw and a neatly trimmed black mustache.

Now with that hangman's knot under one ear and twisting his head sideways, there was little about that horrible dead face to tell Jim Dart that this was Jackson Grady, gambling man and saloon-keeper, trader for profit. A sort of fancy Dan around Bannack.

Jim Dart worked his saddle horse up closer. On the dead man's vest was a placard. A torn page from

one of the books in which he marked the debits and credits of his saloon trade and the men who owed him gambling debts or money on business deals, paid or unpaid. A blank page crudely torn from a ledger and pinned to his vest. And boldly penciled across the blank paper, perhaps with a cartridge ball, was a crudely marked cabalistic sign: A skull and crossbones under which was printed "3—7—77."

The death warning sign of the Vigilantes was pinned to Jackson Grady's fancy vest with a gold nugget necktie stickpin. The dead man was barefooted and the soles of his feet were badly burned.

Jim Dart was no easy man to scare. But there was something about this business of the hanged man that threw a nameless fear into him—a fear of the unknown.

"*Why?*" Jim Dart voiced it in a sort of whisper.

Jim Dart was a Texan. A six-foot, rawboned man with coarse, straight black hair and a lean, flat-planed face. He had a hawk-beaked nose and a straight-lipped mouth whose corners were hidden by a black, drooping mustache. There was a quiet sort of hardness to his eyes. Eyes that were sparked dull red when he had to reach for a gun. Reared in the tradition of the Alamo and schooled in the tales handed down from the battle of San Jacinto, his father a Captain in the Texas Rangers, Jim Dart had been orphaned at sixteen. He had punched cows for the big outfits in Texas and even at that early age he was considered a top hand.

Being a kid among older men, Jim had learned to listen and observe rather than to brag. It spoke well for him that he had ridden the point of the trail herd that came up from Texas that late spring, to be sold in the big fertile Deer Lodge Valley. He seemed older than his twenty-five years because he was a quiet, soft-spoken man. With a solemn pride taken from the fact that he was a true Texan.

There was a job waiting for Jim with the Deer Lodge Valley cow outfit that had bought the Texas trail herd, but the gold fever caught him and he laid aside his saddle and let his two private horses get fat on the Montana grass. He got himself a miner's pick and gold pan and staked out a placer claim but always with the notion that if he struck pay dirt he would swap his placer-mining claim for a little cow outfit of his own.

At Bannack Jim had met Jackson Grady, gambler and saloon man. They had met in Cyrus Skinner's Saloon next door to the Goodrich Hotel, the first hotel in Montana. Later, there in the armchairs in front of the Goodrich Hotel, the two men had talked and Jim Dart had expressed the desire to sell out his placer holdings and buy himself a little cow outfit of his own. Jim said that Montana looked almighty good to him for a cow country.

Jackson Grady, whose full name

was Andrew Jackson Grady, claimed he owned just such a ranch, with a couple of hundred head of cattle, a little cavvy of saddle horses and a couple of teams of work mules. He had stopped there a few times in his travels when it had been used as a stage station. And he went on to describe the buildings and corrals and hay meadows.

"I took it in on a poker debt, Dart," Grady explained. "It belonged to a man named Zack Cristian and he ran it as a stage station. Where, when or how he acquired the cattle, I don't know. I never asked. He made his money mostly from the saloon he ran at his stage station on Grasshopper Creek and from his gambling. Zack Cristian was what we call a tinhorn gambler. I let him get into debt gambling at my place in Bannack. Perhaps Cristian got into bad company. I never asked and I don't believe in a man's guilt until it is proven. Here . . ."

Jackson Grady took from an inside pocket of his coat, a folded newspaper. It was a copy of the Montana *Post* printed at Virginia City, Montana. It bore the date of July 21, 1866. The notice was on Page 5, Column 2. And as Jim Dart scanned it over Grady's shoulder, the gambler read it aloud:

VIGILANCE NOTICE

We see bills posted round town, which go on to state, that whereas divers foul crimes have been committed—or words to that effect—that the bills are posted up for the purpose of warning all whom it may concern that the Vigilance Committee intends to make it pretty warm for all malefactors, in every case where the civil authorities are unable to enforce the proper penalty of the law. The "Piece" bears the date of July 19th. We judge the bill means "Business in a minute." For particulars see small bills.

When Jim Dart had absorbed the import of the Vigilance Notice, Jackson Grady folded the newspaper and put it back in his inside coat pocket, smiling thinly.

"There is the rumor that whenever a man finds that cabalistic skull and crossbones sign that reads 3—7—77 pinned to his door or to the flap of his tent or on his wagon, it's the warning of the Vigilantes. They say that the man so marked will be given 3 hours, 7 minutes and 77 seconds as a warning to leave camp. To quit the country."

"There are only sixty seconds to a minute, not seventy-seven seconds." Jim Dart grinned faintly.

"The pioneers are a whimsical lot," said Jackson Grady. "Perhaps the sound of it—Three—Seven—Seventy-seven—tickled their fancy. It has a grim and mysterious sound. In some instances it will be written 3—11—77, but its meaning is the same. That cabalistic number 3—7—77 comes originally from the Vigilance Committee in California where it meant a warning of death.

"A man in Butte, Montana, said he understood that warning to mean a grave that was 3 feet wide, 7 feet long, and 77 inches deep.

"Anyhow, the Vigilantes never

exact the death penalty except where proof of that accused man's guilt is absolutely proven. But those left unhung by the Vigilantes are under grave suspicion and those suspicions of guilt are almost a certainty. The suspected men are allowed to live but they are banished from camp. And if an accused man was wise, he would quit the country and lose no time about his going.

"Zack Cristian was in debt on my gambler's book. He came to me with a slip of paper that had been pinned to his door. On that slip of paper was that Vigilante sign, with a skull and crossbones. Cristian signed over to me his place on Grasshopper Creek. For boot I gave him what money I had in my gambler's pocket bankroll. I never saw nor heard from him again.

"The Zack Cristian place on Grasshopper Creek is doing me no good at all. I don't know how much pay dirt can be panned from your placer claim but I'm gambler enough to take a chance. If you want to swap with me."

Jackson Grady had described the place in detail. He had told Jim Dart how to get there. And up until right now the young Texan did not see how he could lose. Because that placer claim could be no more than a pocket and when he'd panned the pocket to the last ounce of gold, there would be no more. But when a man had cow country and the buildings and corrals built, he had more than a gouged-out hole in a sand bar.

Riding up to the Zack Cristian place on Grasshopper Creek, Jim Dart's heart had swelled with pride. This ranch belonged to him. To Jim Dart, Texan, who had traveled to Montana to make it his home, call it his home range.

Now, in this low-ebb hour before daybreak, Jim Dart was not so certain.

It was clabbering up in the sky for a storm and spitting rain. Jim Dart scouted around for any sign of bushwhackers before he unsaddled and slipped the pack from his bed horse. There was hay in the mangers as though somebody had fed saddle horses, then ridden them away before they had finished eating. There were half a dozen stalls in the barn. The sign showed that all the stalls had been used.

It was raining hard by the time Jim Dart cut the hangman's rope and carried the dead man into the barn. He found an old dirty wagon sheet to cover the body for a shroud.

The sky was a leaden gray when daybreak came. A drizzling rain was falling. All of Jim Dart's joy in the new possession of an outfit of his own was dimmed now, as bleak as that cold gray dawn.

## II

So far as Jim Dart could read the sign, there had been six men in the hanging party. He spent an hour or longer prowling around. He kept his hand on his gun and moved cautiously. He had broken no law of

the Vigilance Committee, so far as he knew. He had robbed no one, joined no road agent gang, pulled a gun on no man, even in self-defense. Jim Dart was a stranger in a strange land and he had conducted himself accordingly. He had complied with the laws of Montana in filing on his placer claim.

His only crime, then, would be in swapping that placer claim for this ranch on Grasshopper Creek. It might have been that Jackson Grady had no legal right to the ranch. If he had acquired it by dishonest methods, then the Vigilantes might believe Jim Dart was in cahoots on a crooked deal, Jackson Grady's partner in crime, and therefore guilty with the man they had hung. But by the same token, Jim would be entitled to a fair trial.

Jackson Grady had told a straight enough story as he and Jim Dart sat with their armchairs tilted back against the front of the Goodrich Hotel at Bannack: How he, Grady, had acquired the ranch on a gambling debt. Jackson Grady was a likable man, friendly of manner and seemingly forthright in his dealings.

In the short time Jim Dart had known Grady he came to like him as a man. Grady ran a saloon and he was a gambler by profession. But that was nothing against him. An honest saloonman in any frontier town was a man entitled to respect, providing he ran a respectable place and did not make a practice of rolling drunks for the money in their pockets or did not affiliate himself with the outlaw element in any manner. And from the little Jim Dart had learned of Jackson Grady, he was a square gambler whose games were on the level.

Concerning the man Zack Cristian, Jackson Grady had mentioned his name with a faint contempt. He had called Zack Cristian a "tinhorn." It meant Cristian's gambling was shady and that he was not above dealing from a cold deck. That his cards were marked and his dice were loaded.

Zack Cristian had received his warning to quit camp, leave the country. He had showed Jackson Grady the paper marked with that warning 3—7—77 and Grady had given him what money he had in his pocket for a getaway stake. It had been no more than a gesture of generosity on Jackson Grady's part. Therein lay his only breach of the law. You don't hang a man for that.

Jim Dart recalled his parting with Jackson Grady. They had gone down the street to his saloon and Grady had taken paper, pen and ink and written Jim Dart out a bill of sale for the ranch known as the Zack Cristian ranch on Grasshopper Creek. The bill of sale included all improvements and whatever livestock was in Cristian's ZC brand.

In return Jim had signed over his placer claim. He and Jackson Grady had shaken hands on the deal and had a drink of whiskey to bind it.

So far as Jim knew, Jackson Grady had no intention whatever of leaving Bannack. But in routing Jim Dart

there, the gambler had outlined a sort of roundabout trail and he had explained why.

He told Jim that as long as he intended to make that his home, it might be a good idea to make a circle around that would give him a better idea of the surrounding range and the condition of that free range and what he had for creeks and waterholes. It would give Jim an idea how many cattle he could run on the range that went along with the ranch.

Because it had seemed like sound, sensible advice, Jim had followed it. Curbing his impatience to get there and see what he had for a layout, he had taken his time and camped out along the somewhat circuitous route. He had taken a little grub and coffee with him and along the way he had gotten a lot of pleasure out of viewing the cow country and sort of day dreaming how he might, during the years, spread out his range to include a big cow outfit.

So if Jackson Grady had for some unknown reason changed his mind and decided to take a direct route here to the Zack Cristian ranch on Grasshopper Creek, he would have reached here yesterday or before sundown.

But why? Why had he made that long ride?

For the life of him, Jim could not imagine Jackson Grady having anything in the way of a shady, crooked deal in mind. Unless the gambler, for some unknown reason, had violated the laws of Montana and had quit Bannack and was making a getaway. And the Vigilantes had foreseen his move and had lain in wait for him here.

There was a log cabin that had been used as a saloon. It was fitted with a pine-slab bar, a couple of card tables and some barroom arm chairs. There was a half-emptied jug of whiskey on the bar and half a dozen dirty shot glasses. A deck of cards was scattered on one of the poker tables and some of the cards had spilled on the dirt floor as if a card game had been suddenly interrupted and the six men had stopped for a drink at the bar on their way out.

There, on the outer side of the saloon door was that notice of grim warning: 3—7—77. It had been marked there by men who had plenty of time because it had been branded on the wood with a hot branding iron. The branding irons had been thrown carelessly aside. One was an iron fashioned in a letter C. The other branding iron was a Z with the lower part of the Z hammered and twisted back so as to make the stamp branding iron into a 7. Those were Zack Cristian's ZC stamp-branding irons. They were small. Horse irons used to brand Zack Cristian's cavvy.

There was a keg of whiskey behind the bar and as near as Jim Dart could tell by shaking it, it was about half full.

The cook cabin consisted of a kitchen that joined the front room where a long table and benches were set, and there was a heating stove in the corner. The kitchen was equipped

with a sheet-iron kitchen range, cooking utensils, tin dishes, steel knives and forks and spoons in a drawer. There was a supply of grub.

The table had been set for six men and the dirty dishes left unwashed. A couple of dirty skillets were on the stove and some old biscuits left in the bread pan. Stale coffee grounds were in the coffeepot on the back of the cook stove. The place showed a slovenly disregard of the unwritten law of the range that a man's door latch is free to the traveler, but a man who partakes of the frontier hospitality, is duty bound to leave the place as he found it, with dishes cleaned and the cabin swept.

Whoever had been here must have been too careless or in too big a hurry to clean up after themselves.

Certainly it gave the Vigilantes a black mark. And the members of the Vigilance Committee were supposed to be hand-picked for their honesty and law-abiding habits, the prominent citizens of the Territory of Montana.

The more of such sign Jim Dart read, the more uneasy he became. It was a dread uneasiness, and it tautened a man's nerves and raised his hackles. Jim had nothing to fear from the Vigilance Committee. But he had everything to fear from men who had all the earmarks of lawless renegades. Outlaws who might be masquerading as Vigilantes. Murderers who used the cabalistic sign of the Vigilantes.

"I don't like the looks of this," Jim Dart told himself. "I don't like it."

He felt empty-bellied, rather than hungry. He knew that even if he cleaned up this mess of dirty dishes and went to the trouble of cooking a meal, the chances were he couldn't eat it. But he kindled a fire in the kitchen stove and scoured out the coffeepot and made a big pot of strong black coffee. If he had been a drinking man he would have helped himself to the liquor in the saloon.

When he had gulped down his third big cup of the hot coffee he felt in better shape to tackle the job ahead of him. It was drizzling rain and the sky was the color of a dirty gray blanket. He found a pick and shovel inside the blacksmith shop and located a little knoll where he set about digging a grave.

"Three feet wide," he said grimly, "seven feet long and seventy-seven inches deep, accordin' to the figures as set down in the rules and regulations of the Vigilance Committee."

The job might have been easy for a grave digger. But Jim was sweating and his back ached. His clothes were sodden from the rain and the bottom of the grave was sticky mud and he stood ankle deep in the gumbo muck.

The bunkhouse had a row of built-in pole bunks. There was no bedding but Jim found a couple of long wool sacks filled with hay for a mattress and he carried one of these outside and laid it in the bottom of the grave. And he took a big canvas wagon sheet out there.

Then he went to the barn, sodden, his boots muddied and water dripping from his hat brim, to get Jackson Grady's body.

He had to force himself to search the dead man's pockets. But they had all been emptied and turned inside out. Jim was arranging the dead man's clothing in decent shape when he felt something flat and about the size and shape of an envelope inside the lining of one shop-made boot. He slit the hand-sewn thread along the boot top and found a flat oblong leather case. It was like a long wallet and when he opened it there was a tintype picture of a girl. A girl of about twenty.

There was nothing remarkable in her beauty. She had sleek dark hair that looked blue-black and heavy in texture. From under black brows, a pair of gray eyes looked straight at Jim, her lips faintly smiling. She had a straight nose and firm chin. There was strength of character, rather than beauty in the girl's face. Jim Dart liked her looks. He read courage there in her eyes, pride in the tilt of her head. And her mouth was wide and generous.

The wallet held but a single sheet of paper, folded. It retained a faint odor of perfume. Jim Dart unfolded the notepaper and read the neat handwriting:

Dear Andy:

I don't know what else to send you for a Christmas gift. So this *picture* is to remind you what I look like. San Francisco can be very lonely without you. Though you have given me everything I could wish for or ever need, except yourself. I am not complaining. Nobody loves a whiner. But the day you send for me to come to you—that day the sun will shine! No matter how the fog lies across the Golden Gate, the sun will come through to shine down. It has already been too long since we parted. Until that day when we are together again, I shall pray for you. May God bless and protect you.

Ursula

Jim folded the note and replaced it. He gazed for a long time at the tintype of the girl named Ursula before he replaced it in the leather case. He was going to put it back in the dead gambler's pocket and bury it with the dead man. Then, prompted by some strange impulse, he opened his warsack where it lay in his bedroll and hid the leather case inside one of a pair of buckskin gloves.

Then he lifted the dead body of the hanged man in his arms and carried it up to the grave. Wrapping it in the big canvas wagon sheet, he lowered it in the grave to rest on the hay-filled burlap. Then he shoveled in the fresh clods of earth on top of it.

Jim Dart stood there bare-headed beside the grave of Andrew Jackson Grady, gambler, and tried to remember some kind of a prayer to recite over the body.

He had watched men buried, with the benefit of clergy. He had listened more than once to what some circuit rider parson had said at the graveside. But for the life of him Jim could not recollect any prayer and finally he pulled on his hat.

His eyes were hard and black and bleak when he walked away from the gambler's grave. Somehow Jim Dart knew in his heart that Jackson Grady had been murdered and his thoughts were confused with the picture of the girl named Ursula. Her prayers to God for His protection had failed her. She would never again see the man she loved. The man who some day, she hoped, would send for her to join him here in Montana Territory.

As Jim walked down to the log buildings below, his muddy pick and shovel slung over his shoulder, he found himself resolved. While he had stood beside that grave, trying to recall some word of forgotten prayer, something of that resolution, that promise to the dead gambler, to the girl of the picture named Ursula, was forming in his heart. Now as he walked down the little hill, it took shape and he was determined in his own mind to find out, if possible, how to get word to that girl, that Andy Jackson Grady was dead. He would tell her that he had given the dead gambler as decent a Christian burial as he could give the man and he would try to keep from her anything that might hurt her.

## III

Jim Dart cleaned up the dirty dishes. He cooked his supper and ate it alone. But instead of carrying his bedroll to the bunkhouse, he cleaned out an empty stall and spread hay for bedding, laying out his tarp and blankets there. He shut the barn door and fastened it on the inside. Then he pulled off his boots and crawled into bed with his warsack for a pillow and his six-shooter and saddle gun alongside him. He wanted to be close to his horses in case somebody tried to set him afoot.

Outside it had settled down to a steady rain. The wind had let up and the rain dripped off the sod roof of the log barn.

Jim had changed to dry clothing. He was tired and he had eaten a good supper. But sleep would not come. He would close his eyes and doze off, only to come awake with every nerve in his body pulled taut. It was as if he kept waiting for something to happen. For somebody to come riding up out of that rain-soaked black night.

He had taken the nugget stickpin and the sheet of paper torn from an old ledger, with the grim cabalistic skull-and-crossbones warning, 3—7—77, written on its blank paper with a cartridge ball. He had put them in the leather case together with the tintype and the note from the girl named Ursula. Wrapped in the gauntlet glove they made a flat surface inside his warsack which he was using for a pillow. The hanged man disturbed him. He could vision every feature of the girl in his thoughts. And there was something else that was vaguely disturbing him. He tried to remember and bring it into the focus of his thoughts.

It must have been far into the night and he had dropped off into a

weary and sleepless half doze when he came wide-awake and what had been out of reach of his memory, now came into his recollection and stood out clearly.

While Jackson Grady and he had sat together out in front of the Goodrich Hotel at Bannack, chairs tilted back and making their dicker, it had happened.

Some gambler, down on his luck, came along and spoke to Grady, calling him by name.

"I hate to tackle you, even for the loan of a dollar, but I need the price of a meal. I've hocked everything. All I got left is this stickpin. I found this nugget and had it made into a stickpin. The nugget's worth fifteen dollars. I kept it for luck. But if you'll loan me five dollars on it . . ."

"Keep it, Sontag. You know I never wear jewelry, not even a pair of cuff links or a ring or a tie pin. Wouldn't own a stickpin if it had a thousand-dollar diamond set in it. Keep your nugget stickpin. Here's twenty." And Grady had handed the gambler a twenty-dollar gold piece.

"Another tinhorn," said Jackson Grady as the man pocketed the money and went on. "A good gambler but he can't keep from cold-decking the cards. Sontag worked for me as a dealer but I caught him cheating and warned him, and the next time I caught him I kicked him out of my place. He's a boozer, and whiskey and cards never mix. He'll slip around back into Cyrus Skinner's Saloon. Drunk, he'd double-cross his own mother for a bottle of hooch. He's mixed up in bad company. Wouldn't surprise me if he's gotten his 3—7—77. . . . Odd thing, but I don't like even jewelry on a woman."

Jim Dart remembered now. He did not even have to open his warsack and look in the leather case. He had seen that gold nugget stickpin before. It was the same large gold nugget stickpin that a man named Sontag had tried to hock to Jackson Grady.

That nugget stickpin had been used to pin that paper with its 3—7—77 to the vest of the hanged gambler.

Jim was wide-awake there in the pitch-dark barn when somebody tried the barn door. Tried it cautiously and found it securely fastened from the inside of the barn.

In his sock feet, gripping his Colt six-shooter, Jim went to the door. He stood there listening.

". . . He's inside . . . with the door fastened shut. . . . It's no go. Them Texans kin shoot. . . ."

"Perhaps you'd ruther hang. . . ."

"I'd rather take my chances on hangin' than git gut-shot. Or if you're feelin' lucky?"

"Not that lucky. Let's get to hell gone. . . ."

They moved away in the rain-soaked night. Moved away on foot.

Jim pried a strip of chinking from between the logs and peered out. He could see nothing. Then sounds came from the saloon. Somebody had stumbled over a chair in the

dark and cussed. But it was quite a while after that before Jim heard sounds of horses' hoofs sloshing in the mud and he could tell by that sound that there were more than two riders and that they were riding off into the black drizzle.

After that there were no further sounds though Jim lay half-awake in the dark barn. His night prowlers had come and they had gone. In the morning he noticed that the jug he had seen the day before was gone and he reckoned they had run out of booze and had filled the jug and taken it along with them.

The storm had passed and the sun rose in a rain-washed blue sky, crimson and orange-streaked in the dawn. A meadowlark warbled its morning song. As Jim led his two horses to water, last night's rain-filled blackness, with its dread and fear and the unwelcome visitors, took on the unreality of a bad nightmare.

With the damp, sodden ground sending up steam in the first warm sunlight and rain-wet grass a vivid green, the thought came to the Texan that it should be haying time. He felt hungry and he pulled the clean sunlit air deep into his lungs. And while his horses drank, he too drank his full upstream, and washed his hands and face and dried off on the towel he had dug out of his warsack.

Jim Dart, Texan, filled with the zest for living, his troubles dissipated in the morning sunlight, told himself it was good to be strong and healthy. It was a splendid thing to be alive and standing on his own land and he could rightfully claim all the free range about him. He told himself that he had the world by the tail and he stood bareheaded and stared with puckered eyes that were alight with pride, taking in all the country around him, as far as the skyline.

There was the clean pungent smell of the rain-washed sagebrush. Jim had ridden up on the ranch with the storm gathering. And now as he looked down the creek he could sight some loose horses grazing along the creek, partly hidden by the tall sagebrush and the patches of high greasewood. And he spotted cattle grazing out beyond.

Directly he had breakfast he'd saddle up and get a range count on the horses and cattle that he'd gotten along with the ranch.

When a man is in his twenties, and he is a cowboy and has courage along with his dreams of high adventure, he can shake off troubles and fear. Jim Dart basked in the early sunrise, in the sheer exuberant joy of being alive and in possession of his first cow ranch.

"The world by the tail," Jim Dart spoke aloud. "I shore got the world by the tail!"

Then he looked up yonder at the new grave on the hill, and the grin died slowly and the sunlight went out of his eyes, leaving them black and opaque. He had fetched the leather case in his pocket. He took it out now and took from it the tintype pic-

ture of the girl named Ursula. For a long time he looked at it.

Studying it, he tried to read the true character of the black-haired girl whose gray eyes looked into his with steady, frank sincerity.

"Ursula . . ." Jim Dart spoke the name softly, almost with reverence. "Ursula . . ."

Then he shook his head as if awakening from some wishful dreaming. He put the tintype back in its leather case and into his pocket and it was done with abruptness.

"Don't be a bonehead! The lady belongs to another man. The gamblin' man called Andy Jackson Grady . . . A kind of Fancy Dan . . . A square gambler . . . A polished gentleman. The kind of man who has education and fine manners and knows words that a lady likes to hear. His clothes cut to order by a tailor . . . Lily-fingered, but a man for all that. . . . Don't act the damn fool, mister. You're nothin' but a cowhand. The lady named Ursula is what's called quality folks, and so was Andrew Jackson Grady, gamblin' man. The lady was thinkin' of him, mister, when she smiled and her eyes looked like that—prideful. They belonged to one another and that's a fact. Come from the same stock. Quality folks, thoroughbreds . . . You got your sights raised plumb to the last notch . . . better lower 'em right now . . ."

Jim did not give voice to his thoughts. But something of the brightness of the sunrise was dimmed as if an invisible cloud had crossed there.

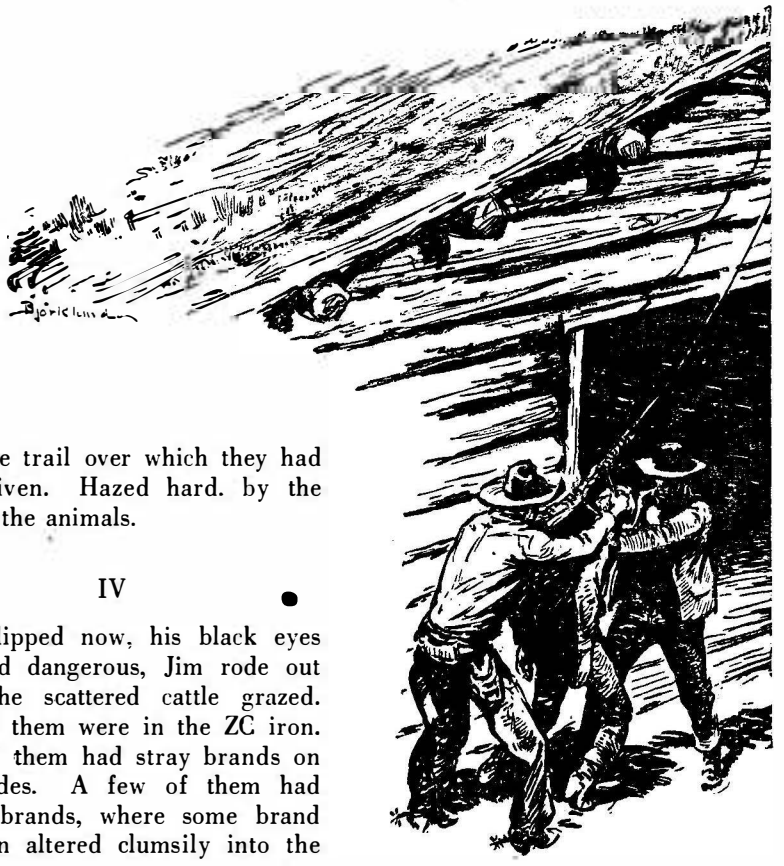
He led his two horses back to the barn and fed them and all the grim reality of life and what he had to face sobered him. He went on, first to the saloon where he found muddied tracks on the hard-packed dirt floor and he prowled around hunting for sign.

Later he cooked his breakfast. He made the coffee strong. There was bacon and bread and he set a pot of beans to soak. He tidied up the cook cabin before he left.

Then Jim saddled up and rode away to get some kind of a range count on his horses and what cattle were in sight. The feel of a good horse under him brought back something of that early-morning zest for living.

"A man kin dream," he told himself.

He rode down to where the scattered horses grazed. And his grin faded slowly, stubbornly, and his black brows were pulled into a scowl. There were about fifty head of horses and they were all good. But only a few head wore the ZC brand. And the brands on the other horses were blotched. Those horses had not been there yesterday. They had been driven here during the night, dropped here below the ranch on good feed and water. Nobody need tell Jim that they were stolen horses left here during the rainy night on the ranch that now belonged to him. The rain had washed away what tracks they had made



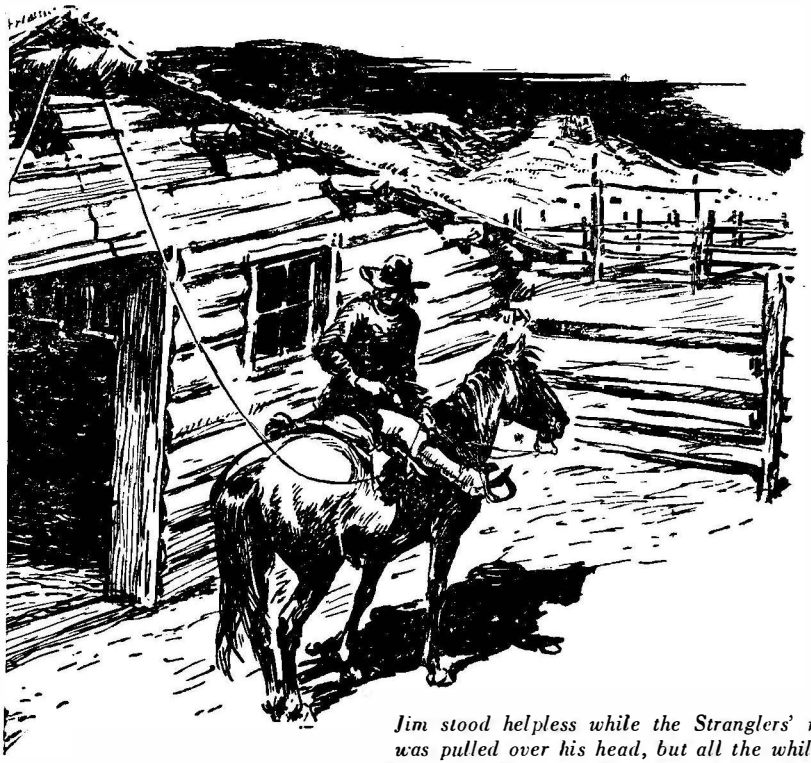
along the trail over which they had been driven. Hazed hard. by the looks of the animals.

## IV

Grim-lipped now, his black eyes hard and dangerous, Jim rode out where the scattered cattle grazed. Some of them were in the ZC iron. Some of them had stray brands on their hides. A few of them had worked brands, where some brand had been altered clumsily into the ZC iron.

Jim had a notion to ride back, load his bed and pull out. He had a bill of sale for this outfit and if any member of the Vigilantes should ride up and find a bunch of stolen horses on his land, cattle with worked brands and too many strays on the range he claimed, it would be just too bad for Jim Dart. Montana Territory had its Vigilante laws. And they hung a horse thief. Common horse sense told Jim Dart to pack up and drift and to lose no time about his going.

But Jim had swapped a good placer claim for this ranch on Grasshopper Creek. Jackson Grady had acted in good faith, and Jim Dart, Texan, was willing to gamble on it. This had all the ugly earmarks of a framed-up deal. But Jackson Grady had had no part in it.



*Jim stood helpless while the Stranglers' noose was pulled over his head, but all the while his hand was edging stealthily toward Sontag's gun.*

Therefore, Jackson Grady had been murdered. And whoever had lynched the gambler was trying to scare Jim Dart off. If he was damn fool enough to stay here, claim what rightfully belonged to him, he stood a good chance of being hung from the ridge log of his own barn.

The more he thought about it, the more Jim was determined to stay. A man doesn't like to be run off what he claims for his own. He'd be a rank quitter. A coward. And a man had to live with himself the rest of his life. Jim Dart was prideful.

"I can't be lettin' a brave man like Cap Dart," he grinned flatly, "turn over in the grave his Texas Rangers dug for him."

Jim was playing his string out. He laid no bragging claim to toughness but since he could remember he had taken his own part. And somehow he had the notion that he, Jim Dart, was, in some manner, responsible for the hanging of Jackson Grady. He didn't trouble himself to figure out the why or wherefore of that feeling.

"If ever I meet up with that lady named Ursula, I want to be able to look her in the eye," he told himself.

Jim was hungry for fresh meat. He found a fat yearling and drove it with a little bunch of cattle towards the ranch. He corraled the cattle, roped the yearling and knocked it in the head with an ax and stuck it, slitting the jugular to bleed it. Butchering the beef, he quartered it and hung the quarters. He got a dishpan from the cook cabin to hold the kidneys, the heart and liver and brains and a strip of marrow gut. And he hung the beef hide with the ZC brand on the fence.

He was hungry for fresh meat. But more than that, he had butchered the first beef in his own iron that he ever owned. He carried the filled dishpan into the kitchen. He'd build himself what the cowboy calls a son-of-a-gun and he'd use the tallow to make a raisin suet pudding that is also called a son-of-a-gun-in-a-sack. Both were delicacies of the cow camps.

Sort of a celebration, Jim figured. Two sons-of-guns; his own beef; the first supper at his own home ranch. He wished those cowhands who had come up the trail with him could be here to help him sort of celebrate the occasion. There was even a saloon here where they could whet their appetites. But those boys were headed back for Texas.

Jim built a fire and put his grub on to cook. A big roasting pan in the oven, a makeshift steam boiler to steam the sacked suet pudding. He kept a slow fire and squatted outside on his hunkers to smoke, always watching the skyline for riders, and the daydreams of a cowboy drifted through his thoughts.

Those daydreams always built up around the tintype of a girl named Ursula. A girl Jim had never met . . . had never known. He had never heard the name before and it made for a sort of magic. Ursula . . . Ursula . . . And she became a part of the mystery. Along with the gambler Jackson Grady, whom she called Andy. . . .

It was sundown and the two sons-of-guns about cooked when Jim sighted a lone rider coming along the trail from the direction of Bannack. One lone man on horseback.

Jim had kept his long-barreled Colt six-shooter buckled on. His saddle gun leaned against the log wall of the cabin. Squatted there on his boot heels, he watched the horseback coming, traveling at a jog trot.

Jim waited there until the rider came up within hailing distance. Then he recognized the man and got slowly to his feet. But he kept his hand on his six-shooter and stood there close enough to reach for his saddle gun.

The rider was a man whom Jim had met but casually during his brief stay at Bannack. Usually the man hung out at Cyrus Skinner's Saloon, next door to the Goodrich Hotel. He was a six-footer and broad-shouldered with lean flanks. He had

curly yellow hair and a yellow mustache that he kept trimmed with the ends twisted.

A fancy dresser, he wore his pants legs shoved into his boot tops and he always wore a buckskin shirt without fringe or beadwork and Indian-tanned to glove-leather softness. He was the only two-gun man around Bannack and both his six-shooters had ivory grips and the holsters tied down on his thighs. He was a spur-jingler and he swaggered his way in and out of the saloons and cut quite a figure around the dance halls of the camp.

His name was Frank Kinnear but he had acquired the nickname of Buckskin Kinnear and that had been shortened to Buck. Buck Kinnear was sheriff of the Bannack district. He had his sheriff's badge made from placer gold and he wore it pinned to the left pocket of his buckskin shirt. Sheriff Buck Kinnear had built up a tough rep as a gun fighter. He was said to be the crack shot around Bannack. Moreover, he was the first man to admit his prowess with a gun.

Sheriff Buck Kinnear reined up his sweat-marked horse. He rubbed the heel of his hand across the gold badge. In the sunset his yellow eyes looked wicked.

Jim Dart had disliked the man on first sight and he had had no reason to change that biased opinion.

"Light, sheriff." He gave the man the habitual invitation. "Put up your horse." He grinned faintly. "I got a son-of-a-gun for supper."

"I'm lookin' for Jackson Grady." Sheriff Buck Kinnear had a flat-toned voice.

"You got here too late," Jim spoke slowly, measuring his words. "Jackson Grady is dead."

Sheriff Kinnear was living up to his rep as being fast with a gun. One of the ivory-handled six-shooters was in his hand and the gun was pointed at Jim Dart's belly.

"The hell you say!" The gun hammer was thumbed back. "Will you come peacefullike or do you want me to gut-shoot you? You're under arrest. Your name is Jim Dart, that right?"

Jim lifted both hands to the level of his shoulders. "My name is Jim Dart. Yeah. What am I charged with?"

"Cattle rustling. Horse stealing . . . And the murder of Jackson Grady. . . . That enough?"

"That seems a-plenty."

"Use your left hand to unbuckle your gun belt. When you've dropped it, walk away from it."

Kinnear's eyes were murderous. Jim Dart unbuckled his belt and it dropped with its holstered gun.

"Commence walkin'." Kinnear's teeth bared.

Jim walked towards the man on horseback. This was cold turkey. That yellow-eyed man meant to kill him. Murder him in cold blood, with that flat grin on his face. Perhaps that was how Sheriff Buck Kinnear had built up his tough rep as a killer.

Step by step and walking slowly

and with the gun in Sheriff Buck Kinnear's hand pointed at his head, Jim could see into the round black muzzle of the gun until he came up to the horse's head.

Jim was about to make one desperate try. Grab the bridle reins and yank, throwing the horse back on its haunches. When the horse reared and lunged, there was a thousand-to-one chance that the gun would miss its mark and if he could jerk the horse over backwards and get close enough to the sheriff to tangle with him . . .

Sheriff Buck Kinnear grinned flatly. His spur rowels dug deep and his horse snorted and lunged. The gun in Kinnear's hand chopped down swiftly, its long barrel clubbing down against Jim's skull.

Jim side-stepped swiftly to keep from being tromped down. Out of the tail of his eye he saw the blow coming too late to avoid it. But he ducked in that split second, enough to keep his skull from being crushed like an eggshell, and the heavy felt of his hat crown cushioning the blow made the difference between death and being left alive.

But his knees buckled and his head lobbed over and the inside of his skull seemed to explode while the world around him was black oblivion.

The instant the gun clubbed down on Jim Dart's head, the trigger was pulled and the six-shooter's explosion was the blast Jim Dart heard as he was knocked out cold.

Sheriff Buck Kinnear sat his horse with his gun barrel tilted and the gunpowder smoke trickling from it in a black wisp. From under his slanted hat brim his narrowed eyes looked down at the man on the ground and they glinted wickedly. For a long moment he stared down at the limp form of Jim Dart, sprawled there on the ground.

As if the gunshot were a signal and they were waiting to pick up its echoes, men on horseback showed up on the skyline. Singly and from different directions they appeared. They skylighted themselves and pulled up, waiting.

Kinnear lifted his head and saw the men on horseback. He counted them —there were five—then a hard, thin, cunning grin spread the lips under his tawny yellow mustache.

He took off his hat and held it high and waved them down off the skyline with a wide circular motion. And when they came riding down Sheriff Buck Kinnear carefully reloaded the empty chamber of the cylinder. And he held the six-shooter in his hand as they rode on, reining their blowing horses to a halt.

"The Texan has two sons-of-guns for supper," Kinnear grinned.

"Dead?"

"Pull his hat off," ordered Kinnear. "It should be full of brains."

## V

It was dark when Jim Dart blinked his eyes open against a heavy curtain of blinding pain. He could feel

that loud explosion inside his skull and it had knocked him out like a light. Now with the throbbing pain pounding like hot hammers, the Texan felt as though the top of his head was blown off while, by some kind of hellish conjury, he was still alive.

He was lying on his back in front of the barn and when he got his eyes focused he could see a rope dangling from the ridge log. There was a noose with a hangman's knot in the loose end and it was silhouetted there against the moonlit sky. He stared up at it.

Then sounds took shape in the night and became blurred voices of men. One voice began forming words.

"Put that jug down and stand up on your hind legs. Raise your left hands!" That was the flat-toned voice of Sheriff Buckskin Frank Kinnear.

"Left?"

"When you pledge yourselves to the devil in hell, you lift your left hands. . . . Lift your left hands and shut up!"

"You're the boss, Kinnear."

"Swear to this oath, you men: 'We do solemnly pledge ourselves to this cause of vengeance: To revenge the death of our members; to swear enmity and death to every member of the Vigilance Committee and death to any man whose name shall be brought up at our secret meeting. That name shall be voted on and if that vote goes against that man, the penalty is death.

" 'Said man, if he's captured alive, will be given a fair trial and if found guilty, shall be hung. Furthermore, if said man is proved to be a Vigilanter, that alone condemns him. And that Vigilanter shall be hung without trial as we hung Jackson Grady. As we shall hunt down every damned Vigilanter and hang 'em until the last one is dead.

" 'Whereas and furthermore, we will use all the tricks and symbols of the Vigilance Committee. We will give that man a warning in his own Vigilante style. We will use the skull and crossbones and numbers 3—7—77. We will tag that hanged corpse with that Vigilante sign so that every damned Vigilanter will be warned that he is to be the next on the blacklist.

" 'We take this unholy oath in the name of the devil in hell, never to reveal the secrets that concern this body of men who have all and every one of us received that warning of the Vigilantes with the skull and crossbones and the 3—7—77.

" 'And this secret order will henceforth now and hereafter be known as The Stranglers.' "

"We'd orter tilt the jug on that, Kinnear!" said a man. "We better drink to The Stranglers!"

"Then drink. And let's git down to business. When I call the name of each man, I'll give him a number. And durin' the meetin's he will be known by that number. That's takin' another page from the Vigilance Committee. I'm Number Three and

I'm callin' the roll. . . . Zack Cristian!"

"Here!"

"You'll be Number Seven!" Buck Kinnear paused.

"Sontag!"

"Aye!"

"Number Seventy-seven!"

"Where's your Number One man, Buckskin?"

"No names. Refer to me from now on as Number Three. Cyrus Skinner was Number One. On the strength and proof Jackson Grady turned in, the Vigilanters grabbed Skinner at his saloon at Hell Gate. His trial lasted three hours. The Vigilante Committee hung him."

"I thought I seen that damned Texan move."

"Must have a damn thick skull . . . Number Seven and Number Seventy-seven—throw a bucket of water on him. You might pour some likker into him. Here's a man we put on Stranglers' trial."

Sontag was a slim, hatchet-faced man, beady-eyed, and drunk enough to stagger a little.

Zack Cristian was short, heavy-set and bull-necked. A powerful man on thick, bowed legs, he carried the jug of booze with a stubby forefinger hooked through the jug handle.

Jim Dart had twisted his head to watch the men gathered in front of the saloon. Now he lay motionless with his eyes closed, playing possum.

Sontag and Zack Cristian took turns kicking him. Jim's teeth clamped and he took the vicious, savage kicks in the ribs and belly without moving.

"Yank his damn boots off," said Sontag. "We'll light a few matches like we did with Jackson Grady. That'll fetch him alive."

"Hell of a lot of good it did with Jackson Grady," said Zack Cristian. "He never told where he had his gold cached. And he had his cache right here on my place on Grasshopper Crick. The day I signed my ranch over to him and he thought I was quittin' the country for good, he told me he intended to cache his gold on my place, that he didn't believe in banks. We burnt matches agin' his feet till we run out o' 'em and all he did was spit in Kinnear's face. Kinnear got mad and told us to string 'im up. I don't hanker to smell any more toasted feet. A man don't come alive right now whenever Buck Kinnear bends a gun barrel acrost his skull."

"He looks nine-tenths dead to me," Sontag admitted.

Sontag had jerked loose the rope that tied Jim Dart's ankles. Now Sontag staggered to his feet to grab the jug Zack Cristian held towards him.

Jim was on the verge of showing life. He had slit the lining of his boot and shoved the leather case belonging to Jackson Grady into it but had not had time to sew stitches across the slit. If they tried to pull his boots off, the case might be discovered.

Then the others came up. Sheriff Buck Kinnear's voice sounded.

"No sign of life? When I tap 'em on the skull, they stay tapped. Let's git on with the trial. . . . Meetin' called to order.

"Number Seventy-Seven. You're appointed lawyer for the accused."

"Careful," chuckled Zack Cristian, "that damned tinhorn don't deal 'em off the bottom of the deck and clear his man."

That got a tipsy laugh. Kinnear rapped his six-shooter barrel on the side of the barn door.

"Come to order. No levity!"

"What's a levity?" demanded Cristian.

"A word they use in lodge meetin's like the Vigilantes hold. It means no damn nonsense. Come to order. . . . The prisoner, Jim Dart, is accused of bein' a Texan."

"Guilty as hell!" sounded Sontag's wheedling whine.

"I got run out of Texas." Kinnear's voice had a snarl to its flat tone. "The prisoner's accused on a second count of bein' a friend of Jackson Grady, a Vigilanter."

"Guilty as hell!" said Sontag.

"On the third count, the prisoner is in possession of stolen cattle and horses."

"Guilty as hell!" shouted both men.

"On the fourth count, this ranch belongs to Zack Cristian and was used and is bein' used and will continue to be used as the Robbers' Roost of The Stranglers. Jackson Grady loaned Zack Cristian a few dollars and forced Cristian—Number Seven here—into signin' the outfit over to him. Then Grady swapped it to Jim Dart, Texan, for a placer claim. That makes the accused man guilty of receivin' stolen property. Jim Dart is accused of stealin' the Zack Cristian ranch. . . . Is he guilty?"

"Guilty as hell!" said Sontag.

"Guilty as hell!" snarled Zack Cristian.

"Has the accused prisoner," sounded the flat toned voice of Sheriff Buckskin Frank Kinnear, "any word to say in his own self-defense?"

He kicked Jim Dart where he lay on the ground. Kicked him viciously in the ribs. Dull pain stabbed Jim but he did not move.

"Number Seven, Number Seventy-seven—hoist him up onto his laigs and slip that noose down around his neck and tighten it so as the hangman's knot comes up behind one ear. Then cut his hands free, so if he comes awake he kin claw at the rope."

Sontag and Zack Cristian, one on each side, lifted Jim up onto his feet and a man cut the rope that was tied around his wrists. The noose was dropping down over his bared head.

"Lift, Sontag. Hold up your side, you drunk tinhorn!" Zack Cristian was sweating and puffing. Their whiskey breaths, rank and sour, fanned Jim Dart's face and clogged his nostrils.

"Jim Dart, Texan," Kinnear's voice sounded in front of Jim who kept his eyes shut and his body sag-

ging limply and heavily like a man who was dead drunk.

"Jim Dart, Texan, the Stranglers' Committee finds you guilty as hell! The Stranglers' Committee hereby sentences you to be hauled up by The Stranglers' rope until your feet clear the ground and you strangle to death. And may you burn forever in the fires of hell."

That six-shooter barrel had cut a gash in Jim Dart's scalp and it had bled a lot, matting his black hair and masking his face with dried blood. Now his blood-crusted eyelids opened cautiously and his head lobbed forward and his glance swiveled sideways. He could see Cristian holding his arm and shoulder on his right side, Sontag, grunting and sweating on his left side.

Jim's eyes cut a look down to where Sontag's six-shooter hung in its holster. His own left hand hung, almost touching the gun. He was flexing his fingers now, cautiously. A man standing behind him had gripped his blood-sodden coarse black hair at the back and was pulling in an effort to get the hangman's noose up under his chin. Jim had his head down so his chin was against his chest and he had his neck bowed rigidly against the pull on his hair. His hand was touching the wooden butt of Sontag's six-shooter.

"That shore beats anything," sounded a clear-toned voice from inside the pitch-dark barn, "that I ever seen, for a kangaroo court. . . . *Stand your hands, Stranglers!*"

## VI

Jim Dart had his eyes wide open now. That voice from the barn went through him like an electric shock. And it held him there motionless as he saw Sheriff Buckskin Frank Kinnear sitting his horse sideways. One end of the hangman's rope had been thrown over the ridge log and Kinnear had taken his dally-winds around his saddlehorn. Now Kinnear's face went slack-jawed and the others were held for that brief moment in a stark, shocked paralysis of fear.

Only for a split second. Then Jim Dart's hand closed over Sontag's gun and jerked it from its holster. Sontag was clawing at his empty holster when Jim's left hand lifted the heavy long-barreled six-shooter and brought it down on Sontag's head with a savage, chopping blow. Sontag went down like a beef knocked in the head with an ax.

The Texan ducked his head clear of the noose just as Kinnear raked his spurs. Kinnear's horse lunged and broke into a run, the rope dallied and secured with a tie knot. The noose with the hangman's knot went flying, hissing in a wild arc through the air. Had it been around Jim's neck, that jerk would have torn his head from his shoulders.

Jim whirled and he thumbed back the gun hammer. The muzzle of the six-shooter was shoved into Zack Cristian's middle when Jim pulled the trigger.

The man who had tried to fit the

noose over Jim Dart's head, was crouched there, facing the barn, his gun in his hand.

Out of the pitch-dark barn spat a streak of gun flame. The man went down, dropping his six-shooter. He was screaming and both hands were clawing at his belly.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot me no more! I'm dead a'ready!" His wild screams almost drowned out the gunfire.

"Git in here, Jim Dart!" the voice from the barn called.

The other two renegades had thrown down their guns and both had their hands raised and were trying to outyell each other as they shouted that they had surrendered.

"We quit! We give up! Don't shoot!"

They all had their horses stabled in the barn. All save Sheriff Buckskin Frank Kinnear who was spurring his horse to a dead run in the night.

The wild screaming of the man who had been shot ended in a death rattle.

Jim Dart stood there just inside the barn with his six-shooter in his hand.

The man in the barn had mounted one of the renegade's horses. He rode close to where Jim Dart stood.

"Stand here," the man said. "Pick up what ropes you kin find for hoggin' strings."

He rode out, his saddle rope in his hand, swinging a loop. He roped both men as they stood side by side, their arms raised. He caught them in a tight loop around the middle, took his dallies and spurred his horse. Both men were jerked high out of their boot tracks and dragged at a run by the saddlehorn to the barn. Bruised and their heads banged together, they lay there, just inside the barn. Jim grabbed a couple of tie ropes and tied their arms and legs, bringing them up behind their backs.

Now Jim recognized his rescuer as the man rode out of the barn into the moonlight. He was Hank Winters, one of the Winters brothers from the Deer Lodge Valley, who had bought up the trail herd with which Jim had worked.

"I played 'er lone-handed," explained Winters. "But by now the Vigilantes should have the ranch pretty well surrounded. Kinnear ain't likely to make a gitaway. Just to make certain, though, I'm takin' after him, hazin' him into their roundup."

Zack Cristian was dead. The six-shooter blow had caved Sontag's skull in and his dead-glazed eyes were staring wide open.

"I'll go along," Jim said promptly.

"You stay right here, Jim Dart. I fetched a young lady along with me. We left our horses in the brush and crawled in through a hay window and she's hid in that far manger. Her name is Miss Ursula Grady and she was bound and determined when she got off the stagecoach at Bannack and couldn't locate her brother, Andy Jackson Grady, to ride here to this ranch on Grasshopper Crick. She's

a right determined young woman. Headstrong, you might say. An admirable quality in any man but fer a spouse who takes the vows in marriage to love, honor and *obey*, such a characteristic might make Miss Ursula, as beautiful and charmin' as she is, remain a spinster. But a mighty handsome one, at that."

"Do I need this pistol?" spoke a voice right behind them. "It's liable to go off."

"Hand it over to Jim Dart here. I'm entrustin' you into the care of Jim Dart from Texas. I knowed his father, Captain Dart of the Texas Rangers. And Jim's a brave man and a gentleman, as was his father before him."

Hank Winters rode away into the night, following the trail Kinnear had taken.

The girl stood close to Jim Dart, at the edge of the moonlight. The perfume that had been on the note was heady in Jim's nostrils. She was holding a small double-barreled derringer pistol in her hand. She shoved it at the Texan with a faint smile. She was dressed in a divided skirt and flannel blouse and her heavy hair was tumbled. Her face was pale and the gray eyes under the black brows were looking up into his, gravely and frankly, and they were dark with grief.

"I had to stay here, hidden," she said, "while I listened to the brutal story of my brother's hanging. We were orphaned. Andy left me in a convent in California when he went to seek his fortune. He seldom wrote. I was ten years old when he left me in care of the Sisters of Mercy. For ten years after that he kept telling me to wait. But I came. I sent him a letter, then started by stagecoach. He had just gotten the letter the day he rode here—to his death."

"He turned my letter over to the judge at Bannack—the one man he could trust—together with a letter for me in case he met death, and a fortune he panned from the placer claim you traded him. My brother put a crew of men to work the claim the day of the trade. It proved to be only a pocket but a fabulously rich one. They panned out all the gold in one working. My brother felt you had been cheated on the trade and he left the fortune for you.

"My brother, Andy Jackson Grady, was one of the Vigilantes. He received a secret notice, telling him there would be a meeting of the Vigilantes at the Zack Cristian ranch on Grasshopper Creek. He was to tell absolutely no one of the meeting because one of the members of the Vigilance Committee was to be put on trial for treason and for revealing Vigilante secrets to Sheriff Buckskin Frank Kinnear. And only the day before Frank Kinnear had been given the Vigilante skull and crossbones warning marked 3—7—77.

"The judge was the one man my brother dared trust, and he was out of town. Andy left that secret notice, together with a letter for me, and the gold taken from your placer claim in a large sealed envelope, with the

judge's wife. He wrote in my letter that he did not tell you about the gold cache on the Grasshopper ranch because he first wanted to test you out. He meant to pay you a visit later and explain the gold cache.

"Then alone, as the secret notice warned him, and saying nothing to anyone, my brother, Andy Jackson Grady, rode here—to his death.

"I arrived by stagecoach today. The judge came in on the same stagecoach and together we planned a party at his home, when my brother Andy met me. Instead, nobody met me. And there was only that sealed letter.

"But Hank Winters was there, on the trail of stolen cattle and horses. With him he brought proof that the man guilty of being the leader of the horse thieves and cattle rustlers was Sheriff Buckskin Frank Kinnear, and named Zack Cristian and other members of the rustler gang.

"Jackson Grady had traded the Zack Cristian ranch to you, Jim Dart, for your placer claim. At the trial of Zack Cristian he had voted for leniency, and leniency for Sontag also. And Jackson Grady had tacked the '3—7—77' on the door of Buckskin Frank Kinnear's cabin and told him to turn in his law badge and get out of the country. That was why Kinnear wrote that secret letter for my brother Andy to come to the ranch on Grasshopper Crick, wording the letter so that Andy would think it was a secret Vigilante meeting. Kinnear wanted to get hold of my brother's gold cache before he quit the country. Zack Cristian had told Kinnear he thought Jackson Grady had hidden his gold on the Grasshopper ranch.

"The judge told me that my brother Andy was too generous, too softhearted, too square a gambler. Always willing to give a man another chance. And in return for his bighearted kindness and generosity, he was condemned by that man Kinnear.

"Jackson Grady was the first man to suspect Kinnear. He gathered proof, absolute proof of his guilt. And clinching that proof was what Hank Winters brought to Bannack from the Deer Lodge Valley."

The sound of shooting was loud and the night threw back its echoes. The girl shuddered and Jim Dart put his arm around her. She edged into the protection of his arms and her heavy black hair brushed his cheek, its soft perfume heady. Her eyes, dark-shadowed, looked up and then her hand reached up and was on his blood-crusted face. In her own grief and utter loneliness and misery, she had thought for this man who held her in his arms.

"I'd like . . . I know this ain't the time or place . . . but ever since I saw your picture . . . But I never dared let myself hope, thinking you were Jackson Grady's wife or sweetheart. I'd like it to be . . . always like this."

"Perhaps . . ." Ursula was looking straight into his eyes now. Then, "Yes . . ." Her two hands held his

blood-streaked face and she kissed him.

"My brother was a gambler, but a square gambler," she said when Jim Dart held her in his arms and kissed her.

## VII

The Vigilantes brought in Buckskin Frank Kinnear. He had been shot through each arm and the bullet wounds bandaged.

Hank Winters rode up ahead of the Vigilantes and their prisoner and reached the barn first. When he saw Jim Dart standing there with his arm around Ursula Grady's shoulders, he took off his hat with a grand Texan flourish and bowed from his saddle.

"Allow me," said the grizzled cowman, "to be the first to offer my congratulations and pat myself on the back for what I said on the way here as escort, by way of praise in your behalf, young man. One Texan stands by another Texan on the far northern frontier. And allow me to kiss the lady."

*"Quick—somebody go in and save my wife!"*

"Now," he told them, "it would be wise and in accord with the orders of the Vigilance Committee, if I told you to get on your horses, head for Bannack and turn yourselves over to the judge.

But when they were mounted, Ursula declared she wanted to wait for the man who was responsible for her brother's murder, to be fetched in. And she did.

Buckskin Frank Kinnear, bolstered by the whiskey he had drunk, had loudly protested his innocence, claiming that he had been secretly gathering evidence against the members of his gang in order to hand them over to the Vigilantes. He asserted that he believed Jim Dart to be one of the gang and responsible for the hanging of Jackson Grady.

The Vigilantes had let him talk in the belief that all the members of his gang had been killed and that Jim Dart had been shot and killed. And further emboldened by the whiskey the Vigilantes fed him to kill his pain and keep him in the saddle and alive. Kinnear had gained courage and was beginning to half-believe his own lies.

Until he saw Jim Dart sitting his horse, and beside him a girl on horseback. And two of his own gang held prisoners.

Ursula Grady rode up to where Kinnear sat his horse. In a voice that was low-pitched and merciless, she told him who she was.

"I am the sister of Andrew Jackson Grady—the man you hanged . . ."

Ursula took out the leather case Jim Dart had given her. She read the letter as if she knew it by heart, pointing to the word "picture" in the note.

"I didn't underline that word," she told them. "In the letter my brother left for me he gave me the key word."

She took the tintype. There was a leather back fitted on it and she took the blade of Jim Dart's pocket knife and carefully slit the back. Inside was a thin sheet of paper on which was written directions for finding the gold cache. It was buried in the third stall of the barn, under the manger. Ursula read the directions aloud, then handed the paper to Jim Dart, together with the picture.

Jim took out the sheet of paper marked with the skull and crossbones and the 3—7—77 sign which he had put in the leather case together with the nugget stickpin.

He handed them to Hank Winters.

"I found this pinned to Jackson Grady's vest with Sontag's gold nugget stickpin," he said, "when I cut his hanged body down."

Hank Winters rode up alongside Buckskin Frank Kinnear. Reaching out, he ripped the gold law badge from the blood-spattered buckskin shirt. He pinned that same warning notice to the front of the buckskin shirt. He must have driven the long stickpin in through the shirt and into the flesh, because Kinnear let out a yelp of pain.

Then Hank Winters, Acting Captain in place of the regular Captain of the Vigilantes, who was absent that night, turned to Jim Dart and Ursula Grady.

"You'd better ride along now."

But Ursula lingered a moment. Looking the accused man straight in his pain-seared yellow eyes, with the cold sweat beading his face that had paled to a jaundiced color, she spoke.

"Do you still declare your innocence, you murderer?"

Crazed by fear and the whiskey he had drunk, Kinnear opened his mouth to snarl curses at her. But Jim slapped him across his open mouth and it was like the slap of a grizzly.

Then Jim Dart and Ursula Grady rode off into the moonlit night, taking the trail to Bannack.

Later, at the judge's home where the judge and his wife made them welcome, there came a rapping on the door. The judge opened it and Hank Winters came in. After the formal greetings, he spoke, grinning faintly.

"You shore build a first-rate son-of-a-gun, Jim Dart. Takes a slow fire to git the correct simmer to it. You're marryin' a good cook, Miss Ursula. The boys didn't leave so much as a grease spot."

When the judge, Jim Dart and Hank Winters were alone, the grizzled cowman told of the trial, saying that it was no secret from Jim Dart, who would be sworn in as a Vigilante, anyhow, and he was entitled to know.

"We give them two renegades just Three Hours, Seven Minutes and Seventy-seven Seconds to quit Montana. Whether they made it or not, I have no way of knowin' . . . as yet.

"Buckskin Frank Kinnear begged like a coward, in spite of the booze. We had to hold him on his horse while the noose was fixed. He might've bin dead from fright when the horse was led out from under him, because his kickin' was feeble.

"We fetched in the gold cache and I got it in a sack to put in the judge's safe together with your placer gold, Jim. Them renegades left some stolen cattle and horses on your place and the owners kin claim 'em. You wouldn't want to take your bride to that ranch on Grasshopper Crick, so I'll buy it. I got another big cattle drive due to stock it."

"You don't know Ursula," said Jim. "We talked it over on the way here. She come a long ways to find her brother. She wants to live where she kin look after his grave."

"Not even a true Texan raised in the shadder of the Alamo," said Hank Winters, "deserves a wife with that much courage."

Then Winters chuckled. "That trail herd's due. You and your bride might just as well buy 'em—remuda, wagons, lock, stock and barrel—and take over the crew that goes with it. They're all cowboys who come north to stay."

They were sipping toddies. The door opened and the judge's wife stood there, smiling.

"She's ready. And a prettier bride I never looked at."

The judge rose, dusting cigar ashes off his vest, his toddy in his hand. Winters got to his feet, prodding Jim out of his chair.

"Here's your bridegroom, ma'am. If he ain't ready, he will be, directly he pulls the slack up out o' his jaw."

Jim stood there, awkward and red-faced. This came as a surprise to him and he watched the judge and Hank Winters grin at each other and nod. Then the judge picked up a large black-leather-covered Bible from his desk.

"Either this marriage comes off," said Hank Winters, Acting Captain of the Vigilantes, "or you git this pinned onto the tail of your coat."

He took the judge's pen and dipped it in the ink bottle and wrote on a sheet of writing paper: "3—7—77."

Then the judge and Hank Winters raised their toddy glasses.

"To Jim Dart, from Texas, and the purtiest, gamest bride a man ever won!" said Hank Winters.

They drained their glasses. And might have smashed them to bind the pledge in true Vigilante fashion.

But the judge's wife stood there in the doorway. And behind her stood Ursula Grady, wearing the wedding veil the judge's wife had worn as a bride and looking so beautiful that for a moment Jim Dart's heart stood still.

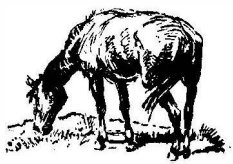
Hank Winters and the judge set down their toddy glasses and the judge picked up his Bible . . .

THE END

# RANGE SAVVY

## By Gene King

Plain as it was, the cowboy's bunkhouse was a palace compared to the loggers' quarters in the first small pioneer lumber camps of the West. In these camps a field bed of small balsam or spruce boughs ran along one side of a 30-to-40-foot-long log cabin. Each logger was allowed about a 2-foot width of bed. The men slept in a long row with their heads up against the wall. All faced the same way. "Spoon fashion" the old-timers called it. When anyone got tired of lying on one side, he yelled, "Spoon!" As soon as the line had been awakened by the signal or punched by neighbors into consciousness, everybody flopped over, and the row of "spoons" faced the other way until the next call.

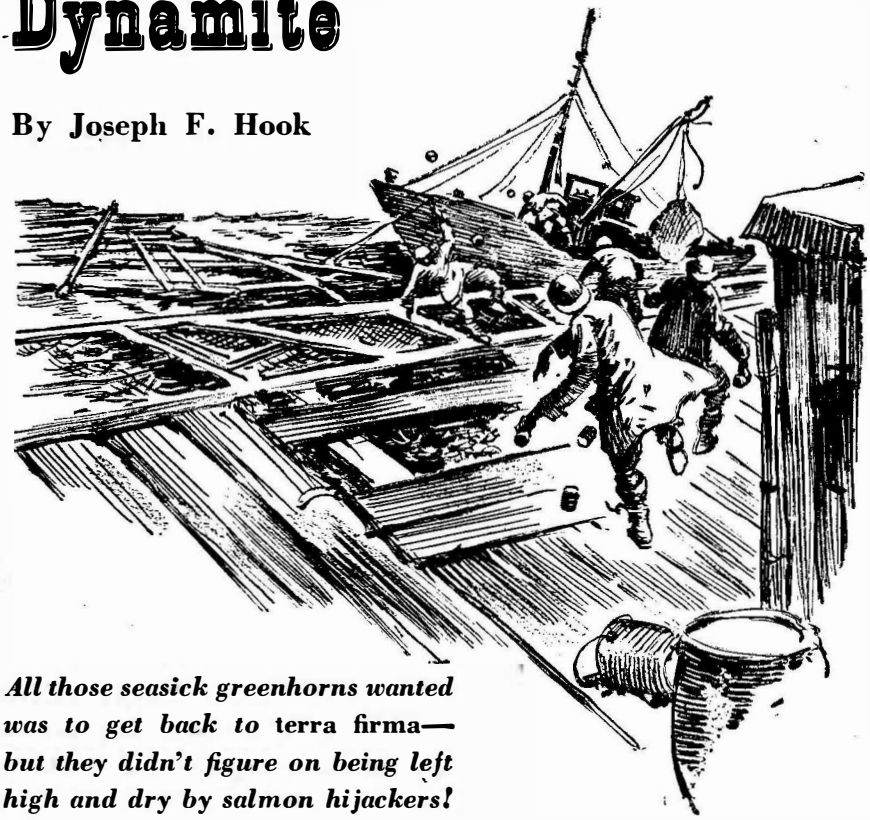


In the West where distances are huge and fences few, a cowboy camping out at night or leaving his horse for any length of time always felt it necessary to secure the animal from wandering. Hobbling was generally preferred to picketing, particularly in brush country where a picket rope might become entangled in the thick brush. Moreover hobbling allowed the horse more grazing freedom. As a rule, a short hobble around each front foot would hold a horse. But some cow ponies learned to travel both far and fast with a set of front hobbles. In such cases the solution was to double-hobble the horse, putting a set of hobbles on both front and hind legs.

A lot of folks, prospectors included, have heard and talked about Mother Lodes in mining country without exactly knowing what they were. Strictly speaking, a Mother Lode is a general mineralized formation that passes through a mining district and, while not rich enough to be worked throughout its length, it nevertheless contains many separated, workable veins of valuable ore. The 100-mile-long Mother Lode of the California gold country is a classic example.

# Grubstake Dynamite

**By Joseph F. Hook**



***All those seasick greenhorns wanted was to get back to* terra firma—*but they didn't figure on being left high and dry by salmon hijackers!***

WITH her overtaxed scuppers spewing water, the salmon trap tender, *Northern Light,* lifted to the crest of a huge comber and paused there long enough for her skipper to give his two seasick passengers a momentary view of a strange contraption bobbing crazily on the turbulent surface ahead.

"For the rest of the salmon season in Alaska, boys," the skipper said with a broad grin, "there's your home."

"Home!" muttered Sparky McNutt and Tosser Thompson, late of Seattle, as the tender slid down the foaming slope into the boiling trough.

There was no warmth of feeling,

no pleased anticipation in that one chorused word. Rather, it sounded more like a smothered groan from the two young men.

The strange thing ahead was a floating salmon trap, an astounding maze of webbing, spiller nets and brailer, heaving fender logs and swaying cross walks, narrow and slippery and draped with kelp. There was a shack at one end which, to the seasick young men, resembled a very fragile match box on a log raft. The trap belonged to the Higbee Salmon Canning Company of Petersburg, as did the tender.

"Get set, you two," the skipper ordered. "You'll have to board it on the fly."

Sparky and Tosser reluctantly released their death grip on the pilothouse hand rail and reeled out on deck, where they promptly froze to the gunwale. The tender came about, heading into the tide with engine wide open. Just when the two new watchmen were sure the bow was going to ram a fender log, the boat veered off sharply.

"Jump!" bellowed the skipper.

Hampered by hip boots, sou'wester hats, tin pants and coats, the two young men jumped for the pitching trap like two ungainly frogs. They landed on a heaving fender log, grabbed desperately for a crosswalk plank, and managed to muscle up onto it. They would have remained there, but a deluging wave drove them toward the shack. They made slow time along the cross walks, creeping along on hands and knees, nails digging into the slippery wood.

"That's the first time home ever got up and tried to belt me on the chin," Sparky observed, spitting water.

"Stand by!" The command rang out above the bedlam of thundering waves, bumping fender logs and slapping crosswalks. The tender was coming full tilt at the trap again. When she veered off, a deckhand heaved the watchmen's dunnage.

With the gale behind them, the warbags slammed hard into the pair's arms, driving them back on their heels and nearly into the spiller.

The tender repeated the maneuver and the deckhand, watching his opportunity, heaved cased goods onto the floating trap. Because their very existence depended on that grubstake, the young watchmen flung themselves on the skittering cases with the vigor and desperation of quarterbacks making a touchdown.

The skipper and deckhand waved a facetious farewell, and the *Northern Light* was soon lost to view in the trough of the giant waves, leaving Tosser and Sparky very much alone and feeling very ill.

They staggered into the shack with their warbags. The interior was dripping with sea sweat. Pots, pans and skillets were eddying around with billets of stove wood in a swirling pool. Only the two bunks and galley stove remained high and dry.

"Welcome home, boys," Sparky gulped. "So this is what we came all the way from Seattle for!"

"Yeah, this and two hundred a month and grub," Tosser observed sourly. "And if we don't hustle and get them cased goods inside this here laundry, they'll be washed overboard. Not that I ever want to see any food again, but you might."

Sparky's eyes narrowed. "Mention food again, feller, and I'll knock you cold!" he gulped threateningly.

They left the shack together and started heaving the cased goods inside.

"Look what it says on this case, Sparky," Tosser said. "Pork and beans with tomato sauce. The comp'ny shore believes in . . ."

Sparky gulped and then exploded. "Just say 'pork' again and see what happens to you. Ugh!"

They rescued the cooking utensils and stove wood, then bailed the water over the backwash board while the trap kept undulating sickeningly and the anchor cables groaned under the strain caused by the storm.

"We've gotta get that stove going or freeze to death," Tosser said with chattering teeth. "I'm soaked to the hide."

When they finally got the fire started, smoke began pouring from every joint in the stove, even with the draft open, as the gale forced it back down the pipe.

"Hey, hand me that slab of salt pork, Sparky," Tosser demanded. "I'll make this blasted fire burn."

Sparky clapped a hand to his mouth, gulped and then shouted, "There you go again, hang it! That word! I'll . . ."

"Aw, the heck with your tender stomach," Tosser retorted, shoving past him. "Don't you suppose it stirs mine up just as bad as yours when I mention salt . . ."

"Quit it!" Sparky yelled.

"Okay, okay. But I'm gonna shove a chunk of it in the stove, just the same."

The pork sizzled promisingly in the firebox for a few moments. Then clouds of rancid smoke billowed out, driving the men from the shack just in time to catch the full brunt of a huge wave's spume in their faces.

Soon, however, the fire caught and the gale cleared the smoke from the shack, enabling the disgruntled men to enter.

"A cup of hot java right now would work wonders for my poor stummick," Sparky remarked wistfully.

He filled the coffeepot from the fresh-water tank and put it on the stove. It slipped and slid around on the smooth surface, banging against the guard rail and slopping part of its contents on the none-too-hot metal.

"I could bring that water to a boil quicker by holding a match under it," Sparky finally said in disgust. "And just watching that pot jitterbug all over the stove makes me feel seasick. Come to think of it, I don't like coffee anyhow."

"Me, neither," Tosser said grimly. "Which makes us both liars."

Fully dressed, they rolled into the bunks and pulled the blankets over them. Their seasick groans mingled

with the howling gale, and it was long after dark before they fell asleep.

The same sickening motion of the raft greeted their awakening. If there had been any letup to the storm during the night, it wasn't noticeable.

"So this is Alaska!" Sparky groaned. "You reckon it's gonna be like this for the rest of the salmon season?"

"How'd I know?" countered Tosser. "I've never been in Alaska before, leave alone on a salmon trap."

"You haven't got nothing on me," Sparky admitted. "I've never even seen a live salmon. Which reminds me—let's take a look at one right now."

They stepped out gingerly on the narrow cross walk and stood staring into the spiller with incredulous eyes. It was alive with captive salmon, churning the water to a froth with powerful tails and fins, sliding over and under one another, sometimes leaping high in impotent attempts to escape.

"Well, what do you know?" exclaimed Sparky. "Never thought there was that many salmon in the sea." He withdrew his eyes from the spiller to the outside of the trap. "What's that brown stringy stuff balled up against the webbing?"

"That's kelp. Seaweed," Tosser replied. "I savvy that much 'cause I've seen it hanging from the piling at Alki Point. And don't I wish I was there right now!"

"Kelp, huh?" Sparky said, picking up a boat hook. "Now I remember what the boss at Petersburg told us—to watch out it doesn't block the trap. What do we do with it?"

"Get rid of it, of course," Tosser retorted. "Was you figgering on eating it?"

He found another boat hook, and together they tackled the weed. They thrust the hooks into the wadded masses, pulling and pushing, swaying with the erratic motion of the trap, drenched by flying spume. They'd get one wad free and tackle the next, only to have the first drift back again with the tide.

They worked long and frantically and, despite the chill breeze, sweat bathed their bodies. By noon they had the trap entrance freed, and they staggered into the shack with blistered and smarting hands.

"Look," Tosser said savagely, "you can stay here till you've grown webs between your toes, Sparky, but I'm going back on the first tender that puts in here for salmon. I've even got half a notion to cut the webbing and let them poor fish escape, too."

"Nuts," said Sparky. "I'm going to hook one out of the trap. My appetite is coming back."

He walked carefully along the cross walk and paused at the spiller, boat hook poised above the jam-packed salmon. There were so many that, for a long moment, Sparky was undecided which one to tackle first. Finally he plunged the boat hook into the seething, frothing cauldron and gave a quick upward jerk.

The hook pierced the tail of a king salmon that must have weighed forty pounds. The fish instantly gave a mighty tug and dived for the bottom of the spiller. Caught off guard, Sparky was jerked head first into the net, letting out a yelp for help as he hit the water.

Tosser came on the run and began shouting advice as to the best way to get out. Sparky tried to swim to the webbing, but the milling salmon brushed his hands aside, butted against his body and entangled his legs. Then Tosser remembered his own boat hook, grabbed it, and fished his partner out.

"Oh, why did I ever come to Alaska?" Sparky wailed, as he shucked his soaked clothing and huddled over the stove. "If I'd only waited a bit longer I could've got a job with the Seattle ball league. I'm a pitcher, not a doggone trap watchman. And I hate salmon, 'specially live ones."

"That goes for me too," Tosser said unconsolingly. "There ain't no better rivet tosser in any Seattle steel gang than me. If I hadn't craved adventure, I could've hung around till the contractors got their next shipment of steel and gone on working. Right now I wish I was back there.'"

"Skip it," Sparky told him. "I'm just getting over being seasick, and now you're making me homesick!"

They sat down to a frugal meal of soda crackers, pork and beans and lukewarm coffee.

"I think," Tosser observed presently, "it's quieting down outside. Leastways the trap ain't jumping around as bad as it was."

"That's just your stummick settling down," Sparky offered.

Tosser got up and went out. "No, I was right," he called back. "It's a lot quieter. Come and take a look for your . . ."

There followed a moment's silence and then a wild whoop.

"Sparky," he yelled, "there's a boat headed this way! Seattle, here we come!"

Sparky joined his companion on the cross walk. They watched the oncoming vessel in silence and with fast-beating hearts. Now white caps had supplanted the huge waves, the gale had about blown itself out, and occasionally the sun peeped through the scudding clouds.

"That doesn't look anything like the boat that brought us out here," Tosser observed presently. "But whether it's the same one or not, it ain't leaving me behind."

Both men rushed back into the shack and began feverishly jamming clothing into their warbags. They emerged just as the boat was making fast to a fender log. When the engine stopped, three men stepped from the pilothouse and boarded the trap.

They were big men, black-bearded, muscular. The one in the lead kept a hand in his mackinaw pocket.

"Say, fellers," Tosser sang out, "are we glad to see you! We're going back with you, and then we'll

ketch the first steamer leaving for Seattle."

The leader looked them over with careful scrutiny, a grin slowly spreading across his bearded face. "Greenhorn trap watchmen, huh?" he muttered. And then, "Listen, you two. We ain't takin' back no passengers. We're just takin' them salmon." Suddenly he withdrew his hand from his pocket, and there was a gun in it. "Stick 'em up!' he snarled, and ordered his companions to search them.

"Why . . . why . . ." Sparky started to protest.

"Button it up," the leader snapped.

Finding the watchmen unarmed, the other two newcomers stepped into the shack and searched it thoroughly, tossing two rifles and a box of shells into the water.

"We're salmon trap hijackers, savvy?" the leader informed the surprised watchmen. "Now you two can raise the spiller. Hop to it, and no monkey business, or else."

Stunned by the sudden turn of events, Sparky and Tosser walked forward to the spiller and were instructed how to raise it the hard way. The heavy webbing broke their fingernails, opened the smarting blisters on their hands and made their backs ache.

That back-breaking task completed, the leader of the hijackers said, "Now get back to that shack and stay there till we get the salmon brailed."

He stepped back aboard the pirate boat, started the engine and hitched the brailer rope to the winch. His companions remained at the spiller, socking the brailer net deep down among the milling salmon, working with speed and precision.

"Well, we've sure cooked our goose now," Tosser lamented. "We're the prize saps of Alaska—letting them guys come aboard the trap. The boss warned us to keep our eyes peeled for trap thieves."

"That ain't the half of it," Sparky said with grave concern. "He'll swear we was in cahoots with 'em,' and we'll have a sweet time proving we wasn't. We'll probably get thrown in the jug."

Following a short silence Tosser said, "Man, if I only had a pair of tongs and a bucketful of red-hot rivets, I'd sure make them salmon thieves sorry for themselves."

"I don't know anything about hot rivets," Sparky observed gloomily, "but if I had a half dozen baseballs I'd bean those trap hogs so fast they'd never know what hit 'em."

The pirate boat engine was chugging steadily, the winch rattling noisily and the brailer shuttling back and forth between boat and spiller.

"They've doggoned near got the trap emptied," Tosser said. "Pretty soon they'll be shoving off and leaving us to face the music."

"Not on your tintype, they won't," Sparky suddenly declared. "Follow me. Hurry!"

Presently both watchmen stepped cautiously from the shack, Sparky in the lead, hands behind his back, pockets bulging. The pirate leader

saw them approaching, and ripped out an oath.

"Get back in that shack, you!" he shouted at them.

"Now!" Sparky whispered.

His knee came up and his right arm whipped back and forward. A small can of pork and beans sped through the air like a bullet, straight for the pirate leader. He ducked, reaching for his gun at the same time. The can struck the edge of the winch, split and sprayed the hijacker with its contents. Sparky's second throw caught him squarely in the face as he raised up, knocking him to the deck.

In the meantime, Tosser's first throw had knocked one of the men into the spiller. The other immediately lost his nerve and started running toward the boat.

"Watch this one cut the plate!" Sparky yelled, and let fly with another can. It struck the fleeing man in the small of the back, knocking him off the cross walk and into the water, where he struck out frantically for the boat.

"Grab that guy back of the winch before he comes to!" Tosser shouted. "I'll take care of the other two."

Sparky leaped from the trap, landing on the boat deck beside the unconscious leader. He grabbed a rope and bound him, then took his gun.

He heard a groan, and turned to see a head appear above the gunwale, the face contorted with pain. Grabbing a handful of hair, Sparky heaved the man aboard.

"Don't . . . don't shoot!" the hijacker pleaded. "My back's just about busted where that can hit me!"

Sparky trussed him up, then glanced up at the trap. Tosser was hauling his man from the spiller with a boat hook. Sparky kept the fellow covered with the gun as Tosser drove him on to the boat.

"You being the least hurt," Sparky told him, "will be the most use to us. Get that engine started and steer for Petersburg."

When the boat pulled alongside the Higbee cannery wharf at Petersburg, an irate face peered over the stringpiece. The face, at which the two young watchmen stared silently, belonged to Mr. Higbee himself.

"So!" he commented with profound contempt. "It would be you two, you yellow-bellied quitters. Caught the first passing boat and came sneaking back with your tails between your legs and leaving my trap to the mercy of any salmon hijacker who happens along." He shook a salmon club at them. "Just wait till you climb up on this wharf!"

"We didn't catch the first passing boat and come sneaking back," Sparky retorted indignantly. "We caught three salmon pirates redhanded, and we brought the salmon they hijacked back here where it belongs." He bent suddenly and came up with a can of pork and beans in each hand. "And," he added, "if you don't drop that club, you'll get the same dose we gave them."

"Hold everything!" Higbee chortled, and put down the club. He dropped from the stringpiece to the

boat deck. He glanced at the man at the wheel and at the two on the cabin floor, then demanded the details. After listening, he said, "I'll pay you boys two hundred bucks for each one of those hijackers, and a hundred more for bringing the salmon here. But, of course, if you've made up your minds to quit, there's nothing I can do about it."

"Two hundred bucks each!" Sparky gasped. "Mister, you've bought three hijackers, as is. . . . Hey, Tosser, are we pulling out?"

"You can go back if you want to, but not me," Tosser declared. "Man, this is Alaska! This is adventure! I'm going back to that trap to wait for more salmon hijackers. Shucks, this beats tossing rivets all hollow."

"I'm sticking right with you, pard, said Sparky. "Catching pirates pays off better'n catching fly balls."

"All right, boys," Mr. Higbee grinned. "And now that that's settled, is there anything you'd like to take back to the trap?"

"Another two rifles and a box of shells," suggested Tosser.

"And some more cans of pork and beans," Sparky added. "The small handy size—just in case."

THE END

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# WHAT'S IN A BRAND?

By JACK LUZZATTO

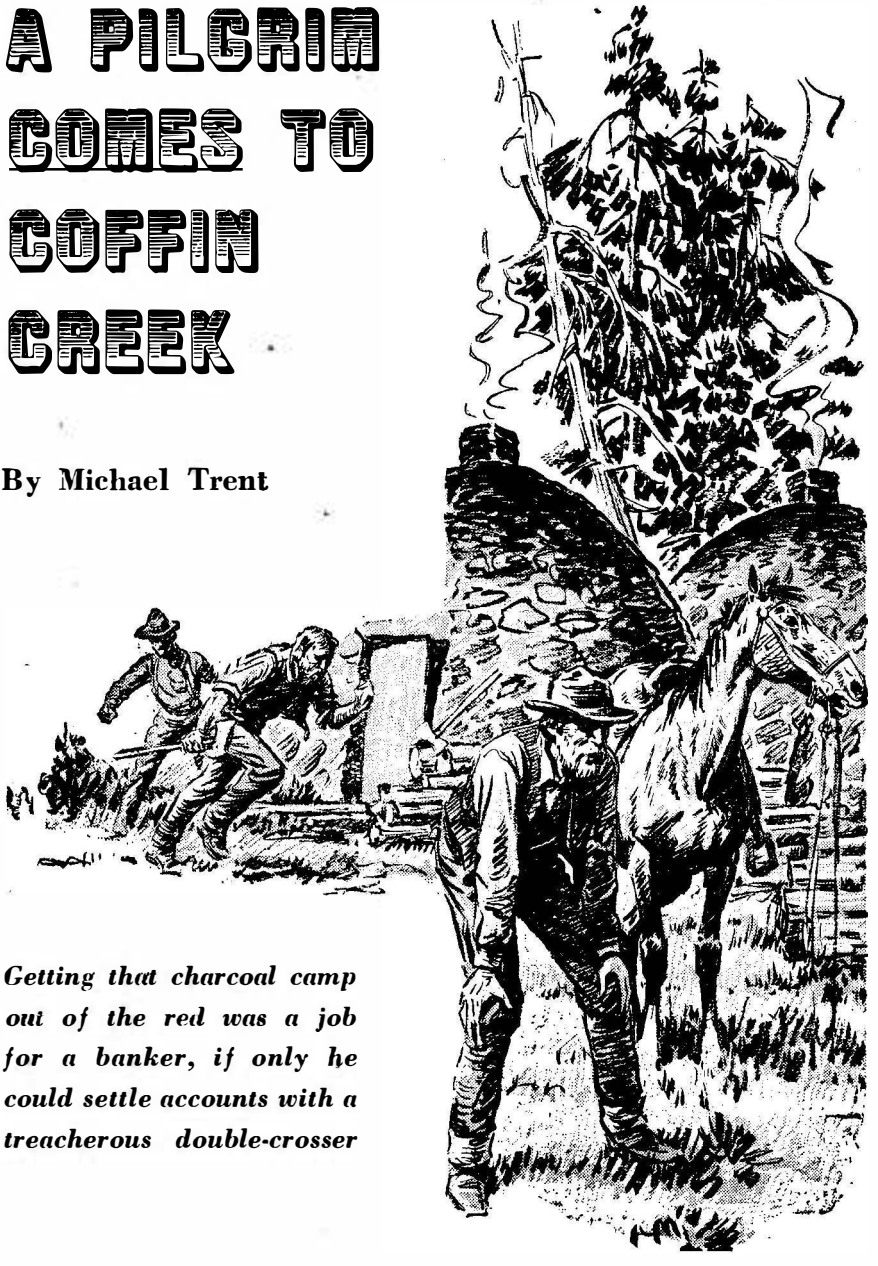

*This group of puzzling brands demonstrates rather well how many ways you can twist the English (or American) language into baffling patterns. When you tackle No. 6, don't follow the conventional "this ON that" clue. One hint you can be sure of for this one is: the warmer you get, the colder you'll be. Now if that doesn't make things easier, at least it makes them worse! There should be no real difficulty with any other one, though Prize Winner No. 2 may stump you for a while. If you are forced to look up the answers, you'll find them on page 153.*

No. 1 sent in by Lawrence J. Morin, McNeal, Arizona.
No. 2 sent in by D. E. Casey Jones, Fort Madison, Iowa.

Can you work out an *original* brand? Mr. Luzzatto will pay $5 for each contribution suitable for use in this department. Address him in care of Street & Smith's Western Story, P. O. Box 489, Elizabeth, N. J. Be sure to enclose a three cent stamp for material which is not available.

# A PILGRIM COMES TO COFFIN CREEK

By Michael Trent



*Getting that charcoal camp out of the red was a job for a banker, if only he could settle accounts with a treacherous double-crosser*

## I

IT took all kinds to make a boom town, but the passengers of today's Palisade City stage were an unlikely lot. A pudgy whiskey drummer sat next to a funereal-looking evangelist. A Chinese tong hatchetman and a Mexican ex-convict still marked by prison pallor made another strange pair. The two shrewd-eyed men were sharpers, one in cards and the other in mining stock. There was a frowzy fat woman and a gaudily dressed young girl. The callow-looking youth—about whom the others were secretly curious—might have been a young Eastern gentleman traveling merely for pleasure.

Not a sociable group. There'd been no talk at all during the trip, but now, as the stagecoach rolled into the town through the rainy dusk, the young man cleared his throat and ventured, "Could anyone tell me the location of the Exchange Bank's branch office?"

His name was Tom Gary, and he was what he looked—the properly

brought-up scion of a respectable family, fresh from some good school in the staid East. But he was not traveling for pleasure. His inquiry brought eight pairs of eyes to focus upon himself, and he squirmed with quick embarrassment.

"You've got me, son," the drummer admitted. "This is my first trip to Palisade." The mining-stock promoter said, "It's located directly opposite the stage company office, friend. You'll have no trouble finding it."

"Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome, friend," the promoter said, and lighted a cigar. "I've been wondering where I'd seen you before. I recall it now. In the Exchange Bank at Sacramento. You were with Magnus Dunn, himself. You're one of his field men?"

Mention of the Exchange Bank had sparked some interest in the other passengers, but the promoter's linking this youth with the fabulous Magnus Dunn caused a little flutter of excitement. Any man associated with California's leading banker was worthy of attention; such a man might indeed be profitable to cultivate. They all awaited Tom Gary's reply with anticipation.

"I'm on an errand for Mr. Dunn," he answered guardedly.

"An errand, is it?" the mining-stock man said, chuckling. "That's a mild way of describing a mission for Magnus Dunn."

He eyed Tom speculatively; the others also regarded him with interest as the stage stopped in Palisade's bustling business section.

Valise in hand, Tom Gary stood on the plank sidewalk and studied the branch office across the street. It was no stone fort like the Exchange Bank's main office, but then none of Palisade was like Sacramento. The boom camp was a hodge-podge of tents, lean-tos, shacks, and frame false-fronted buildings, as flimsy as a town could be. But it throbbed with life; it was more boisterously alive, even on a rainy day, than any town Tom had ever seen.

All manner of wagons jammed the muddy street, most of them great freight rigs hauling ore or green lumber. Both sidewalks were thronged with people, many of them miners just off day shift and hurrying to supper. Beyond the town, upon a slope, were the pounding stamp mills and the smelters belching smoke and painting a ruddy glare against the low clouds. Palisade was a lead-and-silver town. As Magnus Dunn had told Tom, there was a possibility that it might become another Virginia City.

Uncertainty gripped Tom as he stood there; for he was completely a stranger in a strange land, and he recalled the Old Man saying, each word stabbing to the core of him: "Your father was a weakling and a ne'er-do-well, and by the looks of you it's another case of 'like father, like son.' But I'll give you the chance you're begging for, just like I always supported Bert Gary. It'll make you or break you."

It seemed to Tom that the Old Man —he found it difficult to think of

Magnus Dunn as his grandfather—hoped that this trip into the mining country east of the Sierras would break him. A crusty old codger, Magnus Dunn. Rich as Midas, and twice as greedy. Hating his grandson because his son-in-law, the boy's father, had been a sport, an idler, a man who believed in enjoying life.

It didn't matter to the Old Man that Bert Gary had made the girl he'd married extremely happy, up to the very day they'd died together aboard a ship lost at sea. Magnus Dunn lived only for money, and Tom Gary regretted having promised his mother to come West to visit his grandfather whom he'd never seen. . . . But this errand wasn't going to break him. Tom was determined on that. Once it was completed, he would return to Sacramento and tell the Old Man that he was one Gary who wasn't a weakling.

He braced his shoulders, stepped off the sidewalk, and crossed the muddy street. The branch office was a one-storied plank building, distinguishable only by its crude sign and the vertical iron bars across its window. It was after banking hours, but a lamp burned inside the building and the door was unlocked. Henry Dodson, notified of Tom's arrival, was waiting for Magnus Dunn's representative. Dodson was the branch office manager. He would not know that Tom was the Old Man's grandson, for Magnus Dunn had warned Tom, "Don't trade on being related to me. That's one thing I won't stand for."

Entering, Tom found Henry Dodson to be a gray little man with a nervous manner. He seemed afraid that his visitor might be there to check upon him, for he said, as he shook hands, "Everything is in order here, Mr. Gary. The Hagarthy account that's brought you to Palisade was handled by Mr. Dunn, personally."

"My orders are to take over the Hagarthy property if Mr. Hagarthy doesn't pay off his five-thousand-dollar note," Tom said. "I'm to give him thirty days longer, despite the fact that the paper is already six weeks overdue, with the interest in arrears. I'd like to talk to Matthew Hagarthy at once."

Dodson seemed relieved that Tom was not interested in his office. "Matt Hagarthy's property is a charcoal camp located in the hills at Coffin Creek, about seven miles from here," he explained. "You'll need a rig to take you out there. I'll see Ed Glennon at the livery stable."

They went out together, Dodson carefully locking the door.

The neighboring building housed a hardware store on the ground floor and offices on the second. A man descending the open outside stairway from the offices accosted Tom and Dodson, saying, "Is that Magnus Dunn's man, Dodson?"

Dodson's nod was enough. The man strode up to Tom with outstretched hand, saying heartily, "I'm George Bannister, sir. I've had some correspondence with Magnus Dunn about the Hagarthy note which the

Exchange Bank holds. His last letter informed me that he had placed the Hagarthy account in your hands, and that I might be able to make a deal with you. Your name is Gary, sir?"

Tom nodded. He was thrown off mental balance by the man's bluff manner. Bannister was the aggressive type. He was a coarsely handsome man of about forty, expensively tailored, shrewd-eyed, with a broad smile that was too friendly.

"How about having a drink with me, Gary?" Bannister invited. "We could talk about the Hagarthy note and perhaps make a quick deal."

"I'm about to start out for Hagarthy's charcoal camp," Tom said. "Maybe when I get back . . ."

Bannister didn't like that. He frowned. "There's no rush to see Matt Hagarthy. I can assure you that he can't make payment on that note, or even on the interest." He must have seen that Tom didn't like to be crowded. In fact, Tom's face had suddenly lost its youthful, callow look and had taken on a hard, Magnus Dunn look. Bannister still persisted, however, if in a less pushy manner. "I'll make my offer, and you can think it over while you're talking to Hagarthy," he went on. "I'll pay you a thousand dollars more than the note's value, Gary. A thousand dollars."

"I'll think it over, Mr. Bannister."

"Thanks. It'll be an easy thousand dollars in your pocket." Bannister nodded, turned, strode briskly away.

Tom walked on with Henry Dodson, and after a short distance he blurted out in surprise, "Why, he tried to bribe me!"

Dodson smiled thinly. "George Bannister is ambitious and unscrupulous. He came to Palisade six months ago without a dime in his pocket. He was too late to get in on the lead and silver strikes, but he's still ambitious to make a fortune. By using his wits, he's managed to become part owner of a freighting firm, a store and a saloon. But the Hagarthy property is the thing he really wants."

"It's worth that much?"

"Not as Matt Hagarthy has been running it," Dodson said. "Matt is a decent sort. He pays good wages to his woodcutters and kilnmen, and feeds them well. He sells his charcoal to the smelters for a fair price. Bannister would change all that. Hagarthy's charcoal camp is the only one within fifty miles of Palisade. By getting possession of it, Bannister could set his own prices and bleed the smelter owners. He wouldn't need to own a lead or a silver bonanza then. He could make the mine owners pay a price that would make George Bannister as rich as themselves."

Tom nodded. "But he doesn't own the camp yet," he said.

"He won't give up trying to own it, though," Henry Dodson replied. "Not so long as there's the slightest chance for him. If you've decided not to deal with him, Mr. Gary, take my advice and watch your step. George Bannister is a bad man to buck. In fact, he's a dangerous man."

## II

The drizzle turned into a downpour with the coming of darkness, and water dripped through the leaky top onto the two men within the buggy. The drenched horse plodded along a road that was a seven-mile-long quagmire. It was a foothill road, and the slopes hemming it were dense with pine-nut trees. Finally, as the road curved around a bald rock formation, the driver, an oldster named Ike Payson, muttered, "Black Rock. Coffin Creek just ahead."

He was a peevish old fellow who smelled of rotgut whiskey and of the livery stable where he worked. Tom Gary had made no reply to Ike's bellyaching after discovering that the old man just liked to hear himself complain. But now Tom asked, "Hagarthy's camp is right at the creek?"

"Just beyond the bridge," growled Ike. "And me, I'm glad of it."

The bridge loomed through the darkness, a wooden span across Coffin Creek's deep chasm, and Tom, peering steadily through the rainy gloom, made out a number of buildings in a broad clearing in the forest on the far side. No lights showed, however, and Tom had a moment's fear that his trip—the seven miles had been worse than the entire train and stage journey from Sacramento to Palisade—had been made without purpose. The camp looked deserted but he soon discovered that it was not.

There was a flash of powder flame, the crack of a rifle, the vicious whine of a slug. A second shot followed, then a third. Old Ike yelped. "Hagarthy, cut it out—dammit!" And Tom shouted, "We're friends, Mr. Hagarthy!" The only reply was another shot.

Ike muttered something about getting out of there fast, that Matt Hagarthy was crazy drunk again, and, using his whip, he swung the rig about. He whipped the horse into a run, and fled back the way they had come. They rounded Black Rock, and Ike would have kept on going all the way to Palisade if Tom hadn't grabbed the reins and pulled in the horse.

"You crazy, mister?" Ike demanded. "That Matt Hagarthy is a wild man when he gets a mad drunk on. Me, I saw him beat up George Bannister not two weeks ago. Would have killed him only some of the boys stopped the fight. I'm not going back there. Not for any money!"

"Have it your way," Tom said flatly. "I'll go it alone."

He paid Ike off and got out of the buggy with his valise.

It took Tom at least twenty minutes to reach the bridge afoot, feeling his way around the mud holes and skirting the puddles. He paused by the near side of the bridge, among some dripping brush, and peered into the darkness for Matt Hagarthy. He saw no one, but there was now a faint light showing behind the window of one of the camp's buildings.

A queasy feeling inside him, Tom ventured across the bridge. He could hear the roar of rushing water from

deep in the gorge. There was water everywhere. It dripped from his hat brim. It soaked through his clothes. But he could stand being uncomfortable. He was more concerned about that rifle. He didn't want to give Magnus Dunn the satisfaction of seeing him broken by this mission. Far more, he didn't want to be killed while upon it.

*This can't be happening to me,* he told himself. *Not to Tom Gary.* He'd lived a peaceful life back in Philadelphia, and he had been forced to seek a mild excitement by joining an athletic club—the Quaker City Sportsmen's League. His old friends would never believe his story, if he lived to tell them!

When Tom got to the camp he saw that a number of the buildings were shaped like beehives. Kilns, he knew. There were nine of them, and a half dozen square plank buildings like the one he now had safely reached.

Evidently Matt Hagarthy, addled by whiskey, had quit his gunplay for tonight. The light. Tom saw by peering through the window, was from a back room. He could see the room through an open doorway. The building's entrance was just beyond the window, and Tom found it open. He stepped inside. into a storeroom that was evidently the camp's commissary. Setting down his bag, he shook some of the rain off himself. and made his way back through the storeroom.

Through the rear doorway, he glimpsed a bed. a bureau and a wall mirror. Hagarthy's living quarters, without a doubt. Tom stepped into the doorway, saw the other half of the room, and too late realized his mistake.

It was a girl's room, and the girl herself was there.

Tom had only a glimpse of her. She was in a wooden tub, her body all pink from the warm bath water and the heat of the nearby fireplace. She saw him at the same instant, and squealed. Her right arm made a jerky movement, and the sponge in her hand came Tom's way. It was so quickly thrown, and her aim was so good, that he couldn't duck. The sponge struck him in the face, and he reeled backwards, temporarily blinded by soapy water.

By the time he'd rubbed his eyes and could see again, the girl, hastily wrapped in a towel, was there slamming the door. She said furiously, "You! Get out! Get out, or I'll kill you!"

Tom backed farther away from the door, stammering his apology.

He explained how it happened that he had walked in without knocking or calling out—that he'd been afraid of Matt Hagarthy, who'd already shot at him, and might shoot again, more accurately. He told her his name and said that Magnus Dunn had sent him. And by the time he was finishing the explanation, the girl had subsided and he was grinning. However his mission might end, there was never a dull moment and he surely wouldn't die of boredom.

As he waited. he tried to recall what the girl had looked like. She had red-brown hair which she had

pinned atop her head so that it wouldn't get wet in her bath. She had green-gray eyes, and he'd never seen such angry eyes. . . . Suddenly Tom recalled something more. There'd been a heap of wet, muddy clothes upon a chair. A rifle had leaned against the chair.

The girl was the one who'd shot at him!

In a very few minutes the door opened and the girl, now dressed in gingham, appeared. She still looked angry. She had a lighted lamp in one hand, the rifle in the other. She set the lamp down on the counter extending along one side of the supply-stocked room. But she kept a firm grip on the rifle. Tom Gary stared at her, marveling. Accustomed to sedate ladies, he'd never imagined that such a girl as this one existed. "So you're Magnus Dunn's man?" she said, almost scornfully, "Well, what I think of Magnus Dunn and all who work for him couldn't be put into words!"

Tom remained silent. He liked the angry music in her voice.

"Granting Matt Hagarthy a loan—out of friendship, he said." the girl went on. "Then demanding payment right on the day the note is due. And two percent interest a month! The man's a usurer!"

"He told me to give Matt Hagarthy thirty days longer."

"Thirty days, indeed!"

"It won't help?"

"Help, he says!" the girl exclaimed. "A year wouldn't help, the way things are. But my father's not to blame, mind you. There's that George Bannister—"

"You're Matt's daughter?" Tom broke in.

She nodded. "I'm Mollie Hagarthy," she told him. And continued without a pause for breath. "George Bannister pretending to be Matt's friend, getting him to drink and gamble and squander his money. Then offering to buy the camp for a give-away price. And that's not all. Bannister planted men among our woodcutters and stirred up trouble. He got Acme Freighting, being part owner of it, to jack up drayage to the furnaces. And furthermore . . ."

"Things are that bad?"

"Things are worse, Mr. Tom Gary," Mollie said bitterly. "We're closed down for lack of money. We laid off the crew last Saturday. All we've got is two hundred cords of wood cut, and one hundred is in the kilns ready to be fired. But what's the use of burning charcoal if we can't burn enough to meet our contracts? Dad's in town now, trying to borrow some money to reopen the camp. He's turned over a new leaf since he found out what George Bannister was up to. He gave Bannister a beating that he deserved, and . . ." She had to stop for breath then.

"Why'd you shoot at my rig?" asked Tom. "You might have killed me and my driver."

"I thought it was George Bannister coming to pull some sneak trick." Mollie explained. "But there was no chance of my killing anybody. I

wasn't shooting to kill, just to scare off whoever was coming here in the middle of the night. I knew that it wasn't dad. He wouldn't ride in a rig, and besides he always comes up the trail singing." Her anger had dissolved while she talked, but suddenly she eyed Tom suspiciously again. "Maybe if I'd known it was Magnus Dunn's man, I'd have lowered my sights. Thirty days you're giving us! Why, I should . . ."

She broke off abruptly, an intent expression on her face.

Tom didn't hear anything, but he was glad for whatever had distracted her. He was uneasy about that rifle in the hands of this overly emotional Mollie Hagarthy, especially since the muzzle was pointed at him. Then he heard it, a lusty voice lifted in song. The tune was a rollicking Irish ballad, and as the singer drew near, Tom could make out the words.

*Oh, Mollie McGarran,*
*Sweet lass from Loch Garman,*
*You're as pretty a colleen*
*As Mollie McGurk of Cahersiveen!*
*But are you as true*
*As Mollie O'Shea of Derrybellew?*

Tom knew by the softened look in Mollie's eyes that it was Matt Hagarthy.

## III

Mollie ran to the door, flung it open, and Tom picked up the rifle, which she'd set down, and placed it out of sight atop a stack of bagged flour. A red-bearded giant of a man, Matt Hagarthy filled the doorway. He caught his daughter about the waist with two big hands and lifted her high, as a man might playfully lift a small girl. Mollie laughed delightedly, and Matt exclaimed, "And my own Mollie's the prettiest of them all, begorra!"

He put her down, and Mollie started to close the door. But she paused, peering into the rainy dark.

"Matt Hagarthy, where's your horse?" she demanded.

Matt looked bewildered and felt of his pockets, then an expression of stupid astonishment spread over his face. "That's queer," he muttered. "I had it with me when I left town. I must've misplaced it, sure as my name is . . ."

"Oh, dad!" Mollie broke in.

The exclamation was a rebuke. For Matt Hagarthy had turned back his new leaf; he'd been drinking, heavily. He took on a sheepish look, and said, "Just to celebrate, daughter." Digging into the pocket of his sodden coat, he brought out a thick roll of money. "Got a loan. A thousand dollars. We'll start work in the morning. I've passed the word, and the boys'll show up bright and early. Now you won't begrudge me that one little nip, will you, daughter?"

Mollie was wide-eyed. "I'd hug you for that, if you weren't so wet," she said. Then, in a changed tone, "Who loaned you the money?"

"One of my friends, daughter."

"Which one, dad?"

Matt muttered a name. It was in-

coherent, deliberately so. Mollie knew that he was hedging.

"Who, dad?" she demanded insistently. He said that he'd told her once, grumbled that he wasn't going to keep repeating his words like a parrot. But Mollie's gaze upon him was severe and unrelenting, and burly Matt Hagarthy seemed to wilt.

"It was Les Gibbons, Mollie," he said guiltily.

"Les Gibbons!" cried Mollie. "Why, he's part owner of the Big Lode Saloon, and George Bannister is his partner!"

"Bannister doesn't know about the loan, Mollie."

"It's mighty funny if he doesn't."

"Now you're worrying when there's no need to worry," Matt said. He was beginning to sober up, and now he noticed Tom Gary for the first time. "Who's this?" he demanded, jumping at the chance to distract his daughter. "Who's this young dude?"

"He's Magnus Dunn's man. That's who he is," Mollie said flatly. "Says his name is Tom Gary, and claims he's here to see that you pay off the Exchange Bank's note within thirty days. You know what that means? He'll take over the camp if you don't pay up. And I'm thinking that he'll turn it over to George Bannister!"

Matt Hagarthy suddenly looked like an angry bull. "So Magnus Dunn sent you, did he?" he growled. "Well, you can get out of my camp, Mr. Gary—or I'll run you out!"

Tom braced himself, for the red-bearded giant was advancing on him. But Mollie caught hold of her father's arm, and said firmly, "We won't drive him out on a night like this, with no way to get back to town except by walking. He may stay until morning. You take him to the bunkhouse with you, dad, and let him sleep there. We'll give him breakfast in the morning, too. Nobody—not even Magnus Dunn's man—can say that we're not hospitable."

Tom picked up his valise, turned to the door. "You're very hospitable, Miss Hagarthy," he said, and went out.

Matt came and led him to the nearest of the camp's half dozen plank bunkhouses. It was the smallest of the lot, and apparently Hagarthy also used it for an office as well as his living quarters. He went out after lighting the hanging lamp and pointing to the half dozen bunks at the rear, with the comment, "Take your choice. But any one of those bunks'll be a hard bed for a banker."

Alone, Tom didn't know whether to be sore or amused. He'd never known a man like Matt Hagarthy nor a girl like Mollie, but for all their tough ways he was rather taken by them. He even overlooked their sending him to bed hungry, knowing that they had so much trouble that they'd forgotten to ask if he'd had supper. He removed his wet clothes and hung them up on nail hooks at the end of the tier of bunks. Then he crawled into the blankets and fell to sleep almost immediately, without even thinking at all of his bitter dislike of old Magnus Dunn.

The sun was out when Tom woke, and the charcoal camp was bustling with activity. He got up from his bunk, pulled on his still damp clothes, and looked out the open door. Matt Hagarthy was rushing about, bawling orders to a great bunch of men—Chinese, Mexicans, European immigrants, and, in minority, some seedy-looking Americans. There were over a hundred of these men, and more were coming along the trail in small bunches. Evidently they were woodcutters, for they got axes and saws from a tool shed and headed into the pine-nut forest.

Smoke was curling from the tin chimney of a cook shack, and two men were carrying food supplies from the storeroom to that building. Tom saw Mollie Hagarthy appear at the storeroom door, and lifted his hat to her.

"Come have breakfast before you leave, Mr. Gary," she called, and he crossed to the storeroom.

There was a second back room that served as the girl's kitchen. Mollie explained that she and her father did not eat in the mess hall, saying "The cooks have enough to do, feeding three hundred woodcutters."

Tom sat at the kitchen table, at a place already set for him, and Mollie served him bacon, flapjacks and coffee. Not having had supper, Tom ate heartily and the girl was astonished by his appetite.

"I like to see men eat," she told him, "but I wouldn't have believed that a banker—"

She broke off abruptly, for there was a sudden commotion outside. Matt Hagarthy was shouting in anger. Mollie was about to pour Tom's third cup of coffee, but she put the pot back on the stove and hurried out through the storeroom. Tom jumped up and followed her.

Outside, Matt Hagarthy, holding an ax handle like a club, was confronting three mounted men. One of the riders had a lawman's badge pinned to his coat. Mollie ran up to them and demanded an explanation.

The man with the badge said courteously but firmly, "I don't like this any more than you do, Miss Hagarthy, but Les Gibbons here"—he nodded toward one of his companions, a red-faced man wearing a derby hat—"claims that your father held him up last night and took a thousand dollars from him."

"It's a lie!" Matt Hagarthy bellowed. "A dirty, lying trick!" He shook his club threateningly. "You know I'm no thief, Sheriff Tim Nolan! You've known me for ten years! Did I ever rob anybody?"

The sheriff squirmed in his saddle. He was a leathery-faced man of about sixty, with a droopy gray moustache. "I only know what Gibbons tells me, Matt," he said flatly. "He claims that you came to his office in the Big Lode Saloon and drew your gun on him. He claims that you made him hand over a thousand dollars and—"

"I was telling him my troubles," Matt broke in. "He offered to loan me the thousand. I swear that's the gospel truth, sheriff."

"I've got a witness, Hagarthy,"

Gibbons said. "Charlie Adams here was with me, and you threatened him, too. You were mean drunk."

Charlie Adams was a swarthy man with a sheepish grin. "That's right," he said. "We thought it was just a joke you were pulling, Matt. But when you didn't come back with the thousand dollars, Les figured we'd better go to the law."

Matt Hagarthy swore bitterly and made a threatening gesture with his club. Sheriff Nolan drew his gun, and said sourly, "You'll do no skull cracking, Matt. Drop that club. You're under arrest."

Mollie caught hold of her father's arm.

"Go with the sheriff, dad," she urged. "Don't make matters worse by resisting arrest. I'll get a lawyer, and we'll prove that you're being framed by"—she gave Gibbons and Adams a bitter look—"by George Bannister!"

## IV

Tom Gary didn't know what to believe after Sheriff Nolan had taken Matt Hagarthy away. He did believe, however, that Matt was capable of doing the thing of which he was accused, at least while drunk. But he also believed that Gibbons and Adams were capable of framing a man, if so directed by someone like George Bannister. Tom followed Mollie into the storeroom, back to her bedroom, and found her lying across the bed and crying heartbrokenly.

Tom stood embarrassedly in the doorway and tried to think of something to say to comfort her. He cleared his throat noisily to attract the girl's attention. Mollie gave a start, sat up, wiping away her tears.

"Go away," she said in a choked voice. "I have enough to worry me."

"I'd like to help."

"Help? What could you do?" she said scornfully. Then she was contrite. "I'm sorry," she said, more civilly. "But there's nothing anybody can do. Sheriff Nolan will find that thousand dollars on dad. He'll hold dad for trial, and that won't be until Judge Niles arrives at Palisade to open the next session of the district court. Without dad to boss the crew, I can't keep going. The men won't work for a woman. And . . ."

"I'll keep them working," Tom cut in. He spoke without thinking, but

*"My old man can draw faster than your old man!"*

then reasoned that his mission here was to protect the loan Magnus Dunn had made to Matt Hagarthy. He could protect it by helping Matt and his daughter. "You let me handle the crew."

"You?"

"I can do it," Tom said, flushing. He could see that the girl doubted his ability to fill Matt Hagarthy's place. ."Just tell me what's to be done," he told her, "and I'll see that it's done."

"All right. But why should you bother?"

"Magnus Dunn told me to give Matt Hagarthy thirty days," Tom said. "But thirty days' grace is no good to him if his camp is idle." That wasn't his only reason for offering his services. But he hadn't known Mollie long enough to tell her that he wanted to help because of her. "What's got to be done besides seeing that the wood is cut?" he asked.

The wood in the kilns had to be fired, Mollie told him. It had to be burned, cooled, loaded onto wagons and delivered to Palisade. Delivery had to be made before Saturday, now that there was no "loan" with which to pay the crew's wages. Once delivery was made, Mollie could collect from the smelter owners and pay the woodcutters.

"But even then there won't be enough money to pay them for working all week," she said gloomily. "I can't let them work tomorrow."

She told Tom that only one of Matt's kilnmen, a man named Frank Ross, had reported for work so far, and that she doubted that Frank could handle all the kilns alone.

"I'll help him," Tom said, and went out to see the kilnman.

Frank Ross was a lean, gray-haired, taciturn man who knew his trade well. He merely nodded when Tom told him that the two of them would have to do the firing alone. The kilns were of stone and, as Tom had already noted, of beehive shape. They were twenty-five feet in diameter and twenty-two feet high, and a hundred cords of wood could be burned at one charging. Each structure had a doorway and by partially closing it, Frank could regulate the draft and thus cause the wood to burn properly. His gauge was the smoke from the flues atop the kilns.

A thin blue smoke meant that the wood was burning too rapidly, that it was in danger of burning into an ash. Less air from beneath caused it to burn more slowly, and then the smoke was thick and white. The trick was to burn off only the volatile matter and leave the carbon, which, when used in a furnace, produced a heat of great intensity.

By noon Frank and Tom had all nine kilns burning and their only problem then was to keep the fire properly regulated. "It takes two or three days to cool after it's properly burned," Frank Ross told Tom. "This charging should be burned off by tomorrow afternoon."

During the afternoon Tom left the kilns and went into the cutting to see how the work there was coming along.

Matt Hagarthy's absence seemed to make no difference in the way the woodcutters worked. Axes swung rhythmically and whipsaws bit into pine-nut trunks. Trees crashed to the ground. Great piles of logs were being built up.

Nearly two hundred woodcutters had reported for work, and they were doing a good day's work. When Tom got back to the kilns and commented on this, Frank Ross nodded.

"Matt always badgers them too much," Ross explained. "He's never learned that workmen do better if they're not cussed out all the time. You just let them work in their own way, Gary."

"One thing puzzles me," Tom said. "How are we to get the wood in to the kilns?"

"Matt never got around to owning any wagons and teams," Frank told him. "He always had Acme Freighting do his hauling. But George Bannister is part owner of Acme, and if I were you, I wouldn't deal with that outfit. You might try Palisade Freighting. It's owned by Jess Tweed, and he's a straight-shooter. But Monday'll be time enough to get wagons up here. The charcoal will be ready to go by then."

"Mollie's counting on making delivery on Saturday."

"She is, eh? Well, maybe we can do it, at that."

A rider came up the trail in midafternoon. Frank caught sight of him as he reached the bridge across Coffin Creek. He swore and said, "It's Bannister. Wonder what he's after."

Tom had decided to find out what Bannister wanted when the man reined in and spoke to Mollie who had appeared at the storeroom door. Bannister didn't seem to recognize him at first, and that puzzled Tom until he realized that the smoke from the kilns had covered him from head to foot with soot. His face, hands and clothes were streaked with sweat and smoke. When Bannister did recognize him, he said, "Looks like Magnus Dunn sent you here to take over the camp, Gary." He didn't seem to like the idea of Tom filling Matt Hagarthy's place.

"I'm just taking over until Matt's released, Bannister."

"That may be a long time. A good many years."

"Not if he proves that he was framed."

"And that may take some proving," Bannister said. He was as shrewd looking as he'd been when Tom met him before, but his bland smile was missing. In fact, Bannister's ruddy face wasn't quite so self-assured at the moment. Tom's operating the camp had jolted him.

"There's a way out for Hagarthy," he said guardedly. "I was just about to tell Miss Hagarthy so. Matt was drunk when he forced Les Gibbons to hand over that thousand dollars. Les might be inclined to withdraw the robbery charge if the proper person urged him to."

"Meaning you, Bannister?"

"Well, Les is a friend of mine. He'd take my counsel."

Tom was convinced then. He was

certain that Les Gibbons had given Matt the loan of his own accord and then, all on Bannister's suggestion, accused Matt of threatening him with a gun. Charlie Adams was nothing more than a perjured witness.

"What would be your price, Bannister?" Tom asked.

Bannister smiled, suddenly sure of himself again. He was slow to reply, however, and first lighted a cigar. "I'm an impatient man," he said finally. "I don't want to wait thirty days to take over this camp. When a man waits, there's always a chance of a slip-up. You, Gary, might decide that Magnus Dunn should throw good money after bad—and give Matt another loan. You understand?"

"I asked you your price for giving Gibbons the right counsel."

"It's a bill of sale for the Hagarthy property," Bannister said. "In return I'll pay off the note held by the Exchange Bank and give Matt two thousand dollars in cash. I'll also pay you that thousand dollars I offered you last night, Gary. You've got to admit nobody would offer more for a bankrupt business."

"All right; we'll admit your offer is a fair one," Tom said flatly. He saw Mollie's hurt look but he was really watching Bannister. "It's framing Matt that we don't like. Get off your horse, Bannister."

"What—"

"You heard me. Get off your horse."

Bannister understood, then, and he measured Tom for a long moment in silence. Then he grinned confidently.

"You're asking for it," he said and swung down. He was no taller than Tom, but he had a lot more heft. He flung off his coat and hat, and stepped forward to finish it in a hurry. But there was more to Tom Gary than met George Bannister's eye. Back East, as a member of the Quaker City Sportsmen's League, Tom had trained as an amateur boxer and his trainer had been a retired heavyweight prize fighter.

## V

Tom got his guard up in time to ward off Bannister's first heavy blows. A third punch got through, but he rolled with it and the man's fist merely brushed his jaw. Tom had ducked, side-stepped, and jabbed back so deftly that Bannister's rush had petered out. In fact, sudden caution came to George Bannister. Breathing hard, his lips drawn back in a snarl, he was looking bewildered. ***This was no callow youth!*** Tom could almost read the thought in the man's eyes.

Tom circled Bannister, making the man turn with him. The maneuvering annoyed Bannister, who was a brawler rather than a boxer, and finally it infuriated him.

"Damn you—stand and fight!" he yelled, and tried his second rush. Tom surprised him this time by standing and meeting the lunge. In the flurry of blows, Tom landed half a dozen hard to Bannister's face, messing it up badly. Bleeding from a cut lip and a battered nose, Bannister reeled back with a trapped look in his

eyes. His breathing sawed now, and sweat streamed down his face.

Mollie Hagarthy watched with astonishment. She knew that Bannister had been whipped before, by her father, but she still couldn't believe that Magnus Dunn's youthful messenger could equal Matt's feat. Frank Ross had come up to watch, and so had the camp cooks and a couple of woodcutters who'd been to the tool shed for some wedges. Somebody muttered, "Get him, Gary! Get him good!"

Tom tried. He worked without anger or hate, but with skill and precision—a craftsman knowing exactly what he was doing. He gave Bannister a methodical beating, passing up half a dozen chances to knock the man out. He didn't want Bannister unconscious; he wanted him hurt, badly hurt. And he himself got hurt in return.

Wild as he was, Bannister landed sledge-hammer blows. He staggered Tom, he rocked his head from side to side, and once he jammed a knee into Tom's groin. Tom's own breathing became labored and he saw his man finally through a red-black mist. Fear came to him when a blow caught him on the chin, the pain exploding in his brain. He went down then, hard, and only Mollie's warning cry, "Tom, watch him!" saved him from being booted.

Rolling away as Bannister kicked at him, Tom got to his hands and knees, and from that position flung himself bodily at Bannister's legs. He spilled the man, and was first to rise. He caught Bannister coming up, battering him about the head. It was then that Bannister caved in, putting his arms up in front of his face and blubbering, "Let up! Let up on me!"

"You know what I want?" Tom said thickly.

"Anything, man! I'll give you anything!" Tom had hurt Bannister, hurt him badly.

Bleeding from a cut over his left eye, his face bruised all over, Tom gasped, "Get it down on paper, Mollie. So he can sign it. An admission of a frame-up!"

Bannister slumped against the storehouse wall, shaking violently, his eyes full of hate. He was beaten but there was a stubborn look about him, and Frank Ross said quietly, "You'll sign it, just like he says, Bannister. You'll sign it now—or after I take you into the woods and let some of the boys work you over some more."

The threat was enough.

Bannister signed the "confession" willingly enough when Mollie brought it out to him. He took to his horse, then, after Frank gave him his hat and coat.

"Maybe this is the end of it," he mumbled, with a final show of bravado. "And maybe it's not."

He turned his horse toward the bridge across Coffin Creek and the trail to town.

Mollie was all for rushing to Palisade to obtain her father's release, but Tom urged her not to go alone. He got one of the woodcutters to take his place at the kiln; then, after clean-

ing up and changing his clothes, he rode to town with the girl. Luckily, there were several saddle horses kept out at the camp.

They found Sheriff Tim Nolan in his office, and Mollie excitedly thrust Bannister's admission of a frame-up upon the lawman. Nolan worried his droopy gray mustache as he concentrated upon the signed statement, and Tom saw that he was concealing a grin. Finally Nolan couldn't hold back his amusement. He chuckled aloud.

"Saw Bannister ride in with a bloody face," he said. "I asked him what'd happened, and he claimed his horse had thrown him. He went to his office first and then to his hotel room, and a little later he came out and caught the Auburn stage."

"So he left town," Tom remarked.

"Sensible of him, now that I've got to turn Matt loose," said Sheriff Nolan. "But he'll be back, once he figures this has blown over. He's got too many interests here to stay away. Well, I'll go tell Matt the good news."

Taking a bunch of keys from his desk, he went back to the small stone building that was Palisade's jail. A few minutes later Matt appeared. He was beaming. After giving Mollie a hug, he grasped Tom's hand.

"I'll tell old Magnus what you've done for me, son, next time I see him," he said heartily. "I'll tell him you're worth a lot more money than what he's paying you!"

A moment later Matt was glum. He asked Mollie if she'd thought ahead and told the crew not to report for work the next day. Now that the thousand dollars had been returned to Les Gibbons, he had no way to pay the men's wages when Saturday, payday, came.

Mollie had forgotten to lay the woodcutters off, but she wasn't worried about anything at the moment. "Our luck's changing," she told her father. "We'll let the crew work and somehow we'll find a way to pay the wages when payday comes. We've got other things to do just now."

"What's that?" Matt asked.

"We've got to arrange for wagons and teams to haul charcoal, silly," Mollie told him. "Frank and Tom fired the kilns this morning. We'll be ready to make delivery on Saturday. After we've made a deal with Palisade Freighting, the three of us will have supper at the hotel—to celebrate."

Matt was cheerful again. Or at least he pretended to be.

The three of them left Sheriff Nolan's office, but outside Tom said that he would meet them at the hotel a little later. He wanted to see Henry Dodson at the Exchange Bank's branch office. He made his way there and, though it was again after banking hours, the gray-haired little manager was still at his desk, working on his books. Dodson shook hands and asked Tom about Matt Hagarthy being in jail, and showed astonishment when hearing that Matt had been released. He was even more surprised when Tom told him the reason for Matt's being turned loose.

"How can I get in touch with Magnus Dunn in a hurry, Henry?" Tom asked finally. "There's no telegraph from here, is there?"

Dodson said there was not, but that if Tom would write out his message, he, Dodson, would send it to the Auburn telegraph office by special rider. So Tom sat down and wrote out the message. It was a brief:

> Suggest you authorize branch office to make Matt Hagarthy immediate new loan of one thousand dollars. Vital to protect first loan.
>
> Tom Gary.

Henry Dodson shook his head when he read it. "The old boy'll have a stroke when he receives that wire," he commented, but didn't urge Tom not to send it.

With Matt Hagarthy back at the camp and George Bannister making himself scarce, matters at the Coffin Creek charcoal camp ran smoothly. The only trouble, and it blew over, was a brief revolt among some of the woodcutters. Matt had antagonized them by his too-zealous bossing. Afterward, Mollie rebuked him and Matt promised not to ride the men with such rough spurs.

So far as Tom Gary was concerned, those few days were much like a holiday. He loafed about the storeroom, kept Mollie company, and, without really being aware of it, courted her.

Tom did some vague figuring. He wondered if two could live on the seventy dollars a month that Magnus Dunn was paying him. It seemed unlikely. When there were two, there was likely to be more, and a family needed a house and furniture, food and clothing. Too, a man would want his family to have more than just the bare necessities of life. Tom finally decided that seventy dollars wasn't enough and he had better wait until the Old Man increased his salary. But he reflected gloomily that, Magnus Dunn being what he was, it would be a long wait.

Mollie not only acted as the storekeeper but kept the camp's books, and Friday Tom found her at her desk frowning worriedly. He asked her what was wrong, and Mollie said, "Tomorrow is payday, and we've no money to pay the men off. We shouldn't have let them work all week. Even if the smelter owners should pay for the charcoal on delivery tomorrow, there won't be enough money to meet the payroll."

Tom remembered his telegram to Magnus Dunn.

He went to the barn, saddled a mount and rode to Palisade. At the Exchange Bank's office, Henry Dodson shook his head. "There's been no reply from Magnus, Tom."

Tom wasn't surprised, but he was disappointed. "Henry, I want a thousand dollars," he said abruptly. "Out of your office funds. On my own signature."

This time he was surprised. Dodson accepted his note and gave him the money without protest or argument. The banker also gave him some information. "George Bannister got back today," he said.

Tom nodded but by the time he got back to the camp, he'd forgotten Dodson's mention of George Bannister. He went into the storeroom and placed the money on Mollie's desk.

"A loan," he told her. "Matt can take his time in paying it back to me."

The girl's happiness, her exclaiming, "Tom, I could kiss you for that!" didn't rid Tom of the knowledge that the thousand dollars made the day when he could ask Mollie to marry him even more remote!

## VI

Just before full dark that evening, three big Palisade Freighting Company rigs arrived. Each huge wagon was drawn by six big mules, and the teamsters were expert mountain freighters. The charcoal would be cooled enough to be loaded in the morning, and two of the rigs would haul it to town. The third rig would haul cordwood from the cutting to the kilns.

The teamsters unhitched their teams, watered and grained the animals, then headed for the mess hall. Matt Hagarthy and Frank Ross were busy about the kilns. The woodcutters, supper eaten, lounged in and about their bunkhouses. Mollie was working on her account books, and Tom sat nearby watching her. It was about nine o'clock when the blast came.

There was one hard *thu-ump* that made the storeroom's plank walls rock. The floor trembled, and the ceiling lamp swayed wildly. Canned goods spilled from shelves. The explosion was followed now by a rumbling and a crashing, and this sound was like a wooden building being torn apart. Tom stared at Mollie, and she cried, "The bridge!"

It must have been her woman's intuition that told her, for Tom had no real idea of what had happened until he followed her outside. Everybody connected with the camp was running toward Coffin Creek, and everybody was shouting wildly. Matt Hagarthy was cursing.

The bridge was gone, all right.

Except for some heavy supports jutting from the rocks on the camp side, the wooden span had dropped into the chasm. The far side showed a gaping spot in the rockwall where the dynamite charge had been touched off. Somebody, working under cover of darkness, had mined the bridge supports on that side, and now the structure lay a hundred feet below in a splintered heap of wreckage, with the rushing water of the Coffin pounding at it. Forty feet of unbridged space, and Matt Hagarthy stared at it with bitter eyes.

Suddenly Matt was a beaten man. "Bannister," he said hollowly. "He's got me at last."

There was no anger in his voice, just the empty tone of defeat. Matt was done fighting. Mollie too looked as though her spirit was crushed. She took her father's hand, and told him, "We'll start over, darling. We'll go somewhere else, where there is no George Bannister. We . . ." She

couldn't say any more because tears choked her voice.

Tom turned to Frank Ross. "Can't it be rebuilt?"

"It can be," Frank said. "But it'll take too long. It took six weeks to put that first bridge across. Maybe an engineer could do it in less time, but Matt's no engineer. He's licked, all right. You know what, Tom—Bannister wanted this camp bad enough, but he wanted revenge for the beatings he took—from Matt and from you—even more. Well, he should be satisfied now."

"There's no other way to leave the camp?"

"Not for wagons."

"How can we get out on foot?"

"Through the forest," Frank answered, eying Tom with a growing interest. "It's a ten-mile hike through brush and timber, but then you'd hit the Auburn-Palisade road. You're figuring wrong, though, if you think we can get loaded wagons through."

"If there *was* a road?"

"There's no road, friend. Just trees and brush."

"We'll make a road," Tom said excitedly. "We'll cut one out. We've got men and axes. We'll work ahead of the wagons!"

The woodcutters were willing enough when Tom put it up to them, and the man who had destroyed the Coffin Creek bridge and fled in the night would have cursed had he seen the will with which those nearly two hundred men hacked at the pine-nut forest. Tom had won the crew over by telling them that Bannister was as much their enemy as he was Matt Hagarthy's—that if Bannister ever took over the camp and they worked for him. he would pay them whatever he damn well wished. Tom made the men realize that Matt, for all his loudmouth bossing, was a good employer to work for—and to be loyal to in a pinch.

All night they worked, and the darkness racketed with the sound of axes, saws and crashing trees. Tom swung an ax along with them, and so did Frank Ross until dawn came and it was time to remove the charcoal from the kilns. Ross, Matt and a dozen woodcutters returned to the camp to load the charcoal. They'd hardly gone when one of the wagons came along the new road, its driver picking his way over and around tree stumps. The camp cooks were aboard with grub for the road builders, and Mollie was riding beside the driver.

"I don't know what we would have done without you," Mollie told Tom, as the crew dropped their tools to gather around the rig. "We owe you more than we'll ever be able to pay."

Mollie's eyes were aglow, and she was, despite a pug nose and a sprinkling of freckles, the prettiest girl Tom Gary had ever known. He forgot to be banker cautious, and Magnus Dunn would surely have snorted with displeasure had he been there to hear his grandson say, "I haven't much to offer you now, Mollie, but my future is promising. Magnus told me that this trip would make or break me, and since it hasn't broken me . . .

Doggonit, Mollie, I'm asking you to marry me!"

Mollie's eyes glowed even brighter. "Matt Hagarthy's daughter a banker's wife!" she exclaimed. "Why I never dreamed . . ." She laughed musically. "But I did hope, Tom," she told him.

After a meal and a rest, the crew went back to work and by noon, when the big freight wagons, loaded high with black chunks of charcoal, labored along the bumpy, stump-cluttered trail, the vanguard of axmen was but half a mile from the Auburn-Palisade road. The men were tiring, but they worked on and by late afternoon the wagon and teams broke through the last clump of trees and brush. The teamsters swung their rigs south along the smoother road, picked up speed and headed for Palisade.

Matt rode the lead wagon, and Tom and Mollie rode up with the driver of the second. It was still Saturday, the day on which they'd planned delivery of all those tons of charcoal. Monday the kilns would be charged and fired again, and in thirty days . . . Well, Matt might then be able to pay something on his note and what could Magnus Dunn do if his agent, Tom Gary, extended it another thirty days? Darkness closed in, and up ahead Matt Hagarthy, his spirit back, sang his ditty of Mollie McGarran of Loch Garman in a lusty voice.

But when the wagons lumbered into Palisade, Matt stopped singing. He dropped down from the wagon and headed for the Big Lode Saloon, ignoring Mollie's cry, "No, dad—don't!"

Mollie begged Tom to stop her father, but it was too late. Matt had entered the saloon before Tom could drop down from the other wagon and run after him. Tom entered the Big Lode seconds behind Matt, but already the burly red-bearded Irishman had found his man. Or men.

Les Gibbons and Charlie Adams were with George Bannister at the bar.

Matt was standing spread-legged, his big fists out in front of him, a wicked grin showing through his beard. "Hear those wagons, Bannister?" he said tauntingly. "They're hauling charcoal. My charcoal!"

"You're lying, Hagarthy!" Bannister said, his temper flaring. "You couldn't have got—" He caught himself up, but too late. It was as good as a confession of his guilt in the destruction of the Coffin Creek bridge.

Matt's grin spread, and he said loudly, for every man in the Big Lode to hear, "This tinhorn's been making war on me, boys. Last night he blew up my bridge across the Coffin, figuring that'd keep me from getting my charcoal out. But I got it out. And I'm saying now before witnesses that this town ain't big enough for me and Bannister. I'm running him out—"

"You lay a hand on me again, and I'll kill you!" Bannister broke in.

He'd pulled a gun from his coat pocket, and now both Gibbons and Adams followed his example. There were a couple of dozen other

men in the place and they made a wild scramble to get out of bullet range. Tom Gary saw Matt grab for his gun, one man against three. Tom could fight with his fists, but he'd never carried a revolver. He grabbed for one now, jerking it from the holster of one of the saloon's fleeing patrons. He thumbed back the hammer, squeezed the trigger, and somehow he had the muzzle aimed at George Bannister.

The shots crashed, the roar of them filling the saloon. Then abruptly Bannister was dead on the floor, Les Gibbons was slumped against the bar with a bullet-torn right arm, and Charlie Adams was reaching empty hands toward the ceiling.

Matt Hagarthy was still on his feet, but he had been hit twice and he stood swaying like a drunken woodcutter. Tom flung down his smoking gun and hurried to support Matt.

"He'll be all right, once we get him to a doctor," Tom told Mollie when she came flying in. Somehow he was sure that Matt Hagarthy was too tough to die by bullets. And the doctor, whose office was just across the street, agreed with him in that.

After Matt was patched up, dosed with brandy and put to bed, Sheriff Tim Nolan showed up and told Tom that he and Matt were in the clear. There were plenty of witnesses to testify that George Bannister and his companions had started the gunplay.

Afterwards Tom took Mollie to the hotel for supper, and little Henry Dodson found them there in the dining room. "Here's a reply to that telegram you sent Magnus Dunn," he said excitedly, and thrust an already opened envelope into Tom's hand. "It just arrived."

Tom weighed the telegram in his hand, afraid to read it. Mollie saw his anxiety and laid an encouraging hand on his arm. He finally opened the envelope and read the message, and was surprised by the Old Man's extravagant expenditure of words—and money. The wire read:

Dear Grandson,

Dodson reported what you've been up to, as I ordered him to. New Hagarthy loan approved. Congratulations on way you've handled mission. Report Sacramento at once in person, to discuss vice presidency Exchange Bank.

Affectionately,

Magnus Dunn.

"It's bad news, Tom?" Mollie asked anxiously.

"I've got to go back to Sacramento."

Mollie's face fell. "Oh," she murmured.

It was little Henry Dodson who had the idea. "You could take Mollie with you, Tom," he suggested, beaming, "and old Magnus could be best man at the wedding. That way, he might open up his stingy old heart and give you a fine wedding present!"

Tom grinned up at him. "Henry, that's no way to talk of a fine old gentleman," he said rebukingly. And he was surprised, thinking it over, to find that he meant it.

THE END

# BULLET TRAIL

**By Emmett J. Powell**

***Could anything but gunsmoke vent the brand three relentless years of man-hunting had burned on Dane Devon?***

DANE DEVON rode into Silver Bend on a tired, sweat-gummed horse, his clothes red with Utah dust, long, leather-hued face dark with stubble. He sat slack in the saddle, pale blue eyes ranging from one side of the street to the other, a lanky, flat-muscled man, marked as all men are marked who spend most of their waking hours on a horse. This was homecoming, and he should have been stirred by the sight of the town where he had grown up, but he was not, for something had died in Dane Devon.

He reined into Abe Gondo's stable, stripped his roan gelding, and rubbed him down. Gondo came in from the horse corral and stood staring at him. When Dane turned, Gondo said, "Howdy, Devon," in a cool neutral voice, making no effort to shake hands.

Gondo knew, as all the townspeople would know, even Nancy Ardell, why he was back. He had

been liked in Silver Bend as a boy, but he wouldn't be liked now. They'd be afraid of him, most of them, and folks never liked a man they feared. It made no difference to Dane Devon. He didn't give a damn. He had grown used to people not liking him.

"Howdy, Abe." Dane moved toward the archway. "Take care of him. He's come a ways."

Gondo's eyes fixed on the black-butted gun thonged low on Dane's right thigh. "You'd better keep going, Dane," he said. "We need Bat Keen."

"So do I. Where'll I find him?"

"I don't know and I wouldn't tell you if I did," Gondo answered in a wicked, slapping tone. "I hope to hell he's out of town."

"I'll find him," Dane said, and moved into the street.

He stood looking along the dust strip, hearing the growl of the Grand River where it swung around a red sandstone cliff. Nothing had changed in the three years he had been gone. McFee's Bar, the hotel, the blacksmith shop, the bank, the mercantile —they were all the same.

Then, for the first time since he had ridden into town, something tightened in his throat. Actually everything had changed. It had been changed three years ago when his father had been murdered and his safe robbed. Dane's gaze fixed on the false front of the Mercantile, and the old fury and hate and sorrow that had been all mixed up in him these three years was fed again. When he had left town that false front had carried the letters, ALEC DEVON AND SON. They had been painted out and in their place were new letters, ELI TRAVIS, PROP.

Dane turned down the boardwalk to McFee's Bar and went in. The place was empty except for Old Man McFee back of the mahogany. He stood with his palms flat on the polished bar top, black eyes studying Dane Devon with deep and furious passion.

"Get out, Devon," he said. "I'm serving you no drinks today."

"Where'll I find Bat Keen?"

"I don't know, but I hope to hell you don't find him."

In a way it was funny. Dane had never been much of a hand for liquor, but he used to come in here with his father once in awhile and have a beer, and it had always been an occasion, with McFee breaking his neck to be sociable. Everybody had liked Alec Devon and they'd acted as if they had liked Dane, too.

Dane swung out of the saloon and slanted across the street to the Mercantile. The town was almost empty, for it was the middle of the week. When he came into the cool gloom of the store's interior, he saw that no one was here except the clerk, a tall bald man who was a stranger to Dane. He came along the counter, questioning Dane with his eyes.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

Dane made no answer for a moment. He felt again the tighten-

ing in his throat. The familiar store smells were in his nostrils; dry goods and leather, lard and bacon, pickles and coffee. Everything was the same as he remembered. Even the candy counter where he used to snitch pieces of horehound when his dad wasn't looking and get his seat tanned if he was caught. The old safe was still in the back. That was where he had found his father.

"Can I do something for you?" the clerk asked again, his tone courteous.

"Yeah," Dane said softly. "You can tell me where I'll find Bat Keen."

The clerk backed away, lips tightening. Dane thought, *he knows who I am, and he's afraid.*

"I couldn't say," the clerk answered, and retreated behind the counter.

"Where's Eli?"

"In the bank."

Dane went out of the store. He built a smoke and stood there, feeling the pressure of the townsmen's eyes staring at him from behind dirty windows. He touched a match flame to his cigarette and flipped the charred stick into the street. He'd find Bat Keen if it took him a month. He wouldn't be denied now.

It had taken him three years to hunt down the other two. He had known that Bat Keen would be here in Silver Bend, for Keen was not a man to run. That was what surprised Dane now. He had expected Keen to come to him the instant he appeared on the street, his gun smoking. That was the way it had been when they were kids, and they'd fought with their fists. Bat Keen had never ducked a fight, and there had been many between them.

He turned toward the bank, pondering this. He had a hunch that Bat Keen was hiding here in town, perhaps watching him now. A faint prickle chilled his spine. Some men, if they were in Keen's place and knew why Dane was here, would shoot him in the back. He shrugged, the prickle passing. Drygulching was not Keen's way.

Eli Travis was alone in the bank. He saw Dane the instant he came in and stepped out of the cage to meet him, small clawlike hand extended to shake his hand.

"I thought that was you, Dane, when you rode past," Travis said, pleased. "You've changed. Filled out. You look . . ." he paused, searching for the right words, and added, "well, a little tougher than you used to."

Dane shook the proffered hand. "I *am* tougher, Eli. I'm looking for Bat Keen."

Travis shook his head. "Best forget that, boy." He turned toward his desk behind the counter. "I want to settle up with you, Dane. I had to take Alec's property over to satisfy a mortgage the bank held, but I figure the store and house were worth more than what Alec owed, so you've got something coming."

"Where is Keen?"

"Why, I don't know. In town somewhere, I guess."

"I'll turn him up."

Dane started toward the door and swung back when Travis called, "Come here, Dane. Three years it's been. I don't like to let things hang fire for so long."

"It can keep on hanging fire," Dane said. "I'll be back."

The blue veins stood out on Eli Travis' bony face. "No, I doubt that you will, Dane. You keep hunting Bat, and you'll wind up in a pine box."

Dane cuffed back his Stetson. "What the devil is wrong with everybody? You'd think they were crazy about Bat the way they act."

"Maybe they are," Travis said softly. There's been a lot of changes in three years, Dane. You've done your job, haven't you? You'd best settle up with me and ride on."

Eli Travis had always reminded Dane of a sparrow, small and wiry with a quick, birdlike way of moving. He was watching Dane now, head cocked, small black eyes bright as a bird's.

"The way you shook hands with me," Dane said, "I thought you might be the one friendly man in town, but damned if you ain't like the others. Ride on, you say, like maybe I had smallpox."

Travis shook his head. "No. It's just that everybody knows you're here to kill Bat Keen."

"That's between him and me," Dane argued. "No reason why the town should take sides."

"Lots of reason. Bat's been the town marshal since you left and he's been a good one. Silver Bend needs him. You'll kill him and ride on. And where do you think that leaves us? Wide open for Rufe Morglar and his pals."

"Morglar? Who in thunder is he?"

"A tough, Dane. A killer, and he has a couple of saddle pards who are just like him. Morglar bought the Box A a year or so ago. Came up from New Mexico, they say. He walks easy when Bat's in town, but once Bat was gone and Morglar took over. Shot hell out of everything."

Then that was it. Bat Keen was Silver Bend's insurance against Rufe Morglar. Anger began to burn in Dane. A hell of a weak bunch, these townsmen. Abe Gondo and McFee and all the rest. They'd made Bat Keen marshal, and now they hid behind him.

"I'll be back," Dane said, and stalked out of the bank.

There was one other person he wanted to see. He had hoped to finish with Keen before he saw Nancy Ardell, but now he knew he couldn't. He still hadn't figured out why Keen was hiding from him. Nancy might be able to tell him.

Dane had been in love with Nancy long before he'd left town. So had Bat Keen, and that was where much of the trouble had come between them. They had fought over her smiles, wicked fights in the street dust, dog fights in which they'd rolled over and over, slashing and

kicking at each other until they were pulled apart.

Girllike, Nancy had been thrilled by their rivalry, but there had come a day when they'd grown up enough to know that fighting settled nothing, and Nancy had made her choice. The night Alec Devon had been murdered, Nancy had promised Dane. Bat had heard and apparently accepted. Then, hours later, Dane had gone back to the store and found his father dying.

Dane made the turn at the end of the block and walked slowly toward Nancy's house. Perhaps, he thought, he didn't know Bat Keen, after all. It wasn't like Bat to have a part in the killing of Alec Devon. The law, in the hands of a distant sheriff, had said there was no evidence against Bat and had refused to touch him. But it hadn't touched Johnny Hasset and Bill Wilder, either.

Bat had been out of town when Dane had left, but he'd come back to wear the star. For all Dane knew, he might be married to Nancy. If that had happened, he couldn't blame either Bat or Nancy, for he had not written to her. Three years of silence was enough to make any woman think she had been deserted. Either way, it had nothing to do with Dane's job. He had come back to kill Bat Keen, and he would kill him.

She saw him before he turned through the gate in the white picket fence and she ran down the path to meet him, crying, "Dane, Dane, I knew you'd come back."

Nancy was in his arms then and she was kissing him, and he found her lips soft and sweet in a way no other woman's lips had ever been. He had forgotten how it was. Then she pulled away and looked at him, her arms still hard around him, and she was crying a little.

"This ain't the time to cry," he said.

She smiled and, stepping back, wiped her eyes. "I know, Dane. I couldn't help it." She took his hand. "Come on in. I'll get you something to eat."

He followed her through the living room and into the kitchen. She set out cold meat and bread, warmed up a pot of coffee, and poured a cup. Then she cut a wide slab of peach pie and pulled out a chair for him. Dane ate hungrily, for he had had nothing since morning, all the time watching her, and something came alive in him, something that he had thought was dead.

He used to dream about Nancy, of marrying her and having a ranch at the foot of Grand Mesa, of doing things for her, but he had had none of those dreams since he had left Silver Bend. He pushed back his pie plate, knowing he had been wrong in coming to see her, for the job he had set himself to do was unfinished, and he sensed how she would feel about it.

She leaned forward, hands clasped. "Dane, I've got to know something. Did you come back for me or to kill Bat Keen?"

He reached for tobacco and paper,

not meeting her eyes. The answer to this question would decide his future. He sealed the smoke and, slipping it into his mouth, raised his eyes to her. Nancy had been pretty as a girl; she was beautiful as a woman, and he thought with some bitterness that she deserved a better man than he was.

"I love you," he said. "I've always loved you. Isn't that enough, Nancy?"

"No."

She rose, a tall, round-bodied woman who held everything that was good in life for Dane Devon, and a sense of his wrongness nagged him.

"All right," he told her. "I came back for both."

She moved to the window and stood there, the slanting sunlight touching her black hair with a scarlet glow.

"You killed Johnny Hasset in Leadville," she said.

"That's right."

"Then you spent three years hunting Bill Wilder before you found him in Tombstone. You killed him."

"That's right." Dane stared at her, rebellious. "Dad wasn't dead when I got to him. He told me it was Hasset and Wilder. You know that, and you know the law wouldn't do anything about it. If I hadn't got them, who would have?"

"I know, Dane. Folks here hadn't felt the need of law before your father was killed. That was why Bat Keen was made marshal after you left here."

"Then what's the matter with me? Ever since I got back folks have been telling me to ride on."

"There's nothing wrong with you any more than any man who's made himself a killer. I wouldn't say you were wrong in hunting down Wilder and Hasset and killing them, but I do say you're wrong in freezing the good things out of your life and making a gun-pulling machine out of what used to be a fine, gentle man."

Fine? Gentle? He felt like laughing, but it had been a long time since he'd laughed at anything. He hadn't known he had once been fine and gentle. It had never occurred to him.

"I don't reckon I've changed," he said.

"You're entirely changed, Dane. That's why I asked you whether you came back for me or to kill Bat. You told every man you met who was coming through Silver Bend that you'd come back and get Bat as soon as you'd got the other two. You told them to stop here and tell us."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Everything. Bat had nothing to do with your father's death."

He stood up and stared at her, taking a moment to think about what she had said. "How do you know?"

"I'll answer that with a question. What makes you think Bat was with the others?"

"I know the three of them were friends," he shouted, angry for no reason except that the girl was

putting him on the defensive. "I know there was a third man outside who held the horses. I know Bat Keen needed money and he didn't aim to stay around town after you promised to marry me. Doesn't all that add up?"

"It doesn't add up to murder." Nancy came to him and put her hands on his arms, eyes lifted to his. "Dane, if you love me, promise me you'll ride out of town today and forget Bat. I'll go with you."

"Your father . . ."

"He died last winter, Dane. I'm all alone. You're alone. We belong to each other."

She was very close to him, and he found himself stirred by her presence as he had not been stirred by anyone or anything for three years. If she had said that to him before his father's death, he would have accepted without question. But that had been three years ago. Now he realized how much he had changed, how everything, even his love for Nancy Ardell, had been dwarfed by his festering hate for Bat Keen.

He pulled away from her and picked up his Stetson. "I guess I'll keep looking for Bat."

"Wait, Dane." Nancy's face was gray and she looked years older than she was. "Do you know how it is to love someone and hope he'll come back the same man he was when he left, to worry for three years for fear he'd kill a man who didn't deserve killing and to wonder how you could stop him?"

He shook his head. "I wouldn't know how that was."

"Then you don't love me, Dane. It's not that you really think Bat had anything to do with your father's murder. It's just that you hate him. You hated him before you left. You fought with him time after time and I was the cause of it. I know and I'm ashamed, and I have no excuse, but after I found out it was you I loved and not Bat, you had no reason to go on hating him."

It was true. All of it. Dane hadn't admitted it to himself. He had locked his mind against any thought that it might have been his own hatred of Bat Keen and not his conviction of the man's guilt that had made him want to kill Keen. Night after night while he lay with his head on his saddle and stared at a desert sky, he had pictured how he would make Keen fight. Not with fists, for that was childlike. They'd fight with guns and he'd kill Bat Keen.

He wheeled out of the room and walked down the hall. "Dane, Dane," the girl cried, and ran after him. "Would it do any good if I told you how I knew he had no part in your father's murder?"

Dane stopped beside the hat rack and turning, caught a glimpse of his face in the hall mirror. It wasn't a likable face, dirty and dark with stubble, and holding a sort of wildness that he had seen on the faces of so-called badmen. He turned quickly away, wanting to forget the sight of his own face.

"I'll listen," he said.

Nancy stood very straight, looking up at him, and he sensed how much it was costing her to tell him.

"This is the first time I've told anyone, Dane, and I know Bat hasn't told anyone. He loved me. Remember that, Dane. He took it awfully hard when I said you were the one. He came back that night after you had left. I was in bed and he tapped on the window. Dad wasn't well, so I raised the window and let Bat in. He spent two hours here trying to get me to change my mind, and it was during that time your father was shot."

Dane rubbed his face. Nancy wouldn't lie. Even as a girl when her smiles had thrown Dane Devon and Bat Keen at each other's throats, she had never lied to either of them. He was as certain of that as he was certain of her love, but what she had said didn't make him like Bat Keen any better.

"Do you think telling me that will make any difference in how I feel about Bat?" he said harshly.

"It will make you see yourself," she breathed. "You'll know you've been lying to yourself about why you want to kill him."

He looked again into the hall mirror. There were scars on his face that Keen's fists had given him; there were scars on his soul that had been placed there by the street dust and his sweat and his blood and the pain that had come from a bloody nose and a black eye and open cuts on his face, scars that had come from the feral fury that Bat Keen had aroused in him.

"All right," he said. "I'll kill Bat Keen because I hate him. If you tell me he had no part in dad's murder, I'll believe that. If you tell me he spent two hours in your bedroom after you'd gone to bed and that nothing happened between you, I'll believe that, but I'll still kill him."

"Why, Dane?"

He put on his hat and went out, not answering her. She followed him down the walk, and when they reached the gate, she said, "I've been wrong, Dane. Wrong in loving you and waiting for you. You're rotten with hate. You'll go on leaving a bullet trail behind you until somebody kills you."

He went down the street, not looking back. He was wrong. He was terribly wrong. He wanted Nancy Ardell more than anything in his life. He could take the money Eli Travis was going to give him and ride away with Nancy, but it wouldn't be any good. The old dreams were dead. They would never come back. He was rotten with hate. Nancy was right, but he couldn't change. He was like a piece of driftwood being thrown down a dark channel in floodtime, powerless to hold himself back from a course of action that he himself had set into motion.

He came into Main Street, thinking of Nancy's love and was softened a little by it. He would treasure her kiss; he would remember that one short moment out of three years of darkness when he held her in his

arms and hers had been around him.

He did not lift his face to see what was happening until he heard a brutal voice say: "All right, Keen. Make your play. I've been waiting for this for a year."

Startled, Dane looked up. Three men were standing in front of McFee's Bar, hands poised over gun butts. The one in the middle was big and burly with little pig eyes and meaty lips that were twisted in a triumphant grin. He would be, Dane thought, the Rufe Morglar Eli Travis had mentioned. Dane had met men like him, brutal and lacking in the elements of human decency, men of passion whose appetites never rose above the level of drink and the baser satisfactions that went with it. To them, killing a man they hated was a worthy end in itself.

Dane Devon stared at Rufe Morglar, and in that moment of insight he saw himself. Three years of hunting Johnny Hasset and Bill Wilder and hating Bat Keen had brought him to this same gutter level.

Bat Keen was facing Morglar and the other two. He was the same tall skinny man he had been even as a kid, the same freckles and blue eyes and the too-wide chin for so thin a face. But there were two changes in Bat Keen and the second was important: he wore a star and his right arm was in a cast. Then Dane knew why Bat Keen had not appeared in the street to meet him.

"Get out of town, Rufe," Keen was saying in a dry flat voice, left hand awkwardly poised over gun butt. "You ain't shooting this town up today."

Morglar laid a brutal taunting laugh against Keen. "We'll shoot it up, tin star. It was smart, keeping under cover and not letting it out you busted your arm getting bucked off a horse, but it finally got to me. Now we'll see how fast you are with your left hand."

Dane stepped into the street. "Turn around, Morglar. I'm backing the tin star's play."

Morglar whirled, surprise shocking him, for he had been confident that no one in Silver Bend would risk supporting Bat Keen in the showdown.

"Who the hell are you, stranger?" Morglar demanded.

"Dane Devon."

Morglar tensed. There was no doubt from his expression that he had heard of Dane Devon, and what he had heard told him he was caught. He couldn't, under the circumstances, walk off; yet he must have sensed that he wasn't as fast as Dane.

There was this one moment when there was only silence with the five men in the street standing as if they were cast from bronze. The two with Morglar had turned to stare at Dane, and it was one of them who made the first move, a wild grab at his gun. He died with it still in leather, Dane's first bullet catching him just above the nose.

Silver Bend rocked with the thunder of those guns. There, on the main street between the false fronts,

flame ribboned out into the alternate patches of shadow and sunlight, and powdersmoke was a stench in the air. Morglar lurched with Dane's second bullet in him, stumbled and broke and fell, dust clouding up around him. The third man had his gun out and shot at Dane once, the bullet ripping through the crown of Dane's hat. Then Bat Keen made a slow left-handed draw, and fired, the bullet knocking the man off his feet.

They were dead, the three of them, and it was a good day's work. Slowly Dane Devon paced toward Bat Keen, his gun holstered, a great weight lifted from him. He had not killed these men because he hated them or because he had been driven by the urge to take his own vengeance. He had killed them because they stood on one side of law and order and Dane had put himself on the opposite side along with Bat Keen.

"I hear you're gunning for me, Dane," Keen said. "I . . ."

"Forget it," Dane said.

Townsmen were running toward them, Eli Travis, Abe Gondo, Old Man McFee and the rest. Sheep, Dane thought, and that was the way it would be in any town, at any time. There were those who must be protected from the wolves like Rufe Morglar, and others who must do the protecting. Bat Keen was one of those. Now, looking at him, Dane saw no friendliness in his eyes. There never would be. Then, for the first time in many months, Dane laughed. Bat Keen's skinny, freckled face carried scars that Dane's fists had given him.

"I never saw better shooting," Eli Travis said. "You saved Bat's hide and you saved the town."

Abe Gondo slapped Dane on the back. "I had you wrong, son. A lot of yarns got back about what you'd become and what you aimed to do. All hogwash. I can see that."

And Old Man McFee tugged at Dane's arm. "I'm eating my words, son. I'll serve you that drink. Now."

But Dane shook his head. "I'll pass it up, Mac. Abe, double grain my horse. He's gonna be traveling again tomorrow."

"Why don't you stay here?" Travis demanded. "This is your home."

Dane shook his head again. "Me and Bat will never get along, so we'll let it stand the way it is." He looked at Keen. "I learned something today and I'm thanking you."

"Thanking me?" Keen said, surprised. "Hell, man, you saved my bacon. I'm thanking you." He raised his left hand to his face and rubbed a crescent-shaped scar on his cheek, a scar Dane had given him. "It's hard to believe it, but Nancy was right about you."

Dane turned and walked away in long fast strides. He had to see Nancy and tell her she had been right, even though he had not known it himself a few moments before. Dane Devon had come at last to the end of his bullet trail.

THE END

# Powdersmoke Prescription

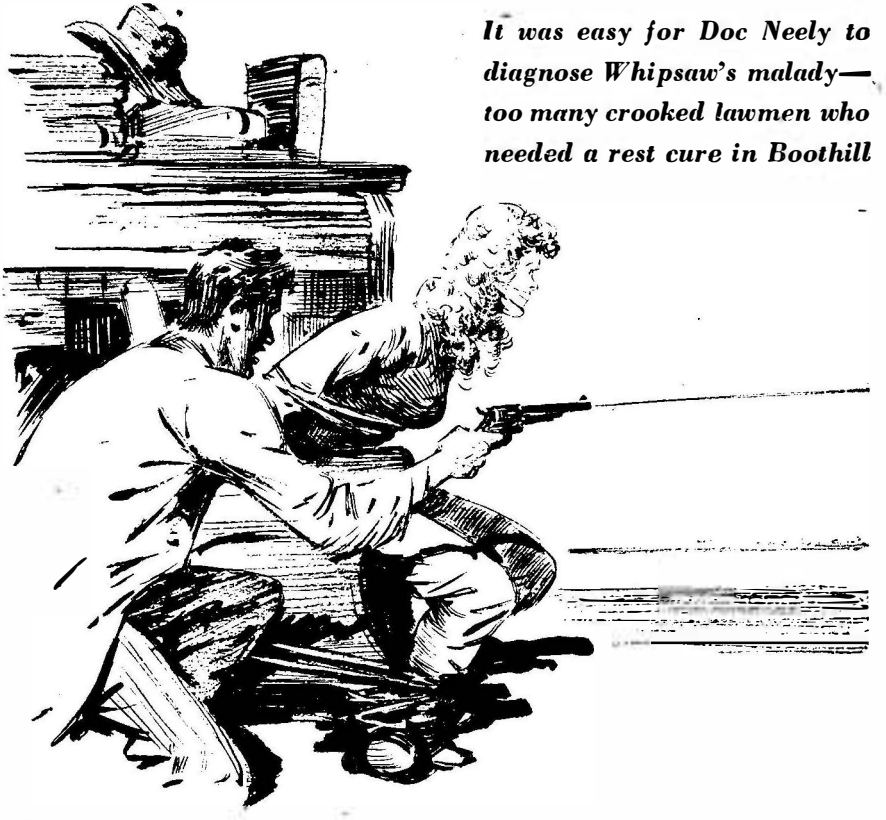
**By Ralph Yergen**

I

SOMETHING was going to explode in Whipsaw. Young Doctor Tom Neely was sure of it. The town was too quiet, too orderly, too morose.

As his waiting room was at present empty on this cool gray morning, Neely lighted a cigarette and watched through the broad window the advance of a narrow-nosed, frozen-faced man wearing a law badge. The man, one of Whipsaw's new star flashers, angled across the street and entered old Cy Wagner's harness shop.

***It was easy for Doc Neely to diagnose Whipsaw's malady—too many crooked lawmen who needed a rest cure in Boothill***



Since returning to Whipsaw as a full-fledged medico, Tom Neely had spent his spare moments puzzling over the invisible shadow that seemed to hang over the town. Was it his imagination, or did some ominous undercurrent actually exist?

When Tom Neely had departed for an Eastern medical school ten years before, Whipsaw had been free and wild and gay. Now the sounds of the town were subdued. There was no more Saturday night dance; no fist fights; no rodeo talk. Men on the street huddled in knots which quickly split when a law officer appeared. Whenever Neely mentioned the mystery, people looked at him queerly and said nothing.

Towns, like people, must change, Neely admitted. Whipsaw had changed no more than he himself. A decade ago, young Tom Neely had been a wild, reckless vagabond whose main interest was gun fighting. He had made life miserable for lawmen, uncertain for his enemies and very brief for anyone who openly challenged him.

One day in Virginia City, a dealer

in mining properties had pointed out that Neely's fiery nature would eventually lead him to a bullet between the eyes. Gifted with a persuasive tongue, the mining man had suggested that Tom shelve his gun and do some good for humanity. The idea had strangely appealed to Tom, once he gave it serious thought. and he decided to become a doctor.

People hooted his decision. They said the killer instinct was too strong in him. They said he couldn't stop hell raising long enough to improve himself. But for ten years he had fooled them. He had worked and studied like a slave. And all of the time he had battled that restless urge to pick up his gun and go out looking for trouble.

Finally, Tom became convinced he could control his wild nature. He told himself he would never again go gunning for a human life. But now that he had returned to his native environment, doubt filled him. For the call of his old ways came strong, stirring, insistent.

The blast of a pistol crushed the town's silence. Neely's lips tightened on the cigarette stub and a prickle ran along the roots of his flame-red hair. It was the first shot he had heard since returning to Whipsaw.

He watched the cold-featured man with the badge emerge from Cy Wagner's harness shop, a smoking pistol in his hand. The man appeared unruffled as he walked along, disregarding the rush of townsmen from shop and saloon doors.

As Neely stepped outside into the cool plateau air someone yelled from the harness shop doorway: "This way, Doc. There's a job for you!"

Neely moved briskly across the street and into the shop. A burly man with a blunt jaw and shaggy white hair lay sprawled on the floor. He was unconscious and oozing blood darkened his elkskin jacket.

"Old Cy himself," Neely muttered. "Looks like the star toter dropped him." He bent down and examined the ugly bullet gash in the old man's chest.

Minutes later, Neely pushed his way through a tense-faced throng and into the street. The badge toter who had shot Cy Wagner was returning. Beside him strode a solid-shanked, black-browed man who displayed a lawman's star with considerable pomp and authority. He had been pointed out to Neely as Jay Klatz, present town marshal of Whipsaw.

Klatz let his stony eyes settle on the gathered townsmen. "No call to get excited," he said authoritatively. "Cy Wagner refused to pay his taxes. We sent Rufe Zell to collect and the old man went loco. Jerked hardware. Nothing Zell could do but defend himself. That right, Rufe?"

His cold-faced companion nodded. "That's the way of it, marshal."

Marshal Jay Klatz stared at the townspeople as if daring anyone to challenge the statement. No one did. The two lawmen wheeled and retraced their steps toward the new city hall at the far end of town.

Tom Neely listened to subdued growls. He noted the thundercloud cast of many faces. And then sounds of grief turned him. He spotted a gaunt, gray-haired woman held back by restraining hands. She was sobbing into a knitted shawl.

"Turn off the water works, Maw," Neely said. "Your husband is still alive. A bad puncture but it wouldn't be critical if it wasn't for his age. You gents give me a hand toting Cy across the street to my office.

Neely's fingers moved skillfully as he cleansed and disinfected the wound. He allowed only Maw Wagner to remain in the office. The courageous old woman talked freely.

"Living in Whipsaw has got to be next thing to living in hell, Tom. A person ain't allowed no more freedom than a turkey in a coop. All we ever hear is tax—tax—tax. And when we don't have the money to pay 'em, this is what happens."

"What is this tax business, Maw?"

"Reckon they didn't put the squeeze on you yet, Tom. But they will."

"Who?"

"That greedy bunch in the new city hall. Burke Bordhurst is the brains. That smooth-talkin', velvet-smilin', shiny-eyed snake in a silk shirt! Reckon you never knew the slicker, Tom. He showed up here about three years ago. Bought the town restaurant. With that smooth gab and chummy manner he made friends fast. He sported big ideas for putting Whipsaw on the map. So we elected him mayor."

"Was it this Burke Bordhurst hombre who hired Jay Klatz for marshal?"

"That's right. Bordhurst was given a free hand. He made the most of it. He brought in Klatz and a couple of gun wolves for deputies. One of them—this Rufe Zell—was hired as a tax collector. Soon the taxes shot sky high without any special levies being voted. They make us pay every month, same as if it was rent. Some businessmen have already given up the ghost. Bordhurst bought them out cheap—no doubt with their own money."

Neely reached for a roll of gauze. "Why don't people boot out this gang?"

"Every time we try to organize, Bordhurst gets wind of it and his star toters bust things up. I tried to get Cy to sell for what little Bordhurst would pay us for the shop. I wanted to get out of this town. But you know how stubborn Cy is. Said he'd lived here forty years and he wasn't letting any Johnny-come-lately chase him away. Cy can't work much any more and they were taxing all our life's savings away. Cy balked finally. You see what it got him."

As Neely listened to Maw Wagner, a rising current of anger heated him. He checked it forcibly. He was a doctor now—not a gunman.

With the puzzle of what ailed Whipsaw clearing in his mind, Neely could understand how a clever crook like Bordhurst could succeed so easily in establishing himself as town tyrant. Formerly there had been many complaints of Whipsaw's wildness.

People used to say that hell raisers like Tom Neely had the law buffaloed. No doubt Bordhurst had preached on this theme, and many had welcomed the hiring of several law officers. Now their sanction had backfired, and the law had the town buffaloed.

"We'll tote Cy home where you can watch him and call me if necessary," Neely told Maw Wagner. "I think he'll make harness again. But not for a month."

Maw Wagner's voice was pathetically grateful. "I knew you was never a really bad kid, Tom. But I didn't think I'd see the day when you'd be the best-thought-of man in Whipsaw. To me, that's what you are right now."

## II

Two days passed in routine manner. The third brought an unwanted visitor to Neely's office. It was Rufe Zell, the special tax collector who had shot Cy Wagner. With a frozen stare, Zell presented Neely with a neat statement.

"Your monthly tax installment is due, doctor. You want to pay it now, no doubt."

Resentment made Neely's red hair bristle. He snatched the statement and examined it.

"Amount is five dollars," Zell explained. "Covers your office and living quarters."

"I can read," Neely said curtly. "What benefit do I get if I pay this tax?"

"You get protection."

"Protection from what?"

Zell glanced laconically about the room. "You've got a lot of valuable stuff in here, doctor. Equipment, medicine, furniture. Reckon you wouldn't want it blown to bug dust. Paying your tax gives you protection against that sort of thing happening."

"You mean that's what will happen if I don't pay it?" Doc asked grimly.

The tax collector shrugged. "Could."

Storm clouds of anger began to thunder at Doc's temples. He warned himself to keep a rigid check on his impulses. He had borrowed the money to equip his office. It was a nice job. If it were destroyed, he would not be able to raise enough money to equip another. Prudence told him to pay the sum and let things ride for the present. The amount was not excessive.

He extracted five silver dollars from his pocket. "Where's my receipt?" he demanded.

Zell scratched his head. "Reckon you'll have to come to headquarters for it."

"I aim to," Neely promised grimly.

After Zell left, Maw Wagner's story began to reflect through Neely's thoughts with a new clarity. Abruptly the tide of anger rebounded through him, almost overpoweringly. Out of it speared a sharp impulse. He started for the trunk which held his .45.

Suddenly his long-trained self-control clamped that impulse, and he halted. Reasoning returned. He was a doctor now, the product of a decade of diligence. Was he crazy enough

to throw those years to the winds and revert back to his wild, hot-blooded youth? No. His business was to save lives, not destroy them.

There were other ways to handle this evil regime. Orderly ways. Whipsaw had elected Burke Bordhurst. Next election, the town could vote him out of office.

Neely was calm again, but he was shaken. It was the first dangerous flare-up of his old wild nature. He hoped it would be the last. Of all men, a doctor should hold to a steady trail.

Late in the day, Doctor Tom Neely walked down to the city hall. Cool-headed now, he had a feeling that the eyes of the town followed him.

Inside the building, doorways marked the walls on either side of a long corridor. He turned inward at a tax department sign and found himself in an expensively furnished office. A red carpet covered the floor, and a decanter of whiskey was perched on the shelf.

Town Marshal Jay Klatz, seated behind a desk, was engaged in lighting a fat cigar. No expression escaped his slatelike eyes as he viewed Neely through the blue smoke screen.

"I'm looking for the tax collector," Neely said shortly. "I paid him my tax this morning. But he said I had to come here for a receipt."

Klatz flicked the dead match toward a cuspidor and resumed his stony, unblinking stare. "Rufe is out on business but I guess we can fix you up." He lifted his voice. "Kiwa!"

A door popped open and an evil-eyed half-breed glided silently into the room. He was a walking arsenal of sheathed guns and knives. His glittering orbs traveled over Neely in a skin-creeping way.

"One of my deputies," Klatz explained. "Kiwa, write out a tax receipt for the doctor."

The half-breed turned and pawed in a drawer. At the same instant, another door opened, and the room was suddenly filled with sartorial splendor. Amazement made Neely blink. He stared as if in a trance.

The man who entered was an excellent physical specimen. He towered above the six-foot Neely and his wide, powerful shoulders tapered downward to lank thighs. Thick, coarse hair was combed straight back from a square, rugged face of light olive hue, smooth shaven except for a mustache of raven black. His eyes were like a clouded midnight. He wore a coat of the finest purple broadcloth, a white silk shirt and scarlet string cravat.

"This is the new sawbones, Burke," Jay Klatz said.

The voice whipped a confused whirl of memories from Neely's mind. But he did not forget that years ago he had known and respected this man in a far different place.

The sharp lips beneath the mustache split into a handsome smile, revealing twin rows of white teeth. A pointed hand was extended.

"And I'm Burke Bordhurst, sir. Your mayor. Privileged to meet you, doctor. May you find our city agree-

able in every way. Would you care to step into my private quarters for a brief chat?"

Neely followed the man into a lavishly furnished inner room. The only article marring the blue-orange color harmony was a small black safe squatting in the corner like an ugly bulldog. A padded swivel chair beside a table drew the mayor. Neely sat down in a roomy armchair.

"You must remember me," Neely said. "But your handle in those silver-boom days at Virginia City was Hamilton Burke."

"Changes make life more interesting, doctor. I'm very happy to learn of your success. You have come a long way from the Tom Neely I used to know."

"I'm not forgetting I owe it all to you, Burke," Neely admitted. "Remember? I was a guard at one of the big silver mines and getting into a gun scrape every night in one of the town guzzle shops. It was you yourself who persuaded me to pack my .45 in mothballs and get an education. You even gave me a hundred for a flying start."

Neely recalled Hamilton Burke as a successful mining property agent. Overflowing with color and personality, the man had been one of Virginia City's prominent citizens. He bought and sold claims with dazzling rapidity. It was rumored that some of his holdings had developed fabulous wealth. Neely wondered why Hamilton Burke had changed his name and moved to Whipsaw.

Burke's teeth gleamed. "I could see you had great possibilities. It was only your wild spirit that you had to bring under control, Tom. We in Whipsaw consider ourselves very lucky that you decided to practice here."

"I'm paying you back that hundred as soon as I earn it, Burke."

The mayor waved a hand breezily. "Forget it, doctor. It was easy come, easy go in those days. You owe me nothing but your good will. I trust our relations in Whipsaw will be as pleasant."

"I hope so, too. But I'd like some information on your city tax policy, Burke."

The mayor's smiling demeanor did not change. "Now be reasonable, Tom. No one likes taxes. I detest them myself. But after all we can't operate a city on a high physical and moral plane without funds. And where else to derive them except from the poor suffering tax payer? We all complain, but I think we realize in our hearts the rich rewards we reap in return."

"That's the point," Neely said. "Where does all this dinero go? I'd like to see a financial statement."

Burke Bordhurst smiled and nodded. "Of course. We appreciate your interest, doctor. As soon as our quarterly audit is completed, you'll be sent a detailed statement of the city's finances. Every penny will be accounted for. And I can tell you now that it's expensive to operate a police force of this size and ability.

Yet crime and rowdiness have been reduced to zero.

"Besides, we're building a fund for new city facilities. Shortly, we expect to surface all the streets, construct a sewage system and city water works. All these blessings will come only as a result of taxes. So I say let us all be reasonable and tolerant, doctor. Time, effort and cooperation will make Whipsaw a city of which we will all be very proud. Shall we drink to the future, doctor?"

Neely rose abruptly. "No, thanks. Liquor and surgery don't mix. I'm not kicking about my taxes, Burke. But savvy this straight. If your Mister Zell gets any more ideas like threatening to blow up my office, I'm liable to start prescribing hot lead pills with a dash of powdersmoke and a long rest cure in boothill!"

## III

On the following day the setting sun was splashing crimson through Doc Neely's office windows when a door banged and quick, light footsteps sounded in the waiting room. An urgent rap made Neely turn away from his microscope. He opened the door and stared.

A girl, slender and shapely in faded Levis and red blouse, confronted him. Beneath her wide hat brim, blond hair tumbled in wind-whipped cascades. There was an expression of alarm in her blue eyes.

"Will you come to the Arrow A Ranch, doctor. Right away—please!" She was almost breathless.

"Cool down, miss. Let's get this straight. Now what happened?"

"It's my brother. He was bushwhacked today, shot from his saddle out on the range. I found him unconscious and he's lost a lot of blood. A neighbor helped me get him home. Then I came as fast as I could get here."

"Do you live at the Arrow A?"

"Yes. Five miles north of town. On Big Bloat Creek. You must remember Stan Allen."

"Sure I remember Stan. Good cowman and caballero. You can't be his kid sister Florence?"

"Who did you think I was—Calamity Jane?" the girl flashed back, her manner suddenly reminiscent of the wild-riding tomboy Neely had known ten years before.

Neely blinked and looked at her again. At least some of the scenery around Whipsaw had improved. "I'll come out as soon as I have a quick look at another patient," he promised.

"Please hurry, Tom. I have to get back to Stan right away. The neighbor has chores to do."

"Sure, Florence. You can count on me."

When the girl was gone, Neely began to round up a few extras for his emergency kit. He wanted to check Cy Wagner's condition before he left town.

Satchel in hand, he was preparing to leave the office when a man sauntered in and blocked the doorway. He was a rawboned giant with abnormally high forehead and pea-like eyes. A nickel star rode brightly over

the muscles that bulged his shirt front. The sight of the Whipsaw law brand brought a scowl to Doc's face.

"Well, what you want?" he inquired bluntly. "I'm in a hurry."

The big man grinned crookedly. "No, you ain't, doc."

"The devil I'm not!" Neely retorted. "Mosey on. I can see you when I get back."

"You ain't goin' no place, doc." One of the man's huge paws whisked into sight. It cuddled a black-muzzled pistol.

Neely gazed at the gun mouth. A frosty slap of apprehension smote him, followed by a scorching blast of anger. Someone down at the city hall must have seen Florence Allen leave his office. It meant Whipsaw law for some obscure reason did not want Stan Allen to recover.

"Might as well sit down and take it easy, doc," the lawman said. "It's gonna be a dull evenin'."

Neely's mind was busy trying to solve this new puzzle. He recalled Stan Allen as an honest, fearless young cowman. Why should the rancher run afoul of the town powers?

This Hamilton Burke who now called himself Burke Bordhurst was becoming a complete enigma to Neely. During those roaring Virginia City days, Burke had befriended Tom. Neely could never forget that it was Burke alone who had convinced him he should make something worth while out of his life. Aside from the hundred dollars, Neely owed Burke a tremendous gratitude. But now the man's actions baffled the young medico.

He wondered if Jay Klatz and his deputies were double-crossing the mayor. He could not believe Burke Bordhurst had ordered this badge-wearing gunhand to make a captive of him. But the fellow was here, and he had the bulge.

"You win, hombre," Neely conceded. "I'm not one to argue when the other fellow holds the aces."

Doctor Tom Neely went back into his office and sat down on a stool. The lawman followed and selected a wicker chair, relaxing comfortably. But he kept the gun sights in line with Doc Neely's belt buckle.

"Did Klatz send you here?" Neely inquired.

"Uh-huh. I'm Klatz's deppity. He told me to hold you awhile. He was scared you'd get hurt plumb bad if you wandered around alone tonight. Can't have a valuable man like the town sawbones gettin' laid up."

"Right thoughtful of Klatz," doc commented dryly. "Well, if I'm not going out this evening, I might as well catch up on some office work. Any objection?"

"Reckon not if you behave. No tricks, though."

"Tricks?" Doc echoed. "What you think I am—a trained seal? You can see there's stuff scattered from hell to breakfast. I just want to put things in order."

He got up and began to replace bottles and test tubes in their proper compartments. He puttered for sev-

eral minutes, paying no attention to the deputy marshal, who was still watching him with hawklike vigilance. Having cleaned his instruments, he filled a fat syringe with alcohol. Placing it on the work bench beside him, he picked up a pack of cigarettes.

"Have a smoke?"

The deputy shook his head and glared suspiciously. "How do I know what's in them things?" he growled.

Doc jerked one and lighted it, letting the smoke drool out of his nostrils as if in complete satisfaction. The big gunman sniffed the smoke-flavored air hungrily.

"Toss 'em here," he grunted.

The next minute, the huge deputy was planting a cigarette greedily between thick lips and reaching for a match. Doc's hand closed slyly on the syringe at his finger tips.

Holding the pistol steady, the deputy flicked a match to life with his left thumb nail. His eyes shifted to focus on the cigarette tip as he applied the match flame. At that instant, Doc Neely's thumb pressed hard on the syringe bulb. A thin, sharp stream of raw alcohol speared out from the mouth of the syringe, spraying the deputy squarely in the eyes.

With a loud yelp of pain, he came up out of the chair clutching at his eyes with his left hand. The pistol mouthed a hot blast of flame and smoke toward the spot where Doc Neely had been standing. But the instant the potent stream had squirted from the syringe, Neely had moved like a shadow, leaping behind the deputy's chair.

Blinded and cursing, the big man was waving the gun like a maniac fighting a ghost. Neely picked up a stool and brought it crunching down on skull bone. The big man tottered, and his voice trailed to a groan. The gun slipped from his fingers and clattered on the floor. Neely repeated the process. Instantly the deputy went crashing to the floor, his bulk making the building vibrate. He was out cold, but Doc took no chances. He filled a hypodermic needle with a drug which he injected into the man's beefy arm.

"That will hold him till sunup," Doc muttered.

Snatching his satchel, he rushed into the soft bluing dusk. He decided to skip Cy Wagner until he returned. Likely Stan Allen was in more critical condition. In a few minutes Neely was astride his horse and heading out of town.

## IV

On the crest of the first ridge, Doc Neely pulled down his horse for a blow. He stared back over the land he had covered. Indistinct in the dusk's blue haze, two moving objects were speeding out of town, turning up the ridge trail.

"More of the marshal's pack, I'd guess," Neely growled.

He slapped his mount's shoulder and the horse stretched low over the trail.

When Neely slackened pace again on the high rim overlooking Big Bloat

Creek, he could see no trace of his pursuers. Due to the advance of prairie night, however, he could not tell if they had turned back or were following at a distance.

A round silver moon was balanced on the eastern crags as Doc Neely skirted the creek willows and came into full view of the Arrow A ranch buildings. Lamplight glistened from the house windows. A hundred yards beyond, other structures bulked in symmetrical array.

Florence Allen came to the threshold. She was still wearing the blouse and Levis and her hair flowed about her shoulders like sparkling honey. Her face was weary and drawn, but she managed a smile.

"Sorry I was delayed," Neely said. "How's Stan?"

"Still out. I've been afraid at times that he'd stop breathing."

Frowning, Neely followed the girl into the room where the wounded ranchman lay stretched on a bed. Doc turned up the lamp and held it close over Allen. When he had finished his inspection, he confronted the girl.

"A bad wound. The bullet apparently traveled a long ways and had lost much of its power. Only that fact saved Stan from the next world. The slug appears to be pressing against a nerve near the spine. That's what causes his uneasy breathing. I'll have to dig out that lead right now. I'll need boiling water and clean cloths."

As Doc readied himself for the operation, an alarming thought chilled him. When Florence came in with a kettle of steaming water he began sterilizing instruments.

"You leave this job to me, Florence," he said, grimness in his voice. "I don't want to scare you but a couple of riders followed me out of town. It's possible we'll have visitors. You keep peeking outside. If you spot anything suspicious, call me."

A brittle light came into the girl's blue eyes. "I'll handle the outside—with a six-shooter."

There were questions Neely wanted to ask. Who shot Stan Allen? Why? Who were the Arrow A's shoot-in-the-back enemies? What connection did they have with the Jay Klatz ring? But these points would have to wait. A life depended on the skill of his finger tips, and he'd have to work fast. As Florence hurried from the room, Neely selected a probe and began to fish gingerly for the bullet.

He worked with a smooth, relaxed precision. To an observer he might have appeared nonchalant but within him every nerve was on edge. Pressure on that bullet might be fatal to the patient. Finally Neely located the lead, but it was securely lodged.

After several minutes, he paused and mopped the cool sweat from his forehead. Some cutting would have to be done. He'd have to widen that bullet hole to make room for his instruments. He was reaching for a knife when the bellow of a six-gun echoed through the house.

Neely spun. Another shot boomed. He darted into the front room. Florence had blown out the lamp, and the room was inky except for a pale moon ray reaching through the east window. He spotted the girl in the shadow. She was kneeling by a broad front window. The sash was open, and she was aiming a pistol toward the creek trail. Neely bent down beside her.

"What's up, Florence?"

"They're in the willows," she whispered. "I've been watching them for quite a while. They started to sneak closer to the house. That's when I cut loose."

"Who are they?"

"A couple of Bordhurst's gun wolves. I saw the moon glint on their law badges. I think it's Rufe Zell and that creepy half-breed, Kiwa."

A scarlet fang of flame winked from the dark line of willows along the creek. A slug crackled through the open window above the girl's head and thudded into the wall behind. Without flinching, Florence fired at the powder flare.

"Give me that six," Neely demanded. "You might get hit."

"Are you through with Stan?"

"No. But—"

"Then please get back to work. Leave this end to me. Those wolves can't reach the house without showing themselves."

"They could circle and sneak up on the back."

"It would take them half an hour. There's no cover anywhere except along the creek. Take care of Stan and quit worrying about me."

Doc Neely bit his lip. Maybe she was right. He hated to leave her alone with two gunmen shooting at her. Yet as long as that bullet remained in Stan Allen, the cowman was in grave danger.

Back in Stan's room he set to work with clenched jaws. Outside, the guns began to yap again. He could hear bullets drum the house walls. The girl's weapon boomed a lusty reply.

Tom forced himself to concentrate on his surgery. It was the most delicate task he had ever performed, and it was being done under the most trying conditions. Gun thunder rocked the walls. The lamp flickered weirdly on the stand. Doc's pulse pounded his temples, and sweat rolled out of his pores in a steady stream.

Finally the bullet, locked securely in steel jaws, yielded to the skill of Neely's fingers. He drew a deep, relieved breath. Laying the slug on a table, he began to disinfect the wound. The firing lulled, and Neely's worry increased. As soon as the incision was stitched and bandaged, he spun and rushed into the front room.

Relief filled him when he discerned the vague outline of Florence Allen's trim figure drawing away from the window.

"Florence, are you all right?"

"I think they've dusted," she murmured. "They tried to rush the house once. I hit one of them. I saw him

stagger. Then he dived back into the willows. The other one must have got cold feet. There's been no shooting since."

"Listen!"

Faint and distant through the hush of night floated the throb of racing hoofs. The sound faded.

Neely smiled grimly. "That was two horsemen on the vamoose. Looks like your job ended in success. Hope mine does the same. Stan is breathing perfect now. With good care, he should be punching cows inside a month."

"Oh, I'm glad, Tom," the girl said, a tremor in her voice. It was her first sign of emotion. "I was so . . . so afraid . . ."

Neely changed the subject brusquely. He was strongly impressed by the girl's courage. Now that the danger was past he didn't want her nerves to suffer a reaction from the long period of strain.

"There's a lot to this gun feud I don't savvy. Why are the Whipsaw star flashers and you Allens at loggerheads?"

The girl's anger returned in a rush. "It started soon after Burke Bordhurst was elected Whipsaw mayor. He began to lord it over the town and to tax the merchants to the bone. While we don't live in Whipsaw, all our trading is done there. In order to meet their taxes, the business men had to raise prices. There was a lot of talk against Bordhurst among the ranchers but no one did anything about it. Then Bordhurst got the idea of extending the Whipsaw city limits to include all the ranches within five miles of town. This sweeps in the Arrow A and many other small spreads. Stan is the leader of a fight against that.

"We get no help from the county sheriff. As you know, he hangs out in the other end of the county across the Goatskin Mountains. That's where most of the population and votes are. The sheriff hasn't been seen over this way since last election. So with the town law under Bordhurst's thumb, it seemed to call for a vigilante movement. Bordhurst got wind of it. He knows with Stan out of the way, the movement will likely fall flat. That's why Stan was bushwhacked today. I'm certain one of the Bordhurst crowd fired that bullet. I hope he was the one I hit tonight."

"Are you certain Bordhurst himself is crooked?"

"Of course. He already owns half of Whipsaw. He's planning the same game for the range. Once he claws all these ranches inside the city limits, he'll bleed them white with levies. Then he'll buy them at a fraction of their value or seize them in the name of the city for delinquent taxes. He already owns the biggest spread in these parts—the Crossbones."

Neely's eyebrows arched. "Bordhurst owns the Crossbones? I didn't think old Sam Cardo or his daughter Mary would ever sell that spread."

"They didn't."

"Then how—"

"When Bordhurst first came to Whipsaw with that flash-and-silk line

of gab, the ladies all practically swooned. He looked them over and made a big rush for little Mary Cardo. You remember how pretty she was with those big dark eyes and delicate features."

"I sure do."

"Bordhurst swept her right off her feet. In a couple of weeks, they were married. Soon after, old Sam Cardo was bushwhacked. The killer was never caught. But the ranch belonged to Mary then. Poor little Mary lived only about a year after that. She didn't seem to be really sick. But she grew pale and thin and complained of frequent headaches. Then one morning she just didn't wake up. And the Crossbones belonged to Burke Bordhurst."

Doc Neely shook his head sadly. "Mary Cardo was a mighty nice girl. Did Bordhurst marry again?"

"No. But not because he doesn't want to. He's asked me a dozen times. I'm not proud of it."

Cross-currents clashed like sword steel and armor within Doc Neely. These stories about Burke Bordhurst must contain much truth. Yet, remembering the man's big-hearted influence on his former life, Neely could not believe Bordhurst such a scheming, cold-nerved fiend. Somehow, there must be a misunderstanding on this troubled range.

"Let's hitch up a team and wagon," Neely suggested. "We'll haul Stan to my quarters where he'll be safe."

Florence hesitated. "I hate to take him into that town. It's just like going into a snake's den."

"You can't stay here alone with him," Neely pointed out. "Those gun wolves might come back any time—with partners!"

Florence sighed wearily. "You're right. I'll light a lantern. There are horses in the barn."

Under the bright glowing moon, Florence Allen drove the team, and Doc Neely rode near the wagon, scanning the shadows for danger signals. Nothing developed, and finally Stan was transported from the vehicle to a bunk in Neely's quarters.

Neely was not surprised to find the giant deputy marshal missing. Klatz and his men doubtless had carried him away.

With Stan settled comfortably, Neely escorted the girl to the hotel and returned to his rooms. Throwing himself on a cot, he sank instantly into deep slumber.

## V

When Doc Neely opened his eyes, the fresh morning sun was streaming through the window. He washed hurriedly and checked Stan Allen's condition. The ranchman was still unconscious, but his heart action and temperature appeared excellent.

Later. when Florence failed to appear, Neely decided to awaken her. He went to the hotel and knocked on the door of the room assigned to her. There was no reply. He rapped louder. Only silence greeted him.

Alarmed, Neely tried the knob. It turned easily, and the panel swung inward. As he scanned the room,

an icy chill seized him. Overturned chairs and scattered blankets pointed to a skirmish. There was no sign of the girl.

Worry put a frown on Doc Neely's face. He should not have let Florence out of his office. The thought entered his mind that she might have arisen early and gone somewhere for breakfast. Yet she certainly would not have left the room in such a mess. Nor would she have left the door unlocked. Neely rushed downstairs and queried the bespectacled desk clerk.

The clerk's reply brought a fresh chill to Neely's spine. "I didn't see Miss Allen come through the lobby. Are you sure she's not in her room?"

"Damn sure," Neely said sharply. "The door's unlocked. Does anybody beside the desk clerk have a key to that room?"

The clerk scratched his head in bewilderment. "Marshal Klatz has duplicate keys for all rooms. He insisted on them to search for criminals in hiding."

"Where's the night clerk?"

"Home in bed."

"Any way to get up or down stairs other than through the lobby?"

"Only the fire escape outside."

That was it, Neely thought grimly. The fire escape. Klatz and his men had used it to take Florence out of the hotel unseen. No telling where they had carried her. Nor what would happen to her in the clutches of those men.

Doc Neely stalked mechanically back to his office. As he moved along, all of the controls he had built up during the years fell away like snow under a fiery sun. Twin flames of hate and fury flared in him like ignited powder. He had tried hard to become a doctor, a saver of lives. But all his plans and dreams and years of toil were splitting to fragments in one wild explosion.

He couldn't stop it. He didn't try. He went directly to the trunk in the corner and dug into its depths. He came up with a soft, oiled cloth, unrolled it and extracted a gunbelt and a shiny-handled Colt .45. He had promised himself he would keep the gun only as a souvenir. But somehow, deep within him during all of those years a conviction had smoldered. A conviction that he would use this gun again to take a toll of human life.

He buckled on the belt, carefully loaded the weapon and let it slide loosely into the smooth holster. Then he strode into the street and headed for the city hall. His feelings toward Burke Bordhurst were all confused. But there was no confusion on one score. Jay Klatz was the man he wanted.

Tom Neely was no longer a doctor. He was no longer the man Maw Wagner and Florence Allen had admired. He was once again the hot-blooded, hell-for-breakfast gun fighter of his youth. Fear was something he laughed at. Danger was something he loved.

The morning was young and golden. Whipsaw's streets were

nearly deserted. None of the Klatz badgemen were in evidence. Neely circled, approaching the city hall from the far end of town. He entered and moved down the corridor, his boots silent on the thick carpet. The sound of human voices issued from the tax department. He halted near the half-open door, listening.

"Kiwa won't be down this morning," someone was explaining. "He stopped a slug at the Arrow A last night. Passed out on the way home. I figured him a gone goose so I let him lay."

Another, deep and heavy, replied: "Burke might not like that. Kiwa did a lot of gun work for him. He beefed Sam Cardo. And young Stan Allen. Bobbled that last job, though. Jay said Allen was fetched in last night by that new doctor after he got away from me there in his office. Damned near burnt my eyes out, the tricky rat."

"Burke figgers he'll have to get shut of that quack. The two has crossed trails before. Ten years ago in Virginia City. Burke said this Neely hombre was a heller on wheels. Burke wanted to stage a raid on a mine where this Neely was a guard. Burke was scared of the feller's gun savvy. So he soft-soaps him a hundred simoleons for a start. Cheap way of easin' a dangerous rannihan out of the picture. But now Neely's lighted here in Whipsaw. And Burke figgers he won't co-operate."

"Now that Kiwa's cashed, I hope Burke gives me the job of beefin' that blasted pill wrangler!"

Tom Neely's face split into a hard, mirthless smile. His hand brushing his holstered gun, he stepped boldly into the room.

The silence suddenly became intense. Rufe Zell was slouched against the wall, a cigarette dangling from his lips. He seemed to freeze there. His eyes slitted and the cigarette hit the floor unheeded.

The hulking deputy was seated, his huge feet planted on the desk. When he spied Neely, his reddened eyes bulged half out of their sockets.

"Here's your chance, hombre," Neely said quietly.

The big deputy gulped and his face turned the color of liver. His boots swung off the desk and he surged half out of his chair.

"You double-dealin' pill slick!" He began to claw for his gun. "Nail him, Rufe!" he added a frantic bleat.

Neely's attention appeared to center on the big man. But he kept one eye on Rufe Zell. The tax collector's gun came snaking out of leather with deceptive speed. Neely's .45 moved with the magic of his old gun skill. Smoke gushed from the muzzle.

The bullet seemed to spike Rufe Zell to the wall. He hung there an instant, his gunhand drooping, his face growing blank and stiff.

With the shot, Neely threw himself into a corner. He swept his gun sights to a line with the towering deputy, who was too muscle-bound to be anything but clumsy on the draw. Both weapons roared. Thunder filled the room.

The deputy's slug smashed the de-

canter on the shelf above Neely. Glass and whiskey rained down on him. He watched the big man rock on his heels, clutching his chest with both hands. Blood spurted through his fingers. Like a tired bull he slumped down and twitched once.

The sound of sudden movement in an adjoining room brought Neely tiger-footing to the closed door. He thumbed fresh loads into the smoking cylinders. With his old reckless boldness, he twisted the knob with his left hand and sent the door hurtling inward with a powerful kick. Gazing through the opening, he found himself looking full into the perplexed face of Marshal Jay Klatz. The lawman's pistol was in his hand. The muzzle jerked upward at the exact instant Neely's slug slammed into the marshal's stomach.

Klatz lurched, shivered. He was trying to summon strength enough to pull the trigger when Neely's second bullet tore through his throat. He went down like a log.

As Klatz hit the floorboards, another pistol snarled. Neely felt the hot, sharp bite of lead in his thigh muscle.

One flashing glance revealed Florence Allen bound to an armchair, her hair a tumbled mass and her blue eyes blazing defiance. Burke Bordhurst in his usual faultless attire crouched beside her, a smoking six-gun clutched in his hand.

As Bordhurst came face to face with Tom Neely, his nerve broke. He hurled himself behind the girl's chair. Neely flung a quick shot that missed. Then he dived along the inner wall behind the squat safe.

The girl slipped her gag and screamed. Bordhurst was shooting again, past the chair arm. A slug snapped at Neely's ear. Another clanged off the top of the safe.

"I'll kill you myself, you meddling quack!" Bordhurst raged.

"I'm not as easy to kill as Mary Cardo," warned Neely. "You poisoned that girl, Bordhurst."

"You've got no proof of that," the mayor retorted.

"You aimed to marry Florence and poison her, too. With Stan dead, that would bring you another ranch. Come out in the open, Bordhurst. We can settle this man to man."

"You think I'm a fool?" sneered Bordhurst. "You won't dare shoot for fear of hitting Florence. But that safe isn't big enough to hide you."

Bordhurst's bullet slashed a hot furrow along Neely's shoulder. He was in a bad jam, for Bordhurst could push the chair around the room and throw lead from any angle. Besides, the shots might summon more of Bordhurst's gun wolves.

"Shoot, Tom!" the girl was shouting. "Forget me."

With a sudden wrenching movement, Florence overturned the chair. Tom snatched a fleeting glimpse of Bordhurst's snowy shirt front. He blazed a quick shot. A screech of pain echoed the gun's explosion. The mayor flattened behind the chair. Florence began to work the object to one side by digging her heels into the

carpet. With a curse, Bordhurst flung an arm over the chair to hold it.

Neely's bullet promptly smashed the arm. Maddened by pain and desperation, Bordhurst shoved his six-gun over the upholstery and triggered like a wild man. Bullets banged the safe steel, splintered the floor, peppered the walls.

When the storm lulled, Neely leaped over the safe like a panther. He was sure Bordhurst's gun would be empty. Reaching out with his foot, Neely sent the chair, girl and all, skimming toward the wall.

Burke Bordhurst had one ace yet unplayed. A sleeve derringer nestled in his hand. His eyes goggling with fear and desperation, he threw the shot too quickly for accuracy. It struck Neely high in the shoulder.

Neely fired, his .45 muzzle almost in Bordhurst's face. The mayor flattened in the spinning cloud of smoke.

Suddenly dizzy, Neely wobbled to the chair. He picked up a paper knife from the desk and started sawing on the ropes that held the girl.

"Did those rats hurt you, Florence?" he asked anxiously. "Did Bordhurst—"

"No." She shook her head violently. "Bordhurst kept trying to talk me into marrying him. He promised me everything but the moon. He said he had to kidnap me to make me listen. But I was scared. Tom, look out! You're turning white as a sheet."

The floor seemed to rush up and knock Tom Neely into oblivion. . . .

When Neely came to his senses, he recognized the furnishings of his own office. He sat up and blinked. Florence was seated beside him, fresh and lovely in a white linen dress.

"How long have I been out?" he demanded. "How is Stan? And Cy Wagner?"

Florence smiled. "It's only mid-afternoon. Stan is awake and hungry as a horse. Maw Wagner says Cy is much better. Main question is: How are you, Doctor Tom Neely?"

Neely closed his eyes and let his thoughts settle. The old haunting doubt of himself was gone. His first concern upon awakening had been for the welfare of his patients. It proved that he was fundamentally a doctor. Out of his turbulent past he had distilled a powder-and-lead medicine which had cured Whipsaw of its trigger tyrant malady. Now his old .45 could sleep in its trunk forever.

"I'm all right," he told Florence. "But I never thought a derringer slug could knock me out. Must be getting old."

"It's time you were marrying some nice girl and settling down to your profession, Tom."

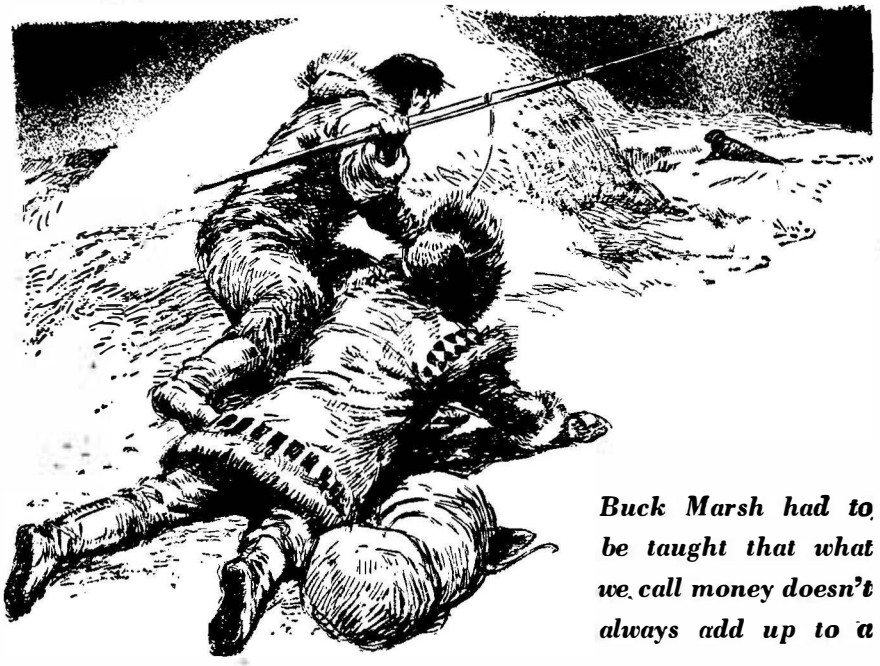
"That's what I intend to do. Settle down to medical work, I mean."

"Oh, is that all?"

"That's all until I can ride as far as the Arrow A. Then . . . we'll see."

Florence smiled, and her eyes were very bright and blue.

THE END



*Buck Marsh had to be taught that what we call money doesn't always add up to a*

# BANKROLL

**By Seth Ranger**

BUCK MARSH'S eyes widened as he saw the size of the Eskimo chief's bankroll. Then slowly, but surely, the expression in the icy blue depths changed from amazement to calculation. He was obviously arguing, "Why should an Eskimo have all that dough? What good is it to him?"

Buck Marsh had already answered his own question, "What good is it to him?" That was the answer, but Buck Marsh didn't know it. After all, a man of twenty-two, sampling Arctic life for the first time can't expect to apply logic until he has had some experience.

Old Akadriak, the chief, glanced up in time to catch the expression in Buck's eyes. His own weathered, deeply lined face, betrayed nothing. He hadn't intended "flashing" his roll which contained nearly ten thousand dollars in fives, tens and twenties.

Akadriak had bundled the currency into neat stacks and lashed them with sealskin thongs. Then he

had lashed the stacks into a single bundle. It was a workmanlike job. He had cached the money under a pile of walrus hides in one corner of his igloo along with spare tubes for his short-wave radio receiver. A tube had gone out in the middle of a program and Akadriak, in digging down for a new tube, had tossed the money aside with just a trace of impatience, Buck Marsh thought.

"That's a lot of dough to be treating like a bundle of old newspapers," Buck commented. "You shouldn't have it around where it's apt to tempt folks."

He spoke lightly, but a certain quality in his voice told the chief plainly enough that a struggle waged within Buck Marsh. He knew that the white man's basic honesty would probably prevail. And yet there might be a weak moment when Buck would pick up the money, hoping to get away with it. There might be a later moment when Buck would fight to prevent his being caught with the money on his person. During the fight Buck might strike a harder blow than he intended. That would add up to murder in almost any language.

The chief was disturbed. He liked Buck. As a young man, Akadriak had served on an American whaler. He had picked up a fair amount of English which he used when needed. Later, contact with schoolteachers and missionaries had increased his vocabulary. Often he put together sentences that would have won the approval of an English professor.

Akadriak had learned, too, that many whites looked upon Eskimos as greasy, stupid people, not realizing that it took a pretty smart breed of humanity to survive in the Arctic. A chief had to govern with wisdom. That meant that he must know a lot about human nature to keep dissension out of the tribe. This man needed praise to give his best; that man needed restraint; and to others the chief must supply strength and guidance. And this must be done quietly and without the beneficiary becoming aware of the chief's influence.

A trading schooner had arrived the previous summer and, as usual, there had been surprises and disappointments. The trader had been amazed at the quantity of white fox pelts Akadriak had on hand. The chief had explained that the best foxes come from Siberia. They prowl the ice floes working on the food left by the polar bears, seal-meat fragments mostly. The ice breaks off and the foxes are carried to American islands. The previous winter had been a good one.

The trader's stock was low and when he had exhausted it he had paid for fur in currency.

"A man can't eat money, up here," Akadriak had commented, deeply disappointed. He supposed it served a native right for permitting himself to become civilized, then of necessity depending on civilization's products. He himself had become fond of good smoking tobacco.

There was a world of comfort in a pipe. It was nice, too, to sit in an igloo, turn on a radio and hear news and music from the outside world. But radios require electricity which must be supplied by a fuel-oil-eating motor generator. The trader sent drums of oil to the beach, but long before the sun came north again, the supply would be exhausted.

When Akadriak had asked about Buck Marsh, the trader had answered, "Oh, he's a white kid who wants to learn the life of the Arctic the hard way. He was in the war and afterward he couldn't seem to find anything he wanted in the States. Instead of loafing around and bellyaching he shipped on my schooner. He might turn into a trader. Or if the government builds air bases along the rim of the Arctic, he might open up a tavern and lunch counter."

"What else?"

"Maybe a flying service from village to village," the trader continued. "He doesn't know. But he's smart. He ain't burning his bridges. He's looking over the country, firsthand, before he makes his final move."

Buck Marsh had arrived in the Arctic with several false beliefs. He had expected to find snow igloos. Instead he had found snug wooden structures. They might be heated by seal-oil lamps, but they were lighted by electricity as long as the fuel held out. The natives, particularly the younger ones, could speak English as well as Buck could. Their slang came from radio programs or from trading schooner crews and the occasional pilots who landed on the remote island.

Buck had wanted to rent an igloo. To his surprise he learned there was a housing shortage even up here. Akadriak had invited him to live in his igloo. He was a widower and his son and daughter had married and established homes of their own. Besides, Akadriak wanted to know more of this young man. He had an idea Buck might be the delayed answer to a prayer.

The young American had revealed homesickness after the schooner's departure. But it lasted only a few days and then he began adapting himself to his surroundings. This was a good sign. There had been other good signs, too, until Akadriak had uncovered his bundle of money.

Instead of thrusting the money under the skins to conceal it, the chief said, "I got plenty other money." He dug deeply and came up with a heavy sack, which he opened. "Silver dollars," he said. "Plenty silver dollars." He dumped them—a tarnished silver cascade, with a few odd coins rolling over the floor.

"Holy cow!" Buck said softly. He thought, "Of course I'm honest and this grabby feeling I have doesn't mean a thing, but dough in big chunks sure does things to a man. Me? Well, I want to get into something up here that'll give me a bankroll like Akadriak's."

There was age-old wisdom in Akadriak's eyes as he asked the young man, "Buck, you like money?"

"Hell . . . yes! Who doesn't?" Buck replied.

Akadriak didn't answer for a moment. A sense of disappointment gripped him. Perhaps this young fellow wasn't the answer to his prayer, after all. Again he spoke with a significance the young man had yet to sense, "You can't eat money."

"But you can buy things to eat with money," Buck argued.

"Yes—in Nome," answered Akadriak. "And in the trading posts when they have supplies. But not on the ice floes."

"You mean to say trading posts run out of grub?" Buck's face revealed surprise and some concern at the thought.

"Sometimes ice is bad. Trading schooner don't get through," Akadriak answered.

"Something should be done about that," Buck declared firmly.

Now a glimmer of satisfaction came into Akadriak's eyes. "Yes, something should be done. People who live on the ice should always have plenty of white man's grub . . . *always.* Or, they should live like a hundred years ago. Something should be done."

Again Buck's eyes were drawn to the packet of money. "It does seem to me, with all that bankroll, you could do almost anything," he said. "I guess I don't understand."

"Some day you understand maybe," Akadriak predicted. "Mebbe you never understand."

"And if I never catch on?"

"You go south with the geese or you die," Akadriak answered simply.

Buck Marsh went seal and whale hunting with the young natives. Akadriak was, of course, the *oomailik*—the "man who sits in the stern," or commander.

"This business of coming alongside a whale in a skin boat and throwing in a harpoon with an explosive head is pretty rugged," declared Buck.

"Scared?" Akadriak asked.

"Damned right," Buck admitted after a moment's hesitation. "A hard whack with that tail would knock a skin boat sky high."

"It is good to be scared," Akadriak told him. "Then a man isn't likely to get careless." He hesitated, then resorted to dialect.

"What does he say?" Buck asked a young native.

"He says, 'Up here a man must always weigh his chances carefully, then do the sensible thing. If a man's family is starving, he is justified in risking his life. But if there is plenty of food in the caches, he shouldn't take chances.' "

They towed the whale to the village and hauled it out with a tractor. It was a young whale and Buck found the steaks something like the round steaks of beef.

A few weeks later Akadriak said, "We take little skin boat and go trading with Siberian boys. Just you and me, Buck. I show you how."

"Why not take a big skin boat with outboard motor and make a party out of it?" Buck asked. Again Akadriak

resorted to dialect. "He says," a young native translated, " 'Outboard motors make too much noise. Two men can move quiet. A half dozen make noise and can be seen.' Akadriak is a very wise man," he added.

"You're telling me!" Buck said.

The chief put a quantity of grub into the skin boat, and a skin bag filled with silver dollars. It weighed thirty pounds.

"Why not paper money?" asked Buck. "Or are you packing the silver for ballast?"

"Siberians don't know about American paper money," Akadriak explained. "They know American silver money plenty good."

A group of young men watched the little boat depart. Akadriak instructed Buck in the trick of hoisting a small sail which whipped the skin craft along at a brisk pace. The village vanished in the mists astern and presently they were skirting a huge ice floe. Now and then they saw seal and walrus.

"I suppose if we needed grub," Buck commented, "there wouldn't be a seal in sight."

They slept on a floe that night and it was a long sleep because what passed for daytime was relatively brief, though a grayish light permitted travel before and after sunrise and sunset. Buck supposed the sun was somewhere in the south, but he couldn't see it; the overcast was too heavy.

"I'll be darned if I see how you chart a course, Akadriak," Buck said the fourth day. "No compass and you can't see any landmarks. I suppose it's a kind of instinct, mixed with knowledge of Arctic currents, winds and what-not that you've inherited from your ancestors."

"Mebbe," Akadriak admitted.

Disaster moved in without warning on the seventh day. Off to the right the growl and grind of the ice pack had been constant. Now it came from the left also, and astern.

"Paddle!" Akadriak said. Aided by sail and paddle, the light craft fairly leaped ahead.

Briefly the chief explained that a large floe had drifted in behind them. Possibly it had struck ice already grounded in shoal water, and now the mass was swinging northward toward the floe on their right because there was no other direction for it to go. The tremendous momentum of the pack must have some outlet. It was like a train wreck, Buck concluded, when the cars shoot right and left because piled-up wreckage won't permit them to go forward.

"Can't we land?" Buck asked, pointing to the northerly floe that was suddenly visible through the fog.

"No," Akadriak answered. "Pretty soon we find good place . . . mebbe."

That qualifying word, "mebbe," popped up frequently, Buck was thinking. A few minutes later they saw ice piling up ahead as the edges of the contending floes met. Akadriak turned the skin boat sharply, then drove the bow into a small opening on the north floe.

"Quick," he said. "Throw stuff onto ice."

Buck caught up the bag of silver and hurled it onto the ice. He heard it land with a satisfying thud. Akadriak had thrown his harpoon first. It was a case of each man obeying instincts bred into him. To Akadriak, the harpoon stood for food. To Buck, money bought food. There hadn't been time for him to think things through.

The chief noticed and smiled wisely as he tossed his sleeping bag onto the ice. Buck's bag bounced beside it. Now they began throwing packages of food in a frantic effort to save as much as possible.

"Push me up," Akadriak said. "Fast."

Buck tried to interlace the fingers of his hands, hastily yanking off mitts. One hand was all Akadriak needed. He put his left mukluk in the palm and grunted, "Heave."

Up he went. He dropped on his stomach, reached down and gave Buck a hand. Digging in knees and mukluks, Buck got to the ice. "What about the skin boat?" he asked.

"No time!" Akadriak answered. He grabbed his harpoon again and hurled it into a snow drift thirty feet away. The sleeping bag followed. Buck heaved the bag of silver, picked up frozen seal meat and raced after the chief as the edges crumpled. He saw the end of the crushed skin boat heave upward, then fall back as a pressure ridge formed. The boat had been crushed like the proverbial egg shell.

Ahead of them another pressure ridge formed as a weak spot in the floe collapsed. The growl and roar was constant. It subsided after a while.

"I guess we don't get to Siberia, Akadriak," Buck said. A fatalistic calm gripped him. "And I'm sure glad you're along."

"You saved the money, too," Akadriak commented.

"Yeah." Buck grinned foolishly. "While you saved a harpoon. I guess leaning on money is bred into a white man."

"*Some* white men," Akadriak answered.

"What do we do next?"

"Start a long walk over the ice," Akadriak told him. He began making up two packs, dividing the weight evenly.

"What about the silver?" Buck asked.

"You can't eat silver," replied Akadriak.

"Yeah, that's so," Buck agreed, "but . . ." He lifted the sack. "Thirty pounds isn't so heavy, and I'm young and strong."

"Nothing is heavy the first mile," Akadriak answered.

Buck added the silver to his own pack and followed Akadriak over the ice. It was slow work, climbing over pressure ridges and making detours around leads. They camped early and started late because when the light was bad a man could walk into blocks of ice and injure himself.

They ran out of grub the seventh day and tightened their belts. The ninth day they came to a lead that was frozen over.

"Do you think it's thick enough to cross?" Buck asked. "It's a hell of a long ways around. I think we should take a chance."

"You don't take chances if there's a safe way," Akadriak answered. "When you guess, the first guess has to be right. You don't get another one."

There were ivory fittings on each end of the harpoon shaft that Akadriak carried. The harpoon end was fitted with an ivory barb that had a steel-cutting edge. The head was detached as soon as the barb was driven into the game. A line, fastened to the head, insured retaining the game, giving it freedom of movement until the animal died. Then the kill was drawn onto the ice. The other end was fitted with a piece of ivory that was a section of walrus tusk eight inches long, cut diagonally. The thick portion was secured to the shaft by thongs. The pointed end now served as a means of testing the thickness of the ice. Walking slowly, throwing the harpoon ahead of him, Akadriak headed for the opposite side.


*"Elect me sheriff and I promise you all a fair trial!"*

"I get it," Buck commented, when Akadriak retreated. "If the harpoon goes through the ice, it's too thin to bear our weight. You fellows figure out everything."

"We try to," Akadriak answered.

They crossed the new ice without incident, except for several detours around thin areas. Buck didn't ask the Eskimo chief the distance from the village. He wasn't sure that he wanted bad news. A man might give up at the prospect of fighting twenty additional miles of floes. But if the twenty miles were divided into five-mile projects and given to him one at a time he might make the whole distance.

The thirty pounds of silver were a constant drain. Buck had lost weight, and the pack straps cut into his shoulders. Akadriak had not offered to relieve him of the burden. Apparently the chief's attitude—you can't eat money—remained the same. Daily the distance covered was shorter.

The tenth day Akadriak sighted a seal. The animal was on the ice a quarter mile distant. The chief shed his pack, grasped the harpoon and began making his way toward the

animal. He kept drifted snow or an ice hummock between himself and the quarry at all times.

Buck watched tensely. "That seal can be the difference between life and death," he thought. "I sure hope Akadriak gets him, but there's an open stretch and Akadriak will have to show himself."

The seal would stretch up and look around every few seconds, then doze. It was evidently suspicious. "Sleeping like that would make a nervous wreck of a man," Buck thought. "There goes the chief into the open while the seal is sleeping."

The seal noticed the change instantly on awakening. It grew increasingly suspicious of the man on the ice. Then Akadriak lifted his own head, looked around and lowered his head. The seal wasn't sure whether this was another seal or not. After a long time it dozed.

Akadriak cut down the intervening distance, then froze. Once again he lifted his head and looked around. The seal was satisfied.

"Now, while the seal's asleep why doesn't he rush in and hurl that old harpoon?" Buck muttered. "Still . . . he knows what he's doing, and he's as hungry as I am."

A hundred feet separated hunter and quarry when the seal suddenly plunged into the water. Akadriak stood up, his attitude one of stoicism. Buck joined him.

"Tough luck," was all the younger man said.

The remainder of the day they struggled over the floes and little was said. Buck felt depressed, but not hopeless.

"This damned dough is cutting into my shoulders," he muttered. "For two cents I'd . . . Naw, the hell with that. Still, it's Akadriak's money, not mine. If he wants it, why shouldn't he pack it?"

He turned in that night and slept heavily. Akadriak awakened him. The air was clear and they could see a considerable distance, but nothing remotely suggesting the chief's island loomed on the horizon. When they packed, Buck tossed away the sack of silver dollars. He started to leave, looked at the bag, picked it up and stowed it in the pack.

"I'm dying hard," was all he said to the native. "Too many generations of civilized beings behind me."

"You can't eat money," Akadriak reminded him again.

Toward noon they saw a polar bear. "I'm hungry enough to tackle the bear with a harpoon," Buck said. "Food," he added with a burst of feeling, "is the only bankroll worth a hoot in hell up here."

Akadriak's face betrayed nothing as he headed toward the bear. The animal was downwind and Buck noticed the native looked around for an avenue of retreat.

"Can't see very far," Akadriak explained, "but can smell a long ways. Sometimes bear smell you and come. Sometimes smell and run."

"Let's hope this is a smeller and runner," Buck said fervently. "That harpoon would need a lot of help to put a bear out of business."

The bear caught the scent a few minutes later, hesitated, started upwind, then took off at an amble.

"That's a relief, but let's not go that way," Buck commented. "He might come back."

"He gone," Akadriak said confidently. He went directly to the point where the bear had stood when first sighted. A couple of foxes were sniffing about. They retreated, and Akadriak gathered up about fifteen pounds of seal meat scattered over the ice.

Buck didn't hesitate, but followed Akadriak's example and began eating the meat raw. "I'd like to stuff myself," he said, "but I'd better go light."

Packing the remaining meat, they crossed another frozen lead to a larger mass. They ate again, then turned in. The next morning as Buck made up his pack, again he looked a long time at the thirty-pound bag of money.

"The devil with it," he said. "And this time, I mean it." He tossed it onto a pressure ridge, shrugged his shoulders and said, "Let's go, chief!"

Three hard days followed. It was mostly working through ice that had been buckled and tumbled in disorder by the tremendous pressures. For the moment it was relatively quiet, though there was always an undertone of contending floes.

"Tomorrow," Akadriak said, "mebbe see land."

"Good," Buck murmured, too exhausted to dance a jig for joy.

He hardly knew when they left ice for land. The floe had piled up on a sandy point and pushed inland a short distance. Buck supposed that during the open season the area was a sort of flat. But the ice-scoured rocks nearby were evidence enough of land.

"I sure have learned a lot, Akadriak," Buck declared. "But for you, I'd have been done for."

"You good man," the chief told him. "Take it easy like a Swede. Don't get excited."

"Thanks, Akadriak. That's tops, coming from you," Buck said. "Say, isn't that the village ahead? Sure it is. And we're arriving under our own power, too. Do you know what? I'm going in for a long session of eating white man's grub."

A trace of a smile played around the chief's lips. "I take good big smoke. No smoke three, four days."

The children swarmed about them along with several half-grown dogs. The young men came out a few minutes later and began asking questions. Akadriak answered in dialect. Someone had lit a seal oil lamp in the chief's igloo, and a kettle hung above the flame was singing softly.

Buck ate a square of chocolate, then sprawled down on a pile of hides. He turned on the radio and heard the tag end of a soap opera.

"Shucks," he said softly, "the old United States is right where she's been all the time. Life kept rolling along while Akadriak and I went back a hundred, or maybe a thousand years, for a few days."

Buck was asleep the next morning when Akadriak quietly left the igloo, crossed the island's backbone and made his way through the gray light to the floe. In a little while the chief picked up an old trail. Four hours later he stopped near a ledge formed by the pressure ice, lifted a sack of silver dollars from the ledge to his pack. The sack weighed thirty pounds.

The chief moved slowly on the return trip, for he was tired. He wondered what Buck Marsh would say if he ever learned he and Akadriak had never been more than a day's travel from the village at any time—that they had wandered back and forth in the same area as they tightened their belts and toughed it out. Akadriak had an idea Buck wouldn't hold it against an Eskimo chief who wanted to bring all that was good and bad in a man to the surface.

Akadriak cached the silver near the village where he could slip it into his igloo at a convenient time, then he went in and found Buck listening to the radio.

"Where you been, chief?" the younger man asked. "I've been worrying about you."

"A chief has many things to do," Akadriak answered.

When Buck went outside to stretch his legs, the chief fished out a defective tube and slipped it into the radio receiver. Then he lighted his pipe and waited.

Buck came in and flopped down. "Can't seem to get enough to eat," he grinned. "Say, what's wrong with the radio?"

"Bum tube," Akadriak answered. "You fix 'em?"

"Sure." Buck pulled the hides aside and burrowed down for the box containing the tubes. He excavated Akadriak's bankroll, looked at it, grinned and tossed it aside. "As the feller says," he commented, "you can't eat money, nor use it for radio tubes." He found a new tube, shoved the bankroll back in its caching place and fixed the set.

The money hadn't even tempted him. He felt just swell as he looked at Akadriak, relaxed and grinned. Akadriak smiled, but for a different reason. He had been thinking that a man can't serve two masters, nor be half free and half slave. An Eskimo should either scorn the white man's food and tools entirely, or else arrange to be supplied with them when a trading schooner failed to get through.

After a winter's seasoning, when Buck learned thoroughly the art of caring for himself in the ice, Akadriak would make the white man a little business proposition.

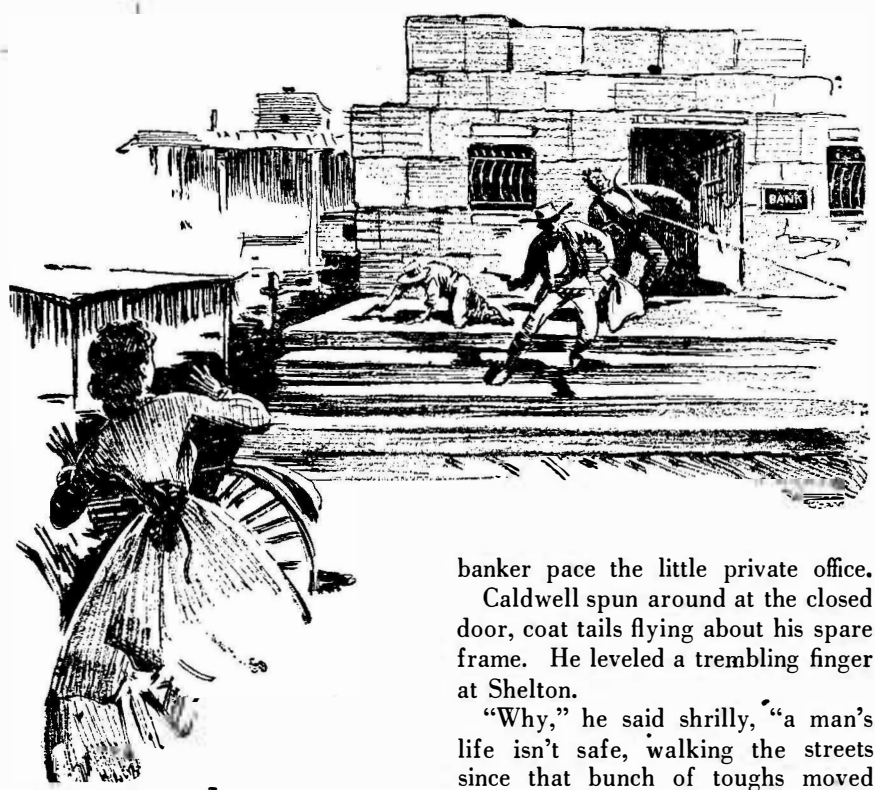
They'd buy a plane equipped with floats or skis as conditions demanded. Buck could fly to Nome for needed things or carry on trade between remote villages. By listening to the radio, they'd know when the price of fur was high, and they could fly it to market.

Akadriak had found the man for whom he had been waiting.

THE END

# GUN THUNDER AT WAR BONNET

**By William J. Glynn**




## I

JOHN SHELTON stood beside the desk, his hat gripped loosely in one big hand, listening to Lee Caldwell's harsh tirade, quietly watching the banker pace the little private office.

Caldwell spun around at the closed door, coat tails flying about his spare frame. He leveled a trembling finger at Shelton.

"Why," he said shrilly, "a man's life isn't safe, walking the streets since that bunch of toughs moved into War Bonnet. Next they'll swoop down on my bank. Did you know they broke into Brandon's store last night—killed his clerk and took over a thousand dollars right out of his

safe? Yes, and Pete Gordman said they made off with a big cut of Ann Bettinger's Angus herd yesterday. I'm putting it straight up to you, John. It's got to stop!"

Shelton settled into the Douglas chair beside the desk. He said, "Ann Bettinger's herd?" and let the surprise build up behind his gray eyes. But his tone was soft, strangely so for a big man. He was not one to hurry, and he didn't now, circling his wide-brimmed hat in hands that still showed the stain of sun and work. He leaned forward, his carefully brushed blond head lifted toward the banker. A brief smile touched his lips and again he said, "Ann Bettinger." Then he got to his feet. "But why throw this into my corral, Lee? It's sure no job for a saloonkeeper."

He moved toward Caldwell, his rider's boots resting solidly on the plank floor. There was the undeniable stamp of a range-riding past in his movements; his wide shoulders lifted beneath the black broadcloth and a hand touched the rosewood grips of the long-barreled Remington .44.

"There's been no love lost between us, Lee. Remember?" His mouth tightened and he added, "Nor be-

***Could John Shelton keep his Palace open long enough to give those outlaws one last spree on Kickapoo juice —with a hot-lead chaser?***

tween Ann Bettinger and me. Why don't you call in your marshal?"

Lee Caldwell threw out his hands in a gesture of defeat. He wilted into the chair behind his roll-top desk, staring at the scattered papers there. He was a hard, bony kind of man, with cold blue eyes that were nearly hidden beneath bushy black brows. But whatever shrewdness he owned was gone. He was visibly shaken; a worried man who glanced out the front window and then swiveled his eyes to the glass door that separated the office from the bank foyer.

"You can't shrug it off like that, John," he said finally. "You're in this, too." He picked up a crumpled sheet of paper from the untidy litter before him, smoothed it out. "The Ladies' Helping Hand Society of War Bonnet has come to a decision."

A grin dallied with John's rugged face, retreated before his sobering thought. "An unusual happening," he said thinly. "Mrs. Caldwell ought to be congratulated upon her accomplishment. Shall we retire to my barroom for a drink . . . on that decision?"

Caldwell said, "There's no smile in this, John, and my wife had nothing to do with it. It was unanimous . . . to close your Palace Saloon at noon today. For good!"

"I run a clean bar," John said softly. "If the Helping Hand figures that wild bunch liquored up at my barroom, got their idea for this outlaw clean-out at the Palace, they can guess again. No. You call your gun-dog marshal on this."

A frown pulled Caldwell's bushy brows together. "Harrington," he said on a sour note, "makes a mighty poor lawman. His appointment was a big mistake—my mistake. I'll admit that. But he's carrying the badge right now and there's no time to do anything about that. What's bothering me, though, is how in time this trouble could grow horns and you not know about it—not do anything about it—a man in your business."

But Shelton wasn't one to tell all he knew, and he wasn't opening up at the moment; this problem needed serious thought. His gaze drifted to the window.

A fringed-top surrey, behind a pair of black trotters, wheeled crisply past, its passengers sitting stiffly erect, prim in picture hats with bobbing ostrich feather plumes. The War Bonnet Helping Hand Society was making its daily rounds.

John's eyes hardened and a bitter tug marred the straight line of his lips as he watched the fancy rig wheel up street. He saw Mrs. Caldwell and the postmaster's wife turn their heads scornfully on stiff, lace-choker collars as they passed his Palace Saloon.

John put on his hat and moved toward the door. Six feet and over, with shoulders that lifted high and flat on a frame of bone and muscle, he towered, a veritable giant next to the slight, bony figure of the banker crouched at the desk. John, in his early thirties, was handsome in a

rugged way, and, for one who spent a good part of his time behind a bar, showed no trace of his trade's inclination to flabbiness. "Because I'm not my best customer," he would tell a pay-day treating crowd.

"All right, Lee," John said, "close me up, but you'll still have the wild bunch on your neck. You can believe that or not, suit yourself.'

Caldwell got to his feet. "It's ten o'clock now. What can you do for War Bonnet in two hours? I can help you that much, John."

"You're asking help from the despised saloon owner?" Cynicism touched John's mouth. "As president of the Helping Hand, Mrs. Caldwell wouldn't like that."

"Two hours, John," Caldwell repeated. "Two hours to go out there and put the fear of God into those lobos." There was persistence in the banker's voice, and understanding of the harshness of the blow that had driven John Shelton into the saloon business.

"Ann Bettinger hasn't married Pete Gordman, yet. This is your chance to prove up, John. Show her that you're the man can do an honest job."

John shrugged. "Gordman is a cowman. He's doing an honest job so far as anyone here knows. Why call me into it?"

"You've got the guts to come out in the open with what you're doing," the banker said. "That's more than anyone in War Bonnet can say for Pete. That fellow's an outlaw, and I'm going to tell Ann before—"

"Ann?" John's smile wasn't good to see. He laughed then, with all his hurt on the surface. And with the action, what he might have added was wiped away and his cold eyes swept past the door to the street, to the buckboard squeaking in from the miles of heat and dust of the valley range. His cold gaze brushed past the tall, heavy-set man on the seat and held as though hypnotized on the trim girl there beside Pete Gordman.

John walked to the glass door, stared out into the bank. The bearded man in faded Levis and run-over boots still loitered near the cashier's cage, a six-shooter slanted around his hips. Out on the walk, another of the same breed leaned against the paint-peeled façade, smoking a Duke's, letting his little yellow eyes stray occasionally to the open door and inside, like prying flies.

"You want me to take care of a situation like that—on the day Ann Bettinger marries a man like Gordman?" John asked, whirling to face the banker. "Maybe . . . I want to get drunk!"

Caldwell's bushy eyebrows twitched. "It would be the first time, John, that you weren't around when you were needed."

Shelton's jaws set hard. He stepped out of the bank, walked to the buckboard drawn up against the hitchrail. He rested a polished boot on the iron step of the rig and his hand strayed toward the .44 on his belt.

Without a greeting, he said, "Ann, I just heard about your loss—the rustled beef." Ignoring Gordman, he

added: "If there's anything I can do . . ."

The trim young owner of the Z-Bar-A layout drew back in the spring seat, her dark eyes reserved, seemingly reluctant to let Shelton see into them.

"Who asked for your help?" Pete Gordman said. Beneath his beak nose his lips drew down, an ugly line. He wore a six-shooter, and in one arm cradled a Ball lever-action rifle. "Sure, we took a loss of critters. We'll take more before I'm roddin' the Z-Bar-A, as owner. An' that'll be today, booze peddler. Now just take your foot off that step. Ann ain't having no more truck with you, starting this minute. You get it?"

John stepped back, recoiled like a big lazy snake touching a sun-baked rock, but he gave no indication of the anger that boiled under his hide.

There was defiance in Ann Bettinger's face at Gordman's harsh talk; and something else that John couldn't place. He read disdain a moment later, when her gaze swept back to him. One corner of her red mouth lifted, and her small nose tilted.

"That's right, Mr. Shelton," she said coldly. "What happens on the Z-Bar-A is no concern of yours, now or ever. And you can tell that bunch of outlaws hanging around your saloon that we're not happy about this rustling. We'll fight. Now, if you'll please step out of the way . . ."

John lifted his hat and stood there with the warm air stirring his blond hair, watching Gordman savagely lash his team into a startled run.

## II

Later, drifting down toward his Palace Saloon, John didn't miss the half-dozen strangers moving in and out of the stores and shops. To a man, they spelled trouble, outlaws sizing up War Bonnet for an easy take. But now the menace of their presence could not hold his thought; could not compete with the cold lump in his chest.

A year past, things had been different. He'd hoped to marry Ann, was a frequent visitor on the Z-Bar-A. But the girl's father had been alive then. When John had asked to marry Ann, the old cowman demanded that John have some substantial means of making a living, aside from a career as a forty-dollar-a-month cowpuncher with a yen to see the other side of beyond.

John knew horses and he knew cattle and the trail drive, with the wild roistering pay days in cow towns from the Canadian to the Big Muddy. But that was the extent of his knowledge—that and the saloons and the men that frequented them.

Without enough money saved to buy a horse string and the nucleus of a herd, he had turned to the next best thing, as he thought; had got himself a job tending bar in the Palace. Likable, soft-spoken, he'd gone on from there, and in the short space of a year had owned the saloon. It wasn't a business he particularly liked but it was giving him his chance to make a stake.

Old Man Bettinger, though,

couldn't see his dust. As a drifting puncher with more than his quota of gun magic, John Shelton had been told to keep off the Z-Bar-A. And when he went into the saloon business, became a bartender, Bettinger had forbidden Ann even to speak to big John Shelton.

"And now she's going to marry Pete Gordman," John muttered, stepping into the Palace.

The only saloon in town, the Palace was usually filled this close to the noon hour. But it wasn't running true to form today. There was a tense, on-edge air to the place, as though the gang of outlaws rodding the town and valley range had taken men's minds off their thirst and dulled their gambling fever.

"Ace didn't even show up," Curly Owen, the bartender, told John from behind the long, ornate mahogany bar. "Look at them poker tables and the faro layout. Like a ghost town in a minin' district. The gals—they come in an hour ago for the noon dancin'. Took one look at this here empty barn and wanted to know where-at the funeral was."

John leaned on the bar, tried to place the four or five cowmen drinking there. One of them, Pete Gordman's wagon boss, was fighting drunk. John remembered ordering the waddy out of the saloon a couple of times in the past for drunk and disorderly conduct. He nodded now to the bartender pouring drinks in front of the long mirror.

"Yeah," Curly said from the side of his mouth. "Reckon I know what you're going to ask, boss. I done it, poured a good half ounce of my Curly Owen Kickapoo juice in his shot glass. Won't be but a minute till that drunk will be wanting fresh air and a hitchrail to be sick over. You won't have to toss *him* out on his ear, boss."

John's eyes searched the drunken puncher for symptoms, saw him suddenly turn away from the bar, white-faced, gulping. He pushed back the empty glass, staggered toward the swing doors.

"Maybe that juice of yours will turn the tables on these hoots casing the town, Curly," John told the barkeep in a voice that carried to Curly's ear and no farther.

John sauntered to the far end of the bar, lifted the shelf gate and moved in beside Curly. "If you haven't plenty of that run-and-get-sick concoction, Owen, you better make more. You can add that gallon of high-proof alcohol we got in last week."

Curly's round eyes bulged slightly in his waxy face. "I don't get it, boss. You figgerin' on drenching a whole cavvy of hydrophoby hosses?"

John grinned. "Could be, Curly. Anyhow you collect a few bar quarts, mix it with the other stuff—the Kickapoo. We're going to treat the town. Free drinks until noon. We close then, for keeps, unless things turn out like I'm beginning to hope they will."

Curly's veined eyes puckered. "You goin' to give a mickey to the whole town, boss? 'Cause if you are,

I'm 'takin' off my apron. Fellers wake up awful mean after drinkin' that devil's brew of mine."

"Not the whole town," John said. "Just to those hard cases—Pete Gordman's wild bunch."

Owen mulled that over, swiping at the bar with his rag.

"You think Pete's roddin' them owlhoots, huh?" he asked. A strange hard light sifted into his eyes. "I'm out of Kickapoo."

John said, "You've got plenty of Star plug up there in the tobacco case. You've got pepper, chili powder, syrup, alum, all the ingredients. You hop to it. I've got to make a big sign, 'Free drinks until noon.' Going to hang it outside. That'll fetch 'em, or I don't know my ridge riders. When Pat Bryan comes in at eleven to swamp out, I'll have him parade the streets hollering out the free drinks. But remember, Curly—none of that doped stuff to the citizens."

Owen worked at a smile. but it was a cold thing. "I savvy the Kickapoo part, boss. I'll make them jaspers turn green after a snort of my stuff. But how about this closing business? Are we done?"

John shrugged. "You've still got my derringer?"

"Why sure, but . . ." Curly reached hesitantly to a drawer beneath the till, pulled out a pearl-handled .41 and handed it over the bar. "Pete Gordman's goin' to be mad, an' I don't blame him."

Marshal Si Harrington, small, wiry, with a step like a hunting cougar, shoved a .45 into John Shelton's broad back.

"I'll just trouble you gents for that hardware," he said coldly. "You drink-doctorin' whelps! I was bushed behind the pianer, and I heard you. Shelton, you ain't waitin' 'till noon to close. I'm runnin' this camp, get it?"

John turned around, his gray eyes staring down into the marshal's leathery face. "Those orders didn't come from Lee Caldwell," he said softly. "I'm taking his word." He moved back from the jabbing six-shooter, his arms tense by his sides. "You're a joke, Harrington—a tin badge," he goaded. "If you're not in the pay of Pete Gordman, put up that gun."

"Like hell!"

"I don't want to call your hand, marshal," John said. "I don't want to have to kill you."

"You ain't gettin' the chance."

The punchers at the bar heard the talk, wheeled around. They saw Harrington's gun and started for the door.

"Wait, boys," John called out. "The drinks are on the house."

Harrington's gaze shifted to the cowhands. The barrel of his Colt dipped.

John struck then. His big right fist came up in a short, hard jab to the marshal's jaw and sent him reeling backward, out on his feet. Shelton caught him as he tottered, scooped the six-shooter from his hand and then let him fall.

"Tie him up, Curly, and gag him. We only have thirty minutes to get that sign out."

Old Pat Bryan, the saloon swamper, came in through the back door, his whiskey-veined face the color of underdone beefsteak. John watched the punchers leave the bar, turn hurriedly and make their way out onto the walk and up street. Then he grabbed the wondering swamper and pulled him into the back room.

In twenty minutes they had a sign; a crude, dripping sign with red-painted letters two feet high. They tacked it over the swinging doors outside while Curly watched them narrowly. John made smaller signs for Pat, pinned them to the man's grimy shirt, fore and aft, and sent him shouting out his news down the center of the main street.

## III

At fifteen minutes to twelve, John stood under the wooden awning in front of the Palace and watched the first of the hard-eyed strangers in War Bonnet come legging down the walk. He could hear Pat, down street, telling the town of the free drinks.

It wasn't only the outlaw element that came on the run. Townsmen, the postmaster himself, and Ed Hine from his saddle shop, all with a thirst and a curiosity that overpowered their caution, hurried out of the shacks and stores toward the saloon.

John spotted Gordman, swinging out from the feed store across from the bank. But the burly ramrod of the Z-Bar-A wasn't following the men on the walk. Even at that distance John could see the man's heavy features twist into a grimace of hate as he turned to stare at the Palace.

Ann Bettinger's range boss did a strange thing then. Leaping onto a buckskin at the tie rail, Gordman kicked startled life into the pony, sent him lunging out into the street, waving a six-shooter and shouting at the little group of men hot-footing it for the saloon.

"Go on, get back!" Gordman bellowed, and shot his .45 into the air until the hammer clicked empty. "Shelton's tryin' to trick you. That tightfist ain't givin' nothin' away."

The townsmen halted to stare at Gordman, then faded like prairie chickens, scattered into the stores and between the buildings until only the outlaw element was left there on the walk barred by Gordman's buckskin.

At that moment Pat Bryan came running across the street, puffing and wheezing. He pulled up in front of John. "By damn, sir. It's you I have to talk to. The Bettinger gal —she's gone!"

"Gone? You've jumped off the water wagon, Pat! She's down to the church getting ready for the wedding."

The red-faced old swamper shook his head. "I'm sober, and I'm telling you she's gone. One of them cowhands of hers came a-ridin' in, or so Mrs. Caldwell was telling me. Said Ann was to go to the ranch. Some kind of trouble out there and . . ."

John ran to the livery barn, his

long legs churning the dust, a puzzled frown building up on his face. Fear gripped him as he led out his bay, and saddled up. Gordman was in town, or had been, but . . . John left town, heading for the Bettinger ranch at a run.

It wasn't far, not over six miles by the county road, but at the rate John spurred his mount, the bay was lathered and blowing when he pulled into the Z-Bar-A yard.

The Chinese cook, Ling See, met him at the door of the big, rambling log house.

"Missy Ann in town," Ling explained. "No tlouble on lanch—tlouble in town. She mally with boss-man Pete. You shoot Pete, huh?" His bland face broke in a wide grin. But there was no mirth in his slant eyes. "You shoot boss-man Pete, I blake cake," he offered.

John grunted disgustedly. He'd been tricked like a green kid and had taken the bait, hook and line. Gordman had been slick, getting him out of town like that.

Hitting the yard running, John leaped into his saddle. He spurred the bay without let-up on the way back to town, got every last ounce of speed the big gelding possessed. Rounding into War Bonnet's main street, he heard gun thunder on the other side of town and was tempted to go on and brace Gordman and his gang—have it out then and there. But when he saw the broken windows of his saloon and the smashed chairs scattered on the walk, he reined in sharply.

There were half a dozen men out there in front of the Palace, every one of them staggering around as though drunk, or stretched out on the boardwalk.

Anger stamped into John's eyes. These men weren't drunk; they were sick, deathly sick. And they were townsmen, storekeepers, his friends! Ed Hine was ducking his head in the horse trough at the end of the hitch-rail moaning something about taking the pledge.

John stepped down from his bay and drew his Remington. He stepped over the men on the walk, into his Palace bar. The place was a shambles, overturned tables, broken glasses and bottles. And the air reeked with the sour smell of spilled whiskey. Curly was behind the bar, serving a hard-eyed man in puncher clothing from a bottle of the best whiskey.

"Curly!" John shouted, his voice popping like a whip. "Those War Bonnet men out there—you gave them that devil's drink of yours."

The barkeep looked up, a snarl pulling his pink face out of shape. "Yeah," he growled, "an' what about it? I'm takin' orders from Pete Gordman, an' have been. You wanta make somethin' out of that—just start the ball to rollin'." The bartender was lifting his Greener shotgun over the edge of the bar as he spoke.

"Why, you double-dealing son!" John said. He saw Curly's finger tighten on the trigger and threw him-

self prone on the floor as the shotgun roared.

A hail of lead slugs whined in the air, one of them ripping a hot furrow across John's thigh as he rolled and jerked to his feet. John shot once, at Curly, then spun to bracket the puncher who had dropped into a crouch and was reaching for his six-shooter.

Curly's shotgun slipped from his hands, clattered on the bar. A foolish expression washed into his veined eyes. The neat red hole that had suddenly centered between them trickled blood and he sank down behind the bar.

The puncher didn't quite make it with his try for the gun. John's Remington flamed again and the man jerked up on his toes, his own .45 blasting lead into the floor before him. Then he twisted slowly and suddenly fell full length.

"Pete . . . Pete'll get you for this," he gasped and lay still.

John straightened up, feeling the hot blood trickling down his thigh where Curly's lead shot had raked into his flesh. And Lee Caldwell found him then, leaning up against the bar, surveying the damaged interior of the Palace.

"We're licked, Shelton," Lee said dully. "You'd better ride, while you still have the chance. Gordman's got this town in his hat."

"Not yet," John said softly. "I'll find Ann . . ."

"No." Caldwell tugged at his tight collar, ripped it loose. "Gordman's got her and the Helping Hand bunch penned up in the church. They were having a meeting and he came in there with his toughs—held 'em up."

"You were there?"

Caldwell nodded. "I was the speaker for the day. I— He let me out, told me to open my bank safe, fork over the money and he'd let the ladies go. I saw your horse out front . . ."

John grunted and his lips set in a straight line. He'd seen movement under one of the tables and stooped to pull Pat Bryan out onto the floor. The swamper had been clubbed over the head and an ugly lump thrust up through his sandy hair. John and Caldwell lifted him to a sitting position and poured some whiskey down his throat.

Pat spluttered and opened his eyes, staring about the wrecked barroom. "Curly Owen," he said, coughing over the strong drink, "that two-timin' son hit me." He blinked his eyes. "Sure, and it's you, John Shelton. I thought for a minute it was Saint Peter haulin' me through the gates."

"It will be unless we get a move on," John told him. "Lee, I think

*What's In A Brand Answers* *(page 83)*
1. Ball on E: Baloney; 2. Ha-Ha-Ha-on-U: The Last Laugh Is on You; 3. Clip JO in T: Clip Joint; 4. Excuse My Dust; 5. IR on Heel: Iron Heel; 6. Four T below: Forty Below; 7. Footlights; 8. EZ on the Eyes; 9. T-Bone Steak (Stake).

maybe we still have a chance to fix Gordman's slick try to take War Bonnet. You go down to your bank like Gordman told you. Take a six-shooter and Curly's shotgun. Stand guard over that safe of yours. And Pat, fill those empty whiskey bottles back of the bar with Curly's Kickapoo juice. Get an armload of 'em and stand near the door. I'll be outside and when I yell, you run out into the street and wave those bottles. Unless I'm mistaken, you'll have a lot of thirsty hoots reaching for that whiskey, or what they will think is whiskey. There's going to be plenty smoke in here. I'll fire this Palace; she's wrecked anyhow, and with the smoke pouring out of here, I figure that'll bring Gordman's bunch on the run, and it will give me a chance to run down the alley to the church and let the ladies out."

Caldwell shook his head. "It won't work. There's six or seven men standing guard around that church, and they're all armed toughs. What do they care about a fire down here? They'll shoot you down like a dog if you try to brace them."

John's shoulders slumped and the lead rip on his thigh burned like fire. The wreckage around him seemed to hold him, to push him down. The Palace was all he owned, and though he hadn't cared for the type of business he was in, it was all he had in his try to make enough money to feel right about asking Ann to marry him.

But that hope was over now. She was going to marry Gordman.

"Maybe you're right, Lee," John said. "But I just can't let that no-good Gordman walk over us. And Ann . . . he'll take her ranch, everything she's got. No, I've got an idea! You said Gordman was keeping his men down there at the church. I'll bet they were liquored up."

"Sure," Lee said, "but—"

"Well, that means they'll be interested in more drink. If they see this place, the only saloon, going up in smoke, why won't they drop everything and run to save it? Yes sir, a fire will throw a tight loop around Gordman's little scheme. It's our only chance. You take this shotgun of Curly's and that dead puncher's six-shooter and make tracks for your bank."

"Now you're talkin'," Pat said, and watched John spill whiskey on the floor sawdust, "but wastin' that red-eye is bad."

And Pat groaned when John touched a match to the whiskey-soaked sawdust and fanned up the blue flame.

## IV

Five minutes later, crouching by the saloon doors, Pat heard the wild, insistent ringing of War Bonnet's volunteer fire bell from the barn back of the hotel.

Doors opened cautiously up and down the street. Spooked citizens hastily slipped out into alleys and back ways to answer the summons. A rattle of shots burst out in the still air down at the church and was followed by the drum beat of horses

spurred into sudden, terrified motion.

John raced back between the pool hall and the hotel, shouted across the street to Pat Bryan. The swamper emerged from the saloon, darted through the smoke now pouring from the broken windows. John saw him standing there in the center of the street, shouting and holding up a quart bottle of Kickapoo. The saloon owner spun around and ran down the littered alley toward the church, saw the outlaws mounted now and riding into the main street.

John waited until they had passed, then tried the church door. It was closed and padlocked. Running back a few steps, he whirled and raced full tilt, shattered the door with the drive of his wide shoulders and sprawled full length into the midst of a weeping, frightened Helping Hand Society.

Ann Bettinger was the first to reach him. With a little cry, she bent over John, grasped his arm as he got to his feet.

"Pete," she sobbed. "He . . . he tried to get me to sign over the ranch to him . . . said he was holding us here until I did. But why am I telling you this . . . I guess it's too late—"

"It's too late for you to marry that outlaw," John said, grinning. "And too late for you to marry a saloon owner. That fire up street is my Palace going up in smoke. But maybe later, you'll consider John Shelton, cowman."

Ann gripped his arm tightly and her eyes shone through her tears.

"Outside, all of you," John said.

"Those outlaws will catch us," wailed one of the women.

"They won't fire at you," John told them. "Ann, you've got to drive that surrey, and fast. It's our only chance. I've got to get to the bank. Lee's there all alone, trying to stand off Gordman's bunch. I'll hide on the floorboards of the surrey, between the seats."

"Oh, Mr. Shelton," Mrs. Caldwell said, her eyes moist. "We have misjudged you so. I—"

"Maybe," John said, "but that can wait and Lee can't."

Four outlaws leaned over the hitch-rail across the street from the blazing saloon when the surrey drove into the main street. They were as sick as only Curly's Kickapoo could make them. One of them saw the rig and reached for his six-shooter, then crumpled on the boardwalk as John rested his Remington over the surrey boot and triggered.

Ann lashed the horses on them, and pulled them to a stop in front of the bank. As John leaped from the rig, he slapped his hat on the nigh black and sent the team racing on out of danger with its load of women.

A man's hoarse shouting broke from the bank, followed by a rattle of six-gun fire and the hollow roar of a shotgun. Lead whistled into the street.

John moved quickly, dragging out his derringer and the .44 as he ran. He ducked under the tie rail but stopped at the front of the bank, for he'd heard the squeal of brakes and

the grating of a suddenly cramped running gear. Ann was returning, lashing her team back into the fight. And she was all alone in the swaying rig.

Then John saw Pete Gordman emerge from the bank, a heavy oat sack swinging in his left hand. Two of his outlaw crew followed, their sixes blasting at sight of big John Shelton.

Lead smashed into John's shoulder, turned him halfway around. Another shot sliced across his ribs. He staggered back against the tie rail, lifted his .44 and sent a fast hail of lead at the three men. But his left arm and shoulder were numb; he saw the derringer fall to the walk from his lax fingers. He crouched there, at bay, triggered again and saw one of the outlaws twist and fall.

Gordman tossed his money sack to the other man, sent him running down the walk.

"Now, I'm callin' your hand," Gordman growled and eared back the hammer of his gun. "You kin have some of this—for passin' out that doped whiskey!"

The six-shooter roared and John felt his right leg go out from under him. He knelt there—and pulled the trigger on an empty gun!

Pete was almost upon him now, a savage snarl on his face. Then John remembered the derringer and, reaching over with his right hand, picked it up from the walk and let the hammer drop on a smashing thunder of sound.

Gordman reeled, surprise and hate mingling on his heavy features. Blood sprang from his mouth. His gun dropped from his hand and a gurgling shout was cut off in its inception as he slowly slumped down in front of the bank doors and toppled over.

John felt very tired, sleepy. He saw the blood spurting from his left shoulder and tried to wipe it away. He knew he was falling, slipping into a vast darkness, but there didn't seem to be much he could do about it.

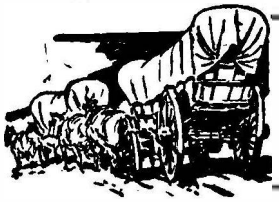
Lee Caldwell limped from the bank, a smoking six-shooter in his long fingers. He stopped there when he saw John, and turned to watch Ann Bettinger hurrying toward them.

John smiled. He could still do that without any part of him hurting. He felt Ann's arms steady him, and warm tears trickling on his face.

"Reckon War Bonnet got itself a real marshal at last," Caldwell said. "The other one is stretched out there in the bank with a load of buckshot in his brisket. And now I'm going to get Doc Stone, if he's through being fire chief," the banker added, nodding toward the smoking remains of the Palace Saloon. "And if this big galoot won't be marshal, how about hiring him as an honest ramrod for the Z-Bar-A, Ann?"

"Better find the parson, Lee," John called to Caldwell. "I think we're goin' to need him—soon as I'm up and about." He looked up into Ann's eyes and found the answer he was looking for in their depths.

THE END



# WHERE TO GO

**By John North**

WHETHER you homestead raw land, tackle a cut-over timber tract or buy a developed farm in your chosen corner of the golden West, you naturally want it to be a productive investment for years to come. A good idea is to measure the land's possibilities—and its drawbacks—by the score-card method. The result provides an overall picture of the tract in question and a down-to-earth basis for estimating its chances for profitable agricultural development.

Reader T.K., from Macon, Georgia, is one of several who have lately queried us on farm-land possibilities in the rapidly expanding agricultural sections of the Pacific Northwest. He has been thinking, his letter said, primarily about cut-over land tracts in Idaho, Washington or Oregon. "I intend going out there to look the ground over this spring," he wrote. "But whether I decide on cut-over land, or a developed farm not quite so rugged, can you suggest some of the more important things I should look for in farm land?"

Try the score-card system, T.K. It lists items that are obvious and others that an individual might be inclined to overlook. Get a pencil and several sheets of paper. Put down the following questions under separate subheadings and leave a blank space to be filled in later with the answers.

Let's start with the tract, or farm, itself. List these questions: Total acres? . . . acres in crops? . . . acres that can be used for crops? . . . acres in field pasture? . . . acres in wood pasture? . . . total acres in woods? . . . waste acres (such as swamps. etc.)? . . . acres that can be cleared or drained at reasonable cost? . . . acres in usable woodlot? . . . estimated value of standing timber, for lumber, for farm buildings, and for posts, ties and poles? Can such wood products be cut and marketed easily, if necessary, or saved for farm use? How much wood for firewood or heating and cordwood purposes? And, finally, how many acres roughly of the total are in lanes, barnyards, building lots, etc., or will be needed for them?

On another sheet put down these important questions concerning the land's general geography, and soil conditions.

Is the geography suitable for cultivation? Level, nearly level, too steep, etc.? Is land suitable for machine farming? . . . for irrigation? Is land likely to flood? Is it vulnerable to

erosion? Is the soil itself deep? . . . productive? . . . well-drained? . . . suitable for various different crops? Is there adequate water for home and farm use in dry summer months? . . . in cold, winter months? What about possible water sources for irrigation?

So much for the land. Now for a questionnaire on some essential living conditions.

Are the buildings suitable for the type of farming contemplated? Do they need repairs? Are new ones needed? Is the dwelling adequate for a home? If not, can an adequate home be erected reasonably? How about fences? Do the old ones need repair? Are new ones needed? Are farm lanes and roads in good shape?

Is the climate generally healthful? Is it one you and your family can, or feel you would like to, live in? Equally important, are the growing season, average annual rainfall and climate adapted to the type of farming you intend to do?

Is the general neighborhood suitable to *you* from the standpoint of roads, nearest town or shopping center, schools, churches and hospital facilities should they be needed suddenly? And don't forget these items: Is a telephone line available, lights for electric lighting, current for farm power use, and R.F.D. for getting your mail?

For the last and final sheet set down the answers to these purely business questions:

First, does the farm contain—or is it likely to—any valuable mineral deposits such as oil, gas, sand and gravel banks, etc.? Do rights to such minerals go with the land? Second, is the value of the tract likely to increase or decrease? In case of desire or necessity, will it resell easily? Third, is the land suitable for a change in type of farming, if desired? Fourth, are taxes reasonable, and can you obtain a sound title?

Then add the following: Is the tract the proper size and kind to make a reasonably good living on it the way you plan to use it? Are the chances good for obtaining more land adjacent or nearby by purchase or rental should you desire later to enlarge your operations? Can the initial cost be paid out of earnings from the land itself within a reasonable period of time? If needed, are local part-time jobs available?

Sure, it is a bit of trouble to check on all these things. And some of the answers may be disappointing. But they will all be revealing. And they will help immeasurably in the information they afford. In farming, as in other lines, a little foresight is often worth a lot of hindsight. It pays in the long run. And the score-card system gets the answers down in black and white.

**Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. Be sure to enclose a stamped envelope for your reply. Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, P.O. Box 489, Elizabeth, N. J.**

# MINES AND MINING

## By John A. Thompson

GEM MINING in the United States is not likely to send the average prospector off on a helter-skelter diamond rush. Yet a wide variety of semi-precious stones has been found in this country. And there is money in many of them.

In California alone more than two and a quarter million dollars' worth of gems and gem material has been found or mined over an extended period of years. Some of this came from the occasional diamonds recovered from placer gravels by miners working the ground primarily for gold.

Several of these diamonds have been found south of Smiths Flat, at White Rock Canyon and Webber Hill near Placerville in El Dorado County. The Volcano mining district in Amador County has yielded a number of beautiful gem diamonds, some of them well over a carat in weight. Diamonds have also been found in the Cherokee district, at Yankee Hill and at Oroville in Butte County.

Still in spite of these profitable finds, diamonds are so sparsely distributed in the gold gravels that it is very doubtful if efforts to prospect solely, or even mainly, for diamonds in California would be a paying proposition. That is a question several readers have brought up lately, one of the most recent being J. R. of Glendale, California, who also asked about any other precious, or semi-precious, gem stones that might be found in his home State—and where.

J. R., leaving out the rare finds of precious diamonds, there are some hundred and fifty or more minerals of gem or semi-precious stone use that the rock hound can look for in California. Let's concentrate on the more important ones.

There is quartz, of course. The clear, transparent colorless variety known as "rock crystal," amethyst (all shades of purple), Spanish topaz (deep yellow), citrine (light yellow), rose quartz, smoky quartz and the stone known as Cairngorm—a dark-brown quartz variety.

For rock crystals of especially good quality, try the country around Volcano and Oleta in Amador County, near Placerville and White Rock Canyon in El Dorado County, Grass Valley, Nevada City and Washington in Nevada County, or

the region around Coahuila in Riverside County.

Amethysts have been found and mined near Woodland, Lake County, and in the Bodie district of Mono County. Smoky quartz is widespread. Many fine specimens have been found around Volcano and Oleta, near Placerville, at Coahuila, Rincon and Mesa Grande in Riverside County and in and near the various gem mines at Pala and Ramona in San Diego County.

Rose quartz? Again Volcano, Oleta and around Coahuila. Also in Hope Valley, Alpine County and near Forbestown in Butte County.

There are good hunting spots for chalcedony, agate and jasper along the Pacific Ocean beaches, notably at Crescent City, Del Norte County, and at Pescadero about 25 miles west of San Jose. Some fine jasper pebbles are also found at Redondo Beach just 15 miles south of Los Angeles. The shores around Lake Tahoe afford an additional chance to pick up jasper and chalcedony pebbles.

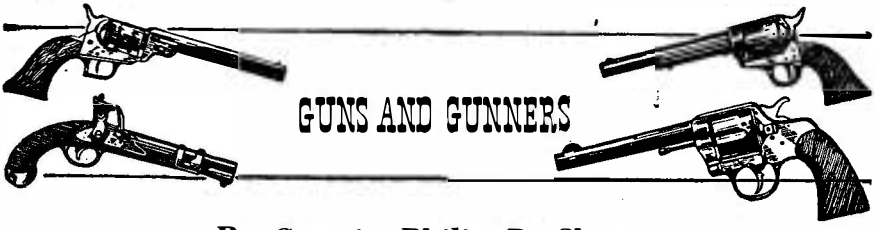
A sky-blue chalcedony, the same as that once highly prized by the ancient Babylonians, can be found near Kane Springs in Kern County. Brickred jasper marked with yellow and deeper red is found near Morgan Hill in Santa Clara County. Good gem-quality opal occurs in the Black Mountains, some 25 miles north of Barstow in San Bernardino County. Fire opal has been recovered in Siskiyou County near Dunsmuir.

Kunzite, a beautiful lilac and violet gem mineral, is found and mined on the ridge east of Heriart Mountain in San Diego County. Gem-quality rhodonite, a rose-red semi-precious gem stone, has been found some three miles north of Lemon Cove in Tulare County, along the north fork of the Feather River, Butte County, and at Forest Hill, Placer County, as well as elsewhere in the State.

Garnet Hill, Calaveras County, is the source of some fine gem-grade garnets. Other garnet locations are Deep Canyon, Inyo County; Grub Gulch and Fort Miller, Fresno County; Coahuila, Riverside County and the semi-precious gem-mining district around Ramona, San Diego County. Excellent topaz also occurs in this last-named section.

Tourmaline crystals, prized the world over as gem stones because of their hardness, beauty and attractive bright colors—green, red, pink and so forth—are found on the southeast slope of Thomas Mountain, near Riverside in Riverside County and at Pala, San Diego County. Turquoise has been found near Manvel in San Bernardino County, and iridescent obsidian near Davis Creek in Modoc County.

**If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter enclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, P.O. Box 489, Elizabeth, N. J., will bring a prompt, authoritative, personal reply.**




**By Captain Philip B. Sharpe**

WHILE the bulk of this department's mail comes from our American and Canadian reader friends, we still get many interesting letters from all over the world—from other than our own scattered service men. People of many nations seem to love their guns.

One recent letter came from an officer in the British Merchant Marine, asking for information on a gun he picked up. It seems that he found an almost-new Model 1849 .44 Colt percussion Army revolver, complete in case with bullet mold, powder measure, cap holder, and other accessories. I think he wanted to gloat a little, and I didn't blame him. He said that he paid 10 shillings—about $2—for this rare prize. Incidentally that gun is legally an antique, now. According to international law, an item must be 100 years old to be classified as an antique. Such items are usually exempted from customs charges.

There is another interesting case to show to what ends a gunbug will go. Many long years ago, through this department, I "met" a French-Dutch Colonial army officer, stationed in Morocco. I remember that early letter which said, in part, "Some day I want to get a copy of your big book, *The Rifle In America.* I cannot order one because the law will not permit us to send money out of the country. It would do no good to ask anyone to send me one and 'trust' me to pay later—the law will not permit books to come into the country. But I am going to get one."

There followed many letters from this chap who had hunted big and small game all over the world, using almost every type of European and many American sporting arms. He told of a year spent long before the war, working with a German sporting ammunition firm, testing all kinds of hunting bullets in various cartridges against wild game and domestic animals, studying the wounding and killing power of these. If I could ever get him to write a book on the subject, it would furnish valuable information.

Also, at periodic intervals of a few months, came the usual letters telling me that he was still trying to get a copy of my book. Then came the 1947 revised edition. greatly enlarged. He heard about it from someone other than me, and almost

blew his top. "I've just *got* to have one," he wrote. "I'm working on a new idea."

In November, 1948, I received another letter from Eric—an air mail from a resort in southern France. He had finally obtained his book.

In his most recent letter, Eric writes: "Funny how backward the French are concerning firearms, especially rifles, when one realizes that nearly every other man has a shooting license. They were always thus. The Frenchman who wanted good guns bought them from the United Kingdom or Germany.

"I am greatly surprised to learn how game has dwindled here in southern France, compared to what I knew it to be some ten years ago. There is little war damage here, and there has been little hunting. The bigger game is about all gone.

"I am sorry to say that I disagree with you regarding the use of iron sights for hunting. The peep sight is all right, but there are many times when I have found the open leaf barrel sight to be better for certain hunting conditions. I have found that peep sights are a serious handicap in bad light."

(Here I disagree with friend Eric, but in this game, every man has his own opinion, and we do not object to the other fellow's ideas. So, as a matter of policy, we print them.)

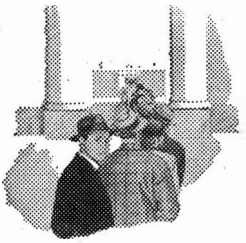
"In my extensive hunting experience," he continues, "I have found that 50 percent of the shots are in bad to very bad light, and the open barrel sight really performs. I designed my own."

Eric then made a sketch on the bottom of his letter—a gold bead front sight with a "U" notch rear, the notch being flanked either side at the top with a wide band of white. Beneath the notch was also a vertical band of white. Perhaps such a sight would work—I never tried it, but I did try some shooting on my range the other night with a Remington 721 with an ordinary notch. It would not begin to compare with one of my Springfields fitted with a Lyman peep, and I shot until darkness stopped me—a string every few moments. I could shoot the peep a half hour after I was unable even to locate the target with the open sight. Others have found this to be true, but it might work with that white idea—except against game on snow-covered woods.

Yes, we enjoy these letters from our friends, and when we find hunters in other lands, we enjoy swapping ideas with them. It's amazing to discover how many of them speak English, too.

I know hundreds of these boys throughout the world and I can assure you that the foreign gunbug is much like the American.

Address all letters concerning firearms to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Story, P.O. Box 489, Elizabeth, N. J. Be sure you print your name clearly and enclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.



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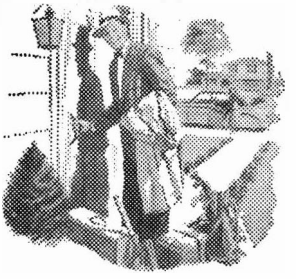
## AND THIS IS MIGHTY WONDERFUL



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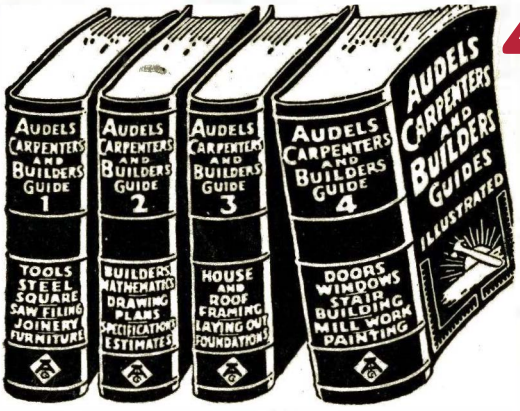


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