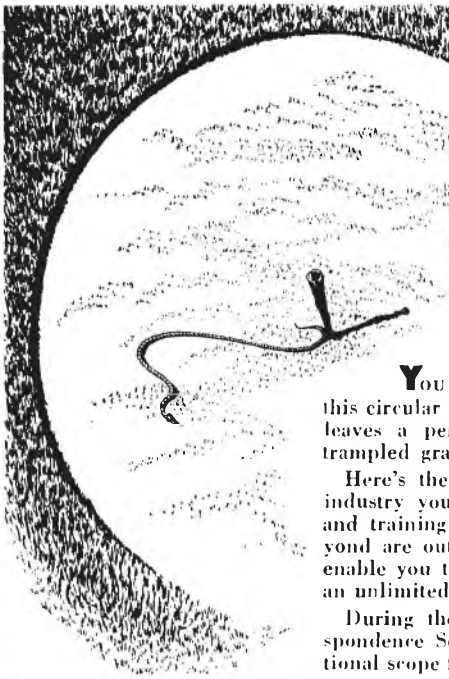
STREET AND SMITH'S
WESTERN STORY
JUNE 1948
25 CENTS

POWDERSMOKE PROMOTERS

A Preacher Devlin Novel

BY L. L. FOREMAN



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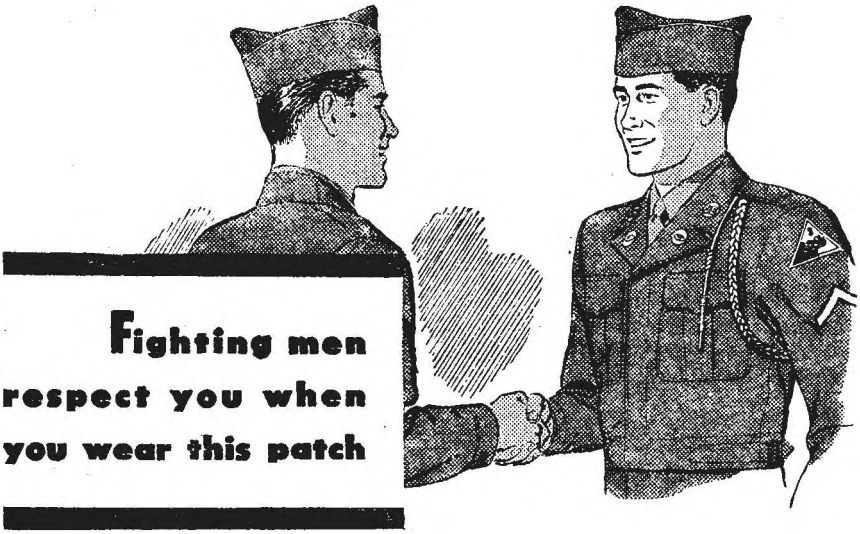

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Tally Branding *

LET'S GO FISHIN'

Jim Kjelgaard (Fishin' Fool, page 62), long a favorite with our readers for his outstanding animal stories, turns his versatile talents in a new direction in our pages this month. We sure hope you get as much of a bang out of Cousin Lightner as we did!

Kjelgaard, although born in New York City, was taken by his parents, at the age of three, to a farm in the mountains of Pennsylvania. "In the following twenty years," he informs us, "I learned to hunt, fish, trap, chew tobacco, cuss a little and, by some strange grace, managed to get a high school diploma.

"My earliest recollection was being kicked by a horse but history doesn't record whether or not I kicked back. Probably I didn't because I still have an aversion to getting within range of a horse's hoofs. Subsequent personal research on horses proves that they can: No. 1—Strike with their hoofs; No. 2—Bite with their mouths; No. 3—Transmit a stiff caboose to anyone who perches on their back for an extended length of time. However I still like 'em but I really go strong for good hound dogs.

"I've held down more jobs than I can remember, from ditch digging to teamster to factory worker, with nearly every other kind of work in between. But now I'm a full-time writer and wouldn't trade the job to be President of the United States. I'm married and we have a lovely daughter Karen and we make our home in Wisconsin which, to my mind, is a State!

"When I die I don't want to go to heaven but will be satisfied with some place where I can hear a trout jump and a deer snort. My ambitions are to write more stories, to shoot a kodiak bear and to catch a ten-pound brook trout."

With a partner like Cousin Lightner, Jim?

AH, SWEET MYSTERY . . .

"What's the matter with that man Brandon in New York City who wrote in Tally Branding (March issue) that he thinks Western Story is getting too romantic," inquires Hunter Cummins, of Portland, Oregon. "He claims he buys Western magazines for thrills. I don't pretend to know much about

** Reg. Trademark applied for.*

New York but hasn't Mr. Brandon ever heard of the 'thrill of romance'?"

HE LIKES OUR BRAND

"Due to being snowed in," writes Buzz Ferris, from a ranch near Salida, Colorado, "I missed the January issue of Western Story. Having nothing to read, I got to nosing around out in the bunkhouse to remedy the situation. After rearranging the dust several times I ran across a not-too-old issue of another brand of Western stories. After the first page or two I was thoroughly disgusted, disappointed and downright hard to live with.

"However I'm sure this off-brand magazine got off on the wrong foot by trying to describe a street scene in the early days—quote—'The board walk was lined with pedestrians. Near the doorway stood a cowboy in gray woolen shirt, a wide-brimmed Stetson and faded blue *overalls*.'

"Now I don't say that all cowboys gotta wear Levis but I always picture a farmer or a carpenter as wearing *overalls*. Perhaps I've been spoiled with the authenticity and realism that the authors of Western Story are so skilled at, but I know for sure that I'm gonna keep right on being spoiled.

"You can bet your Sunday boots that I sure didn't miss your February issue and as usual the stories were all tops. Walt Coburn's Tinhorn Rep was ace-high as far as I'm concerned and I also liked Thicker Than Water by Eli Colter. Western Story is just one downright good pack o' readin'."

TEXAS MEN

From Houston, Texas, Mr. V. E. Fincher sends us greetings and in his opinion Allan R. Bosworth's Texas Man, which was featured in our March issue, "was one of the best novels you've ever published—and I've been reading Western Story for a long time. I'm sure Bosworth must come from down here because only a Texan could write as he does about this section of the country and its people. I sure hope we'll see more of Bosworth's fine stories in the future."

You're right, Mr. Fincher, Bosworth was born and raised in The Lone Star State.

HOT IRON!

Harold F. King, of S. W. Canton, Ohio, is a Western fan who really goes to town. "I enjoy Western Story," he tells us, "because it's so far above the cheap dime-novel class. But what I particularly like is the W e s t M a B r &
department."

We're all having plenty fun with the What's In A Brand feature, and Reader King's iron is cherry red.

COMING NEXT MONTH ★ ★ ★

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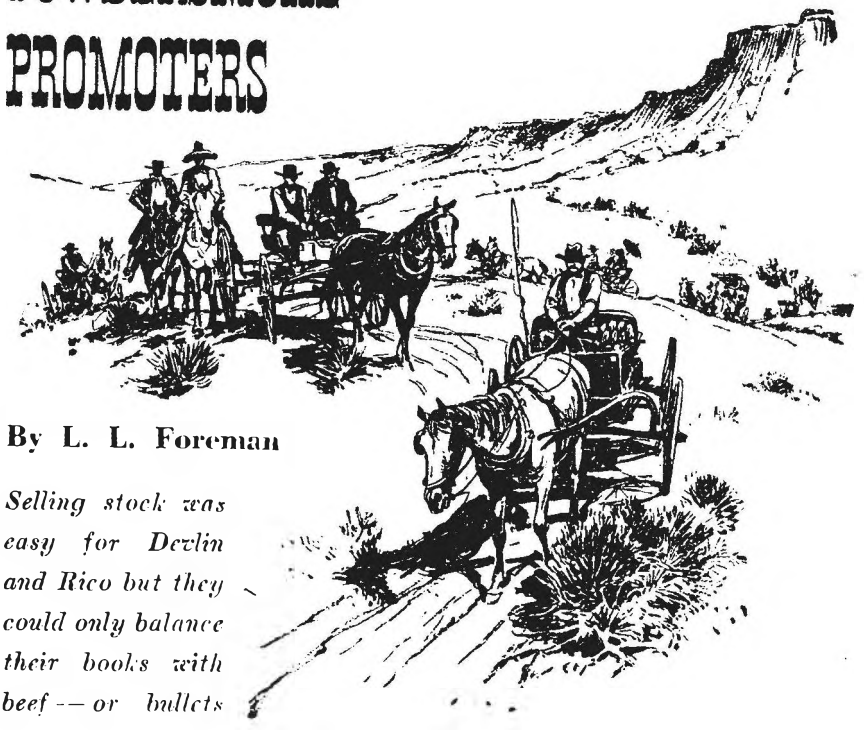


By L. L. Foreman

Selling stock was easy for Devlin and Rico but they could only balance their books with beef — or bullets

I

THE young fellow with the moodily preoccupied air, who said his name was Greg Sharan, told the two tough-looking strangers they were welcome to stay.

"I don't own the place, anyhow," he mentioned, "and nobody knows who does. Nobody's tried to throw me out yet."

He went over to the broken-out window and stood gazing glumly down at the valley town about a mile away. His expression was like that of a maverick bull that had missed roundup and was lonesomely wishing it hadn't.

"Make yourselves at home," he invited them cheerlessly.

Their appreciation was meager. The place wasn't much of a roost, just an abandoned shack, and they weren't feeling well. They had swallowed too much alkali dust, crossing the San Sebastian bowl. Why they had crossed the San Sebastian when there was a perfectly good road around it watched over by troops and lawmen, they didn't see fit to ex-

plain. Their mood was prickly, and each was inclined to blame the other for bringing bad luck.

It was the sight of the apple trees around the shack that had caused them to halt and drop in. On a desperate line of reason, starting with the fact that alkalied cattle could usually be cured with large doses of vinegar, they recalled dimly that vinegar was produced from apples. True, they weren't cattle. They weren't even cattlemen, strictly speaking. They could take cows or leave them alone, depending on the market and other factors. But, what the blazes, an antidote wasn't likely to be fussy about what kind of stomach it worked in.

They drank shudderingly a murky fluid that came from a dusty old crock of apple cider that had soured long ago. The stuff was the nearest thing to vinegar that Greg Sharan could supply, and it tasted like unpurified tartar with a dash of alum. As a remedy, it was worse than the ailment.

"Phew!" spat Don Ricardo de Risa. His stomach was a hardy organ, but his taste in liquids was not to be trifled with. He had lived high in his time.

"Ugh!" agreed Preacher Devlin, who also had lived through some high old times.

They sat glowering at the crock. Their fortunes were at a low ebb, accentuating their toughness. Devlin, tall and somber in his knee-length black coat and wide-brimmed flat hat, at first glance bore some resemblance to a grim archdeacon examining the paths of profligacy.

A second glance brought the distinct impression that he was examining them for his own benefit. His sun-darkened face had the saturnine humor of an ancient pagan god, the cold stare of his deep-set gray eyes was enough to freeze a hungry wolf on a moonlit night, and two heavy guns bulged under his ministerial coat. High-grade gambler and ace gun fighter, the Preacher left deep tracks where most men trod on tiptoe.

On the other hand, Don Ricardo de Risa—the Laughing One—indulged a strong fancy for elegance, and his sense of humor was cheerfully macabre and brightly immoral. Suave, volatile, as graceful and dangerous as a panther, he seldom gave much serious thought to the many rewards resting on his handsome head.

But now they sat glowering, veteran longriders weary and sore and alkalied, with humor for nothing and liking for nobody, least of all for each other. Devlin's black hat and coat were powdered gray with dust. Don Ricardo's rakish sombrero looked hard-worn and faded, and its brocaded curlycues sadly betrayed tarnished threads amongst the gold.

They were old *compañeros*, wanted in more places and for more reasons than they could remember, and their lives lay in the keeping of their wits and their trigger fingers.

Notorious, sharp on the scrap, seldom casting up accounts in advance of the deed, they privately and grudgingly acknowledged their need

of each other when it came to a tight pinch. But they were altogether too individualistic, too arrogantly independent, to keep from turning their dangerous talents against each other between-times. Between them lay a long record of rivalry—the gatherings of years of an intermittent partnership, and the hard-shelled harvest of an unspoken mutual respect.

"Hey, you," Devlin growled to Greg Sharan, "what's in that keg yonder? Water?"

"Huh?" Greg Sharan turned an abstracted attention from the town below. "No, that's a mixture I made up out of some applejack and hard cider and a gallon of rye. I called it Sharan's Shandy and I figured to sell it, but nobody ever stops by here. Too much competition. Town's full of saloons."

"You got two customers now!" said Devlin.

"I don't know if it's any good for what ails you."

"We'll let you know! Fill 'em up!"

An hour and four rounds later Devlin and Don Ricardo agreed that the shandy had considerable medicinal merit. Its flavor was unusual and its effects were mellowing. Under its curative balm a battered brotherly tolerance arose cautiously and memory blunted its thorns. After a while old grudges and unpaid scores became matters for a chuckle.

Devlin spread his long legs out relaxedly, found a broken cigar in his pocket, and chewed on it.

"What d'you reckon is bitin' our host, Rico?" he inquired affably of Don Ricardo.

The Don shrugged. He had slapped some of the dust from his high-peaked sombrero and now he wore it cocked at its customary jaunty angle. He was almost himself again, debonair and smiling, the sparkle of cool amusement ready to dance in his dark and mischief-loving eyes.

"Needs more medicine, perhaps?" he suggested. "Me *tambien!* You?"

"Sure."

Greg Sharan had stood the first round, joined them in it, and absently refilled his tin cup at every round thereafter. It didn't appear to uplift him much, though. He mooned at the window, hands in his pockets, replying in a wool-gathering way to the questions of Don Ricardo who had a habit of inquisitively exploring his surroundings.

"What's that thing?" the Don asked, pointing to a big iron contraption that looked like a cross between a rock crusher and a guillotine. Not waiting for a reply, he walked to it and pushed a long hand lever. The lever was under the tension of a strong steel spring, and when he let it go, it snapped back into place again, smacking him neatly in the chin.

"Huh? That?" Greg glanced around surprisedly at the Don sitting on the floor holding his jaw. "Why, it's one of those old-fashioned printing presses that you work by hand. Somebody had a printing shop here once, I guess. I printed up some

bills on it for my shandy, but nobody took any notice. I been a kind of jackleg printer, among other things. . . . Say, what's wrong with him?"

"Victim o' the machine age," said Devlin. "Give him another shot o' medicine!"

They revived the Don. To dissuade him from shooting the machine, Greg Sharan spoke of his troubles.

"I'm broke," he said. "Seven years ago my dad went drought-busted and died, leaving me the biggest and poorest so-called cattle ranch in the Soldier River country. I pulled out. Seven years it took me to raise a cash stake so's I could go back. I turned my hand to just about everything. I caught on quick. Sometimes I think I'm maybe a kind of genius." He returned to the window and stared out.

"You're a genius an' broke," Devlin remarked. "Well, I guess that's possible. What busted you? Sit down, Rico."

"A girl," sighed their host, and the Don sat down and showed interest. "Her name," Greg said dreamily, "is Wrenetta Yardley. She's the kind you dream about. She's beautiful. She's a crook."

"That's possible, too!" observed Devlin, a hint of reminiscence in his cynical eyes. "She skin you, eh?"

"She sure did! She and her pals —her uncle, Flash Yardley, and Keve Maunsell and the others. Yeah. Heard of 'em?"

"Sure." Devlin and the Don nodded. "Know 'em. Never met the girl, but Flash is a good man. Keve Maunsell . . . well, not so good, maybe, but smart. How'd they take you? Cards?"

Greg flushed. "Cows," he confessed. "Everybody's gone loco over cattle nowadays. Price is up to forty at railhead and still rising. It's a boom, account of the railroad coming through. You can sell a certified tally book down there in that town, without showing a calf. I bought on tally. Yeah. From Flash Yardley and Keve Maunsell. Y'see, she—Wrenetta—just looked at me, and that did it! I reached for my wad."

"And where," queried the Don, "are the cows you bought?"

Greg took a pull from his tin cup. "They're all over the Indian Nations, far's anybody knows! Last seen, old Chief Querlo and his braves were stampeding 'em away from a trail outfit. I didn't know about that till after I paid cash on the line for the tally book. See, there she was—Wrenetta—looking at me with those beautiful eyes. And me looking at her. And—"

"Say no more," cut in the Don. "She is a cheat, preying on the unwary traveler! She is nothing but a—"

"You can't talk like that about Wrenetta!" Greg flared, banging his emptied cup down. "Who the devil are you? Dammit, she can have my scalp and hide if she wants!"

"*Mil santos!*" murmured the Don. And Devlin grunted, "A loco loon if I ever met one!"

They talked it over while punishing the shandy keg some more. This

Greg Sharan appeared reasonably sane, but on the subject of Wrenetta he was a lunatic.

"I would like to see her," finally announced the Don, tipping his sombrero farther over his ear. "Let us go to town, Preacher, amigo!"

Devlin, who had chewed his cigar to the finish and couldn't find another, was agreeable. Greg immediately went out and saddled a half-broken dun gelding with Satan's stripe down its back. The Don threw the saddle on his splendid palomino, and Devlin laid the furniture on his powerful big black brute.

"Let's go see the gal!"

II

The town was in the full swing of the increasing cattle boom. Prices were rising with every shipment. The maddest predictions of future prosperity were being accepted as gospel. The grass range of the West, they said, was inexhaustible. There was feverish buying and speculation in land, and money was coming from big Eastern syndicates hungry to share in a feast of huge profits. The beef bonanza was the game of the day.

The coming of the railroad, the swarm of homestead-seeking emigrants, the beef issue for the reservation Indians, all contributed to the soaring price of cows. The buffalo was vanquished. The steer was king.

Investors and speculators, wealthy plungers and poverty-ridden emigrants, were buying shares in ranches they had never seen. Everybody was being caught by the golden mirage. All you needed, they said, was a bunch of cows and you could sit back and watch yourself grow rich. You needed grassland, so you bought a few thousand acres somewhere—anywhere—and turned the cows loose on it. It was a grand gamble. Everybody won and nobody lost. Buy at ten and sell at twenty. Up, up, up . . .

The town reflected the prevailing spirit. It was wide open, ready to accommodate anybody's choice of fun, frolic or fight. The customer could buy stock in an unknown ranch, trade it off for unseen cows, lose the cows in a poker game, and get shot for questioning the deal, all in one evening's entertainment. Few knew the sheriff's name, and nobody cared.

"Nice town, Rico!" Devlin commented approvingly, riding down the main street.

"It seems promising, amigo!" returned the Don.

Their tastes ran to a fast tempo and swift winnings. In such matters they understood each other. This town was a bigger and better duplicate of others that had preceded it. Wherever the railroad paused for a breather in its track-laying race toward the land of cattle, there a town sprang up overnight. This one was the latest of the string.

It was full of money, crowded with speculators, syndicate agents, cattle dealers, promoters, railroaders, men on the dodge, and wide-eyed emigrants looking for Utopia. Down at the loading chutes beef buyers were bidding against one another while

the herd owners stood around puffing gift cigars and looking smug.

"There's the Yardley-Maunsell office," Greg Sharan remarked, motioning toward a window bearing the painted sign, Cornucopia Land & Cattle Company. "But generally the mob hangs out here in the Burliegh House," he added, leading the way into an establishment that must have been built by somebody who had once seen a picture of a royal hunting lodge. It had enormous beams and stained-glass windows.

Inside, the atmosphere was one of peace and prosperity. A head houseman on a high chair kept a watchful eye over the games, and white-aproned barmen hustled quietly about with trays of drinks. The high-stake character of the games was indicated by the general absence of noise. Most of the players wore the studious expressions of men engaged in a solemn rite, handling their cards and chips carefully and few of them speaking an unnecessary word.

Greg motioned toward the biggest table, where a private game was in progress, graced by the highly attractive presence of the only girl in the place. The girl was keeping bank for the game, an occupation allowing her plenty of time to exchange smiles with two or three of the players who were foolishly paying more attention to her than to their cards.

She was all that Greg had intimated she was, and more. She was as gorgeous a come-on for a deadfall game as any man could wish for and not get. Yet there was no hard glitter about her, but rather a look of gay young humor and a clean freshness.

Devlin nodded. He had never seen Flash Yardley's niece before, but he had met Flash over the gambling tables here and there, and knew him for a laughing kind of man, a good loser. A different proposition was Keve Maunsell—a gaunt, pale-faced shark whose clothes never seemed to fit his angular frame, and whose dull black eyes contained a sneering secretiveness.

Devlin looked for the usual half-dozen gun guards and cappers whom Keve Maunsell was known to take along with him wherever he operated, and located them at a nearby table. They were playing penny ante to pass the time.

Flash Yardley, an old-young sort of man with graying hair and an unlined face, glanced up and recognized the tall, notorious Preacher.

"Hiya, Devlin," he called quietly. "Care to sit in?"

The invitation was surprising. Flash Yardley and Maunsell had caught a couple of well-feathered pigeons, that was plain. It was against all reason for Flash to ask a casual acquaintance to help himself to a share of the plucking. At the next table Maunsell's bodyguards went motionless, then turned slowly and looked at Devlin. Maunsell narrowed his stare at his cards and said nothing.

"Don't mind if I do," Devlin answered, and pulled up a chair. With the last of his cash he bought a short stack of chips from Wrenetta Yard-

ley. He won the first pot on three kings, on Flash Yardley's deal, and knew for certain then that Flash was for some reason out to do him favors. Cool cynicism wanted to know why.

Within five minutes he knew also that matters were not as they appeared on the surface. Flash Yardley's smile was forced and his eyes showed some worry. Maunsell didn't speak to him, but once he sent him a look. He did it after gazing for a moment at Wrenetta, and it was a look of cold purpose. Something was wrong in the Yardley-Maunsell camp.

Maunsell raised his head and gazed past Yardley. Devlin, with his habit of regard for signs and portents, followed the direction of the dull black eyes and studied briefly a group of men at the bar.

He checked them off as tinhorns of the common run, short sports, bunco steerers and two-bit badmen prowling hungrily around the fringe of big money. One of them, catching Maunsell's look, returned an almost imperceptible nod and detached himself from the group. He was lanky and he affected a swagger as he came over toward the table. The others put on a show of elaborate unconcern.

Some kind of play was building up, with Maunsell pulling the strings and Flash Yardley as the probable target. Devlin scanned his cards. The hell with it. As long as it didn't involve him he was willing to live and let live. He was sitting in for poker, not powdersmoke.

After that alkali trek across the San Sebastian, he was in a mood to side-step anything that didn't resemble pleasure and profit, and he guessed Rico felt the same way. Rico was at the bar, taking on refreshment and looking everything over, well behaved and about time too.

The San Sebastian trek had become necessary soon after Rico took a deep dislike to a tall beaver hat, back in Colson City, and shot a hole through it. He also disliked the wearer, an important-mannered personage in a frock coat who passed a rash comment upon la-de-da Mexican dudes who failed to make way for his surrey.

Not content with shooting the beaver, Rico shot up the surrey and stampeded the team. Unfortunately, the gentleman turned out to be as important as he looked. He was Straight Rube Spink, powerful boss politician, who could call up more law than showed on the books and promptly proceeded to do so.

The lanky tinhorn bumped Flash Yardley's chair, swaggered on to the end of the table, and with an oddly deliberate gesture ran his fingers through Wrenetta's hair.

"Hello, kid!" he drawled, watching Flash alertly. "What's it cost to dance with you?"

His play was simple. So was he. Like many a better man, he made the mistake of underestimating the strength of a woman. He should have kept his eye on Wrenetta first, Greg second, and Flash third, because it was in that order that they opened hostilities.

Wrenetta rose swiftly and hit him with her open hand. Greg uttered a grunt of outrage and landed a smashing blow on his jaw, and Flash came darting around the table to get at him. The surprised tinhorn hurtled backward over another table and stood on his head in a shower of cards, chips and glasses. The players there jumped up, fighting mad over the wreck of their game.

The bunch of tinhorns quit the bar and advanced in a rush, and the downy ducks dived for cover. Bouncers and barmen came running. Maunsell's squad of bodyguards sprang up and struck at everybody within reach, and noisy riot and confusion exploded the quiet peace of the Burliegh House.

It was a Maunsell bodyguard who fired the first shot. He wore no gun in sight, but he rammed his right hand into his coat pocket, sent a disgusted glance at the knocked-out tinhorn, and then looked inquiringly at Keve Maunsell.

Getting the nod, he pulled a pistol from his pocket, fired it twice at Flash Yardley, and swung it around to send a shot at Greg. He cut it back again, though, fast, as Devlin kicked back his chair and reared up.

Devlin's hands swept under his black broadcloth coat and out again, and the pair of heavy guns that he flipped up roared together. While the pocket pistol drooped and its owner twisted and fell, Don Ricardo at the bar sang out mockingly:

"Amigo, must you always be stirring up trouble?"

The Don had plucked his guns from their silver-studded holsters and eared the hammers back. Casually, he tripped the hammers, and through the twin bursts of blue smoke his white-toothed smile and dancing eyes invited anybody to return the compliment. The Don was always at his coolest when violence erupted around him.

Among the charging band of tinhorns, one rocked aside, dropping a ring-trigger derringer and gripping his forearm. The rest halted as abruptly as runaway ponies at a barbwire fence. The head houseman, who had reached under his armpit, blinked gravely at a bullet-broken rung of his high chair, folded his hands, and sat still.

The flare-up subsided to a sullen smolder, Devlin and the Don holding their guns poised ready to oblige any prospective takers. Flash Yardley lay dead on the floor, Wrenetta kneeling beside him, and suddenly that became the focus of all attention. The girl rose and went steadily to the end of the long table.

"Game's over," she said hushedly. "Cash your chips, please, gentlemen!"

In silence she balanced the bank and paid off. Then she looked at Keve Maunsell. "You ran that play on him, Keve. He guessed it was coming. He was worried, not for himself, but for me. It was Tascosa Carl—one of your men—who shot him. I saw it!"

"Tascosa's dead, too," Maunsell said woodenly, staring at her. "Shot by Devlin. You can't blame me if

Tascosa got rattled and went on the scrap all of a sudden. He simply fired wild and—"

"Liar!" Wrenetta called him quietly.

He continued staring at her. His hunger for her grew naked in his eyes. His pale, gaunt face was like that of a man possessed and driven by a gnawing obsession he could not control.

"I'll not pretend I'm sorry Flash is dead. He never trusted me, never left me alone with you. He . . ." His voice husked and broke off. When he opened his lips again his teeth were clamped tight. "Don't try to quit the bunch, you hear? Don't try it!"

She turned away as if he weren't speaking. She looked at Greg, at Devlin, at Don Ricardo. "Will you help me to"—she looked down at Flash Yardley's body—"do the things that have to be done?"

"Glad to," Greg responded fervently, and Don Ricardo bowed to the girl and gallantly took her arm. The Don appeared almost excited, and mightily pleased and impressed with his prospects.

Devlin scowled, detecting a bad sign. He would have much preferred a continuation of poker. Any girl possessing the startling beauty of this one was bound to be a source of trouble. Already, dammit, Rico was prancing into his grand caballero act, and Greg Sharan was mooning along in a state of dizzy hypnosis. Already those two were trading glances of dark distrust.

Preacher Devlin

III

It was dark by the time they got through at the funeral parlor. True to his claim that he had turned his hand to everything, Greg displayed sufficient inside knowledge of the undertaking business to cause the proprietor to cut the bill in half.

From there they accompanied Wrenetta over to the Yardley-Maunsell office to gather the dead man's effects.

It didn't take the girl long to do the task, after she lighted the lamps. For a sure-thing gambler, Flash Yardley had left little to show for a precarious life.

"He never saved anything," Wrenetta explained simply. "Flash was a highbinder, but he was always a reckless spender, too generous for his own good. He was the only kin I had left, and he took good care of me. He watched over me like a father. That's why Keve Maunsell pushed that fight on him and got him killed. I'll try to get my things out of the hotel tonight, and catch the

first train leaving. It won't be easy. Maunsell will follow me."

"Wish I could help more," Greg said. "If only I had some cash . . ." He stopped, embarrassed.

She smiled ruefully. "I'm sorry we sold you that tally book. Flash bet his share of your money on a cut of the cards, and lost it to Maunsell. Oh, well, it's all in the game." It was strange to hear this girl, young, soft-lipped, with a kind of high-hearted innocence about her, using gambling terms and easygoing philosophy.

"Better not help me too much—it's dangerous," she said. "Maunsell wouldn't like it."

Devlin slanted a searching glance at her. It was possible that she was voicing a subtle dare. He looked to see if Don Ricardo was rising to the bait, but the Don was thumbing through some sheets of parchment paper, and Devlin queried, "What you found there, Rico?"

The Don held up one of the sheets. It was printed in fine and fancy lettering and gold scrolls. "There's a whole stack of them here. Are they worth anything? They feel like money!"

"They're new stock certificates," Greg judged, and Wrenetta nodded. "Blanks. No good until they're signed and sealed and filled in with the name of the company—and sometimes not much good then! Maunsell must be figuring to sell stock in his so-called Cornucopia Company."

"That's right," Wrenetta confirmed. "But the deal is being held up until it gets the approval of a man named Spink—Straight Rube, as he's called. He's a big politico. No doubt you've heard of him?"

"No doubt!" grunted Devlin, examining the pretty print. He caught the creak of a loose plank outside on the boardwalk, and cocked an eye at Don Ricardo. The Don, however, having found that the parchment sheets didn't represent money, was giving ear and eye to the girl.

Wrenetta was saying now, "If Maunsell can't stop me from boarding the train, he'll get on and follow me. I'll be expecting it, and I'll look for a chance to play the same trick on him that he played on Flash. He's a killer, so the man I pick to push a fight on him will have to be good. I don't know," she added deliberately, "of any man in this town that good."

It worked. Greg opened his mouth to speak, but Don Ricardo beat him to it. Bowing deeply, the Don swept off his sombrero and the final wind-up of its flourish found it cupped over Greg's face and blocking his speech.

"I, señorita—Don Ricardo Candido Fernandez de Risa y Lágrimas del Corazón—am a good man!" he intoned, and practically on the instant he got a first-class chance to show what he meant.

There was an inch or two of space between the bottom edge of the canvas window curtain and the sill, and it was in that shaded strip of glass that Devlin glimpsed the twin muz-

zles of a double-barreled shotgun gliding carefully in line with him. He uttered a grunt, and his jump took him over the desk into the stock certificates. He chopped a shot back over the desk, ducked low around it, and put a frayed groove in the wooden sill with his next bullet.

The shotgun blared both charges, the riddled curtain flapped wildly, and buckshot and flying glass sprayed the room. "Watch it!" Devlin barked. "More of 'em out there! Put those lamps out. Rico, if you can reach 'em!"

"Leave them on!" sang out the Don grandly. "Would I crouch in the dark from such scummy assassins?" As a matter of fact, he would, and often had done so when good sense prevailed. At present, however, he was full of gallantry, plus Sharan's Shandy and some Burliegh House bourbon.

Standing dashingly erect, he blazed two shots from his bone-handled guns, and, outdoing Horatio at the bridge, bowed politely to a lady before charging at the enemy.

"If you will excuse me," he murmured to Wrenetta, and took a running dive through the window, carrying the remains of the curtain with him.

It was too bad that the curtain wrapped itself around his head, momentarily ruining his aim and sense of direction. Even so, the sheer unreasonableness of the madcap act upset the nerves and calculations of those outside. When Devlin, swearing at such damn-fool heroics, leaped out after him, the Don was bouncing around and shooting blindly in all directions like a jumping firecracker, while four or five men who had been crouched cannily under the window were scattering bewilderedly out of the way.

"Make for the livery, you locoed Lothario!" Devlin snapped, and slung a shot at the Burliegh House where a man knelt in the shadows with a rifle. The crowded town sounded as if it were bursting apart, and it wasn't possible to distinguish who was on what side of which fence.

Greg and Wrenetta came racing together from the office, he with his single-action .41 out, she with a loaded pistol she'd found among Flash Yardley's things. Don Ricardo, ridding himself of his wrapping, sprang like a ballet dancer to the girl's side and offered his arm.

"Allow me!" he begged.

Devlin, heading for the livery, knew then that trouble was really cropping up. When Rico started cutting his very best caballero capers for a girl, hell sat up and took notice and the devil rubbed his hands. He was a love-cracked lobo on the high lope.

The prospect of hard cash in the offing was a pretty sure cure for what ailed Rico. Devlin held an arm against the stock certificates that he had thrust under his coat. He figured there might be ways of turning them into cash, big cash. Maybe it wouldn't cure Rico, he mused—but it sure would remedy and nourish his own lean pockets!

IV

They sat after dawn around the rickety table in Greg's roost, looking at the stock certificates. Their horses cropped grass in the abandoned apple orchard, and Wrenetta was cooking breakfast.

"If we've got to turn guardian angels for an uncleless girl," Devlin remarked, "we might's well make it worthwhile."

Greg and the Don, thinking it already worthwhile, sent looks at Wrenetta, caught each other at it, and their faces stiffened.

"How would we do it with this rubbish?" asked the Don, whose knowledge of business was limited to its most direct forms.

Devlin stuck a thumb at Greg. "Let him tell us. He knows everything, he says."

Greg coughed modestly. "Not everything. Still, I do *sabe* this stock thing. So do you, don't you, Wren?"

Devlin quirked a dark eyebrow. So now it was Wren. Not Wrenetta. Wren, for gossake, and she a bird of paradise if he ever saw one.

"Okay," he called to her. "Come here an' sit down . . . uh . . . Wren! H'm! How 'bout it?"

"Well," she said, "let's say you own the makings of a business—a ranch, anything. You need money to get it going, so you call it a company and sell stock in it. With the money you start the business and split its profits with the stockholders. That is, you're supposed to use the money for the business. It doesn't always happen!"

"And," Greg put in, "if there's a boom in that business—like the cattle business nowadays—then the value of the stock is likely to go up. In that case you could sell the stock you've kept for yourself, and walk out with big profits."

"Ah!" breathed the Don, giving Devlin a knowing nod. "Amigo, it is you who are the genius!"

"You catch on quick, Rico," Devlin repaid the compliment. "What've we got to lose, huh? We'll call it . . . h'm . . . the Caballero Land & Cattle Company!"

"Hey, what are you hombres talking about?" broke in Greg. "We haven't got anything to start a company with!"

"The hell we haven't!" Devlin drawled. "How 'bout all that ranchland you own down in the Soldier River country?"

"It's been droughted out for years!"

"Oh, well, maybe it'll rain there one o' these fine days. How 'bout all those cows you bought on tally?"

"Scattered all over the Indian Nations!"

"The Indians didn't get the tally book! All right, so we got title to land an' cattle." Devlin leaned back and bit on a fresh cigar. "Town's crawlin' with rich Eastern speculators achin' to grab all the country an' cows in sight. It's high time somebody taught 'em not to come out here an' rob us poor natives!"

Wren laughed. "And I thought

Flash was fast company! When do we start?"

Devlin regarded her with rather more tolerance. "Right away, or soon's Greg gets on that printing press an' puts our official handle on these stock blanks. Your job is to help pull the suc . . .ahem . . . customers in! We'll use Sharan's Shandy to put 'em in a buying frame o' mind! Rico, how are you at sellin' stock?"

"I have sold stock by the herd!" declared the Don.

"This is a slightly different kind o' stock," Devlin said, "but anyhow you're elected head salesman!"

The town had witnessed some fast and fancy promoting, but nothing like the promotion of the Caballero Land & Cattle Co. It incorporated the features of a stock exchange and an election-day frolic with the best qualities of a medicine show.

Greg, who maintained they had to have what he called a prospectus, made up one that was a beaut. On a huge showcard he drew a map of his old ranch, and pinned to it the title deed to prove the company really had the goods. Under it he hung the tally book for all to peruse. He then had another inspiration.

"Let's cut the land up in tracts on the map," he said, "and everybody buying a share of stock owns a tract, see? It ought to make a hit. I'll number the stock and the tracts, see?"

"How much do we sell the stock for?" Devlin asked.

"Oh, about twenty-five dollars, I figure, would be . . ."

"Too cheap! Make it a hundred. That's a nice round sum."

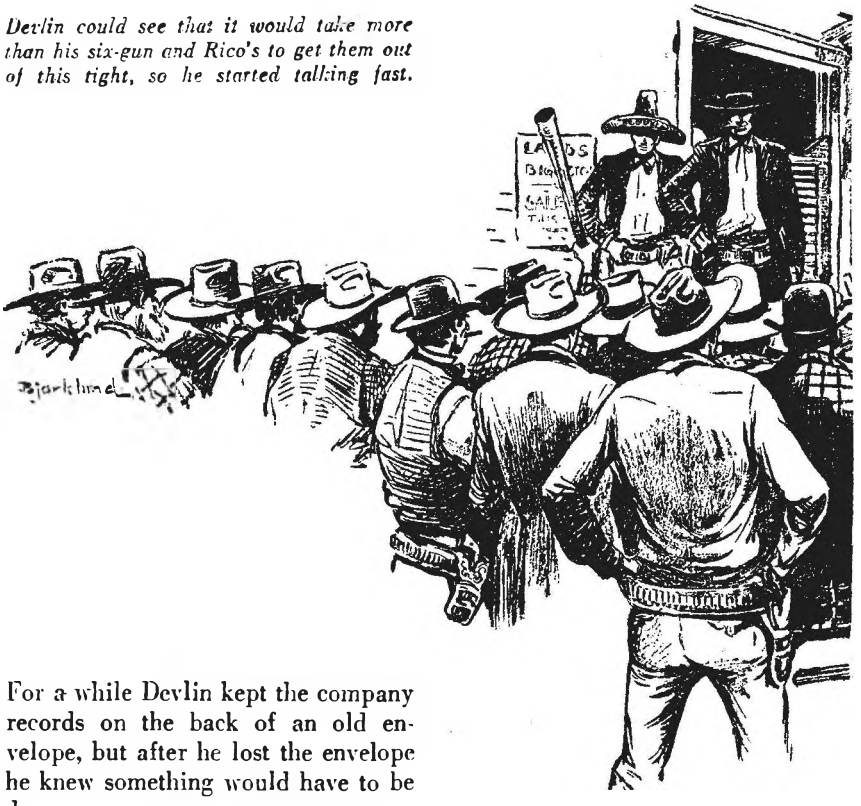
They loaded the mammoth prospectus showcard on a wagon, along with the stock certificates and the keg of alleged shandy, and drove to town.

Devlin and Greg went into the Burliegh House to see if anybody knew of an office to rent. When they came out there was a crowd around the wagon. Wren was graciously passing out free shandy, while Don Ricardo was selling ten shares of stock to a Scotsman who wanted to teach Wren the Highland fling. The Don, who wanted to teach her the *varsoviana* some time soon, dissuaded the burred enthusiast and accepted his check.

"The hell with an office!" commented Devlin. "They're doin' okay!"

But as time passed and the keg went dry, an office of some kind became necessary to the conduct of business and the comfort of the powdersmoke promoters. Newly arrived speculators, some of them sporting spats and derbies, appeared to consider it less than dignified to buy stock at a wagon. They mellowed under the shandy and signed their checks for shares, but when they sobered they looked the other way.

Don Ricardo wanted to split the cash as it came in. He was bitter when Devlin and the others outvoted him, and the checks were deposited in the bank to the company's credit.



Devlin could see that it would take more than his six-gun and Rico's to get them out of this tight, so he started talking fast.

For a while Devlin kept the company records on the back of an old envelope, but after he lost the envelope he knew something would have to be done.

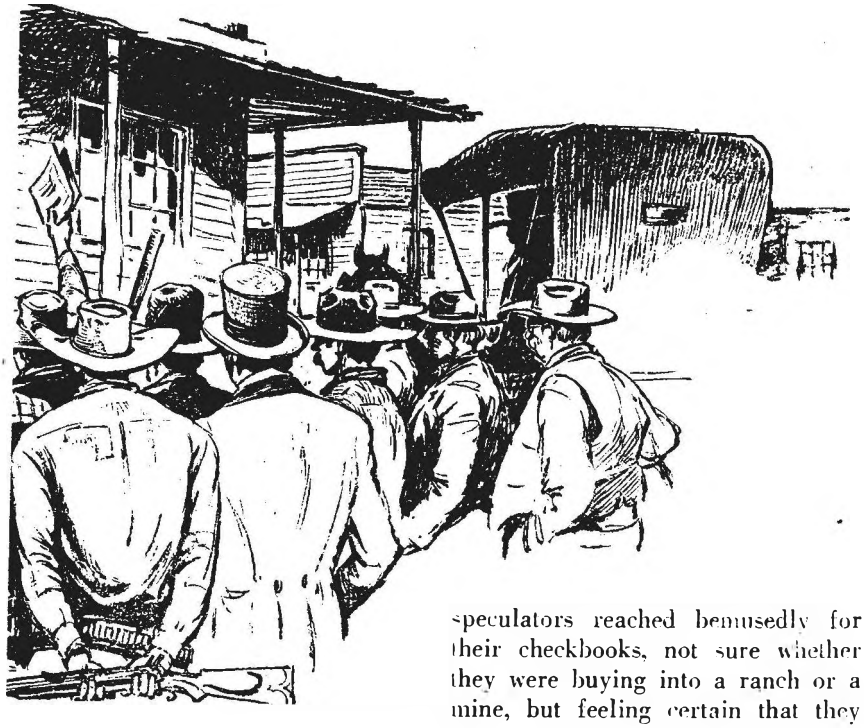
In the end they hired the Burliegh House, moved in off the street, hung the prospectus up over the bar, and threw the bar wide open. Business boomed, the stock certificates ran out, and Greg was kept busy printing new ones.

As a salesman, the Don developed amazing ability, imagination and initiative. He was out to make a big hit with Wren and prove to her that he was a good man in more ways than one. To the prospective purchasers he gave glowing descriptions of the golden opportunity he was offering them.

According to him, the Caballero Company owned the finest range, the sweetest water, and the most contented cows in the country. There was a splendid trail, he declared, between it and the railroad, a boulevard that you could travel over in a carriage without a bump.

"My gosh!" Greg whispered to Devlin. "It's a washed-out old cow track! He's the worst liar unhung!"

"The best!" corrected Devlin,



pouring himself some fine old imported. "An' the best is none too good for us! Get back to your printin'—we're runnin' low in stock!"

For extra inducement, the Don hinted that rich gold deposits lay waiting for the lucky discoverers on some of the land tracts. He couldn't say definitely which tracts—it wouldn't be playing fair—but if a man was fortunate and had lived right, all he had to do was buy Caballero stock and wake up a millionaire.

No other company promoters could match that one. They hadn't thought of it. The stock-buying speculators reached bemusedly for their checkbooks, not sure whether they were buying into a ranch or a mine, but feeling certain that they were in on a very good thing. Caballero stock began rising, its value increasing as the Don thought up new selling points every day, and the Burliegh House became the busiest spot in town.

And then the bubble burst.

V

Maunsell had come into the Burliegh House only once during its occupancy by the Caballero Company. He entered with a railroad surveyor by the name of Wadsworth, who had got fired for going on a binge while on duty and had been hanging out in the Burliegh for several days, trying to talk himself

up a job. They scanned the map above the bar, and Wadsworth muttered something to Maunsell.

Devlin saw Wren catch Don Ricardo's eye and flick a glance to the pair. That girl, Devlin decided, was sure out to fix Maunsell one way or another.

The Don smiled thinly, sauntering forward. But Maunsell, after a stony stare at Wren, turned quickly and paced out with the surveyor. The sale of stock took on a fast spurt the rest of the day, but the next day it fell off, and by evening a strange caution gripped the free-drinking customers at the bar.

"Perhaps," pensively murmured the Don to Devlin, "it is time we moved on, eh?"

Late that night Wren bestowed her dazzling smile on the last departing guest, a young man with whom she had been sitting at a table, talking. Greg was half asleep, and Devlin and the Don were having a final drink at the bar. Wren's gorgeous eyes played over them, lingering last and longest on Greg.

"Well, fellows," she announced, "it's been a high old whirl, but here's where we get off the merry-go-round! That boy is a telegraph operator down at the station, and he gave me some confidential information. Seems an important message has come through for Maunsell—from Straight Rube Spink!"

Greg came awake, and Don Ricardo spilled his drink. Devlin bit clean through his chewed cigar.

Wren chuckled. "My, you look guilty! Straight Rube is coming here with a squad of special deputies, to investigate the affairs of the Caballero Company! Federal officers have been notified to watch all roads out and be on the lookout for the head men—two of them well known by name, description and reputation! Maunsell must have got in touch with Rube and put a bee in his beaver, because Rube's message tells him to do what he can to tie things up here until he arrives. What are you going to do?"

"We move!" stated the Don positively. "At once! Perhaps if we cut across fast to . . ." He paused. A look of acute pain came into his handsome, daredevil face. "*Mil santos*—the money! It is in the bank, and the bank is closed until tomorrow! I knew it was a mistake to bank that money! I knew it! I said so!" He glared angrily at Devlin.

"Don't bog your head!" Devlin flung at him. "We pull out tomorrow after the bank opens!"

"That's about what I thought," Wren said. Her voice held a cool and scornful note that made them look at her. "You'll pull out! And what do I do?"

"You'll come along," Greg and the Don said together, and turned and eyed each other.

She shook her head. "No, I'll look around for a good man who'll do me the favor to break Keve Maunsell!" she said, and Greg flushed, while the Don jerked as if stung by the lash of a quirt. She stretched her slim white arms, smothered a tired yawn with the back of her hand,

and looked like a little girl who had lost all her faith in Santa Claus. "I'm going to bed. G'night!"

In silence, when she was gone, they leaned against the bar. The emptiness of the place became suddenly oppressive. At last Greg said broodingly, speaking aloud a thought to himself, "I've never been a fast hand with a gun, but I can use one. She's afraid of Maunsell. He haunts her. I guess she can't feel safe while he lives. I'll try to down him before I leave. Then she'll feel safe, and she'll leave with me."

Don Ricardo swung his face slowly around. "How much you take for granted, my friend! She meant those words for me! It is I who will attend to Maunsell! She will leave with me!"

"She won't—I'll bet my life on it!" Greg retorted, and that was a mistake.

"So? Bet your life, eh?" The Don's tone and manner were courteous. A wicked amusement brightened his eyes. "*Bueno!* Permit me to call your bet!" He took a step away from the bar, struck a match, and held it before him between his two forefingers. "Make your draw while the flame lasts, because I shall make mine when my fingers become uncomfortable! *Sabe?* The best man—the one who lives—wins a shot at Maunsell and takes the girl! Ready? Let me suggest that you—"

"You'll get your fingers burned, Rico!" Devlin's harsh voice rasped dryly across the pleasant little speech, and the Don grew very still.

The match burned on. Devlin said, "Want to count me in, Rico, an' make it a three-handed game?" His position was behind the Don and he didn't change it.

Unhurriedly, the Don blew the match out, broke it, and dropped the pieces. He turned then and looked at Devlin, and all the amusement drained out of his dark eyes. The big gunfighter stood relaxed, chewing on his cigar, his right elbow resting on the bar. The Don studied the left arm, critically and coldly, taking note of how the hand rested on the hip, thrusting wide open the black, ministerial coat and allowing a generous sight of the heavy shell-studded gunbelts beneath.

"I did not realize," said the Don softly, "that you were in on this particular game." He threw a glance toward the stairs up which Wren had departed to her room. "But perhaps it was to be expected. After all, she is a prize, yes?"

Devlin said nothing. His deep-set eyes, blank and frozen, were fixed steadily on the Don. He waited for the Don's silky cloak of civility to split, and finally it did. The Don said abruptly, his voice crackling like crushed tinfoil, "We know where we stand! Tomorrow we share the money and split up! And the best one of us shoots it out with Maunsell and takes the girl—and perhaps the money too, who knows!"

They swung sharply around, all three, at a noise in front, and stared forbiddingly at two New England gentlemen who had come West to double their fortunes and begun by

Don Rico

buying Caballero stock. The two stockholders, entering the door, changed their minds and backed out.

"I wonder how much they heard?" Devlin muttered, locking the door. "You're a gabby so-and-so, Rico!"

Rico wasn't so gabby in the morning. For a while he was speechless. He came pacing into the Burliegh House, stiff-legged as a rabid bull terrier, his face white with fury. The polished bone handles of his guns bobbed and swayed at his thighs, and his hands brushed them as he walked up to the bar.

It was pretty early for a bracer, but he took on three in rapid order and slammed the glass down so hard on the bar it broke. "I have just come from the bank!" he grated.

Devlin grinned faintly. "Thought you'd pull a fast one, Rico? But you found out you can't draw a dime without all our signatures. Too bad!"

"Signatures, hell!" Don Ricardo spoke through his teeth. "Listen, my brilliant friend! Maunsell and a crowd of our stockholders called on the bank manager early this morning. On their demand the bank has tied up our account! None of us can draw a dime!"

"Gee-hollikens!" said Wren, coming downstairs. "That happened to poor Flash once, and he never did get his money!"

Devlin turned wordlessly to the bar and fortified himself. He cast a glance of somber distaste at Greg, who, conjuring up an obnoxious bit of philosophy, remarked that money wasn't everything. He only looked away when Don Ricardo slapped the rest of the unsold stock and the company ledger down on the bar before him.

"Yours!" snarled the Don. "All yours, and welcome! I go!" He stalked to the front door, yanked it open, and stopped. Slowly, he shut it again and came back, and thoughtfully he gazed at Devlin. "Do you feel lucky?" he queried.

"Go to blazes!" Devlin growled.

"Neither do I," sighed the Don. "But take a look outside!"

Devlin looked. At least a hundred armed men stood openly waiting out front, Keve Maunsell and his crew among them. Many of them could be recognized as stockholders in the Caballero Company, but there were also a lot of characters who obviously had never worn spats in their lives.

Devlin went back to the bar. "Well?"

Don Ricardo lifted his shoulders. "Well?"

They exchanged their glances. For the moment they were again two old

compañeros of the lobo trails, in trouble together, needing each other's guns and wits and chill nerve. Mutual anger and deep-seated rivalry had nothing to do with that. Self-interest, if nothing else, required that they stick together until they got out of this jackpot.

"Shall we see what they want?"

"Might's well!"

They walked to the door, Greg and Wren behind them, and faced the crowd.

"Mister Devlin," twanged a Down East accent, "we hear your company's a swindle!"

"I never listen to rumors," said Devlin, keeping watch on the Maunsell mob and several other hard-bitten pilgrims. The hulk of the crowd was composed not only of well-dressed speculators, but of miners and emigrant homestead seekers, and what they had to do with the case Devlin couldn't figure out.

"Fraud!" somebody shouted, and an ugly rumble rippled through the crowd. A bearded Tennesseean let his rifle slide from the crook of his arm into his gnarled hands, causing a general stir of preparation around him. The miners drew pick handles from under their coats. Some of the speculating gentry looked nervous, but the tougher syndicate agents felt for their pocket pistols.

The hard core of the crowd was Maunsell and his crew of tinhorn grifters and gunmen. Don Ricardo swore softly, his hands creeping to his holster.

"This is bad—bad!" he whispered, and Devlin nodded. An armed and beserk mob of this size, led by trigger men, wasn't going to be stopped by a few shots.

Maunsell, with the manner of a leader and spokesman, held up a hand for silence and addressed Devlin. "You were overheard late last night, planning to travel!" he pronounced like an accusing public prosecutor.

Don Ricardo groaned. Greg got ready for the worst. Wren looked to see if her pistol was fully loaded. But Devlin merely nodded. "We're planning to travel down to the Caballero Ranch," he drawled, "in the interests of our stockholders!"

Don Ricardo murmured admiringly, "Well spoken!" Greg let his breath out, and Wren gave a hushed cheer.

Seeing Maunsell compress his thin lips and the crowd grow quiet, Devlin took the offensive. "What the devil have you an' some o' these others"—he gestured at the miners and emigrant homesteaders—"got to do with the business affairs o' this company, anyhow?"

"Ah, *bueno!*" breathed the Don. "Take the war to the enemy!"

But a flicker of triumph crossed Maunsell's gaunt face. He answered tonelessly, "We're stockholders. I happen to have bought a good deal of the stock, day before yesterday, through agents. Yesterday I happened to sell some of it to these men here. I sold it to them in good faith at no profit. If there's anything wrong with the stock, they know it's

your business to make it right, not mine!"

Devlin, manufacturing time for thought, trimmed the frayed end of his cigar with his teeth and spat out a flake of tobacco, but all he could think of was Maunsell's damned cleverness. By buying stock and selling some of it to the miners and emigrants, Maunsell had made himself the head of a powerful force. To rouse that force into action he had spread the word that the company was no good.

Against any attempt of the company to eliminate his force by buying back its stock, Maunsell had instigated the tying up of the company funds. And, on his tip-off, Straight Rube was hurrying here with a squad of deputies who would go all the way down the line for him at his nod. Not to mention the federal officers watching all roads out.

It was about as tight a jackpot as Devlin could think of, and he could see no loophole except the trip south. The game was blown up, and it would be the bank's job to pay off the stockholders, while the Caballero promoters took off on a long, long ride.

"Welcome to our happy outfit!" he said to Maunsell, meantime wishing him to hell's hottest corner. "We'll give you all a full report when we get back. We're leaving right away."

The flicker crossed Maunsell's face again. "That won't be necessary," he answered, and played his trump card. "You see, we're all going with you! We want to look at what we've bought!" He stared past Devlin at Wren. "Personally, I don't expect to be disappointed!"

Devlin swallowed cigar juice. Beside him, Don Ricardo hissed, *"Mil diablos!* I knew you were going too far! You should have let me—"

"Ah, shut up!" Devlin growled, stalking to the bar for a farewell drink to fading fortune. "If you don't like it, go an' make pals with Maunsell!"

"It is an idea!" flared the Don.

VI

Under a broiling sun the motley cavalcade struggled down a trail that cows had made and men had abandoned. Brush Indians and half-breed renegades peered, astonished, at springless farm wagons, mule-killer carts, mud-spattered carriages, men on horseback, and miners plodding alongside loaded burros. Nobody had ever seen such a parade on that forgotten trail. It was all right with the sweating, swearing caravaneers if they never saw it again.

They were emigrants seeking good soil, miners with dreams of wealth, and syndicate agents anxious to make unlimited profits on their employers' capital. And private speculators, moneyed men, plushy adventurers expecting a tree-bordered avenue to a cattleland castle.

All they had got so far was sunshine and sore bones. The washouts and arroyos took the shine off the upholstered carriages and jumbled the contents of the wagons like numbers in a keno goose.

Wren and Greg rode in the com-

pany wagon, Greg driving, his horse hitched behind. They were the only ones getting any sort of pleasure out of the jaunt. They talked together, sitting side by side, and often they so far forgot serious matters as to laugh.

Devlin and the Don, though, weren't talking, much less laughing. The strain of keeping on civil terms had proved too much and snapped between them. The Don wanted to make a dash for it and quit the bunch. He could see no profit in staying, he said, and it got on his nerves to ride along with the struggling column, never knowing when a Maunsell man or an enraged stockholder might put a bullet in his back.

"They watch us every minute, day and night!" he muttered wrathfully to Devlin. "Their eyes are never off us! We are practically prisoners! And when we get to where we are going, what then?"

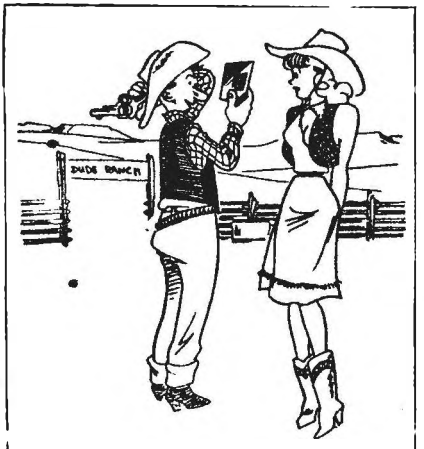
Devlin didn't have any answer handy. Nor did he enjoy leading this band of rambunctious pilgrims into the promised land of the Caballero Company. But somewhere under his hard and sardonic shell was the battered old code reminding him that he had got Wren and Greg into this disaster, and he guessed dourly that he ought to do something about getting them out of it. The Don could take care of himself. So could Greg, maybe, for that matter. But Wren hadn't a chance; Maunsell would see to that.

And there were these farmers and miners. It was all right to make wealthy speculators pay for their fun. Devlin wasn't one bit regretful on their account. But these others—that was something else. He had never yet taken toll from those who couldn't afford it. He couldn't see what he could do by sticking with them, but on the other hand the code said he couldn't quit. A man had always himself to live with, and there were too many nights when the old ghosts gathered around the hidden campfire and opened the blotted ledgers.

"And Rube Spink, curse him!" the Don went on. "He'll be hot after us! And the federal men! And—"

"Aw. take up knitting!" Devlin grunted, and that was when the final break came.

"Damn!" rapped the Don. He was in a black and restless mood, anyway, due mostly to Wren and the total loss of the company receipts.



"Any particular part of the bull's eye?"

Wren was showing conclusively that she preferred Greg. The Don, deploring her lack of judgment, and giving up hope of ever teaching her a finer discrimination, wanted only to leave failure behind him and forget it.

"It was you, damn you, who banked the money!" he spat. "It was you who stopped me from shooting Sharan! I would have got Maunsell next. But for you, we would now be rich—and I would be traveling in comfort with that girl! From here on I take care of myself—and may the devil take care of you!"

So now Devlin rode alone, cursed in undertones by the Caballero pilgrims and closely watched by the Maunsell crew in the rear. He didn't particularly blame Rico for bowing out. There was no profit left in a game as busted as this one was, and Rico had always been entirely frank in his opinion of any man who didn't have the sense to get off a sinking ship.

Rico was riding now with the Maunsell crew, and making no bones about it. It hadn't taken him too long to accomplish the switch. He had charm and personality that he could turn on at will, a pair of gifted trigger fingers that any gun bunch would prefer to have on their side, and a silver tongue to sell a bill of goods to Satan himself—the slick little double-crossing son!

The Don's light-hearted promises were coming home to roost, dragging their tails—not to the Don, but to Devlin. The bearded Tennessee emigrant and his farmer brethren swore to take nothing less than good soil and water; the miners nursed great expectations, and the derbied gentry talked of fat cattle. Devlin cursed Rico's lively imagination.

Somehow the caravan got through the thick brush and cut-up hills, leaving wrecked carriages behind to mark the trail, and came to a river. Greg said it was Soldier River, fed by mountain springs and running all year 'round.

"It's the north boundary," he told Devlin. "When we ford it we'll be on our land."

"Good!" said Devlin. "This water looks all right."

"Yeah, the river's okay," Greg said, "but wait'll you see what we run into on the other side!"

They crossed the Soldier and pushed on, minus a few wagons that didn't quite make it, and Devlin soon saw what Greg meant. The terrain south of the river was a flat, burned-out plain, affording less grazing per hundred acres than a healthy steer could munch between sunrise and sunset. The bone-dry dust spurted from beneath the hoofs of the horses and rose in choking clouds. It was the worst part of the journey.

"Hasn't rained here, I dunno how long," commented Greg.

"You mean it ever did?" Devlin grunted skeptically.

Don Ricardo came riding up, a handkerchief tied over his mouth and nose. "How much more of this before we get there?" he demanded.

Devlin blew dust from his caked lips. "Shucks, we're there!"

The Don's eyes rounded. "Heaven help you!" he exclaimed, and turned back to the Maunsell bunch. The caravan stumbled on, to a chorus of oaths and raging complaints.

The farther they went, the worse it got. The plain began sprouting low outcrops of gray-streaked rock that Greg said he didn't remember noticing before. The wind-drifted dust had laid them bare, which meant that the drought here had continued unbroken for years.

Devlin motioned toward a high red sandstone ridge that they were approaching. "Did that get laid bare, too?"

Greg managed a wry grin. "No, that's old Sunrise Ridge. It's always been there. Biggest mess of sandstone this side of the river." He left the wagon to Wren and rode his horse on ahead. In a short time he returned and informed Devlin that they were coming up to the old ranchhouse.

"It's in bad shape," he said. "The floor's all caved in, and so's part of the roof. I dunno what these folks are going to think."

Devlin squinted ahead. "I can guess! This here pilgrims' progress is due to blow up right in our teeth! Get on that wagon an' hitch your nag to the team. When I start for the house, you break the wagon out o' line an' follow fast as you can! *Sabe?*"

He rode along at a walk until he saw Greg raise an arm in signal that he was ready, and he dug in his heels and the long-legged big black lunged forward. Clear of the column and heading for the house on the run, he looked back. The wagon was careening after him, Greg lashing the horses and Wren hanging on to the bumping seat.

Maunsell and his men, hardly aware of what was happening in the thick haze of dust, shouted muffled queries. The rest of the pilgrims, by this time expecting nothing good, merely cursed the extra dust boiled up by the wagon and figured somebody had finally gone crazy.

The front porch of the house sagged so that its middle rested on the ground. Devlin rode his horse over it, knocking loose boards all a-skelter, and ducked on through the gaping doorway. The floor of the house had not only caved in, but settled itself for a long decay. The black's hoofs punched holes through it.

A moment later Greg, making a halt the quickest way, crashed the wagon sidelong against the porch and completed its ruin. The team and his horse broke loose and took off for unknown parts, but the wagon stayed where he put it.

He and Wren came running in. The Maunsell crew by now were riding in pursuit. Maunsell shouted a command and they circled the house, gesturing for the weary wagon train to follow suit.

"That hombre's too smart for this world!" observed Devlin, watching the maneuver. Wren and Greg, peering from a rear window, agreed.

"They're boxing us in, Devlin!" Greg said.

Under Maunsell's directions the caravaneers made a job of it. With their wagons they formed a ring around the house, halted, and stepped down on the off-sides with their rifles. The carriage trade withdrew some distance, and the Maunsell coterie bunched inside the circle, fronting the house. For minutes a stillness held the besiegers while the dust slowly settled. Then from the huddle around Maunsell a horseman detached himself—a slim figure, jaunty with a hard-worn elegance—and rode his silver-maned palomino over to the house.

The Don doffed his sombrero, entering the door. "Greetings!"

"Get the hell out o' here!" said Devlin.

The Don looked pained. "Amigo, I come as a friendly courier with a message from Maunsell. Listen—and learn! You remember Wadsworth, the surveyor? From him Maunsell discovered that the railroad will run its right-of-way through here! Wadsworth laid out the route himself before he got fired. And Maunsell holds stock that gives him the title to every tract of land the route goes through here—and stands to make a fortune!"

He wagged his head in mock sympathy at Devlin's expression. "The pity of it! And that is not all! He has kept a record, and he finds that our remaining unsold stock, which you hold, only represents the tracts containing nothing but that sandstone ridge yonder! The rest of the stockholders own land that is flatter, but just as worthless! Amigo, I cry for you! I bleed for you!"

"Go ahead an' bleed!" rasped Devlin. "I'd like that!"

The Don grinned. "It is also true that Straight Rube Spink is coming—as you may see from that dust cloud in the north, if you look out the door! Very bad!"

"Bad for you, too, if he catches you!"

"No, no. Maunsell has some influence. He needs me. When the railroad comes he expects a town to spring up here, and he will own it. He will need good men then. Confidentially, I have some private ambitions of my own in that direction! But that is by the way. Let us discuss Maunsell's ultimatum to you, eh?"

"Yeah, let's!"

"*Bueno!*" The Don lit a cigarette. "You know, no doubt, that against gunfire this house is an eggshell?" He kicked a hole in the wall to illustrate the point. "Maunsell could wait until Spink arrives, but he would like to avoid trouble and investigation.

"If you"—he glanced courteously at Wren—"were his wife, he would be willing to let your friends ride off and never come back! He is reluc-

tant to fire on this place while you are in it, of course. Fortunately, Elmer Dyal—that bearded individual from Tennessee or some such place—is a justice of the peace, or something, so a marriage can be performed quickly and—"

"Why, you two-tongued twister!" Greg burst out.

The Don surveyed him calmly. "Quiet, please! I am sure the señorita is able to cooperate with the inevitable, without your interference! And if the inevitable becomes intolerable, I shall be on hand to render her whatever service is necessary! Your answer, señorita? Forgive my haste, but time passes!"

Wren looked at Greg, at the armed bunch around the house, and at the dust cloud looming in the north. "Yes," she whispered, and before the argument could start, the Don bowed and left. Wren listened to Greg's storm of protests, but only shook her head.

As for Devlin, he kicked rotted floorboards aside so that his horse could stand on solid earth, and found more of the gray-streaked rock beneath. "What a country to ranch in!" he muttered. "Sharan, your old man built on rock—and what rock! Look at it! Not even decent rock!" He picked up a piece and scowled at it. Its dirty gray streaks were soft and greasy, as if contaminated by the rot.

Greg, looking at it, uttered a short, harsh laugh. "Know what that is? What a joke!" His eyes, resting on Wren's deathly pale face, were tragic. "I worked with a mineralogist once. I'll tell you what it is."

"Don't bother," said Devlin. "I'm not that interested. Here come Maunsell an' his bunch. Comin' for the bride!"

VII

It was a queer wedding. Wren and Maunsell stood before the wrecked wagon at the porch, Greg stood gnawing his knuckles, and Devlin stood on the wagon where he could see better the approaching dust cloud. The Maunsell gunmen lounged on guard, the miners and emigrants didn't know what it was all about, and the Eastern speculators thought the whole thing was awfully jolly and picturesque.

Elmer Dyal, the bearded Tennessee J. P., headed into the ceremony, and didn't hit a snag from, "Dilly b'loved," to, ". . . p'nounce you mannen wahf!"

It was all over. Dyal parted his beard and proclaimed his intention to kiss the bride. But the bride faced the groom and said, "There's something I should tell you, Keve."

"Later," Maunsell answered hastily.

She shook her head. "No, now. Listen. You hold stock entitling you to every tract along the right-of-way that Wadsworth lined up through here for the railroad, isn't that so?"

The listeners crowded forward, startled by the news. Maunsell drew in his breath and a fearful anger quivered his pale, gaunt face.

"Hold your tongue!" he muttered.

"You bought that stock on Wads-

worth's tip." Wren's young voice was clear and distinct. "He needed cash to get home on. You paid him five hundred dollars for his information. I told him you would!"

Maunsell's bony fingers snapped around her wrist. "You . . . told him?" His eyes were like black marbles. *"What do you mean?"*

She shivered under his glare, but went on. "I mean you've been stung harder than anybody else here! Yes, you — clever Keve Maunsell — trimmed! What Wadsworth didn't tell you is that after he got fired, the railroad condemned his proposed route and laid down another one—five miles from here on the other side of the river! You've sunk your fortune in a strip of dust and rocks! I said I'd break you for what you did to Flash, and I've done it! Now, do you still want me for your wife? I've carried out my part of the bargain!"

The glaring black eyes bulged like those of a madman. A spasm of uncontrollable rage shook the long, angular frame. Still gripping Wren's wrist, Maunsell drew back his right fist to smash her full in the face. Dyal uttered a horrified cry, and shouts of outrage came from the onlookers.

The solid roar and mushroomed flash of a shot, fired at close quarters, abruptly overwhelmed all other noises and stilled them. Over a smoking gun held at hip level, Don Ricardo de Risa, a good man on hand to render service to a lovely lady, watched Maunsell rock back, shot through, sparks from the close blast pitting his coat and vest.

In the instant of shock that held Maunsell's crew frozen, Greg grabbed Wren and rushed her to the house. The Don, plucking out his other gun and backing toward his horse, attempted to hold the crew in line, but they were too spread out and the crowd was in the way.

"Make it if you can, Rico—I'll cover you!" Devlin yelled from the wrecked wagon at the porch, and threw a fast shot that tangled a Maunsell man's draw. He got down in the wagon and fired again over the side, hoping to break out on his saddled black as soon as Rico made a getaway.

Rico, though, changed his bet and sprinted for the wagon. The gun crew, darting for cover to the surrounding circle of wagons and carts, began blazing recklessly at him, regardless of the stampeding crowd. He sprang over the side of the wrecked wagon and crouched beside Devlin, and their guns thudded together.

A bullet ripped through the wagon and neatly cut the leather chin string of the Don's sombrero. "A devil of a place to make a stand, this!" he grumbled.

Devlin sighted a shot and peered critically at its result. "Teach you not to bust into family arguments! What switched you back on my side, anyhow, you two-timing trickster?"

The Don grinned. "Force of habit!"

The wagon, getting riddled, be-

came untenable. They slid over the hidden side onto the porch and ducked into the house, where Greg and Wren in the rear were holding off some shooters who had worked their way around, and about that time the firing slackened off.

Devlin and the Don, taking up position inside the front door, saw riders loping off, and guessed the reason. They swapped a glance and a nod, and made for the rear.

Greg and Wren, too, were watching riders lope off. Greg said, "Must be the Spink outfit's getting here, Lord help us!"

"Must be!" commented the Don, climbing out through a window. He climbed briskly back in again, as a group of dusty horsemen came trotting around the house, rifles resting across their saddles. Giving a fatalistic shrug, he sat down and lit a cigarette. He was a dead duck and he knew it. Spink wasn't likely to forget that bullet through his beaver.

Devlin holstered his gun, chewed on his cigar, and wished he had taken up politics.

"Come on out, gentlemen!" called Straight Rube Spink, as firmly brave as if kissing a voter's baby. His squad of special deputies, stern men all and hoping to gain his notice, leveled their rifles at the house.

"C'mon, Rico!" said Devlin, and showed himself at the door. He touched his broad-brimmed hat. "The Honorable Reuben Spink, I believe? Proud to meet you!"

Mr. Spink, who hadn't been called honorable in some time, thawed a trifle. "I observe several . . . ah . . . incapacitated persons lying around, among them the defunct remains of my friend, Mr. Keve Maunsell!" he clarioned. "I demand the reason!"

"And most rightly do you demand," Devlin assured him. His guns weren't much good in this jackpot, and he had to fall back on his tongue. "They got hurt in an argument involving the sacred honor of a defenseless female!"

"That sure is right!" chimed in Dyal, coming forward.

The Honorable Reuben Spink counted heads, estimated the number of votes, and dismissed that detail of the case. "Very well! But, Mr. Devlin, I have it on good authority that you and your friends have sold stock in a worthless enterprise! Yes or no?"

"No!" sang out Greg, and Devlin blinked surprisedly. "Do you see all these uncovered rocks around here? See those gray streaks on 'em? That's molybdenum—a rare metal used in making steel alloys! The railroad is hungry for that stuff, and here we've got untold deposits of it!"

Devlin took it up from there. He had triggered for his life many times. He had never had to talk for it, but he did it now. "This Molly-be-damn stuff," he announced with authority, "makes this the richest piece o' land in the country!" He had never heard of the stuff before, but he could talk about it. "You miners will get rich on it! Are you squawking?"

"How 'bout us farmers?" shouted Elmer Dyal instantly.

Devlin thought fast. "The soil we crossed is good," he stated. "All it needs is water. I heard some o' you say so. All right, then! You got the river. Dig your irrigation ditches an' water it, an' grow anything you want. Hell, this is your paradise, if you only knew it! Mining an' farming! An' the railroad comin' only five miles from here to freight your output! You'll have a thrivin', prosperous town here! As for you speculators—d'you know anything better you could put your money into than this? What more d'you want?"

"Does anybody," piped up a Bostonian. "want to sell his stock? I'm buying!"

"The devil with you!" retorted a dozen stockholders.

Straight Rube Spink got out of his surrey, walked to Devlin, and raised his new beaver hat. "Sir, you are a gentleman and a scholar! I am sure," said he. "that you and I can reach an amicable understanding. I am sure that you and your Mexican friend do not wish to engage in argument with the federal officers who are on the way here! Eh? Ah, exactly! Then let us go into this house and . . . hem . . . talk things over!"

They lay in hiding, two bad hombres in the brush, watching the trail both ways. "Somebody coming!" murmured the Don, and smothered the campfire.

"Those two—Sharan an' the girl," said Devlin, and hailed them.

They shook hands all around. "You," Wren told the Don warmly, "are a good man! Right after you left, Dyal married Greg and me. Rico, I kiss you!" She kissed him.

"You're the first girl I know," remarked Devlin, "who ever got married, got widowed, and got married again the same day! I reckon you inherit Maunsell's stock, too. I swear, this young generation's just too fast for me!"

"Funny thing, Devlin," Greg said, "you were absolutely right. About the land, I mean. Everybody's more'n satisfied. The miners want to get to work, the farmers want to put in that irrigation system, and the speculators want to put more money into the thing. We'll have a town there, sure enough! Wren and me, we've got an order on the bank to release the company funds, and I'm elected head of the company!"

"We're going to settle down," declared Wren. "I've had enough of highbind, and so has Greg. We're going to—"

"Get goin'!" interrupted Devlin. "Our company just isn't respectable enough for the likes o' you!"

Wren and Greg rode on, waving farewells. Devlin said, "Well, Rico, we started a town. How's it feel to you to be an empire builder?"

"I am not impressed, amigo," sighed the Don. "After all, we got nothing out of it, did we?"

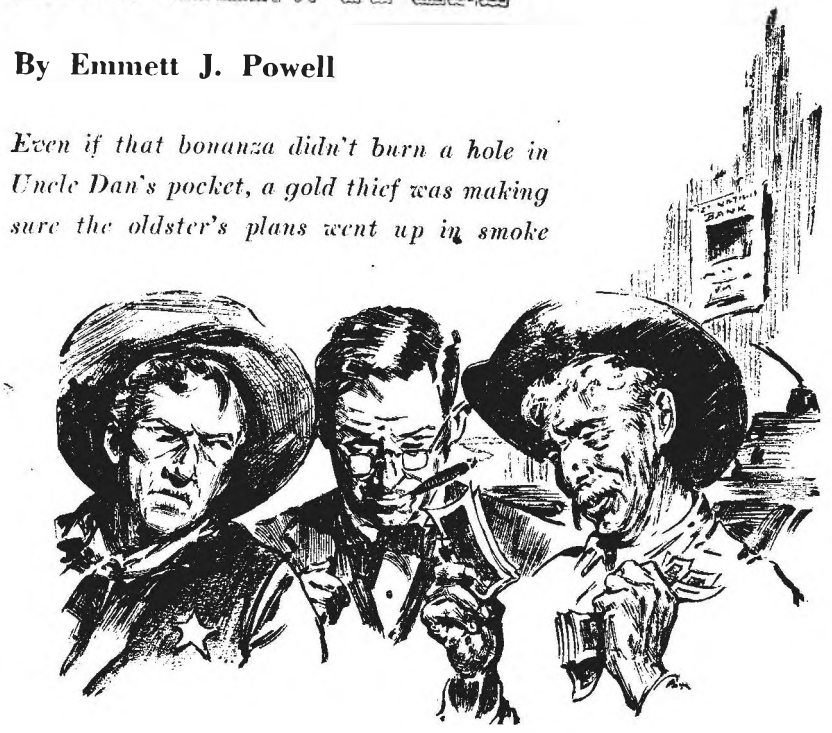
"I wouldn't say that," remarked Devlin. "Y'see, Rico, I sold the rest o' that stock to Spink at half price—as a personal favor!"

THE END

RATS WANT IT ALL

By Emmett J. Powell

Even if that bonanza didn't burn a hole in Uncle Dan's pocket, a gold thief was making sure the oldster's plans went up in smoke



THERE was a saying around Cascade Gulch that a man could drift into town broke and be a millionaire the next day. It had happened more than once, but Johnny Frost, the town marshal, had never seen a better illustration of it than Uncle Dan Frome and his partner, Pete Bexell.

The difference between Uncle Dan and the others was that he had been prospecting in the San Juan for years, but fate had always tapped someone else on the shoulder. Now, at last, it was Uncle Dan's turn, and there wasn't a man in the gulch, unless it was the banker, Adam Morey, who resented the old man's luck.

Johnny Frost was in the Gold Nugget the night an Eastern capitalist wrote out a check for Uncle Dan's and Pete Bexell's claim. For a long time Uncle Dan stood there at the bar, holding the check and staring at it. Nobody said anything. Johnny suddenly found something in his throat that made it hard to swallow. If there was ever a generous, deserving man, it was Uncle Dan Frome.

Watching the old man now, Johnny wondered what Pete Bexell, supposedly laid up with a bad ankle, was thinking. If he had the man pegged right, Bexell would be scheming up a way to get his hands on all the money instead of his half.

"One hundred thousand!" Uncle Dan wiped the back of a gnarled hand across his eyes. "Mebbe I'm dreaming. How about it, boys?"

"It's real as rain," Johnny told him. "You've got enough to buy the finest house in Denver."

"Only half of this is mine," Uncle Dan reminded him.

Johnny said nothing. The Eastern capitalist looked around, surprised at the sudden tension and not understanding it. Nobody except Uncle Dan or maybe Adam Morey liked Bexell. If there was any resentment, it was because Pete Bexell was the man luck had picked to share Uncle Dan's fortune.

"What are you going to do?" asked Johnny.

"I'm gonna set 'em up," Uncle Dan declared proudly. "I've mooched drinks off you boys for years. Now I'm going to pay a few back."

"Tomorrow's time enough for that," said the Eastern man. "Right now I'm paying for the drinks."

"Why sure, if that's what you want to do," Uncle Dan agreed. "Only I *would* like to get this check cashed. I want to see how big a pile of gold it'll make."

Uncle Dan had his drink, but he kept staring at the check, age-puckered eyes holding a faraway look as if he still could not believe this was real. Finally he sidled up to Adam Morey.

"You couldn't open the bank up and cash this for me, could you?" Uncle Dan wheedled.

Johnny grinned. Uncle Dan would get chopped off at the neck. Adam Morey was a stickler for form. He had ice water instead of blood in his veins, according to the miners, and he'd skin any fleas he could get his hands on, for the hide and tallow. Morey wasn't a man who did other folks favors just for the sake of doing a favor, but now for some mysterious reason he didn't cut Uncle Dan off as Johnny expected.

"Why, I guess I could," the banker said after a moment's thought. He scratched the end of his long nose, cocking his head as he looked at Uncle Dan. "I don't make a habit of it, but I guess this is your night to howl."

"That's just what I'm aiming to do." Uncle Dan waved his check.

"Come along, Frost." Morey said. "I want a witness to see that Frome gets that money."

Johnny went, inwardly boiling, but not knowing how he could stop it. Uncle Dan had no business on the street with a hundred thousand dollars in his pockets.

"I'll loan you a hundred dollars," Johnny said when they reached the bank. "That'll do to get drunk on, won't it?"

Uncle Dan squared his shoulders. "I'm a rich man, Johnny. I'll be

hanged if I'll borrow money to get drunk on."

Johnny knew there wasn't any use to argue. When the old man set his mind, he was as stubborn as any burro in the San Juan.

"No more hard times for you, are there, Uncle Dan?" Morey asked jovially as he unlocked the bank door.

"No, sir," Uncle Dan said proudly. "Now, Johnny, I ain't gonna blow this tonight. You worry like an old woman. I'm gonna take it up to the cabin for Pete to keep. I'll just tote along a little to irrigate with. Tomorrow I'll take my half and light out for Denver. I've got a daughter over there. She'll give me a home long as I need one."

Morey had opened his safe. "How do you want it?" he asked.

"Gold," Uncle Dan said expansively.

The banker frowned. "I haven't got it in gold. I can give it to you in thousand dollar bills."

"Thousand dollar bills!" Uncle Dan breathed. "That'll make Pete's eyes bug out. Sack it up, Adam."

Johnny groaned. "Hell's bells, Uncle Dan. You wouldn't last an hour on the street with that money on you."

"Let him alone," Morey said irritably. "It's his."

It wasn't right, Johnny thought. Not by a long shot. It would have been more like Morey to have insisted that the money be deposited. Johnny chewed his lip as he watched the banker drop the bills into a coin sack and hand it to Uncle Dan. The only thing he could do was to ride herd on the old man and hope.

"There you are," Morey said. "Have yourself a time and don't blow it all."

"I'll just take one of these." Uncle Dan fingered the bills. "Pete'll keep the rest for me till I get on the stage. Come on, Johnny."

They followed the path up the mountain to Uncle Dan's cabin.

Pete Bexell was still up. He stared coldly at Uncle Dan when he came in, then his little black eyes touched Johnny's face and switched again to Uncle Dan without greeting.

"I suppose you're drunk?" he challenged.

"Not yet, Pete." Uncle Dan upended the sack, dumping the money on the table. "I'm gonna be, though. Just look at that, pardner. Just look at that!"

Bexell's eyes glittered. Johnny's fingers tightened on his gun butt. There was murder on Bexell's knife-thin face. A greedy, inward-thinking man, Pete Bexell was the kind who would shoot Uncle Dan in the back and light out with the money. But, too, he was a scheming man. Johnny had rodded a dozen gold camps during the last ten years, and he knew the type. Bexell wouldn't commit a murder unless he could figure out a sure-fire alibi.

Uncle Dan stepped back. "What do you say to that, pard?"

The tip of Bexell's tongue moistened his lips, eyes flicking again to Johnny and back to Uncle Dan. "A lot of money," he said. "What'd you take it out in cash for?"

"Just to see it," Uncle Dan explained with childlike frankness. "I've heard about money like that, but danged if I ever really thought I'd get a chance to say it was mine."

"Half of it's yours," Bexell snapped.

"Sure, sure."

"Well, let's split it." Bexell stood up, putting weight on both feet. "I ain't staying in this stinking hole no longer than I have to. Tomorrow I'm taking the stage."

"Me, too, Pete." Uncle Dan motioned to the money. "I'm afraid to tote mine around town." He picked up one of the bills. "That's enough to treat the boys on. You keep the rest of it. We'll make the split in the morning."

Bexell walked to the stove, and returned with a baking powder can. "I'll put it all in here. The lid fits on good so a rat can't chew it up."

It would be a pleasure, Johnny thought savagely, to take his gun and beat Bexell's ears off. Bexell was supposed to have worked with Uncle Dan in the shaft as well as furnish grub money. Uncle Dan had his cabin built, his claim staked, and had started work on the shaft when Pete Bexell had drifted into camp. Right from the first Bexell had ducked out of his share of the labor, claiming first this and then that. For the last month it had been a sprained ankle. Now he wasn't even limping.

"All right, Pete." Uncle Dan stuffed the bill into his pocket. "I'll be back, come morning. Let's go get ourselves that drink, Johnny."

They had reached Main Street before Johnny said, "I don't trust Bexell, Uncle Dan."

"Quit worrying," Uncle Dan told him. "He's all right. A mite lazy, but I was busted flat when he showed up. I'd never have made the strike without his help."

"He's money crazy." Johnny said flatly.

"I reckon he is," conceded Uncle Dan, "but he won't let that can out of his sight. He'll hug it all night just like paper hugs the wall."

Uncle Dan visited every saloon in camp before morning. By the time the sun showed a red rim over the canyon wall, his thousand dollars were gone. He had irrigated thoroughly, but he was still on his feet.

Usually the gulch quieted down in the early hours of the morning, and Johnny could go to bed, but tonight the camp throbbed until dawn, celebrating with Uncle Dan.

Twice during the night Johnny had come up the trail to Uncle Dan's cabin. Both times the place was dark, but the second time Johnny passed Adam Morey on the trail. It was strange that Morey would be up so late. He wasn't a man to celebrate, and Johnny hadn't seen him in any of the saloons, but the banker had a reputation for strict honesty, and it was hardly likely he'd risk that reputation by robbing Bexell.

Johnny went with Uncle Dan back to the cabin, knowing the old man might pass out on the way.

"Damned cold," Uncle Dan complained. "Damned winterish."

If he took a notion to build a fire,

he was likely to burn the place up, but Bexell would certainly hear him banging around and wake up. So Johnny turned back down the trail to his own cabin.

It was late in the afternoon when a shotgun blast woke Johnny. Shooting after dark usually didn't mean much, but coming at this time of day it was something else. He tumbled out of bed, pulled on his pants and boots and, grabbing his gunbelt, stepped out into the sunlight. He paused as he latched the belt around him, eyes raking the street, and saw the knot of men gathered in the aspens along the trail to Uncle Dan's cabin.

Johnny headed for the men at a high lope, premonition of tragedy raveling along his spine. He shouldered men out of his way, looked on the ground, and turned away, sick. Uncle Dan Frome had put the muzzle of the shotgun in his mouth and let go.

"Where's Bexell?" Johnny asked finally.

"In the cabin," the blacksmith, Mell Carter, told him, "but he didn't do it if that's what you're thinking. I saw Uncle Dan come out of the cabin. He had the gun and he was reeling around like he was drunk. I watched him come plumb down, wondering about it 'cause I never seen him carry a gun much. Then all of a sudden he stopped, and blew his brains out." Carter shook his head. "Never saw nothing more horrible in my life."

The blacksmith shop was directly across the street, and it was possible for Carter to see the entire length of the trail from his doorway. Johnny had known the blacksmith for a long time, and he trusted the man.

"Take the body over to Doc's place," Johnny said tonelessly, and started up the path.

There wasn't a better-hearted, more generous man in the San Juan than Uncle Dan Frome had been. That was Johnny's first thought, and it was the only thought his mind would receive. The knowledge that Uncle Dan was gone and the shock of seeing his shattered face momentarily numbed Johnny's brain. But before he reached the cabin the feeling that Pete Bexell had somehow pulled this off grew into a conviction.

Bexell was sitting at the table, his thin face pale. Bony hands were working convulsively, and for a moment Johnny thought he was having some kind of fit. Slowly Bexell's eyes fixed on Johnny. He grabbed the edge of the table, gripping it so hard that his knuckles whitened.

"The fool!" Bexell screamed. "The crazy drunken fool! It'd been better if he'd killed himself last night."

Johnny struck him on the side of the face, an open-hand slap that jarred the man. "What happened?"

Bexell shook his head as if trying to gather his sanity. "He burned up the money, the damned drunk! Look." He motioned to a smoke-blackened can. "I hid the money in the stove after you two left, figuring that was one place nobody would look. I waited up most of the night so I could help him get to bed. When

he did come in I was sleeping so hard I didn't hear a thing. I didn't wake up till a little while ago. I started to build a fire when I saw what he'd done."

"I'd say you were the fool," Johnny said harshly. "A stove is the damndest place to hide money I ever heard of."

"Would you have thought of looking there?" demanded Bexell.

"No," Johnny admitted grudgingly. "I guess I wouldn't."

"Everybody in camp knew he had the money," Bexell went on wildly. "After you and him left. I got scared. All my life I've wanted money, and I had it. I wasn't going to let no tough come in and steal it. He never built a fire, Frost. I always did it, even when I was laid up. I did all the cooking. Blast it, he hadn't touched that stove for six months. How'd I know he'd take a notion to start a fire this morning?"

There was a wild glitter in Bexell's eyes, the glitter of a man brought close to madness. Either his story was true, or he was the finest actor Johnny had ever seen.

Bexell relaxed his grip on the table and, dropping his head on his arms, began to cry. Johnny had never heard a man cry like that before, great shoulder-shaking sobs. A jabber of words broke out of him. "Fifty thousand dollars." Or, "The drunken damned fool."

Johnny picked up the baking powder can. The charred remains of money was in the bottom. He poked it, dribbled the ashes into his hand, mashed some on his palm, and blew it off. Uncle Dan must have had a roaring fire. Johnny couldn't tell a thing from the ashes. Thousand dollar bills burn down to the same thing a one dollar bill would.

There was no regret in Pete Bexell about Uncle Dan's death. Staring down at him, Johnny felt a repugnance such as he would feel for any crawling thing who passed as a man. But the man was acting exactly as Pete Bexell should act and would act under these circumstances.

Then Johnny thought of Adam Morey. If the banker had refused to cash the check last night, this wouldn't have happened. If he'd insisted that Uncle Dan deposit most of his money, the old man probably would have done it.

"Was Morey in here after we left?" Johnny asked.

Bexell lifted his head. "Morey," he said dully. "Morey. Yeah, he was here once. We had a drink. It was almost morning. I went to bed after he left."

Some of the truth came to Johnny then. He grabbed Bexell by the shoulder and shook him. "Where was the money when Morey left?

"On the table in front of us." Bexell ran a hand over his forehead, frowning as if trying to think. "We had a drink. I don't remember anything after that. Morey left. I guess I went to bed."

"Did he say anything about the money?" Johnny demanded. "Like telling you to hide it in the stove?"

For a moment Bexell's face was blank. Then his lips tightened

against yellow teeth and he pounded his fist on the table. "Yeah, now I remember. It was his idea, Frost. That damned thief stole our money. Go get him. Beat it out of him. Make him tell what he did with it!"

It might have been that way. Johnny rolled a cigarette, not moving for a long moment as he covertly watched Bexell. Yes, it might have been that way, but Johnny wasn't sure. Not sure enough to arrest Adam Morey.

"You didn't see Uncle Dan build the fire?" he asked.

"I was asleep I told you," Bexell snarled. "But this morning the money was burned."

"Then you didn't know Uncle Dan built the fire?"

"He said he thought he did. He couldn't remember, but I knew I hadn't."

"With you sleeping like you were and Uncle Dan drunk, it would have been easy enough for Morey to come in, build a fire and steal the money."

"That's what happened, sure!" Bexell cried. "Go get it back."

"But Uncle Dan is dead, and I say you murdered him."

"Hang it, he shot himself in front of everybody," Bexell snarled. "How do you figure I killed him?"

"He was fuddled in the head when he woke up," Johnny charged. "You cussed him, pushed the gun at him, and told him he ought to be shot. Uncle Dan was the kind of fellow who'd blame himself for it. He knew he couldn't pay it back to you, and he'd counted on that money himself. It was natural enough he'd blow his brains out."

"I didn't care what happened to him," Bexell grated. "I figgered he'd burned it up, and it was the money I wanted. Now I reckon Morey has it, and it's your job to get it back."

It might be the way Bexell said, Johnny thought again. Morey might have drugged Bexell's drink and come back for the money. But there was another way it might be. If Bexell had been in a deal with Morey, the money might still be here in the cabin, and Bexell might have hit on this idea of jailing Morey while he got clear of camp.

"I'll see Morey," Johnny said finally, and left the cabin.

It was almost closing time, but Morey was still in the bank. Johnny stopped in casually as if he suspected nothing. "Too bad about Uncle Dan. Bexell says he hid the money in the stove and Uncle Dan built a fire in it this morning when he got back."

"And the money burned up?" Morey asked incredulously.

"That's it."

"I'll be danged!" the banker breathed. "Too bad I couldn't have given it to Uncle Dan in gold."

"I was thinking that," Johnny said pointedly. "Bexell's got a notion about it. He figgers you knocked him out with that drink you had, built the fire yourself, and stole the money."

Morey scratched the point of his long nose, the corners of his mouth twitching. "I reckon I ought to get mad about that," he said finally, "but everybody knows what Bexell is. I

guess you don't take any stock in his yarn."

"It's worth thinking about," Johnny said flatly. "It wasn't like you to open up for Uncle Dan last night."

"A man does a good turn and gets blamed for robbery," Morey muttered. "Isn't that hell?"

"I call it murder," Johnny grated. "When I get the man who schemed this up. I'll treat him like he'd pulled the trigger of that shotgun instead of Uncle Dan."

Johnny wheeled out of the bank and slanted across the street so Morey could see him. When he was out of sight, he angled back to the opposite side of the dust strip and stepped into the Green Front Livery Stable. He glanced at his watch. If Morey held to his habits, he'd leave the bank in fifteen minutes.

"Saddle the fastest horse you've got," he told the stableman. "Hustle it up."

Johnny stood in the archway watching the bank. When the horse was saddled, he told the stableman what to do. Within five minutes from the time Johnny had reached the barn, Morey left the bank.

The stableman mounted and rode past Morey. The banker was within a dozen paces of the trail that led to Uncle Dan's cabin when the stableman turned into the path.

"Where you going?" Morey demanded.

"Bexell sent word he wanted the fastest horse we had, and he wanted it pronto. This is it, Mr. Morey." The stableman rode on up the mountain toward Bexell's cabin.

Morey went on until he was past the trail. Glancing back, he turned up slope from the street and disappeared in the thick-growing aspens.

A grim smile curved Johnny Frost's lips. Morey had taken the bait. There was no doubt now in Johnny's mind about the banker's guilt. He raced around the stable and through the aspens toward Uncle Dan's cabin. When he reached the clearing he saw the livery horse tied in front. He waited, thinking he had beaten Morey, and a moment later knew he shouldn't have waited because a gun roared in the cabin.

Johnny lunged across the open space and jerked the door open, Colt palmed. Pete Bexell lay on the floor, Morey not over ten feet from him, a Colt in his hand.

"Drop your iron, Morey," Johnny ordered coldly. "Any kind of a move will make a dead man out of you."

"What's the matter with you?" Morey shouted in indignation. "I won't be called a thief. A man's got a right to clear his name, hasn't he?"

"You just killed the man who could testify against you," Johnny said. "You didn't clear your name of anything. I'm arresting you for robbery and attempted murder."

"Attempted murder?" Morey choked.

"You're a rotten shot, Morey," Johnny said contemptuously. "A cheap, scheming chiseler who got Bexell to do the dirty work and then tried to kill him so you'd get it all."

"All right," Morey said heavily.

He stepped toward the table as if to lay his gun down. "I'll go to trial if I have to. Then I'll get your job, Frost. The minute I'm free . . ."

But Adam Morey didn't lay the gun down. He tilted the barrel and fired, the bullet snapping past Johnny's ear. But he had fired too fast—a fatal mistake because he didn't get another chance. He died with Johnny Frost's bullet in his brain.

Pete Bexell wasn't dead, but he was close to it. As Johnny knelt beside him, he said feebly, "Uncle Dan was a good man. I shouldn't have done it. Morey thought it up. Being a raw night, we knew Uncle Dan'd be cold when he got to the cabin, so the fire idea would sound good. We was going to split Uncle Dan's half, but I figgered I'd get it all if you arrested Morey."

"The money," Johnny urged. "Where is it?"

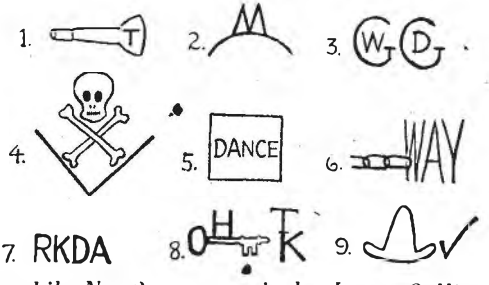
"Under the floor," breathed Bexell. "Loose board in the corner. I've got no heirs. Give all of it to Uncle Dan's girl."

Five minutes later Johnny Frost rode back down the trail on the livery horse, the money sack under his arm. There would be three funerals in Cascade Gulch, but only one of them would be well attended.

THE END

WHAT'S IN A BRAND?

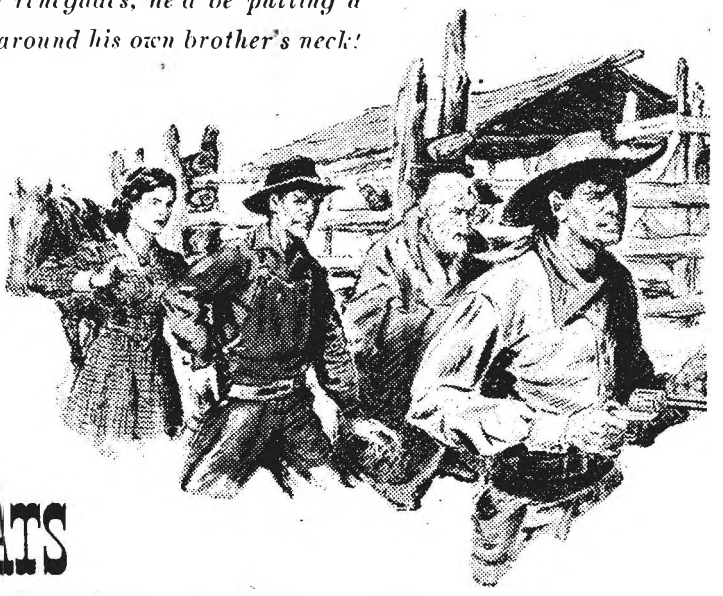
BY JACK LUZZATTO



Again we lead off with two winning brands sent in by contributors. No. 1 comes from Charles H. Smith of Halloran Hospital, Staten Island, while No. 2 was sent in by James Collins of Azusa, Calif. We heartily thank all our contributors and deeply regret that not everyone can be a winner. We trust readers understand that it is impossible for every contributor to receive a personal answer because so many brands are received. But feel assured that every entry is considered. Our only policy is "may the best brand win." Now tackle this new batch. You'll find it stimulating and amusing, something to set the brain cells dancing. *The answers are on page 109.*

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 Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure to enclose a three cent stamp for material which is not available.

If Rod Gerry told all he knew about those night-riding renegades, he'd be putting a hang noose around his own brother's neck!



LARIATS MAKE CRUEL LASHES

I

SOMEBODY with a perverted sense of humor had called the place Eden—a group of ramshackle houses in the midst of a dreary desert that smelled of sheep.

Rod Gerry, carrying a burlap sack containing his saddle and equipment, stepped down on the depot platform and looked around. It was still early in the day, and if he could hire a horse there should be time to ride out to the Walking K cow camp. But, being a stranger in this part of the country, he would have to inquire about directions and distances.

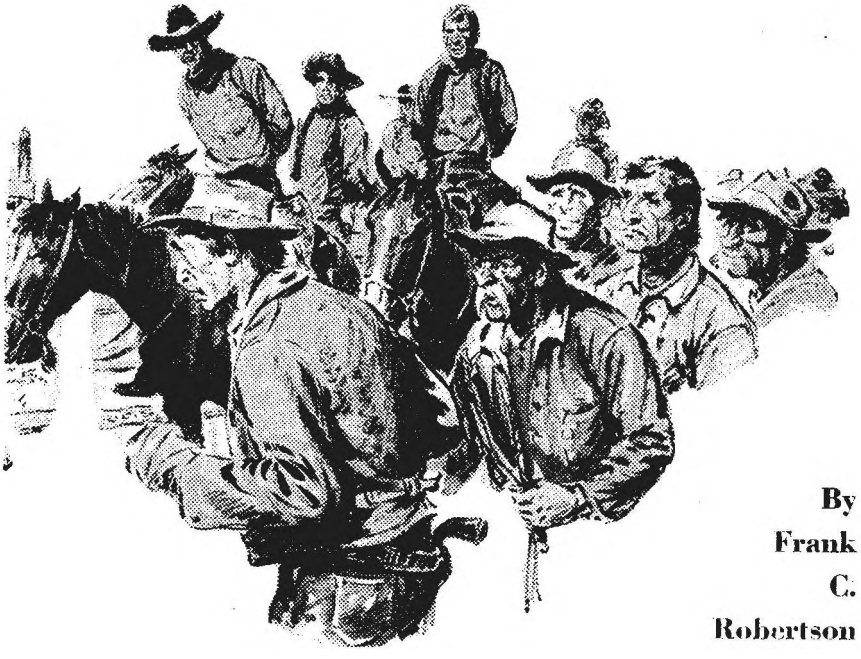
He left his saddle and strode toward a group of men in front of a saloon. The first words he heard stopped him as though a gun had been jammed against his ribs.

"Clyde Gerry, hunh? I class him lower and yellower than the mangiest sheep-killin' coyote on the desert!"

The speaker was a huge man with a shock of yellow hair and a florid face. He wore a gun, and though he was well dressed, his garb was plainly that of a sheepman.

"I notice he's stayin' clear of Eden, Jensen," another man said.

"He'd better," the giant growled. "The dirty, lowdown coward!"



By Frank C. Robertson

The epithet applied to Clyde Gerry suddenly sent a wave of temper flooding through Rod's brain. Before his mind caught up with his temper he had stepped forward and thrown a punch at the blond giant's jaw. It landed with explosive force, and the hit man fell like a tree.

The crowd was still gasping when Jensen got to his feet. The big man was still partly dazed. "Who hit me?" he roared; then, sighting Rod, he rushed, hamlike fists flailing.

Rod sensed that he was in for the fight of his life, but he didn't care. Clyde, his half brother, his hero ever since he had been a little kid, had been insulted and called a coward. And that Rod wouldn't take.

It didn't matter that it had been eight years since he had seen Clyde, or that, as a matter of fact, he had never actually lived in the same house with Clyde since he was six years old. Clyde was ten years older than Rod, but he had been a character of great color, and a reckless daredevil when Rod had seen him last. The fact that he had become the foreman of a big cattle outfit like the Walking K since coming here certainly proved that he also had ability and integrity.

Rod knew how to box. He had little difficulty evading the first wild rushes of Jensen while he sent punishing punches to his opponent's face. But Jensen handled himself well for

a big man. As the edge of his rage subsided, he began to show more skill.

Rod, although twenty-three and six feet tall, looked like a kid. Jensen maneuvered him against the front of the saloon, and began to crowd. Rod's arms were high, protecting his face. Jensen fought from a crouch, always bearing in, taking his punishment with blue eyes blazing with the lust to crush and maim.

The crowd was silent, waiting for the kill. This was Jensen's town, and Rod was a stranger. Rod's backward stepping foot touched the wall, and then he sensed what his huge foe was trying to do. Once caught in a clinch, he would have no chance. He knew by the look on his foe's face that he could expect no mercy. He was cornered; only quick thinking could save him.

As though suddenly exhausted, he dropped both hands. His unprotected face was too tempting a target for Jensen to resist. The man swung a great hamlike fist in a roundhouse punch designed to knock Rod's head from his shoulders—had it landed.

Rod's duck was a smooth bit of the boxing art. Jensen's fist whistled past his ear, and, unable to pull the punch, the man found his knuckles colliding violently with the board front of the saloon. Human bone couldn't withstand that shock, and Jensen howled with pain as he grasped the back of his injured hand with the other, and whirled about, forgetful of the man he had intended to demolish.

Rod leaped away from the wall, once more ready to resume the fight, but Jensen, with a broken hand, had had enough.

Nobody spoke. There was sullen antagonism in the faces before him, but no one offered to take over Jensen's end of the fight.

Rod turned away to seek a livery stable. He crowned himself with no laurel. Jensen was a skunk. Had Clyde been there to defend himself, Jensen would have crawled into his hole without a word. Rod expected to get a laugh when he told Clyde about the encounter.

"I want to hire a horse to ride out to the Walking K headquarters," he told the stableman. "How far is it?"

"Around twenty miles," the man answered sullenly. "You work there?"

"I expect to."

"Mostly the Walking K does business in Crescent. It's further for 'em, but safer."

"Have you got a horse or not?" Rod demanded.

"Guess so, but it'll cost you five dollars a day—in advance. One day out and one day back."

"Let's see the horse."

The animal Rod hired was a pot-bellied, rat-tailed roan, which he discovered after a mile or so was wind-broken. On such a horse he wouldn't be able to reach the Walking K camp until long after dark.

About ten miles from Eden he failed to see any of the landmarks the hostler had mentioned. In fact, the country didn't answer the de-

scription at all; yet Rod knew that he hadn't lost his way. Anger came upon him as he realized that the man must have deliberately lied to him.

Off to his right a hogback projected into the desert. The hills looked green, an indication that there was water near, and water likely meant a ranch. He decided that he could reach it about sundown on his decrepit mount. If he could find a place to stay, he could get directions to Clyde's camp.

He should have written Clyde, Rod thought, but since his brother had never evinced any enthusiasm for him coming to work for the Walking K he had planned a surprise appearance.

His guess about the time proved to be too optimistic. It had been dark more than an hour when he saw a light shining through the darkness. He spurred the wind-broken roan to a lope.

A set of ranch buildings loomed suddenly before him, but at the same time he caught the acrid, oily odor of sheep!

He stopped his horse, mentally debating whether or not to ask for hospitality. All his life he had been trained to hate sheep. He had little choice, however, for the roan was finished for the day.

He rode past the corral, where he could see a number of rams lying, and approached the house. After another moment of hesitation he dismounted and knocked on the door.

It was promptly opened, but instead of the greasy, bearded shepherd Rod expected to see, he found himself looking into the face of an extremely pretty girl with smooth black hair coiled around a graceful head. For the moment the power of speech deserted him.

The door hadn't been entirely opened. "Yes?" the girl asked warily.

"Excuse me, miss," Rod said uncertainly, "I seem to have gotten mixed up in my directions, and my hired horse has given out with me. I wondered if I could put up here for the night, and maybe get supper?"

"Why, I . . . I . . . don't know. I'll ask my father."

The girl closed the door, leaving Rod in the darkness. He liked her voice, in spite of her evident confusion. If he got something to eat it would at least be clean, he thought.

When the door opened again it wasn't the girl he faced, but a gray-bearded man in overalls with his feet shoved into soft buckskin pacs.

"Where you trying to go, stranger?" he asked.

In view of his experiences in Eden, Rod had decided that it might not be wise to mention his brother's name to a sheepman.

"I'm looking for horses to buy. I was told I might find some at the Walking K outfit," he answered.

He didn't miss the man's frown. "An outlaw outfit," the man said curtly. "The less you have to do with such people, young man, the better."

"I'm only looking for a place to stay right now," Rod answered good-

humoredly. He wasn't surprised that sheepmen didn't like a cow outfit.

The girl whispered something to her father which Rod didn't hear, but the old man said, rather grudgingly, "Well, all right. I'll show you where to put your horse."

"Thanks."

While Rod was stuffing hay into a manger the sheepman said, "I'm Mark Holmes. This is the Sweetwater Spring Ranch."

"I'm Rod Lewis," Rod answered, giving a name from his mother's side of the family. "How far did you say it was to this Walking K range?"

"They'd tell you it was right here," Holmes said surprisingly. "But all they're entitled to is fifteen or twenty miles south. Their camp is at an abandoned stage station on Grouse Creek, couple of hours' ride on a good horse."

Rod thought it inadvisable to question Holmes further. After all, he could get firsthand information from Clyde when he reached the camp. All he wanted now was a place to spend the night.

He wasn't so sure that was all he wanted when he found the girl—her name was Jane—preparing supper for him. It was a fine meal, and he found himself wanting her good opinion very much. He hated to think that she would lose what little respect she had for him when she learned who he was.

After supper Holmes showed him to a bedroom. "This is my son Gene's room," he stated, "but he's out with the sheep. We have breakfast at six. Good night."

Rod was soon fast asleep. But not for long. He was awakened by someone jerking the covers rudely from his bed.

"Roll out, shep," a harsh voice ordered. "Time to take your medicine."

Rod sat up and blinked. Above him stood a tall, masked figure with a gun pointed at his middle. The house was full of armed men!

II

Mechanically Rod reached for his clothes. "Never mind that, you've got clothes enough on for what you're gonna git," the man said, and poked him painfully in the ribs with his gun barrel.

Rod was awake now, hot with anger. He felt certain that Holmes must have betrayed him, and that the masked men were Jensen and his friends come to avenge the sheepman's defeat.

Two other men seized him and he was thrown, barefooted and in his underclothes, into the living room of the house. Acutely conscious of his appearance, Rod looked for the girl, but she wasn't there. He could hear her sobbing in another room. He got a worse shock when he saw Mark Holmes, also in his underwear, standing in the middle of the room with a gun muzzle in his back. Then he noticed that all the masked men wore high-heeled boots and chaps. No sheepherders, these.

"Say, what is this?" he demanded.

"You'll find out," the leader said curtly. "Take 'em out to the corral, boys."

Mark Holmes spoke up. "You men are making a big mistake. You can whip me if you want to, if that's the only way you cowards know how to fight, but this fellow isn't a sheepman. He's just a stranger stopping here for the night."

"Yeah? What's his business?"

"I was looking for the Walking K and lost my way," Rod answered.

"He's lyin'," a puncher barked. "Let's have no more ka-yoodlin'. I'm gittin' anxious to hear the sheps squall when I start layin' a doubled-up lasso rope across their backs. Give this hombre about forty whacks and he'll remember that he's a sheepherder."

"He is not," came the girl's voice from the bedroom. "Please let him go. We never saw him before."

Rod noticed that the door to the girl's room was being held by a tall, gangling puncher, and she was trying vainly to push it open from the inside.

"I'll bet you never see him again either, after we git through with him," the leader laughed. "As for you, Holmes, you've had your chance to pull out. Now you're gonna wish you had."

"All right, you cowards, do your damndest," Holmes said defiantly.

"No, no!" the girl cried out. "You can't whip my father. He has a weak heart. He can't stand it."

"Hang onto that door and don't let her out, Bill," the leader said callously. "Bring 'em along, boys."

"Just a minute," Rod said loudly. "I don't know who you men are, but I do know that the Walking K wouldn't stand for this kind of business. I'm Clyde Gerry's brother, and you'll answer to him if you do any whipping tonight."

They stopped. All eyes, including Mark Holmes', were upon him.

"You're who?" the leader asked curiously.

"I'm Rod Gerry. My brother runs the Walking K," Rod said triumphantly.

"These are Walking K riders," Holmes stated cynically.

Rod gasped. It hadn't entered his mind that Clyde would countenance such tactics. He scanned the masked faces, wondering if one of them could be Clyde. He was sure his brother wasn't there; still sure that they were acting without Clyde's orders if they were Walking K men.

"If your name is Gerry what're you doin' in a sheepherder's house?" the leader asked caustically.

"I lost my way, and they took me in."

"Don't tell me Mark Holmes would feed Clyde Gerry's brother," the man scoffed.

"If he is Gerry's brother, then he's a spy," Holmes said. "He told me his name was Lewis." There was withering contempt in the sheepman's tone.

"Got any proof your name is Gerry?" the leader demanded.

Rod handed out papers which proved his identity.

"All right," the man said reluctantly. "We'll give you the pleasure

of watchin' the old man git leathered till he blats like one of his own woollies. Then we'll take you back to Gerry, and you'd better be his brother. Get your clothes on."

Two men kept close to Rod while they dragged Mark Holmes out to the corral, and all but bent the sheepman double over a corral pole. Rod knew that he couldn't stand to watch what was about to take place. He broke away from the man guarding him, and rushed toward the others.

"You lowdown cowardly polecats!" he raged. He caught the leader by the coat, jerked him half around, and sent him reeling against the fence from a blow to the face. He was completely berserk, but he had only begun to fight when a gun blow sent him crashing more than half unconscious to the ground.

Someone dragged him over to a water trough and thrust his head into the cold water. He came out sputtering and gagging, but his head was reasonably clear. He was too weak, however, to break away from the men holding him.

He heard the steady, rhythmic swish and thud of a doubled lariat, followed instantly each time by the tight-lipped groan of a man in dreadful pain. Then, as the blows increased, Holmes was no longer able to control himself and at each blow of the rope across his naked back he screamed with pain.

Rod listened until he thought he would go mad. He had never felt such hatred as he felt against these bestial night riders. He cursed them steadily, with more venomous words of abuse on his tongue than he had ever imagined he knew. His captors let him rave on, too busy watching the flogging to hear a word he said.

Gradually Holmes' cries subsided until they were mere gasps, but it seemed an eternity to Rod before the leader ordered a halt.

"If you and your woollies ain't out of here in a week, Holmes, this won't be a patchin' to what you'll git next time," the leader warned.

Rod fell silent; there was nothing else to do. If these were Clyde Gerry's men—and he was certain now that they were—he didn't want to see either them or Clyde again. That wasn't quite right. He wanted to see Clyde just once, to give him a chance to repudiate the actions of his men.

He wanted to stay behind to help Jane Holmes with her father, but he was being taken along, a virtual prisoner. As they were leaving he saw Jane run out. Apparently Holmes was unconscious and she was trying to get him untied when the night riders disappeared from sight.

III

It was already dawn when the party rode into a cluster of tumbled-down buildings that had once been a stage station. Several had been repaired to serve as bunkhouses and a cook shack, and already the cook had breakfast on the fire.

The riders had long since removed their useless masks, and by the light of day Rod saw the toughest-looking

bunch of men he had ever been among.

"Boss back yet, Jim?" the leader of the riders asked the cook.

"No," the cook replied. "I guess them two stockholders delayed him some in Crescent."

The leader, Rod now could tell, was a tallish, impatient-looking man of about thirty-five. His name was Harry Shaw.

"Soon as we have breakfast everybody will sleep till noon," Shaw ordered. "Jim, you keep your eye on this new hombre and don't let him try to leave."

The cook turned upon Rod. "Okay," he said.

Rod didn't sleep. He wanted to see Clyde, but more he wanted to go back and apologize to Jane Holmes and her father for having deceived them. Sheep owners or not, they had treated him decently. He didn't want them thinking he was a spy.

When the men were snoring Rod got up and walked outside. Jim, the cook, confronted him instantly, but without hostility.

"You better git back in there, hombre," he warned. "Shaw is a mighty tough man when he's mad."

"I'm not leaving. I just wanted to talk to you. I'm Clyde Gerry's brother."

"You don't say!"

"Where is Clyde?"

"He taken a couple of stockholders back to Crescent. They gave him a bad time, them stockholders."

"Who are they?"

"It's thisaway." Jim said, after a peek into the bunkhouse to assure himself that everybody was asleep. "The Walking K belong to a bunch of Easterners. Things ain't been too good, and these stockholders come out to see what's wrong. Gerry had to keep 'em from findin' out that sheep have done crowded us off a lot of range."

Rod went back to a bunk, but he couldn't sleep. His mind kept struggling with questions for which he had no answers. Was Clyde responsible for the whipping of Mark Holmes? What would happen if Holmes died? It would be murder, and suddenly Rod realized that he would be the only witness who could swear to the identity of the killers.

After dinner all but two of the men rode away on some duty. The two who remained, Aim Ersfeldt and Brick Griffin, seemed to be Shaw's top hands. Rod knew that their business was to watch him.

Just before sundown a big man on a tired, sweat-caked buckskin horse rode into camp. Although it had been eight years since their last meeting, Rod recognized his half brother instantly.

Some of the hero worship which Rod had lost the night before rushed back to him. Clyde was still a handsome figure on a horse, but when he dismounted and Rod got a look at his face, it wasn't so good. The once square jaws seemed to have sagged. The eyes that had sparkled with recklessness now seemed cold with avarice and suspicion.

Rod was taken aback when his brother didn't recognize him. "Don't

you know me, Clyde?" he asked. "I'm Rod."

"Hunh? Well, hanged if you ain't. What're you doin' here?" Clyde made no offer to shake hands, displayed no pleasure at seeing his young half brother.

"My first intention was to ask you for a job."

"And now you've changed your mind? Don't you like the outfit?"

Ersfeldt and Griffin were listening eagerly.

"From what I've seen," Rod answered bluntly, "I don't like it a bit."

"No? What's wrong with it?"

Brick Griffin horned in. "We give old man Holmes his needin's last night and, believe it or not, your kid brother was bedded down with the rest of the sheep. We were about to give him a whalin', too, till he told us who he was."

"What were you doin' there?" Clyde demanded.

"They gave me a bum steer in Eden, and I landed there after dark," answered Rod. "They fed me and took me in. Whipping that helpless old man was the most despicable, cowardly act I ever saw."

"Uses big words, don't he?" Griffin jeered.

"Take my horse, Brick," ordered Clyde. "I'll have a talk with you in my cabin, Rod."

Rod followed his half brother into a single comfortably furnished room. He sat down while Clyde washed the trail dust from his face and combed his hair. Watching, Rod felt the last of the old boyish hero worship slowly oozing out.

"Let's see," Clyde remarked, "you were only about seventeen when I left home, wasn't you? You were a tall kid then."

Rod had been just fifteen. This proved that while Clyde had been much in Rod's mind, Clyde himself had scarcely remembered his kid brother. And now they faced each other, practically strangers. Potential enemies.

"I've got no place here for you," Clyde told him with sudden harshness. "Best thing for you to do is go back home and forget anything you may have seen here."

"If Mark Holmes should die I'll be a witness against every man that was there," Rod said flatly. "Did you send them?"

"So you'd swear me into the penitentiary, too, if I did, eh?" Clyde said.

"I don't think I'd have to. Harry Shaw and the others would put the blame on you whether you were responsible or not."

Clyde winced. "I gave the orders," he said. "I'd have been with 'em if I hadn't had to go to town. Holmes has been warned to leave Sweetwater Spring. It's cow range. Instead, he had got other sheepmen like a fellow named Pete Jensen to come in here."

"And you're afraid of Jensen," Rod taunted.

Clyde's face flamed. "Watch your tongue, boy," he warned. "I'm not afraid of anybody."

Obviously Clyde was puzzled over

what to do about his brother. As a possible witness against the Walking K, Rod was dangerous.

"I'll have to return my horse to Eden." Rod said. "I'll leave in the morning."

"You'll stay right here till I say you can leave." Clyde said harshly. Almost as though speaking to himself, he added. "I should have gone along. Harry Shaw never did have any judgment. If old Holmes dies . . ."

"You mean I'm a prisoner?" Rod demanded.

"Call it anything you like, only don't try to leave."

It was incomprehensible that his own brother would try to have him killed, but if Holmes did die from the beating, Harry Shaw and others would certainly see to it that Rod couldn't testify against them. Rod made up his mind to get away that night.

When Jim, the cook, sounded the supper gong the crew made a mad dash for the cook shack. Rod lingered behind, although he knew the time wasn't yet ripe for a getaway. Just as he started to follow the others he met one man coming in late. It was Bill Gantling, the elongated puncher who had held the door on Jane Holmes. He was the horse wrangler of the outfit.

"Got bad news for you, son," Gantling said. "That wind-broke nag of yours fell and broke his neck."

"After he was shot," Rod commented bitterly. "I see."

"It was orders." Gantling said, with a tone of regret that made Rod look at him sharply. The fellow's face was homely, but not unkind. Gantling went on hurriedly. "You can't fight 'em, kid. You'll be killed if you do. And don't think Clyde'll help you. He's in too deep. If you stay you'll have to be like me—holdin' doors on females because you're too chicken-hearted to watch a man getting whipped."

Rod looked at the tall wrangler with new interest.

"See that cedar knoll over there?" Gantling said. "You'll find a gentle horse tied over there that you can ride bareback. Don't try leavin' before midnight."

"Thanks, Bill, you're a white man," Rod said gratefully.

IV

Blue juniper smoke was pouring from the Holmes' house when Rod rode in. He was within ten feet of the door when it opened and Jane stepped out.

"You!" she exclaimed angrily. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see if I could be of any help to you or your father." he replied simply.

"You're Clyde Gerry's brother. I heard you say so."

"I don't work for him. I hadn't seen him for eight years. I knew nothing about conditions here, but I tried to help your father."

"Yes," the girl admitted. "Dad said you did."

"How is he?"

"He's a very sick man. If there's

any justice in the world . . ." Jane's eyes filled with tears and her voice choked.

"I'll testify against those men if it's necessary."

Jane got hold of herself. "You haven't had breakfast," she said. "I'll fix you some. Then you must leave here. The men may be back any time."

"The men?"

"Jensen's men. They went to raid the Walking K camp last night. We know about your fight with Jensen in Eden. He's just as ruthless as your brother and the others."

"You mean," Rod gasped, "that the sheepmen intend to attack the old stage station?"

"It'll be over now," she said. "You were lucky to be away. Jensen had nearly thirty men. My brother Gene is with them."

Rod shuddered. The Walking K, he knew, would be caught completely by surprise. That the sheepmen might have the nerve to retaliate had never entered their minds. They hadn't even had a guard out. It could easily be a massacre. Clyde hadn't been present at the whipping of Holmes, but he was the man they hated most. Blood still had its call, and Rod felt rage rising within him against Jensen.

"When I dressed those hideous wounds on my father's back I hoped that every man who had a hand in it would be killed," Jane said. "Now I'm praying that nobody will get hurt. It's all horrible."

Rod talked with Mark Holmes while Jane was cooking breakfast. The sheepman was bitter. "It's true that cattle were here first, but they didn't build up anything. I paid for this land, and built a home. It was my water then, and it wasn't my fault other sheepmen came in. I only wish I could have gone with the other boys tonight."

They had just finished breakfast when Jane, who had been watching at the window, cried out, "Here they come. And they've got prisoners!"

Rod hurried over to look. True enough, a big party of men was riding in, and they had half a dozen prisoners. Among them Rod could see Clyde, Harry Shaw, Aim Ersfeldt, Brick Griffin and Bill Gantling. Pete Jensen rode arrogantly at the head of the party.

They stopped at the corral, and a clean-cut young chap in his twenties dismounted and ran toward the house.

"We got 'em, dad!" he exclaimed as he burst into the house. "Caught every last one of 'em asleep. Some of 'em got away, but we didn't have to fire a shot. All we wanted was the ring leaders, and we got 'em. We'll give 'em just twice what they gave you, right on the same corral pole."

"Oh, no, Gene," Jane pleaded.

Young Gene Holmes saw Rod and shot out, "Who's that?"

"This is Rod Gerry. He tried to help father the other night—"

"Clyde Gerry's brother! The boys'll give him the same medicine."

"They will not," Jane flared. "He doesn't work for Gerry. He's our friend and he's helping us."

"He's a cowpoke. That's enough," Gene said angrily.

"You sheepherders may whip me, Holmes, but not before I've put some slugs into a few carcasses," Rod warned. "You haven't caught me asleep, you know."

Gene turned to rush back to the corral and Rod, loosening Jane's grasp on his sleeve, followed.

"Keep away from me, Jane," Rod said. "I don't want you hurt."

"So the bum who took up for Clyde Gerry is his brother, hunh?" Jensen roared as he saw Rod. "Nab him, boys, and we'll give him the same stuff his yellow-bellied brother is goin' to get."

Clyde was looking off into space, his face ashen. He wouldn't meet his younger brother's eyes.

"I told you that whelp was a spy," Harry Shaw said audibly.

Mark Holmes, wrapped in a blanket, had come out of the house with Jane.

"Strip their shirts off," ordered Jensen. "We'll let Mark say when they've had enough."

"Give 'em plenty," Holmes said grimly.

"Dad, you can't do it!" cried Jane. "You can't be a brute just because they were. Turn them over to the law."

"The law!" Holmes said bitterly. "They'd be out on bail the next day. They wore masks. We can't prove who they were."

"Rod Gerry can," the girl declared.

"I can and will," stated Rod.

"You dirty rat, you're no brother of mine." Clyde grated.

"We don't want nobody's testimony," Jensen shouted. "We've got 'em dead to rights, and we know what to do with 'em. To blazes with the law. And I want young Gerry whipped along with his brother. Grab him, men."

That was a mistake. Rod's gun streaked from the holster, its muzzle pointed directly at Jensen. Rod walked slowly forward until he was within six feet of the big sheepman. The others watched with gaping mouths. Rod's draw had been unexpectedly fast. Every sheepman there sensed that if one of them drew, Jensen would get a bullet. And he was their leader.

Only Gene Holmes had a chance. He was behind Rod; had a chance to get him in the back. But Gene hesitated, looking to his father for a sign.

"You'll turn those men loose, Jensen," Rod said evenly, "and if just one of you makes an awkward move he'll get a bullet in the guts. I mean business."

The sheepman stirred and growled, but none of them quite dared any action. They were silent, peaceful men as a rule, and it had taken a fiery, blustery leader like Pete Jensen to get them to make the raid on the cow camp. They looked to Jensen now to tell them what to do. And Jensen's life was at stake.

Behind Rod, Gene Holmes' hand moved furtively to his gun. Suddenly Bill Gantling called out, "Look out, Rod! Behind you!"

Gantling's intentions had been good, but had Rod looked behind him, he would have been in real trouble. Rod knew who was back there, and his gun didn't waver from Jensen's body.

Mark Holmes' voice said steadily, "Hold it, Gene. Maybe Rod is right."

"Look, Holmes," Jensen raged, "we risked our lives to catch these men so you could get revenge, and so you could keep your property. Now you turn against us. The sheepmen aren't going to forget you're a traitor."

Rod was in command of the situation. He could hardly comprehend how such a set-up had come about. Had anyone told him, twenty-four hours before, that he would have been dominating a situation like this while Clyde, the man who never was afraid of anything, watched helplessly, he would have laughed. But not one of them dared move so long as he had that gun on Jensen.

He said calmly, but loud enough for all of them to hear, "Get on your horse, Jensen, and you and your men get going."

Jensen's blue eyes blazed. He stared hard at Rod, then, breathing heavily, turned and climbed into his saddle. "I'll fix you for this, blast you!" he threatened, choking with his wrath.

"And you won't catch us asleep again, Jensen," Clyde Gerry shouted suddenly. "From now on it's open season on sheepherders."

"Well, dad," Gene Holmes said grimly, "it looks like you and this fellow have lost us a range war."

V

The hands of the cowpunchers were tied behind their backs. They could only watch as the men who had captured them rode away. Rod Gerry had saved them from a brutal whipping, but only one of them, Bill Gantling, showed the slightest sign of gratitude.

Rod holstered his gun, drew his jackknife and cut the thongs that bound his half brother's hands. He stepped over and did the same chore for Bill Gantling, then told Clyde to finish the job.

"I wouldn't dirty my hands on the rest of these rats," he told Clyde.

"You've never made such a big mistake," Clyde said in a thick voice. "If the sheepherders don't get you, we will. And while I'm about it, I'll tell you now that I've hated your guts ever since I first laid eyes on you, and that was the day you were born."

Hate seemed to mount inside Clyde, and rushed out of his mouth like flood water over a spillway. "I hated your mother before you were born, but after that I couldn't get away with anything even with my own father—"

He stopped as though aware that he had confessed too much. And suddenly Rod realized how blinded he had been by his foolish hero worship. So many things were now clear. The reason his mother had talked to him so much about the evils of lying and stealing was because Clyde had always been a liar and a thief. To protect Rod from his half

brother's evil influence, she had perhaps caused their father to treat Clyde harshly. Rod could still remember how his father had whipped Clyde for reasons beyond his childish comprehension. But because of it Clyde had secretly hated them all.

It came to Rod then with a tremendous shock that Clyde was telling the truth. Clyde had never liked him, but Rod had been blinded to the fact by his boyish hero worship.

"We're going to take this business to the courts, Clyde," Rod said steadily. "Not just because you brutally whipped Mr. Holmes, but because there's more to this than just a sheep war, and I know you don't dare face a court."

He wasn't quite sure of his ground, but the look on Clyde's face told him he had struck the weak point in the Walking K's position.

"Come on, boys," Clyde said finally, "we're getting out of here."

The Walking K men whirled their horses about and started away. But Bill Gantling remained.

Fifty yards away Clyde stopped. "Come on, Bill," he shouted peremptorily.

"I'm not with you any more, Clyde," Gantling called back. "I'm through."

"You weak-livered, mangy coyote, we'll get you for this," Harry Shaw yelled, beside himself with rage. They spurred their mounts to a gallop and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

The Holmeses regarded Gantling with curiosity. Jane and her father knew the part he had taken in the raid, and their eyes were hard.

"Bill only held the door the other night, and he was the one helped me get away last night," Rod explained.

"I guess I'm kind of weak-kneed," Gantling confessed. "I got mixed up in a dirty mess, and didn't have the nerve to get out."

"All we've done," young Gene said bitterly, "is antagonize our friends, and turned the Walking K men loose to ruin us."

"It's just a question of which party comes after us first," his father admitted grimly. "It'll do no good to have those men arrested for whipping me. Crescent is the county seat, and it's cow country. If we could have got the county divided, like we've been trying to, and Eden was the county seat—"

"Maybe that's the answer," interrupted Rod. "Even if they were acquitted, such a howl would go up that you'd get your new county. With me and Bill here both testifying, though, I don't see how they will get an acquittal."

"Count me out," Gantling said. "I told you I was weak-kneed. I'm not public-spirited enough to swear myself into the penitentiary."

"What do you mean?" Rod asked quickly.

"The stockholders of the Walking K are mighty suspicious. Clyde had a tough time fooling the two investigators that were just out here. If he and the others were arrested, the stockholders would find it out,

and send other men back here. They couldn't be fooled a second time."

Rod looked Gantling straight in the eye. "About what, Bill?" he demanded.

"About the fact that for years Clyde Gerry and the rest of us have been looting the Walking K, and rustling cattle on the outside to make up for it partly. If the stockholders knew there was a range war on, or that sheep were going to get most of their range, they'd sell out as they have been threatenin' to. If they did that, the crookedness would come out before Clyde and the others could pull the really big steal they plan for this fall, before they get out."

Again Rod felt a sickness equal to what he had felt when he saw Mark Holmes whipped. He knew Gantling was telling the truth. His own brother was a crook!

"Well," he said presently, "we don't need to drag you in, Bill, and I hope you get away. But we're going to take Clyde into court, and see that his stockholders know about it."

An hour later Rod and the Holmes family were on their way to Crescent, Mark lying flat on his stomach in the bottom of the wagon. Gene rode a horse alongside, while Rod drove the team, with Jane on the seat beside him.

Once the girl touched his hand. "I'm sorry it had to be your brother you have to work against," she told him.

"So am I," said Rod. For a long time Jane's hand rested upon his.

They knew it would be dusk before they could hope to reach Crescent. They were still five miles from the town when Gene, riding ahead, whirled his horse and came galloping back.

"They're ahead of us," he reported. "I saw a dozen men when I topped the ridge. It's the Walking K."

Although Rod had not voiced his misgivings, he had been afraid that Clyde would try to head them off before they reached town. The others looked to him for leadership.

"Did they see you?" he asked.

"I don't think so," answered Gene, "but I'm not sure."

"We'll soon know," Rod said grimly.

When nobody appeared in a reasonable time he decided that Gene hadn't been seen. There was no way, they told him, to get the wagon into Crescent except through the road down a steep canyon.

Rod urged the Holmes' to turn off the road and make camp for the night. Leaving Jane and her father in a sheltered spot, Rod and Gene proceeded on foot. About half a mile from where they had stopped they saw three Walking K men guarding the road. It meant that Clyde and the others were desperate and intended at all costs to stop Rod and the Holmes family from filing any charges.

Keeping to the brush, the two young men moved on. In Rod's mind the conviction was growing that the issue could only be settled when he

and Clyde stood face to face. And he wondered if it was in him to kill his own brother. He knew that Clyde would have no hesitation.

It was long after dark when the sore-footed pair limped into town, but the evening's gaiety was in full swing. Clyde would have the Walking K men distributed at strategic points, and Rod realized that he and Gene might stumble onto one of them any time.

"The first thing," he told Gene. "is to find a justice so I can swear to an affidavit before anything happens to me. Then we'll try to get the address of the Walking K stockholders who were here, and write them a report of what's going on, and how they've been fooled."

Since it was necessary to ask for directions, they were just approaching a man they had spotted when they heard loud whoops and yells from the depot. A train had just pulled in; the one that had passed through Eden an hour or so earlier.

"Great Scott!" Gene said. "I know that voice. It's Pete Jensen's. Him and his whole bunch must've just got off the train."

Jensen and his men were swinging up the street toward the saloons. Their shouts and yells indicated that most of them were drunk. Somehow the roaring Jensen had persuaded these usually peaceable sheepmen to invade the cow town. They were carrying rifles, and there was going to be the devil to pay.

Rod drew Gene into an alley and watched the sheepmen march past; then they hurried along behind the buildings, keeping abreast.

They saw other men emerging into the street; heard a man challenge, "What do you want here, Jensen?"

Jensen shouted in reply, "We caught a bunch of sheep-killin' man-brandin' cowpokes this morning, and they got away from us. We know they're here in town, and we've come after 'em."

Clyde Gerry's voice rang out, "You mean me, Jensen?"

"I mean you, all right," answered Jensen.

A gun roared. Who fired the first shot nobody knew, for the street echoed with gunfire as men dived for whatever shelter was available.

Only two men remained in the street: Jensen and Clyde Gerry. Having sighted each other, the two enemies were too intent upon a showdown to think of shelter. Rod was close enough to see flame spurt from Clyde's gun an instant before Jensen fired. But Clyde missed. After that their shots came too fast to count.

Rod's gun was in his hand, and a terrible agony tore at his heart as he watched his one-time hero stagger, stumble, and then fall prostrate in the dirty street. For a moment he was torn by grief, even though he knew Clyde deserved what he had

got. He had only the grim satisfaction that at the last Clyde had stood and fought like a man.

Involuntarily, Rod raised his gun to fire at Jensen, but before he could pull trigger he saw that Jensen had been badly hit. Then, suddenly Harry Shaw's ugly face appeared, and the Walking K man fired the shot that finally brought Jensen down. Rod fired then—at Shaw. He saw the man pitch out onto the sidewalk, while behind him, Ersfeldt and Griffin opened up.

Rod and Gene dived for shelter while lead hissed above their heads. Seconds later Ersfeldt and Griffin lay dead within a few feet of Clyde Gerry and Harry Shaw.

The battle was over. Seeing their leader dead, the drunken sheepmen fled back the way they had come. The now leaderless Walking K men, realizing that their fight was lost, raced for their horses.

An hour later, accompanied by a sheriff's posse as a bodyguard Rod and Gene rode back to the wagon where Mark Holmes and Jane waited. They had, to their surprise, found Jim Booth and George Lyons, the two stockholders of the Walking K, still in town, and the men, already suspicious, had been easily convinced of what was really going on.

It required nearly a week to get things straightened out. To Rod's amazement he was then approached by Booth and Lyons.

"We need a man to take charge of the Walking K," Booth told him. "In spite of the fact that you're Clyde Gerry's brother, and that he turned out to be a thief, we think you're the man to take his place."

"The fact that you refused to join your brother inclines us to trust you," Lyons added.

"You're friendly with Mark Holmes," continued Booth. "Perhaps you can work out a deal with him and the other sheepmen so we can all live in peace."

"Well," Rod answered, "I've made one deal with him. He's agreed to let me marry his daughter. I'll see what I can do."

He told Jane about the offer. "It's a good deal, honey," he said, "and I think if your father could get the sheepmen to agree to stay on the Sweetwater Spring side of the divide, and I kept the Walking K on the other, we could get along. But it's up to you. I'll even herd sheep if you say so."

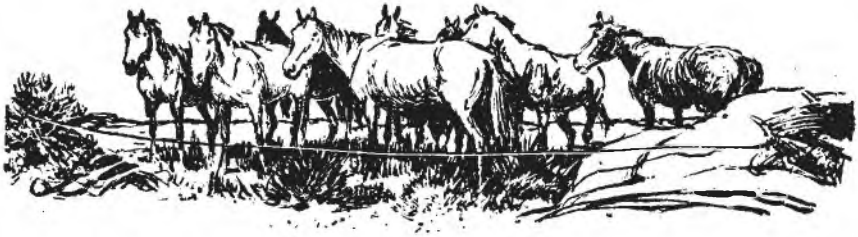
Jane laughed. "I wouldn't interfere for the world. I think it's wonderful. And I'll tell you something, darling, but don't ever tell father or Gene. I've always hated the smell of sheep."

"What a confession!" Rod said. "Anything else preying on your conscience?"

Jane blushed. "Uh-huh," she admitted. "Secretly, I've always wanted to marry a cowboy."

Rod kissed her. And then, without difficulty, they established a treaty of peace between sheep- and cattleman.

THE END



ROPE CORRAL

By S. Omar Barker

The rope corral don't have to be much higher than their knees--
  It holds them horses in there just the same:
A hundred or two hundred, as the wagon boss may please,
  But not because they're plugs or kitten-tame.

There's some in the remuda that have worn a heap of cinches.
  There's others young an' bronkish in their ways,
But one lone rope stretched at a height of twenty some-odd inches,
  Is something every one of them obeys.

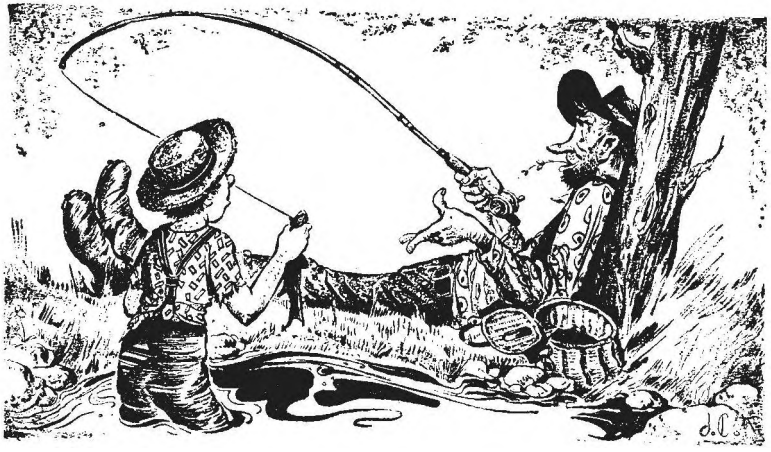
One little jump would clear it, but before he learns the bit,
  The cow horse has been taught a thing or two
About the rangeland Rule of Rope to which he must submit
  Or be shipped off some place to boil for glue.

They rope him when they geld him an' they rope him when they brand.
  It's rope that busts him when he tries to run;
He learns that rope's his master an' begins to understand
  That fightin' ropes ain't never any fun.

For if he ever jumps the string, a rope will loop his neck,
  An' bust him hard. Or if he gits away,
The whack of ropes will whip him back, to learn him, sure as heck,
  That breakin' out of rope corrals don't pay.

A cow horse don't git treated rough no more than is required
  To learn him certain things he's got to know;
But from his colthood on through life until he's been retired,
  His deep respect for ropes is bound to show.

He may sometimes act salty on a cold an' frosty morn,
  An' pitch enough to make some cowboy ride,
But when they stretch that rope corral, as sure as you are born,
  The rope-wise cow horse sure will stay inside!



FISHIN' FOOL

Cousin Lightner wasn't exactly lazy—he just didn't like to move around any more than necessary

By Jim Kjelgaard

SOMETIMES, when I think of how generous and good my Cousin Lightner is, I get tears in my eyes! He has not only given me a home for the past four years, since I was eight and my father died, but every now and then he takes me hunting or fishing!

Because he has so many sicknesses and miseries, about all the poor man can do is hunt and fish. He's very brave about it, but it tears the heart right out of Annie, Cousin Lightner's wife, and myself, when we see him struggling off to the streams or hills while we do the work.

Cousin Lightner himself admits that he might better be in bed. He goes out, anyway, so's to bring in what he can for our food. On the seventh of July he crawled painfully down the stairs to eat the twenty-six pancakes and twelve pieces of bacon Annie had ready for him—he would have no strength at all if he didn't eat.

"Annie," he said when he finished, "Egbert hasn't had a day off in a long while. Do you think you can

whitewash the hen coop if I take him fishin'?"

"I'll be glad to!" Annie answered. "I just worry myself to tears every time you go off alone!"

"My little girl!" Cousin Lightner said. "My faithful little girl! Come. Egbert. you can carry the tackle."

That was a wonderful thing. Mighty few people except himself ever touch Cousin Lightner's fishing tackle. I walked behind him up the Smoky Creek trail, carrying the rod as though it was made of egg shells and holding the creel so it wouldn't bump anything. Cousin Lightner trusted me; I wanted to prove I was worth it. We swung up Two Devil Hollow and climbed to the top.

There's a big beaver dam right on top of the mountain and not many people know about it. Nobody looking at the little trickle of water that comes down Two Devil would think it big enough for beavers to dam. But Cousin Lightner knows all about such things—he knows everything! He took the rod from me, jointed it up, strung the line through the guides, tied a nine-foot leader on, and all but collapsed. The misery had him again!

"Egbert," he whispered. "catch me a grasshopper."

I went out to catch a grasshopper. Cousin Lightner likes the medium-sized brown ones best—he says the trout do, too—and it took me about five minutes to find the right one. When I finally caught one, and went back to the dam, I saw something that stopped me in my tracks!

Cousin Lightner had not moved, but something else had. A brown beaver, 'most as big as a yearling shoat, had come out of the water and was chewing an aspen tree not four feet from where Cousin Lightner lay! He was the biggest and fattest beaver I ever saw, and as soon as he caught sight of me he jumped back into the dam and swam away. I couldn't believe my eyes!

Cousin Lightner looked around. "Did you get a grasshopper, Egbert?"

"C-cousin Lightner!" was all I could say. "Did you charm that beaver?"

"No, Egbert," he told me, "I've just fished this dam so many times that he knows me. He'll take apples out of my hand. I've fed him a couple of dozen."

"He must be the biggest, fattest beaver in the world!"

"Yes, Egbert, very interestin'. Let's have the grasshopper. Come, come, the grasshopper."

"Here it is."

"Put it on the hook, Egbert."

I put it on the hook and . . . Oh, but Cousin Lightner is a fisherman! Anybody can stand up and cast a grasshopper. Cousin Lightner can do it lying down! The line and leader snaked across the dam, the water swirled where a trout rose, Cousin Lightner let him have the grasshopper just long enough, struck, and brought him in.

"Go get him, Egbert," Cousin Lightner said when the trout was in shallow water.

I brought the fish in, cleaned it

and laid it in the wet moss that I had packed in the creel. Cousin Lightner, who was all tired out, slept while I did that. Then he opened his eyes.

"Come, Egbert, another grasshopper."

All morning I caught grasshoppers, baited Cousin Lightner's hook, brought his fish in, cleaned them, and packed them in the creel. Cousin Lightner—that poor man!—took little cat naps in between and it was noon when we started back to the house.

Looking as excited as I ever did see her, Annie met us in the kitchen. She put a finger in front of her mouth.

"Sh-h! Lightner, there's two gentlemen in the parlor to see you!"

"There is, huh?" said Cousin Lightner. "They'll have to wait 'til I've et."

"But, Lightner! They've come a long way!"

"All right. I'll go in."

Cousin Lightner didn't say I couldn't, so I sneaked in, too, when he went to see the gentlemen. They were sitting in chairs, and I could see they were gentlemen because, even though they wore hiking boots, they also wore ties. The little one with the black moustache and horn-rimmed glasses stood up and held his hand out.

"How do you do," he said. "My name is William Allison and this"—he turned to the tall blond man—"is my colleague, Arthur Pratt."

"How-dee-do," said Cousin Lightner. "What do you want off me?"

"We propose to make wildlife pictures, and we have heard of an albino beaver here in Bixby County."

"A what?"

"An al . . . a white beaver. We were told in Red Board that, if such an animal exists, you would know where to find it. They said you spend more time on the streams than anyone else does."

Cousin Lightner doubled over and grabbed at his stomach, and I knew the misery had him. He was starting to groan when:

"We'll pay you fifty dollars if you can get us close enough to such a beaver to take adequate pictures," William Allison said.

Cousin Lightner straightened quick. His misery comes and goes just like that.

"Did I hear you say fifty dollars?" he asked.

"You did."

"Well," said Cousin Lightner, "there ain't just one white beaver around here. There's two."

"Two!"

"Sure," said Cousin Lightner, "and I can g'arntee you picters of anyhow one."

"Wonderful!" William Allison exclaimed.

"Sure," said Cousin Lightner. "You came to the right man. Egbert, as soon as you've had your dinner I want you to take these gentlemen to the beaver dam at the head of Smoky Crick. One of the white beavers lives there. If you don't see him, I myself will take you out to another beaver pond tomorrow."

After dinner I took them to the dam at the head of Smoky Creek but, though we lay in the grass all afternoon and even into the night, we didn't see anything except a couple of brown beaver. When we went back to the house, Shep, Cousin Lightner's fox hound, came running to meet us. I was surprised because most times Cousin Lightner don't let him run loose. Cousin Lightner met us at the door, rubbing his hands like he was real pleased with himself.

"No luck, eh?" he said to the two men. "Be here at eight tomorrow mornin'. *I'll* show you a white beaver!"

They were there at eight o'clock the next morning and Cousin Lightner! Once again he proved how kind he is! After shutting Shep in the house, he said I could go along and we started up Two Devil Hollow. When we came near the dam Cousin Lightner made us get down on our hands and knees and crawl. He went ahead. When we broke out of the sweet fern, he turned and beckoned to us. We crawled up beside him and, sure enough, there was the white beaver!

It was about two hundred yards away, near an aspen tree, and it was the whitest thing I ever saw. William Allison sounded awful excited when he whispered:

"How will we get near it?"

"Show me how to work your picter machine." Cousin Lightner whispered back. "I'll get near."

William Allison showed him. Cousin Lightner took the picture machine and started to crawl on his belly towards the beaver. He made a wonderful stalk, but was still about twenty yards away when the beaver lunged. The aspen tree shook. The beaver scampered towards the water, and Cousin Lightner ran like fury trying to head it off. He couldn't. The beaver jumped in and dived.

"Gone!" said William Allison.

We all ran over to Cousin Lightner. I have never seen him any redder or any madder. He was muttering to himself, but all I caught was: "The damn thing! After all the apples I fed him, too!"

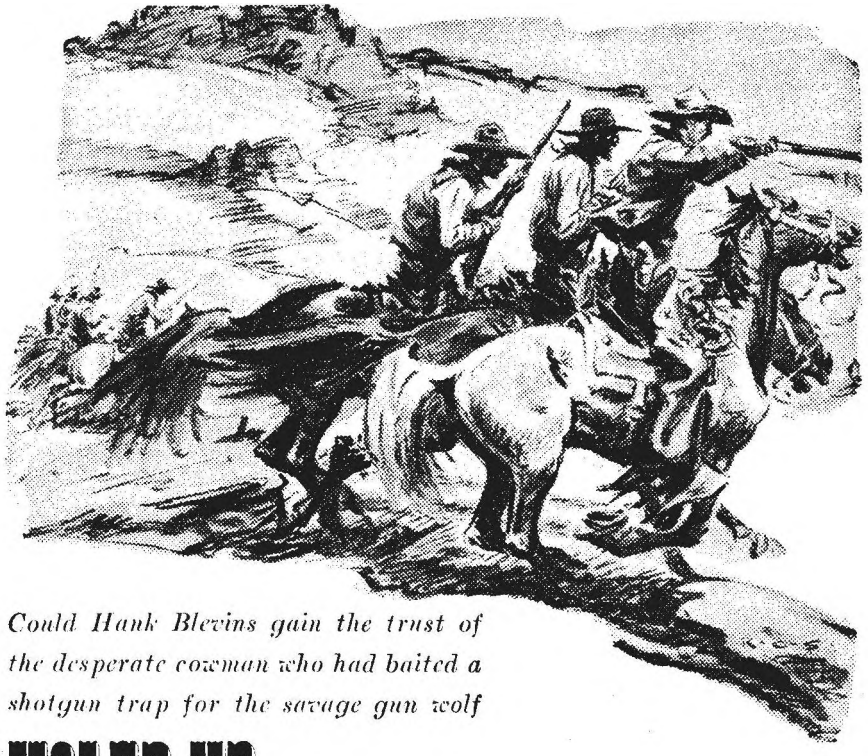
Far out in the water a brown beaver's head broke water, and trailing behind it was some sort of white stuff, just like somebody had tossed a bottle of milk into the dam. William Allison and Arthur Pratt were looking at it, and while they looked Cousin Lightner kicked something behind the aspen tree. It was Shep's chain, and a broken collar dangled from it. William Allison and Arthur Pratt looked at each other.

"Uh . . ." William Allison said. "I think we've hunted albino beaver long enough. Good-by."

My poor cousin! It seems that all he has is disappointments, and him sick too! Tomorrow he's got to go to Red Board and buy some more whitewash. At supper Annie said that night she was sure there was anyhow two quarts left.

But somehow it wasn't there when she went out to look for it.

THE END



Could Hank Blevins gain the trust of the desperate cowman who had baited a shotgun trap for the savage gun wolf

HOLED UP UNDER THE RIM

By Walt Coburn

I

It was a shotgun trap. The gun was hidden in the brush along the barbed wire fence and so rigged that when a man got off his horse and opened the pole gate and swung it open, a whang leather string tripped the shotgun trigger.

At close range, in the peaceful silence of the Utah twilight, the explosion of that twelve-gauge shotgun was louder than the roar of a cannon.

Hank Blevins got the full charge of the shotgun blast in the back. But low, below the belt, in the seat of his old faded Levi overalls. His

leather chaps protected his legs but the result was disastrous. He let out a wild, sharp yelp of pain as he went down. Yanked off his feet, he sprawled on the ground when his horse spooked and whirled and jerked the bridle reins from his hand.

Pain stung the small of Hank's back and it was as though he'd sat on a hornet's nest or been bucked off into a patch of cholla cactus. His horse stampeded, snorting, the stirrups of his empty saddle flapping. Hank scrambled up onto his feet, clawing for his six-shooter. The stinging pain was needling him and he was gritting his teeth and grunting a little.

From the thick heavy brush on the opposite side of the pole gate from where the shotgun trap was set came the sound of a man chuckling. The chuckle had a dry, rattling sound, ominous and dangerous. Yet there was grim humor in it as if the man hidden behind the brush were enjoying the little show.

Hank Blevins heard it through the dying echoes of the shotgun blast and his right hand came away from his six-shooter. The pain stung like burning nettles now. He wondered dazedly how he was able to stand on his legs when he'd gotten the full blast of a shotgun, because if it was buckshot he'd be torn apart. Now that the first shock was wearing off, the pain was needling him into anger. But he had sense enough not to pull his six-shooter. Hank Blevins was a stranger in a strange land. And it was a part of lawless cow country where he'd heard there was a range war going on.

Hank cut a quick desperate look across his shoulder and saw the horse he had "borrowed" last night finally get fouled up about a hundred yards away with the trailing bridle reins caught in the brush. Right now Hank was afoot and at the mercy of that man concealed behind the brush.

"Kind o' stings, don't it, stranger?" The brittle voice had a chuckle in it.

Hank Blevins grunted. He rubbed the palm of his hand gingerly across the seat of his faded old Levis and looked at it, expecting to find blood. There was no blood. He felt again and more thoroughly. There was a little blood but not much, and though the pain was still as sharp as stinging nettles, he had the full use of both legs and his flesh wasn't mangled by buckshot.

"What the devil . . ."

"Rock salt," said the brittle voice. "Shore does the job. It's the first time I tried 'er out. . . . She'll do."

He let Hank stand there. And then in spite of the pain a slow grin spread across Hank's leathery face and the grin puckered his eyes. He was almighty glad right now, and thankful he was alive. Alive for a little while longer, anyhow.

"Rock salt, eh?" he gritted. He was rubbing the seat of his Levis now with both hands.

"You take a hunk of rock salt an' pound it with a shoein' hammer. Empty the buckshot out of the shell an' load in the coarse salt an' replace the wad. Set your shotgun to aim about belly high. The gate staub is fixed to bother a man so he can't just reach down from his horse an' yank 'er out. He's got to git off. He's afoot when he opens the gate to lead his horse through. Then *ker-wham!* He's shot and he thinks he's shot all to hell and his horse spooks and there he is. Shore set afoot and I got him at a disadvantage. It taken me a while to work 'er out. And you come along to give 'er a tryout. What do you think of it, stranger?"

"What I think of it," grinned Hank Blevins wryly, "can't be put into proper language."

"If you got ary religion in you, young feller," cackled the dry brittle voice from behind the brush, "then thank your Maker it wasn't buckshot."

"I've already done that, mister."

Some of the rock salt was embedded in his hide and the pain was sharp and biting. But he tried to tough it out. The owner of that dry cackle was watching him, studying him, sizing him up. Perhaps sizing him up for the kill. Hank Blevins wasn't going to weaken.

He kept the grin frozen on his face and stood there, a man about thirty with wiry black hair and a week's growth of black whiskers. Blunt-jawed, short-nosed, he had a wide mouth and his eyes, slate-gray, were set under heavy straight black brows. He was five feet eight with his boots on, heavy through his chest and with shoulders that wedged down to a flat hard belly and lean flanks. His legs in their shabby leather chaps were bowed.

His denim brush jumper was faded, his Stetson hat sweat marked and pulled into useful shape. He looked like any drifting cowpuncher riding the grubline and traveling light without a packed bed horse. Traveling south and within a long hard day's ride of the outlaw hideout called Robbers' Roost in the southeast part of Utah.

"I never was much of a hand," said

the dry voice, "to ask questions. A man's name or where he come from or where he's headed for, is his own private business. But these is troublesome times. Every stranger comes under suspicion."

"Hank Blevins is my name. I come from Montana. I'm on my way to Old Mexico. Just a-driftin'. There's not a thing gained or lost if you cut me down here in my tracks. If you'll let me git my horse I'll keep driftin' along."

"No hard feelin's?"

"I'll write it off to experience. And, like you said, be grateful it wasn't buckshot."

In the silence that followed, Hank felt the scrutiny of the hidden man's eyes.

"That horse of yourn looks like you got 'im about rode down. Any of that rock salt in your hide?"

"Some."

"Better git your horse an' come on to the cabin. I'll take a chance on you."

He stepped out of the brush then. A tall, gaunt, rawboned man with leathery hide and gray beard, moustache and hair. Under shaggy brows were deep-set eyes that were as blue as a rain-washed sky. His nose was high-bridged, jutting, as though it was roughly hewn from dark, weathered granite. In the crook of his left arm was a saddle carbine. He wore a wooden-handled six-shooter in an open holster fastened to a filled cartridge belt that sagged heavily around his lean flanks. His faded Levi overalls and old blue flannel shirt were clean, his boots were tallowed and his old black Stetson hat was brushed. He walked with a ramrod-straight erectness.

In spite of his cowman's clothes and his guns and the shotgun trap he had set, this gaunt white-maned man had more the look of a parson than a killer. His smile was kindly and warmed the cold blue of his puckered eyes.

He walked over to where Hank Blevins stood and their eyes met and held as they studied one another at close range. Then the tall man held out a calloused hand.

"A sorry welcome, stranger." The voice had lost its dry brittle sound. It was gentler, more mellow. "I'm John Lamb . . . Mormon John."

The grip of his big hand was crushing. He towered head and shoulders above Hank Blevins.

II

Mormon John . . . A name to conjure with. Hank Blevins had heard it spoken for the first time back at Robbers' Roost. And under strange grim circumstances. Inside the glow of a campfire where outlaws were squatted around on spurred boot heels—hard-eyed, grim-lipped men with law bounties on their heads. Their backs were to the night's shadows as a jug was passed around.

Hank Blevins, a stranger among them, had sat listening to their talk, some of it meaningless or having a hidden meaning to the initiate. Then one of those renegades had mentioned the name of Mormon John.

"That murderin' Danite!" snarled another man's voice across the campfire at Robbers' Roost. "That Avenging Angel! The coldest-blooded murderer that ever shot a man in the back or hired the murder done by one of his Danite killers!"

"You're a liar!"

Two guns had spewed jets of flame across the open campfire while those other men had scrambled back out of the line of gunfire. Two guns had shot it out. And then the guns were silent and the rough, rocky badlands of Robbers' Roost had flung back the echoes in the night. When the echoes died out two men lay dead on the ground.

None of the others had taken it up from there. The two dead men were dragged back from the fire and their bodies shrouded with bed tarps. The jug was passed around and the talk was resumed. But the name of Mormon John was not spoken again that night. And at daybreak graves were dug and the two tarp-wrapped bodies were buried.

Hank Blevins had helped with his share of the grave digging and burial. In the cold gray light of dawn he had gotten a good look at the dead men. The one who had defended the name and reputation of Mormon John was fair-haired and beardless, a young man twenty years old at the most. The man who had called Mormon John a Danite Avenging Angel had coarse black hair sprinkled with gray and even in death had looked tough and evil.

Daylight and more whiskey had loosened some of their renegade tongues and they had talked about the man they called Mormon John. And while no man would openly declare himself one way or the other and what they said they quoted as hearsay, Hank Blevins had heard Mormon John called both good and evil. Some spoke of him as John Lamb and they said of him that he would give a man on the dodge enough grub to take the wrinkles out of his belly and stake him to a fresh horse to travel on.

Others were suspicious of Mormon John and declared they would go empty-bellied and afoot before they would stop at his ranch "Under the Rim" for a change of horses.

"Shucks, yes," said one of the Robbers' Roost renegades, "Mormon John will feed a man on the dodge. He'll stake you to a fresh horse. But before he'll let you ride out o' his part of the cow country, he'll give you the name and description of some man on his Danite black list. Mormon John will tell you where to locate that black-listed feller. When you've killed him, then Mormon John will let you git along your trail—if you're still alive. That's the price Mormon John, boss man of the Danite Avenging Angels, charges for his grub and the fresh Boxed L horse he's staked you to. Don't take my word for it, misters. It's this Robbers' Roost rotgut likker a-talkin'."

"And so much for your likker talk, mister. John Lamb never killed any man that didn't need killin'. I punched cows for Mormon John when his Boxed L was one of the

biggest cattle spreads in Utah and he paid his tithes to the Mormon Church. He lived up to the laws of the Church. The Mormons are good people. And until Uncle Sam got after 'em on account of some of 'em had more than one Mormon wife, John Lamb was just a cattleman and his big Boxed L was just one more big cow outfit in the country.

"Then somethin' happened and nobody but Mormon John Lamb knows what it was. Uncle Sam sent soldiers into Utah to put a stop to Mormon polygamy, and that's a fact.

"But John Lamb had one wife and only one. That I know for a fact because I was workin' for his outfit. I'm no Mormon but I worked with Mormon cowhands and for John Lamb who was a Mormon and still is one. They're good people if they're let alone. Bother 'em and they'll fight for their rights . . .

"Mebbyso John Lamb belonged to the Danites. Mebbyso he was one of them Avenging Angels you hear about. I wouldn't know. But I know John Lamb the man and he's much man. Bother him and he'd stand out in the open and shoot it out with you. But John Lamb never hired a killin' done for him. And you kin gamble on that, misters.

"I wasn't there when John Lamb was run off his big Boxed L range and had to hole up Under the Rim of the Orange Cliffs along Dirty Devil River. I wasn't there when his Mormon cowboys was killed off and his remuda of horses stolen and his Boxed L cattle rustled.

"I wasn't there because John Lamb paid me off and staked me to a horse and told me to quit his Boxed L range because there was ugly trouble comin' and as long as I wasn't a Mormon, I had no part in it and he didn't want my young cowboy blood on his hands. That's all he said when he paid me off. That's the last time I saw John Lamb. But I've heard a-plenty about him since then. And while I can't prove it, I'll gamble my life on it that John Lamb is and always was a good man. And when the time comes that John Lamb needs what help I kin give him, he's got Wild Pete Walters on his side."

Hank Blevins recalled it all now when the tall gray-bearded, gray-haired man said his name was John Lamb . . . Mormon John. It all passed through Hank's mind swiftly and he forced a grin.

"I've about rode that horse down, sir. And till I git the rock salt picked out o' my hide I'd be standin' in my stirrups. I'll be glad to lay over till I kin sit a saddle again. I'll work for my grub. And there's no hard feelin's. I'm still grateful it wasn't buckshot."

Hank Blevins gritted back the pain as he hobbled stiffly towards his horse. He returned to the gate riding high, standing in his stirrups.

Mormon John held the pole gate open until Hank had ridden through. Then he closed the gate and reset his shotgun trap. Leading a saddled horse out from behind the brush, he mounted and rode along the wagon road with Hank. It was half a mile

to the little cluster of log buildings and pole corrals. They rode it in silence.

The place had a run-down, almost deserted look. Mormon John, watching Hank Blevins covertly, spoke in a quiet flat-toned voice.

"I'm all alone here now."

There was something grim about the way he said that. And when Hank Blevins looked at the big man, the eyes of Mormon John Lamb were as bleak as a winter sky.

There was a little graveyard on a low hill above the ranch buildings and corrals. It was enclosed by a barbed wire fence. There must have been a dozen or more graves there, all of them marked by weathered headboards. The wagon road passed the little cemetery and the bleak eyes of Mormon John were fixed on the graves.

He lifted his black Stetson hat in grim salute to the dead and Hank Blevins followed suit.

"I have four sons buried there." Mormon John's voice matched the bleakness of his eyes.

"Four sons," he went on, his voice flat-toned. "The other graves hold the bones of Boxed L Mormon cowpunchers who were loyal and brave enough to stay with me when they knew it meant death. When I was driven from my big Boxed L range to this remote hideout on Dirty Devil River at the edge of Robbers' Roost. . . . And so brave men have shed clean blood."

Mormon John's eyes were cold and blue and bleak as he looked at Hank.

"I set that shotgun trap, loaded the shell with rock salt to set some man afoot there at the gate, as you were set afoot. To put that man at the mercy of Mormon John. . . . But that man will know that he can expect no mercy from me."

Looking into the bleak blue eyes, Hank Blevins nodded.

"Your name is Hank Blevins," said Mormon John. "You come from Wyoming. You have no part in this blood-spattered feud. Work for Mormon John and the only wages he can offer you is death. So tomorrow I will stake you to a good stout Boxed L horse to carry you far away from Dirty Devil River and Robbers' Roost."

"I know a man at Robbers' Roost," said Hank Blevins, "who talked like he's on his way here to your place. To work for you at them kind of wages. His name is Walters. Wild Pete Walters."

"I sent young Pete Walters away." Mormon John spoke harshly. "Ten years ago. He should not be coming back here. Unless . . ."

He left it unfinished there and fell into a deep silence. A strange spark of light was there in his cold bleak blue eyes.

III

Mormon John Lamb filled two tin cups to the brim with whiskey. It was good whiskey, well aged in the keg. When they had drunk it down, the cowman picked the rock salt out of Hank Blevins' hide with a pair of tweezers and gave him some salve to rub into the shallow wounds. The salve drew out the pain and Hank

said he would be able to ride a horse tomorrow. Then he'd be on his way, Mexico bound.

"Unless," he said. "I kin talk you into hirin' me."

"That one drink of likker make you that drunk, young man?"

"It's good likker, sir."

"I am called John."

"But it ain't the likker that's talkin', John."

"They have sent spies before."

"But you know I ain't a spy."

"I'm not hiring any man."

"But your outfit is short-handed. John."

"There is no more Boxed L outfit. Just this ranch and a little remuda of saddle horses and work mules. I can do my own chores around the place. You're welcome to grub and tonight's bed. Tomorrow you will ride on your way to Mexico."

Hank shook his head. He did not know just when he had come to this decision. Nor was the reason quite clear in his own mind.

"I want to stay here," he told Mormon John. "Lend you a hand with whatever you've got for a hired hand to do. Side you the best I can, when there's trouble."

"Why, son?"

Mormon John put the question quietly. His eyes were puckered, studying this drifting cowhand who had no cause or reason to give him any friendship.

"I don't know why. I'd never heard of you till I rode down the Outlaw Trail from Brown's Hole to Robbers' Roost. It was at Robbers' Roost I first heard of Mormon John. There was a young towheaded cowboy there. Just a driftin' kid who didn't look as though he belonged in an outlaw hideout. If he had a name I never heard it spoken.

"And there was an ornery-lookin' renegade with iron-gray hair and pale eyes and a wicked tongue. I heard him called Bonner. Bonner got ugly drunk. And he cussed the name of Mormon John.

"This towheaded young cowboy called Bonner a liar. They went for their guns and shot it out and when the shootin' was over they was both dead—the towheaded kid and Bonner. They'd killed each other.

"It wasn't till mebbyso an hour or two after the shootin' that Wild Pete Walters rode into the camp. He took care of his horse and had a drink from the jug and watched a poker game that was goin' on around a tarp spread on the ground by the fire. I was a stranger there and I was tendin' to my own business and takin' no part in anything.

"Sittin' off to myself, I saw this feller called Wild Pete Walters when he rode up. Saw him look over every man there like he was huntin' for somebody. But he never asked a question. When somebody told him about the double killin' he walked over to where the two dead fellers lay under bed tarps.

"I was watchin' him when he lifted the tarp that covered the dead towheaded kid and from the look on his face, I knew that Wild Pete Walters had found whoever he was huntin' for. But he said nothin'. Just laid back the tarp easylike as

if he was coverin' up somebody he knowed and liked.

"It was daybreak when I helped bury the two dead fellers. And it was when he stood there at the grave of the towheaded boy that Wild Pete Walters declared himself.

"Pete Walters told every man there that he had worked for John Lamb's Boxed L outfit. That John Lamb was a good Mormon and a good man. That you'd paid him off and told him to drift because you didn't want his blood on your hands. And he wound up by sayin' that when the time came that John Lamb needed what help Wild Pete Walters could give him, he was on your side."

Hank Blevins was helping Mormon John get supper ready while he talked.

"Pete was about twenty years old when I sent him away," said Mormon John. "The best hand with a green bronc I ever saw. And with a wild streak in him that was bound to crop out. I've heard he turned outlaw."

"Pete Walters came out of Brown's Hole," said Hank, "to take a hand in the Wyoming cattle war. That's where and how I met him. Not actually to know him. But we was on the same side while the fightin' lasted. I drifted out o' Wyoming in a hurry an' headed down the Outlaw Trail because it was my quickest and safest trail out.

"Wild Pete Walters wasn't but a day or two behind me, I reckon. But when we met at Robbers' Roost we met as strangers. Because it ain't safe for men like Pete Walters and Hank Blevins to know each other. Some of the blood that got spilled on the ground in Wyoming will never dry. And amongst renegade strangers like there at Robbers' Roost a man never knows who might be an enemy. So me'n Wild Pete Walters met like strangers.

"I was ready to pull out when Wild Pete Walters shoved somethin' into my chaps pocket. When I got a few miles gone, I took a look at it. What Wild Pete had shoved into my chaps pocket was a little map he'd drawn on a hunk of wrappin' paper. It showed me the trail from Robbers' Roost to your ranch here on Dirty Devil River. It's marked here 'Mormon John's Ranch.'"

Hank took the folded brown paper from his overalls pocket and handed it to the cowman.

"I owe a debt to Wild Pete Walters," Hank spoke quietly, "for what he did for the Blevins outfit up in Wyoming. But he ain't the man to ask payment on that kind of a debt. So when he handed me this map it could have bin that he was just layin' out a trail for me with Mormon John's Ranch as a place where I could git a bait of grub and swap horses. But mebbyso he meant for me to wait here till he overtaken me. Any man who is a friend of Wild Pete Walters kin count on Hank Blevins. . . . That's about what it amounts to, sir."

"I am called John," said the bearded cowman.

He spread out the brown paper and studied the crude map drawn on

it with the lead of a soft-nosed .45 cartridge.

"You are welcome to stay here," he said flatly, "until Pete Walters shows up. Then the two of you can travel on together."

"No man on the dodge should wear out his welcome, John. And that's a fact. Me'n Pete Walters might fetch our enemies swarmin' in on you here on Dirty Devil River. We'll drag it as quick as Wild Pete gits here."

"The law close behind you?" Mormon John's eyes were cold. "The law doesn't ride here to Mormon John's. This is No Man's Land."

"The law ain't on my trail and no law officer is fool enough to ride up on Wild Pete Walters. But there was a bunch of hired killers mixed up in the Wyoming Cattle War. Fetched in to wipe out some of us little cow outfits they branded as cattle rustlers. Them hired killers was out to collect the bounty the big outfits put on our hides. And they killed off some of us and run off our cattle and set fire to our cabins.

"Us nesters pooled our int'rests. Some men like Pete Walters rode up out o' Brown's Hole and out of the Hole in the Wall country to throw in with us. And we give them hired killers a battle. When the gun smoke cleared and the dust settled, both sides had lost some men. My father and two brothers was killed. Our ranch was burnt out and our cattle run off.

"I had to make a fast quick choice. Either stay and git killed or drift yonderly. I had a mind to stay and fight it out but Wild Pete Walters changed my mind for me. He told me that he was ridin' back to Brown's Hole and so was the others. For me to hit the Outlaw Trail and foller it south to Robbers' Roost. To keep a-driftin' till I crossed the Mexican border. So I taken the advice he gave me.

"Them hired killers was ordered to come in. Them that wouldn't come in would be rounded up by a Winchester gatherment. The whole tough pack of hired killers was to be deported. There was a train waitin' to take 'em out o' Wyoming.

"Some of 'em came in. Others was rounded up. But there was one bunch got away. They was tough and on the prod. They had come to Wyoming from Robbers' Roost. They called themselves the Roosters. They was by far the toughest and most cold-blooded and rankest of all the hired killers that was fetched into Wyoming to wipe out us nesters. Those Roosters are on their way back to Robbers' Roost. . . . At least one of 'em got there."

"Bonner." Mormon John spoke flatly.

"Bonner." nodded Hank Blevins. "Though that's no more than a guess on my part from how I sized him up before he got into that ruckus with the towheaded boy, and after I got a good look at his dead carcass. But mostly from the look I saw on Wild Pete Walters' face when he pulled the tarp off Bonner's body."

"Those hired killers called the Roosters," said Mormon John

quietly; "up in Wyoming, did you hear them called by any other name?"

"Yeah." Hank Blevins looked straight into the cold blue eyes of Mormon John Lamb. "They was called the Avenging Angels. Danites. Outlawed by the Mormons."

"Danites." Mormon John's voice was toneless. "Avenging Angels. Destroying Angels."

Darkness had fallen and inside the log cabin Mormon John had a lamp lit. In its light his leathery skin took on a grayish color and his face looked as though it was chiseled roughly from gray granite. And with his gray mane and beard and the bleakness of his blue eyes he stood there like some gaunt raw-boned statue of vengeance.

"Bound by unholy vows. Executioners. The list of membership kept a black secret. Their leader was Ralph Brandon."

Mormon John's big hands clenched until the leathery knuckles were bone-white.

"When the Destroying Angels were given the name of a man, they went after him. They killed him. In some cases they killed not only that man on their Destroying Angels' black list, they murdered him and his whole family or any of his hired men who were loyal enough to fight in the condemned man's defense. . . . The name of John Lamb was given to the Destroying Angels. . . ."

The lines in the face of Mormon John deepened there in the lamplight until they looked like deep cuts. From under the shaggy brows his bleak eyes stared. Stared into the past to see things there that shriveled his heart and left in it no mercy.

IV

Hank Blevins stood there, watching the bearded cowman, waiting while Mormon John got control of the terrible emotion that gripped his gaunt frame.

"Ralph Brandon," Mormon John said when he had gotten a grip on his emotions, "was the leader of the Danites. His power was tremendous, widespread, its tentacles countless. He became the most feared man I have ever known. To make an enemy of Ralph Brandon meant certain death."

Mormon John Lamb could shed illiteracy like a shabby coat. His talk and his manner of speaking were those of an educated man, perhaps a preacher of God's word.

"I have never known," he went on, "whether or not I incurred the enmity of Ralph Brandon, the man. This much I swear. I had no quarrel with the Mormon Church or its Latter Day Saints. I was a Mormon. I was married to the daughter of a Mormon. I raised my children in the Mormon faith.

"When the question arose concerning plural marriage, I was silent. I have never condemned polygamy; neither did I practice it. I was married to my one wife. I was content.

"Eph Bonner was a Danite. He was first in command under Ralph Brandon, the field leader of the

Danites, the Destroying Angels. Eph Bonner had six wives. Each of those wives bore him several children. When his sons were old enough for it, Bonner swore them into the Danites. The Bonner you saw killed at Robbers' Roost was one of those sons. There were nineteen of Eph Bonner's sons members of the Danites at one time. How many of them are left I have no way of knowing. Some of them have been killed off while they were doing their night-riding Destroying Angel murders. Others went to Wyoming as hired killers, calling themselves the Roosters. . . . But I'm getting ahead of my story.

"The United States government sent its law after all Mormons who were practicing polygamy. Eph Bonner moved his plural wives and his sons and their wives to the safety of Robbers' Roost.

"Eph Bonner was tough as a boot and he raised his nineteen sons accordingly. They were a power unto themselves. Evil and vicious, greedy and ruthless and relentless. To cross any one of the Bonners meant destruction. They were using their Danite power to put the fear of the Bonners, not the fear of God or respect for the Mormon Church, into men. Men and women . . . and children. Eph Bonner and his sons were completely out of Ralph Brandon's control before Brandon realized it.

"Ralph Brandon, leader of the Danites, openly condemned Eph Bonner and his sons as outlaws – cattle rustlers, horse thieves and murderers. But his condemnation came too late to undo the damage the Bonners had already done. And while perhaps it has no significance, Brandon did not condemn Eph Bonner and his sons until after the United States government had driven them into the lawless exile of Robbers' Roost."

"My quarrel with Bonner and his sons was personal. I caught them rustling my Boxed L cattle. I warned Bonner and his tough sons to stay off my range.

"I have never known whether or not Bonner obtained the collusion or consent of Brandon. The Danite leader died shortly afterwards and I never got the chance to charge him with the accusation. But Eph Bonner, acting as field leader and range boss for the Danites, the Destroying Angels, accused me of withholding my cattle tithes to the Mormon Church. A lying accusation but Bonner and his nineteen sons were in power. Bonner sent me a warning that the Destroying Angels were coming after me.

"I knew the meaning of that warning and lost no time in acting on it. Under the black cover of night, I sent my wife and daughters and my two youngest sons away from their ranch home at the old Boxed L headquarters ranch. My five older sons and a crew of loyal and courageous Mormon cowboys stayed behind with me to fight the Bonners when they came.

"One man and only one man went along with my wife and children when I sent them to the exile of

safety. I knew that I could trust that young cowboy even though he was not a Mormon. It was his job to escort my family to safety and beyond the evil and vicious reach of the Bonners. I offered him money in payment. He refused to accept a dollar. And he did his job thoroughly. I have never seen him since the night he left, armed and on horseback, piloting that little wagon train away from the only home they knew and into faraway exile. . . . That man was Pete Walters."

Mormon John's voice softened when he spoke the name of Pete Walters.

"I have told you this, Hank Blevins, because this same Pete Walters has given you the reckless forthright loyalty he gave John Lamb and his family. Because I have read in your eyes something that tells me you can be trusted with a secret that until now has been sealed with silence. Because Pete Walters sent you here and he will be coming soon. And because I am alone now. Perhaps I am growing weak in my advanced years. I have just buried the last of those Mormon cowhands who refused to desert me. And you rode up at a time when I was setting a shotgun trap for Eph Bonner to set that Danite outlaw afoot and at my mercy. And there is no mercy left in the heart of Mormon John Lamb. When old Eph Bonner springs that shotgun trap—"

From the darkness of the night came the distant, ominous sound of the shotgun's loud blast!

V

For a big man with more gray than black in his hair and beard, Mormon John moved with incredible speed and without a lost motion.

"Stay here, Hank!"

His brittle voice came from the darkness. Because before the shotgun explosion died in the night the bearded cowman had the lamp light blown out. Then he had the door open and was gone in the night.

Hank Blevins heard him running towards the barn where he had left his horse saddled and the saddle cinch slack, in one of the stalls. A moment later Mormon John was riding at a run into the night.

Hank forgot the lingering pain of the rock salt wounds. He had his saddle gun and was outside in the darkness, staring into the night, his ears strained, every nerve taut. There was part of a white moon riding the sky and it shed a pale cold light. The country was level and spotted by patches of sagebrush. Open country.

For a moment Hank caught sight of Mormon John riding at a run towards the pole gate. Then horse and rider veered off from the wagon trail and were lost to sight in the brush. Hank got his fresh horse from the barn and saddled quickly. He mounted and headed for the pole gate, his saddle carbine ready to shoot.

Before he reached the gate he heard the warning crack of a .30-30 saddle carbine. A bullet whined over Hank's head so close that he ducked.

"Stand your hand!" barked a voice from the brush near the gate.

That wasn't the voice of Mormon John. But it had a familiar sound. It came again from behind the high brush near the pole gate that was open.

"Powder River!" barked the hidden voice.

"A mile wide and a foot deep!" Hank Blevins called back, his blood pounding.

"That you, Hank?"

"It's me. That you, Wild Pete?"

"Me'n some more like me."

"Someone tripped the shotgun trap. But don't git quick triggered," Hank warned. "Or you'll shoot Mormon John. You must've seen him ride up—"

Wild Pete Walters let out a laugh. It sounded loud in the night. He had a hearty laugh but this had more than mirth in it. Sheer relief and a pitch of excitement were in it. Then it stopped.

"I learnt long ago never to git careless when I opened a gate where there might be a shotgun trap laid. So I sprung it cautious. A load of buckshot shore got wasted in the air. . . . I was told that Mormon John was dead. So when a feller rode up at a high lope, then off the trail into the high brush, I didn't know who was bushed up. . . . You there, John?" There was a tenseness to the voice of Wild Pete Walters.

Mormon John rode out from behind the brush and towards the open gate. And from the opposite side of the barbed wire fence Wild Pete Walters rode out to meet him.

The two men met there on horseback at the opened pole gate. Their hands gripped as each man leaned forward in his saddle. Silence was their way of greeting. Watching them, remembering what Mormon John had told him, Hank Blevins understood that silence. He knew that the gray-bearded Mormon John and Wild Pete Walters were both too choked with strong, inarticulate emotion to give voice to any words.

Tears were still in the eyes of Mormon John and tears already shed had coursed unheeded and unchecked down the man's leathery face into his gray beard, when Hank Blevins rode up.

Wild Pete Walters was a towheaded six-footer, lean and long muscled. Sandy whiskers a week old and dust-grimed marred the clean hard line of his jaw. There was a grin twisted on his mouth and it puckered his gray-green eyes to slivers.

Pete Walters had been a range orphan, making his own living first as a horse wrangler, than as a cowhand and bronc rider. Though he had been cheated out of his boyhood, he would never grow old, even if he lived to be a hundred. He took his fun wherever he could find it, wild and reckless, fun-loving, fighting when he had to fight. Loyalty and the meaning of friendship were his only religion. Pete Walters fought in the open. But when he was pitted against bushwhacker odds he could

use their rules and beat them at their own game.

Now Wild Pete took off his hat and lifted it high and motioned with it. And from the high brush along the fence came half a dozen heavily armed men on horseback.

One of them gigged his horse to a lope and came on ahead of the others. Hank, sitting his horse near Mormon John and Wild Pete Walters, watched the rider come up and rein his horse to a halt. He was a boy about eighteen or twenty with light-brown hair, tanned skin and puckered blue eyes.

"I'm David," he said and he rode up alongside Mormon John.

"David!" Mormon John's voice choked.

Then the gray-bearded cowman reached out both big arms and embraced the young cowboy. And Hank Blevins knew them now for father and son.

"Come out, Long John—or I'll come in after yuh!"

"Reuben was killed." Wild Pete Walters broke the news quietly. "At Robbers' Roost. Zeke Bonner killed him. But Rube killed Zeke. . . . Hank Blevins might have told you about the shootin', though he didn't know Reuben Lamb by name. . . . I got there too late, John."

"Hank Blevins told me, Pete." Mormon John had his one remaining son gripped by the shoulders, looking at him as a father looks at the grown son he last saw ten years ago, as a boy.

"Your mother, David . . . your sisters?"

"All well, father. They sent their love . . . and mother said for me to fetch you back to her . . . when our work was done here."

Mormon John Lamb did a strange thing then. Yet no man who watched saw anything odd about his actions. He dismounted slowly and, taking off his old black hat, knelt down on the ground.

His son David was off his horse, kneeling there beside his father, head also bared. The light-brown head of youth, the iron-gray mane of age bowed as Mormon John thanked his God in words that were low-toned and husky with emotion.

"Thy will be done . . . Protect us. Unite us once more . . . Forgive us . . . for that which we must do. We ask Thy mercy, Thy protection. . . . Amen."

Hank Blevins, Wild Pete Walters and half a dozen outlaws from Brown's Hole sat their horses in silence, their hats in their hands.

They found nothing strange about the prayer that Mormon John offered there on his knees to the God in whom he still believed. Though they were men who knew little of the teachings of God, they had all lived very close to death's shadow. And each man of them, in his own way, had his respect for an Almighty God and some sort of belief in His workings.

"Amen." was echoed in their hearts.

When Mormon John and his son were mounted again, the gray-bearded cowman faced the half dozen outlaws Wild Pete Walters had fetched along here with him. The cowman dropped easily into the rough vernacular of the range and the language of the dim outlaw trails.

"I don't know how much or how little Wild Pete has told you boys. But it's none of your quarrel and there's no reward in workin' for Mormon John, like I told Hank Blevins, except death. . . ."

"Shucks, Reverend," spoke up a big red-whiskered tough-looking member of this outlaw gang, "all the reward we want is a chance to gut-shoot one of them blasted Roosters."

Wild Pete Walters chuckled. "Mormon John ain't no Reverend, Red. He'll drink hard likker with you or set with you in a poker game. And till you've seen Mormon John yank Eph Bonner and his biggest, toughest son out o' their saddles and bang their Destroyin' Angels' skulls together till they cracked like dry gourds, like I watched him do, you ain't never seen a fightin' man in action. . . . I told this bunch of gentle Annies there might be a keg at Mormon John's cabin."

"They won't be disappointed. . . . So you sprung the shotgun trap, Pete?"

"And you lost a charge of good buckshot, John."

"Rock salt," grinned Hank Blevins and stood in his stirrups to feel the seat of his Levis.

Hank Blevins knew and remembered Big Red and the other outlaws from Brown's Hole. They had all come out of the outlaw hideout country called Brown's Hole with Wild Pete Walters to side the Blevins outfit and other nesters in their war against the hired killers up in Wyoming. Since meeting Mormon John and hearing his story of the Bonner Destroying Angels Hank understood now what Wild Pete Walters had told him that last night up in Wyoming when he refused Hank Blevins' thanks for the gun fighting Wild Pete and the Brown's Hole outlaws had done.

"Don't waste thanks on us, Hank," Wild Pete had said then. "My grudge against them Roosters goes back a long ways. To when they called theirselves the Danites, the Destroyin' Angels. My only sorrow is that them coyotes got away from us. But I know where to cut their dirty sign again to pick this up where we're leavin' it in Wyoming. You hit the Outlaw Trail, Hank. Foller it down to Robbers' Roost. Like as not, I'll overtake you before you

cross the Mexican line. . . . So long till then."

Now they were together again. And Hank Blevins was learning the why and wherefore of things that men didn't talk about.

Hank Blevins was one of them now, though he was no outlaw. Wild Pete Walters had come back to Utah to side Mormon John. Somewhere, Pete Walters had hidden John Lamb's wife and daughters and two youngest sons. Then one of those sons had shown up at Robbers' Roost. The other son had come along with Wild Pete.

"Reuben got impatient," David told Mormon John. "He left Brown's Hole ahead of us. He'd cut the sign of Zeke Bonner and trailed him to Robbers' Roost. Wild Pete had told me'n Rube a million times never to git into an argument with any man unless he was there to back us up. But Rube was hot-tempered and heady."

"Dave's the level-headed boy," said Wild Pete.

A man buried his grief with its dead. Mormon John hid it in his happiness in the return of his other son.

Wild Pete Walters grinned at Hank Blevins. "Let's hear some more about that rock salt, Hank."

Hank said he'd be able to tell it funnier after supper and when he wasn't standing in his stirrups.

And it was when they had turned loose their leg-weary horses and had fresh Boxed L horses tied in the stalls at the big barn and supper was over that Hank told how he'd been caught in the shotgun trap.

They sat up late that night, smoking and swapping yarns. Hank Blevins, Big Red and the other outlaws.

Meanwhile Mormon John, David and Wild Pete Walters squatted on their hunkers down at the barn and talked about other things. Things that belonged to them alone.

VI

It must have been midnight when young Dave came from the barn to the cabin where Hank Blevins and the others were.

"Mormon John wants to see you, Hank," said Dave and he went back to the barn with Blevins.

"Mormon John," said Wild Pete, "is kind o' lonesome starved for news about his wife and daughters." A grin twisted his whiskered mouth.

"I told him you could tell him more than I could. Especially about his daughter Sarah."

"Uh?" Hank grunted as though Wild Pete had just kicked him hard in the belly.

"Remember the Widder Smith and her daughters," chuckled Wild Pete Walters, "at Rock Springs, Wyoming? It wasn't safe for her to keep the name of Mrs. John Lamb. So she changed it to Smith, and there wasn't ary husband so she was the Widder Smith. She's got the hotel there. And up until the Wyoming cattle war busted out, the Blevins boys were star boarders there in her hotel dinin' room. Hank Blevins,

in particular. . . . Them ears of yourn a natural red, Hank, or do you paint 'em?"

Hank grinned and said to give him time to get his wind back. He'd just had it knocked out of him.

"You never met the two boys, Rube and Dave," continued Wild Pete. "I kept 'em with me at my ranch in Brown's Hole. It was safer thataway, because there was no knowin' when one of them Danite Bonners might show up on the prowl at Rock Springs. They wouldn't dare harm the women because the cow town of Rock Springs would quick lynch any man that bothered the Widder Smith and her daughters. But boys is different. And I was raisin' Rube an' Dave to look out after themselves and kind o' trainin' 'em to take their own part if ever the Danite Bonners showed up. Only time I ever taken Rube an' Dave to Rock Springs was after dark and on the sly. I had to do the best I knowed how to keep them two boys alive. . . . Even then that snake Zeke Bonner got Rube. . . ."

"Easy, son." Mormon John laid his big hand on Wild Pete's shoulder. "I've got David left."

Then Mormon John was looking at Hank Blevins and smiling faintly, no hardness left in his eyes.

"My wife told Pete," said Mormon John, "that Sarah wanted to marry Hank Blevins. That you had come to her and asked her permission to marry her daughter and that she had to turn you down. My wife was afraid, Hank. She'd seen too much terror and bloodshed here in Utah. There was a range war threatening Wyoming and the Blevins outfit was mixed up in it. She liked you. She would have been proud to have you for a son-in-law. But she feared and dreaded seeing her daughter widowed while she was still a young bride."

"That's what she told me," said Hank quietly. "I understood. Sarah and I talked it out with her. Sarah told me she'd wait till I got located in Mexico. When it was safe to send for her, she'd come."

Mormon John nodded. "Your trail to Mexico is wide open, son. Pete and I have talked it over. I've got money buried here. Plenty of it. It's yours when you leave in the morning. When you're located in Mexico, find a place there for my wife and her other three daughters not too far from where you and Sarah will be ranching. . . . You'll be the man of the family, from here on, Hank."

Hank Blevins stood there on widespread bowed legs. His fists knotted and hot anger surged up inside him. "Would you want your daughter to marry a yellow-bellied, bushy-tailed, two-legged coyote?" His voice was harsh.

"I told you, John," grinned Wild Pete. "I seen this Hank Blevins thing in action. He killed three out o' the seven. Only pity is nary a one of 'em was a Bonner. . . . You can't keep Hank out o' this and I said so."

"I didn't figure I could," smiled the bearded Mormon John. "But I

had to give it a try. . . . You can simmer down now, Hank."

Hank Blevins' anger cooled as quickly as it had flared up. Mormon John said that if by some miracle of God they all came through alive, there would be no need for Hank Blevins or Wild Pete Walters to drift on into Mexico.

"We'll locate in Arizona Territory," said Mormon John. "I've been there and back. I know the place. It's in the pines. Plenty of feed and water. You can grow a stand of alfalfa there in the meadows. Fruit trees are already planted.

"There are log cabins in the shade of the old cottonwoods, a pole corral. The horse pasture and hay meadows are fenced. Split-rail fence, at that, the wood's so plentiful. Snow in the winter makes good feed when it melts in the spring. There's trout in the creek and the deer jump the split-rail fence to graze with the remuda.

"There's room in that valley for a colony. But the ranch I just described is mine. Ours. I bought it fifteen years ago when I knew that Eph Bonner's Danites were going to run me out of Utah. But as long as the Bonners are alive it isn't safe to move my family there. Killing is an ugly business. But the Bonners must be destroyed. When that's done and if we're still among the living, we'll go there to Peaceful Valley.

"You know where it is, Pete. You were along when I bought it from the old-timer who will be there when we come. A hermit of sorts who sold it to me for no more than a prayer. On one condition. No firearms allowed, no gun of any kind. Because the wild game, the quail and doves and wild turkey, the deer and even the bear and mountain lions are to be unharmed.

"He named it Peaceful Valley. It was given to him, he said, by the Indians. He swapped it to me for a prayer. A strange man who said he read something in my eyes. A hermit with long white hair and beard and a gentle voice that could call the birds and wild animals to his door. An ageless man. He said he would be there to welcome me and my family when I got there. Perhaps he's something of a prophet. God alone knows."

Pete Walters nodded. There was a bright glint in his puckered gray-green eyes.

"I never forgot that Peaceful Valley or the old hermit. That's where I wanted to take the little wagon train. But it wasn't safe. Not while there was a one of the Bonner tribe left alive. But before I left Wyoming I took a chance. Crowded our luck, mebby. I told the Widder Smith to sell her hotel, take the girls and board the train to Prescott, Arizona. And go from Prescott by wagon to Peaceful Valley. When I started to draw a map showin' her how to get there, she said she knew the trail. That you'd told her how to get there, John. They will be waitin' for us. Mebbyso that's crowdin' our luck a little. But I reckon not. God owes you that much, John."

"A man of simple faith," Mormon

John laid a fatherly hand on the shoulder of Wild Pete Walters, then smiled at Hank Blevins.

"Unlike you and Sarah, Hank, Pete and my oldest daughter Rebecca got married first. Then told Rebecca's mother. Rebecca said she would far rather be the widow of an outlaw than to die denied of the love she and Pete had for each other since they first met."

Then the talk changed and they went to the cabin to make their plans for war. The Bonner Destroying Angels, said Mormon John, would attack at night. This time, perhaps, to their own destruction.

VII

There were still twelve of the Bonner sons left alive. Old Man Eph Bonner rode in the lead of those sons of his. A full moon was pushing itself slowly up from behind the rim of the high open mesa known as Robbers' Roost. They rode by the pale white light of that moon, thirteen men whose trade was killing. And if a man believed in ghosts, then he might see the ghosts of the other Bonners riding with these living to bring their number up to nineteen sons, with Eph Bonner riding in the lead of them. Danites. Destroying Angels. Eph Bonner had sired them all. And each of them bore strong resemblance to their sire, in gaunt wolfish build, in cruel evil heart.

Ralph Brandon, organizer and leading spirit of the dread Danites, leader of the Destroying Angels, said when he outlawed Eph Bonner and his sons that Bonner was insane.

"Eph Bonner bartered his soul and the souls of his sons to Satan. To the fallen angel Lucifer. Destroying Angels, indeed. Eph Bonner and his nineteen sons are true disciples of the fallen angel. Their bodies and souls have been bartered to Lucifer. I wash my hands of them, ban them from the Mormon Church. Let them ride to their own evil destruction."

When Ralph Brandon had chosen Eph Bonner for his field leader of the Destroying Angels, to punish men who violated the laws of the Mormon Church, he had chosen too well. Eph Bonner was a born killer. Born without a drop of mercy in his blood. He killed because he had the lust to kill and the thirst for human blood. He bred that into each and every one of his sons.

Eph Bonner rode now. A tall gaunt man, his face clean shaved and fleshless as a death's head skull. Long and lean-jawed with the weathered skin tight drawn like dried rawhide over the skull bone structure. He had the long, lean pointed jaw of a wolf with wolf fangs yellowed when they bared in a lipless grin. And from that rawhide-covered death's head glittered a pair of pale yellow eyes that were like the eyes of a gaunt gray wolf on the prowl. His hair, once black, had long ago turned dirty gray.

Eph Bonner sat his horse as no other man ever rode, leaning forward across the saddlehorn, head thrust still further forward on a gaunt

neck. He rode a long stirrup and there was no saddle scabbard for the rifle he carried in the crook of his left arm. It could be protected against bad weather by an Indian tanned buckskin sheath. But on nights like this its naked steel barrel glinted in the moonlight. So rode Eph Bonner who still arrogantly called himself the leader of the Destroying Angels.

Behind him rode his twelve remaining sons. Tall, gaunt, black-haired, clean shaved like their evil sire. All rode the same long stirrup. All of them were stamped with the same evil brand, alike in body and soul.

Eph Bonner held the evil belief that he could never be killed by enemy bullet or knife steel. He had made his unholy pact with the devil, so he told his sons when they were old enough to be told such things and instructed in the vicious pattern of his ways. And while his tough hide was scarred by gun lead and whetted steel, he still lived to prove his claim to a life that could never be destroyed by human hand.

Let one of his sons get killed, Eph Bonner had an answer to fit that death.

"We've sent plenty of tough men to hell. The devil's claimed one of you to ride herd on 'em. When your time comes to go to hell, you go. But not till the devil needs you. Fear nothin'. Ride at it."

Eph Bonner claimed that he feared no man on earth. He had drilled that into each and every one of his sons when he led them or drove them ahead of him into enemy gunfire. And he was certain in his belief that all of his sons were fearless. Because when he was with them they dared not turn back or weaken or flinch. They feared their father far more than they feared all the other tough men on earth.

When Eph Bonner was not with them, the Bonner sons had none of that fearless courage he drove them into showing. They were a night-riding, skulking coyote pack that killed and ran and hid away until time to ride out on another prowl.

Sixteen Bonner sons had ridden up the outlaw trail to fight in the Wyoming cattle war. Only thirteen had ridden back alive. And one of them had been shot and killed by young Reuben Lamb the other night at Robbers' Roost. That left an even dozen of them now.

Bonner had not gone up the outlaw trail for the bounty hunt in Wyoming. He had stayed behind in his cabin "Under the Rim" of the Orange Cliffs below the high mesa called Robbers' Roost. Like some old wolf pack leader grown too old for the enjoyment of that long trail, Eph Bonner's hatred was centered closer to the Robbers' Roost. Alone, Under the Rim of the Orange Cliffs he drank his moonshine whiskey to warm the poison of hatred in his blood, and waited for the return of his Destroying Angels.

Now he led them across the great open mesa of Robbers' Roost. He was headed for Mormon John's place on the Dirty Devil River. He had

put off the destruction of Mormon John until now. Because he hated Mormon John Lamb as he hated no other man on earth. And before he showed Mormon John the mercy of sudden death, he had robbed that cattleman of all that he had on earth to lose. Or so Bonner figured.

Because his sons had lied when they rode back down the Outlaw Trail from Wyoming. They gave Eph Bonner the evil report he expected of them. He had told them not to return without that report.

"We located Mormon John's wife and daughters," the sons of Eph Bonner told their lie. "We wiped 'em out. And we found Wild Pete Walters and killed him where we found him. We found Mormon John's son David and killed him. The other son, Reuben, coyoted and Zeke caught up with him at a camp at Robbers' Roost and killed him. But Zeke got killed by a bullet from Reuben's gun. How do you figure that?" The last question was a clincher to the lie, to get Eph Bonner away from further questions that would require more lying. They dared not admit they had been run out of Wyoming.

"The devil in hell needed Zeke. You shore certain you wiped 'em all out? Pete Walters and them wimmin?"

"We can't lie to you, kin we?"

"Then saddle fresh horses and foller me. I'm headed for the Dirty Devil River. You kin watch me kill Mormon John."

Now they followed old Eph Bonner across the open mesa of Robbers' Roost. They had it made to kill him, shoot him in the back. The old renegade had gone plumb locoed, they decided.

Eph Bonner was bound to find out soon that they had lied, that they had been run out of Wyoming like a cowardly coyote pack. When Eph found out, there was no telling what he might do to them. Go plumb hog wild locoed and commence killing them off. So they'd better shoot him in the back now. They each and all of them had their guns in their hands. Yet all of them were too scared to commence shooting at the back of that evil man ahead who had sired them all. They more than half believed what Eph Bonner had told them all since they were old enough to know what he was talking about. That Eph Bonner, leader of the Destroying Angels, had made a deal with the devil in hell and no bullet was ever molded that could kill him. . . .

They were out on the high open moonlit mesa called Robbers' Roost when old Eph Bonner straightened up and stood high in his stirrups and pointed, at the same time letting out a harsh snarl that was like the howl of an old gray wolf who has smelled out a death trap.

"Looky yonder! Comin' thisaway. That's Mormon John . . . That's Wild Pete Walters ridin' alongside 'im . . . A stranger flankin' Mormon John on his other side. Half a dozen more hossbackers. And, by the devil in hell, they know where they're a-ridin' an' what they're after. You've lied!"

They were too scared of old Eph Bonner now to pull a trigger. He was cursing them as he had been cursing them since they could remember. But this time with a terrible insane fury that tore his voice from corded throat and out from behind his yellow fangs in a wailing scream that was unlike any human sound.

"Git at 'em!" screamed the old leader of the Destroying Angels. "Ride at 'em! Kill 'em! But don't shoot at Mormon John! Mormon John is mine! I'm sendin' Mormon John to hell this night! If I have to foller him there!"

VIII

Even against the night breeze the wailing howling scream of Eph Bonner could be heard.

"God protect us," Mormon John spoke in a deep-toned voice, "from all evil and from harm."

Then he slid the saddle carbine from its scabbard and his voice lifted.

"It's every man for himself. Let's take it to 'em, men!"

Hank Blevins and Wild Pete Walters flanked Mormon John while Big Red and his outlaws from Brown's Hole fanned out through the high sagebrush. Their horses were fresh when they charged at a long high lope, holding their gunfire until they got within range where their bullets would not be wasted.

They were outnumbered nearly two to one but they were not counting odds. Those outlaws from Brown's Hole made no brag of being fearless. But they had fighting guts and they rode straight at Eph Bonner and his dozen tough sons, and the Bonner Destroying Angels spurred at them yelling and cursing. Eph Bonner was behind them and driving them ahead of him with his crazed cursing.

Hank Blevins and Wild Pete Walters rode at a lope. Until the bullets were whining and snarling close, they held their gunfire.

"Good huntin', Hank!" yelled Wild Pete and he stood in his stirrups with the bridle reins dropped over his saddlehorn. He lifted his carbine and it spat fire. One of the Bonners reeled drunkenly in his saddle and then pitched headlong.

Hank Blevins did not know when he fired his first shot. He stood up in his stirrups and squinted to line his carbine sights and pulled the trigger. He hit one of the Bonners with his first shot and levered the smoking shell from the carbine and shot again. His horse never flinched or slacked its headlong speed.

Every Boxed L horse Mormon John had mounted them on was well broken to ride into this kind of a gun ruckus. Those horses carried their riders where they wanted to go.

Hank Blevins and Wild Pete Walters rode side by side now and into the thick of the wild mêlée. Hank caught a glimpse of Eph Bonner. That one quick look was enough to make Hank believe every horrible, evil thing he'd heard said about this leader of the Destroying Angels.

Then Hank, Wild Pete and Big

Red were together. Two of the Brown's Hole outlaws lay dead on the ground and the other three were cussing flesh wounds. There wasn't one of the dozen Bonner sons left alive. Their horses spooked off a ways with empty saddles. The twelve remaining sons of old Eph Bonner lay dead on the ground there on the high mesa called Robbers' Roost.

"Look yonder!" Big Red shouted.

Hank Blevins and Wild Pete Walters were already staring, their guns ready.

Out there on the mesa called Robbers' Roost Mormon John and Eph Bonner, the last of the Destroying Angels, faced each other on horseback. Their horses were reined to a halt and not more than fifty feet of open ground separated the two enemies. Neither of them had fired a shot.

Now, as if given some silent signal, their two guns lifted. Eph Bonner's rifle; Mormon John's saddle carbine. Both guns spat jets of flame at the same split second. Both guns kept spewing fire. Neither man so much as flinched or swayed in his saddle. It was as if both guns were missing. Neither man spoke; no sound of any kind came from them. Their leveled guns spat shot after shot and the blending of those gun explosions filled the night and the echoes were far flung across the great wide open mesa of Robbers' Roost.

Then both guns went silent at the same time. Both were emptied. The last echoes died out and for one brief moment there was a terrible hushed silence.

Mormon John sat erect in his saddle, his empty carbine gripped in both hands.

Fifty feet away and facing him, Eph Bonner, last of the Destroying Angels, hunched forward in his saddle. Then his empty rifle dropped to the ground. And from the throat of that man who claimed that he had bartered his body and soul to the devil in hell and could never he killed by gun or knife in human hands, came a horrible wailing scream that was unlike any human sound ever heard. Then Bonner pitched headlong from his horse, dead before his bullet-riddled carcass hit the ground.

Mormon John had not missed a shot. His carbine held six cartridges. He had put six .30-30 bullets into Eph Bonner. Any one of those shots was deadly enough to kill an ordinary man.

Call it the protection of an Almighty God. Or blame it on the moonshine rotgut booze and poisonous hatred that spoiled Eph Bonner's aim. . . . Whatever the reason, Mormon John Lamb had come through that gun duel without a bullet scratch!

Pete Walters and Hank Blevins had each been shot. But they had only gotten flesh wounds that would be healed in a couple of weeks. Big Red had come through the ruckus unhurt.

Back at Mormon John's the wounded were cared for and the dead outlaws buried there.

But up on the high mesa called Robbers' Roost the dead bodies of Eph Bonner and his twelve sons lay unburied. The leader of the Danites and his twelve Destroying Angels who were his sons were left where they had fallen in battle. Left for the prowling varmints and wheeling, circling buzzards to pick the carrion meat from bones that would bleach where they were scattered.

Only the horses ridden by Eph Bonner and his sons were looked after. They were unsaddled and turned loose.

Big Red and his outlaws rode back up the Outlaw Trail to Brown's Hole where they belonged. Before they left Wild Pete Walters shook hands with them. This was his parting from men who understood the meaning of true friendship.

"So long, boys."

"So long, Pete."

No more than that. It covered all there was to be said. Anything more would have been awkward.

And on a cloudless sunny day a month later three men rode into a fertile valley in Arizona. Mormon John, Wild Pete Walters and Hank Blevins, driving ahead of them a little remuda of Boxed L horses.

At the edge of the valley Mormon John reined up his horse. His long arm swept the valley with a slow, wide gesture.

"Peaceful Valley."

Then he pointed to the lone rider who was coming up out of the valley to meet them. They waited until David Lamb rode up. Then Mormon John removed his old black hat and the three younger men followed suit as the older man offered up a brief prayer to God.

Then Mormon John spoke quietly to his son.

"Eph Bonner made his unholy pact with the fallen angel named Lucifer, known as Satan, alias the devil in hell, and that unholy barter was paid in the flesh and blood of human life."

Mormon John smiled. "I made my bargain with God. Lest we be killed, there had to be one man among us left alive. There were women to be protected. So I sent you, David, though you were reluctant to go. But, of us all, you were the only one who had never taken a human life. So you were chosen to go to Peaceful Valley to protect your mother and your sisters. You accepted that task without a word of protest, without one reluctant gesture though you wanted more than anything on this earth to carry a gun and use it in revenge on the Bonners who were our sworn enemies. . . . David, you are the bravest man of us all. Never has a father been more proud of his son. . . . Forgive me if you can find it now in your heart."

Young David Lamb smiled and the

smile was like sunlight in his blue eyes. He wore no gun. His open hands made a brief gesture.

"The Hermit of Peaceful Valley," he said, "is a man of God, though he knows nothing about any Bible or any of the religions which teach their belief in God. But he is a great teacher. I've learned a lot from him. And unlearned about all I was ever taught inside Brown's Hole. I'm glad you sent me here ahead of you, father. Until I talked to the Hermit of Peaceful Valley I believed myself a coward because I hated the feel of a gun in my hand. Now I'm not ashamed of that dread of guns. A man can hate killing without being a coward . . ."

"Your grandfather," smiled Mormon John, "my father, was a circuit rider parson who never had a gun in his hand. He rode alone in the frontier wilderness among Injuns on the war trail and outlaws and badmen, without fear and without being harmed. His name was David Lamb. You were named for him. You have his courage."

Then Mormon John took the saddle carbine from its scabbard and dropped it on the ground. Unbuckling his cartridge belt with its holstered six-shooter, he tossed it on the ground beside the saddle gun.

Wild Pete Walters shed his guns with a grin.

Hank Blevins threw away his saddle gun, threw it as far as he could into the brush. Then his cartridge belt and six-shooter followed.

"I savvy how Dave feels," he said with a sort of unsteady laugh. "I killed because I had to use a gun. I'm glad to be gone from Wyoming. Almighty glad to be here where guns are barred. Done with all that I've left behind."

Thus unarmed, with the sun shining, they rode into Peaceful Valley. As they rode along, Mormon John smiled.

"I was just thinking, Hank. . . . You and my daughter Sarah will have need of a parson. I know of no more fitting one than this Hermit of Peaceful Valley."

When Hank Blevins saw the white-haired, white-bearded Hermit standing with the wife of John Lamb and her daughters, he agreed. Dressed in clean faded overalls and cotton shirt, bareheaded, barefooted, the Hermit had the look of a man of God. His arms lifted in a gesture of welcome.

The meeting of Mormon John and his handsome white-haired wife was something to behold.

When Hank Blevins swung from his saddle and Sarah Lamb, her black curls tossing, went rushing into his arms, that lump was in Hank's throat and it choked back the words he wanted to say.

"Ketched," Hank heard Wild Pete Walters telling his black-haired young bride Rebecca. "Mormon John ketched Hank Blevins in a shotgun trap set with rock salt . . ."

THE END

CODE OF A KILLER

By Adolph Bennauer

That battle with an enraged grizzly taught Lobo LaRue that he could no longer glory in his rep as the most feared man in Alaska

THERE was a feeling of tense expectancy in the air. The more timid citizens of Caribou hurried home and bolted their doors, bartenders made sure that their sawed-off shotguns were ready to hand and all roulette and faro games were promptly suspended. There could be no mistaking that tall, broad-shouldered individual striding down the center of the street. Lobo LaRue was in town again!

Of all the evil forces which had infested that portion of southern Alaska, Lobo LaRue was considered the worst. Lawless and predatory by nature, he took from life whatever he desired, respecting no man's will but his own and wiping aside with his rifle, his hunting knife or his bare fists all who sought to oppose him. In a region where men were not held too strictly to account for their actions, LaRue was the exception. He was feared, hated and cursed by all who knew him.

Now the steel calks of his number twelve boots pounded challengingly upon the narrow plank sidewalk. Still in his early thirties, Lobo LaRue was a splendid specimen of a man, six feet, four inches in height and grossing two hundred and twenty-five pounds of solid bone and muscle —a physique which even his heavy red mackinaw could not quite conceal. No two men had yet put him on his back, no man dared face his knife and no furred or feathered creature could live within the range of his rifle. The nickname by which he was called had been well earned.

Abruptly, Lobo's footfalls ceased. He had paused beside the entrance of the Pay Dirt Saloon, where a tinkling piano proclaimed that, though the time was early afternoon, the place was already well patronized.

For a moment LaRue stood there, glancing about him curiously. He knew that while the street itself was

deserted, he was being observed from every window and doorway. His thick lips curled and an amused, almost mocking, light appeared in his flashing black eyes. That people hated him bothered him not at all; that they feared him gave him immense pleasure.

Rifle resting in the hollow of his arm, he pushed open the hatwing doors and entered the saloon. A dozen men were standing at the bar and as many more were seated at the small, round tables against the opposite wall; but no one turned or lifted an eye at LaRue's entrance. The latter's expression of amusement deepened. Ordinarily, he would have hanged his rifle butt on the floor and peremptorily ordered everybody to drink with him. But he was not doing any drinking today. He had come here strictly on a matter of business, and he did not mix business with pleasure.

At the rear of the barroom was a door leading to the private office of Dave Bannister, proprietor of the Pay Dirt. Straight toward this door LaRue headed and, opening it without the ceremony of knocking, found himself facing a stout, semi-bald man of about fifty who was seated at a

desk, poring over some papers through a haze of cigar smoke.

"You send for me?" LaRue's greeting was as blunt as his entrance had been. "Well, here I am!"

Covering a start of surprise, Bannister turned a pair of cold, fishy blue eyes upon his visitor.

"Why, yes, of course! Only I didn't expect you so soon! Have a seat, LaRue! And here—have a cigar!"

LaRue accepted the cigar and, dropping into a chair with his rifle across his knees, grinned at Bannister insolently.

"Ah, thees is good! When you give me cigar, my frien', then I know you have very important job for me, job which pay much money! Is it not so?"

There was more truth than sarcasm in his words. For this was not the first time that he and Dave Bannister had met in the latter's private office. Although the two could hardly have been called friends, they had one thing in common—an exalted sense of their own power and an insatiable desire to increase it.

In his way, Bannister was as much of a human wolf as LaRue. He owned not only the Pay Dirt Saloon, but the whole town of Caribou and much of the surrounding territory, as well; and the methods he had used to acquire all this had been as ruthless as those employed by his companion.

"It's a job," he remarked coolly, "that will bring you one hundred dollars in gold! But it will have to be handled within three days! And there must be no slip-up!"

Lobo LaRue gave an expressive shrug.

"I do not make the slip-up, my frien'! That you should already know! An' now, about thees job?"

Dave Bannister drew a folded paper from his pocket and spread it out upon his desk. It was a crude but fairly accurate map of the region around Caribou showing the town itself, a stretch of Portage River, three miles to the east, and various sections of land on both sides of the stream. No barren wasteland was this but good arable soil! In a few more weeks the patches of winter snow which still covered it would be gone. All it would need then would be the sowing of seed and the short but warm Alaskan summer to make it yield a golden harvest.

Bannister's pudgy forefinger indicated one of the sections on the near side of the river which was marked in red.

"You see this tract, here? It's the only parcel of land in the whole valley that doesn't belong to me! Of course, it has no value in itself, but I want it to make my control of the region complete. Right now it's being homesteaded by a man named Bill Jepson who refuses to sell his rights and who will finish proving up on the place in three more days. Your job is to make sure that he doesn't remain long enough to do that!"

LaRue took the map and studied it curiously. He revealed no surprise

at Dave Bannister's cold-blooded method of doing business, but he knew this part of southern Alaska as he knew the palm of his hand, and his lips curled into an ironic smile.

"So you want thees man, Jepson, run off, eh! That is fair enough, my frien'. But you are one fat liar when you say thees land have no value! By gar, she is most valuable section of them all! She is only place where one can ford the river at high water! You will get the land, my frien', but she will cost you two hundred dollars, gold, instead of one, an' thees money you will pay me now!"

The fishlike eyes of Dave Bannister narrowed slightly, his teeth bit deeply into his cigar. He had taken no offense at the other's slur, being immune to such; nor was he reluctant to pay LaRue in advance, knowing that the latter never went back on his word. What rankled his miserly soul was the increase in price. But there was no sign of compromise in the stoic face before him. Grudgingly, he turned to his safe.

"All right! There's your money, LaRue — ten twenty-dollar gold pieces! And next Saturday, remember, I'll expect to take possession of the property!"

As coolly as he had entered the office, Lobo LaRue left it. Though the saloon bar tempted him, with all that money in his belt, he knew better than to stop for a drink. One drink would lead to two, two to a dozen; and then his job would be forgotten, his promise to Bannister broken. And LaRue was too proud to break a promise. It was a manifestation of his supreme egotism. Besides, he could catch up on his drinking later!

Since it was not more than five miles to the Jepson homestead, LaRue decided to go out there right away. After all, this was only a minor job, a kind which he had performed many times in the past, and it should cause him no great trouble! Though he did not know Jepson, he was sure that the latter would be no different from other men. If he refused to be intimidated and put up a fight, so much the better! In that way he would be eliminated altogether and LaRue himself could claim self-defense!

Slipping on the snowshoes which were strapped to his back, LaRue started off, cross-country, for the Jepson place. It was a beautiful spring day, with the distant sun shining at its best and with just enough tang in the air to make a man's blood tingle. Being as much a part of the outdoors as the animal whose name he bore, Lobo LaRue was in his element. His black eyes danced and his lips whistled the tune of a French-Canadian love song as his swinging stride carried him over the undulating terrain.

A few miles north of town he entered a region of hills, covered with scrub pine and juniper bushes, immediately beyond which lay Portage River and the homestead of Bill Jepson. It was dark among those

trees, compared with the brightness of the open country, and LaRue's thoughts were momentarily back in a certain dance hall in Skagway. Hence, he was not aware that he was no longer alone until his ears caught a distant but distinct growl. Glancing up quickly, he saw a grizzly bear not more than a hundred yards ahead!

LaRue had come upon many grizzlies in his time, though seldom upon one like this. It was a giant silvertip, standing six feet in height and weighing about seven hundred pounds. But, even more startling than its size, was its display of temper. Apparently, it had just come out of hibernation and had brought its appetite with it, an appetite which it was now vainly endeavoring to satisfy with what berries it could find on the sparsely covered bushes. And with each unsuccessful attempt its growls of anger seemed to grow in intensity.

"*Mon Dieu!*" La Rue whispered softly, as he leaped for the shelter of the nearest pine.

There was more admiration than fear in his voice. He knew that the bear had not yet seen nor scented him, for he was to leeward of the beast; but being a creature of strength himself, he respected strength in others, and here was a creature that made his own physique seem like that of an infant in comparison. Not for anything in the world would he have disputed the trail with that silvertip grizzly, not even armed with his rifle; for he knew that, unless his first shot found the bear's heart, he would be loosing upon himself swift and certain destruction!

Cautiously, he continued to edge away until he was a good hundred yards east of the trail. This brought him to the very bank of Portage River which, thawed out by the spring rains and sunshine, was now running swift and clear fifty feet below him. Although it was a more roundabout course to the Jepson homestead than the one he had chosen, it was certainly a much safer one. With nothing to lose but a little time, LaRue dropped down beside the stream and proceeded to follow it northward.

And half an hour later, rounding a bend in the steep bank, he came in sight of the Jepson homestead. It was more prosperous-looking than most of the homesteads he had seen in that part of Alaska, comprising a substantial log cabin, a good barn, a cow shed, pigpen and chicken yard. The buildings stood at the near end of a level tract of land half a mile long and a quarter of a mile wide and though there were still patches of snow on the ground, most of this tract had already been plowed up for the spring planting.

LaRue took one good look at the place and whistled softly.

"By gar, I bet thees man, Jepson, put up one beeg fight before he leave place like thees!"

Which, however, was beside the point! He had been hired to run Bill Jepson out of there and he could not let a momentary feeling of respect for the man dissuade him from that purpose. The sooner he got

the job over with. the sooner he would be able to enjoy the orgy of spending which those two hundred dollars in his money belt insured him. Boldly, he continued on toward the house, glancing about as he did so for some sign of the owner of the homestead.

A wisp of pale blue smoke ascending from the chimney indicated that the cabin was occupied; but LaRue divined shrewdly that the occupant was Jepson's wife, and he was not making war on women. On a bright spring day like this, Jepson himself should be somewhere outside, working on his place. Yet, to LaRue's disappointment, the homesteader appeared nowhere in evidence. And then, chancing to glance toward the little pole corral, LaRue found the explanation. The bars were down and the corral itself was empty, proclaiming that Jepson had gone to town!

LaRue now had two courses of action open to him. He could either go back to town and pick his fight with Jepson there, or wait here for the latter's return. A moment's consideration decided him against the former course. He might have difficulty locating Bill Jepson in town and there would be too many witnesses if he picked a fight with the homesteader there. On the other hand, Jepson would be sure to return by sunset, and that was now not more than an hour away. Selecting a sunny spot on the lee side of the barn, LaRue slipped off his snowshoes, lit a cigarette and sat down.

In this position he faced the slope of the hill which formed the southern boundary of Bill Jepson's homestead. It was not more than a hundred yards distant from the cabin and, being covered with scrub trees and brush, provided excellent shelter for the dwelling in that direction—one more thing for which LaRue had to give the homesteader due credit. And yet, even as this thought occurred to him, he caught sight of something which caused him to forget all about Jepson and brought an exclamation of mingled surprise and amusement to his lips.

"Well, by gar! What you know about that!"

The object which had attracted his attention was no part of the landscape. It was the figure of a little boy about five years of age, who, clad in a white knitted garment that covered him from head to foot, looked like some elf out of a fairy tale. And even more elflike than his appearance were his actions. Armed with a little bucket, he was running from one bush to another, stripping them of their crop of berries which, unfit for human consumption, had doubtless attracted him with their bright red color.

Children were rare in that part of Alaska. In all the five years that Lobo LaRue had been there, this was the first child he had ever seen. That it was Bill Jepson's boy, there could be no question. But LaRue had not known of the youngster's existence when he made his bargain with Dave Bannister.

This brought a new complication

into the affair, a complication which filled him with no little misgiving. Prepared though he was, to wage an all-out war on Jepson himself, he had no quarrel with the latter's wife and child!

In the meantime, he could not take his eyes off the little fellow. Each of the boy's movements, as he darted excitedly from one bush to another, brought a fresh grin of delight to LaRue's lips. Just like a young jackrabbit, he thought, only far more fascinating to watch! And soon a strange impulse began to take possession of him. He felt an overwhelming desire to pick this little boy up in his arms and bounce him up and down, to laugh and talk and play with him!

The idea seemed ridiculous at first. LaRue thought he must be getting a little soft in the head. He did not know that he was experiencing the oldest impulse in the world, the impulse that lives in even the most savage creatures of the wild. But since he could not shake the impulse off, he knew that his only alternative was to give way to it. Grinning a little foolishly, he stamped out his cigarette and arose. And just as he did so he caught sight of something else which wiped the grin from his face and caused his heart to skip a beat.

There was another figure on the hillside now. It broke suddenly out of the brush a hundred yards from the little boy—the snarling, hunger-maddened grizzly which LaRue had side-stepped farther back on the trail! Being down wind from the cabin, the beast had evidently been attracted here by the scent of human habitation. And now its sharp eyes had glimpsed the bucket of berries in the boy's hand. Head erect, forepaws waving menacingly, it came lumbering toward the child!

"*Mon Dieu!*"

Like a thing of magic, LaRue's rifle leaped to his shoulder and even as his glance flashed along the barrel, his finger pressed the trigger. With the whiplike crack of the report, the grizzly staggered a little, but growled its anger and came on, the bullet which had been intended for its heart having glanced off its ribs. LaRue's left hand pumped out the empty shell, jerked the lever back—and stopped halfway as the second cartridge jammed in the breech!

The bear was now within a hundred feet of the boy, who, startled by the sound of the shot, looked up and saw the great beast. With a cry, the little fellow turned and started for the cabin, still clutching his bucket of berries. At the same instant, from the direction of the cabin, LaRue heard a woman's shrill scream. Dropping his useless rifle, he whipped out his hunting knife and ran to head off the bear, yelling to the boy as he did so.

"Drop those berry, little one! Drop those berry!"

The child, too terrified to understand, however, continued to cling to the half-filled bucket. The grizzly, now running on all fours, was only fifty feet from him and gaining rapidly. But LaRue's long legs brought

him between the two before the gap could be closed.

With a vicious snarl, the bear rose upon its hind legs and made a sweep at him with its forepaw. LaRue nimbly side-stepped and before the beast could recover its balance, darted in under the outstretched paw and sank his knife deep into the shaggy body!

He had struck at the grizzly's heart and, by all the laws of anatomy, his knife should have gone home. But a slight twist of the bear's body at the crucial moment deflected the steel blade. It missed the heart by a fraction of an inch and the wound served only to increase the beast's fury. Both its forepaws now closed about LaRue's body, drawing him with irresistible force against its breast.

LaRue knew that he could not break that grip. He realized that it would be only a matter of seconds before his ribs would be crushed like egg shells. Already, his head was beginning to swim and he was finding it difficult to draw his breath. If only he could free his right arm so that he might strike again! Fortunately he still had the use of his legs. With all the power he had left, he brought his right knee up and into the bear's belly!

The grizzly felt that blow. For an instant its own breath was cut short, the crushing grip about LaRue's body relaxed. In that instant LaRue jerked out his knife and struck again —not at the bear's heart, for he was too high for that, but straight into the beast's jugular vein. The fountain of warm blood that sprayed his face proved that this time he had not missed, and he kept the knife there, twisting it back and forth to widen the cut.

That it was now mortally wounded, the bear seemed to realize as well as LaRue. But apparently it had no intention of dying alone. The grip about LaRue's body tightened once more. He could not have drawn his knife out again, had he tried. Even his legs were becoming useless. He seemed paralyzed from head to foot. His breathing stopped, consciousness was fading fast. And then, in what he thought was the swoon of death, he went toppling to the earth!

But it was not a swoon! He and the bear had gone down together, and he was lying, full length, upon the beast's body! The viselike grip about his torso had relaxed now; he felt the precious, life-giving air coming back into his lungs. But there was no quiver of muscle or beat of heart in the great shaggy carcass beneath him. The grizzly was dead! It lay with its head on one side, its eyes slowly glazing, while a rivulet of blood continued to flow from the wound in its neck.

Slowly LaRue disengaged himself from the beast's clutches and got to his feet. He was still very weak and dizzy and splattered from head to foot with blood, but he had no bones broken and was conscious of no internal injuries.

With a grimace, he bent down, drew his knife from the bear's throat

and wiped it upon the snow. And, just as he arose again, he saw three people running toward him from the cabin—a man and a woman and the little boy who had been the cause of all the trouble!

"Thank heaven, you're safe!" It was the man who spoke, a tall sinewy individual with blue eyes and an honest-looking face. He was carrying a Winchester in his hands. "I saw you just as I got back from town and hurried into the house to get my rifle! By the time I came out again, the fight was over! And what a fight that was! I never saw anything like it! That silvertip was big enough to finish off half a dozen men! Are you sure you're all right?"

Before LaRue could answer, the woman, tears streaming down her cheeks, rushed up and pressed his hand to her lips.

"Oh, I don't know how to thank you," she cried. "You saved my Bobby's life! In all my prayers I will remember you! As long as I live I will never forget you! And now please come into the house, so that we can take care of you!"

It was an embarrassing moment for Lobo LaRue, quite the most embarrassing one he had ever known. Never before had he done anything for which he deserved thanks. To be sure, the slaying of that giant grizzly in a hand-to-hand conflict had been quite a feat! Jepson would doubtless spread the news and men would talk about it for months! It would be discussed in every barroom, lumber camp and trading post in that part of Alaska! But, whereas this thought might have pleased LaRue immensely at any other time, it seemed to mean little or nothing to him now.

His eyes were on the little fellow nestled close to his mother's side. The impulse which had stirred him so strangely when he was watching the boy picking berries awoke in him again. Awkwardly, he stepped over to Bobby and laid his hand on the child's head. As the latter's blue eyes met his, he grinned broadly.

"Next time you see bear, you be sure to drop those berry, eh!" He gave the boy's head another pat, then turned toward the parents, his features growing suddenly hard. "There is nothing wrong with me, my frien's! An' I have other business to take care of, now—very important business! I see you again, maybe! So long!"

Ignoring their protests, he strode over to the spot where he had left his rifle, picked it up and started back down the river bank toward Caribou. The exertion of walking, coupled with his superb physical condition, soon removed the last shred of dizziness and brought him back to normal strength. But LaRue himself was hardly conscious of this fact. Only one thought lived in his brain, an all-consuming thought, which grew in intensity as he proceeded, which caused his black eyes to flash and which seemed to make the miles flash by.

The sun had set when LaRue finally reached town, and the dusk which

follows quickly in Alaska at that time of the year was already darkening the main street as he walked along it. Once more he was heading for the Pay Dirt Saloon, but this time he did not pause before the entrance. Straight into the barroom he strode, unmindful of the startled glances which greeted his blood-stained appearance—straight back to the proprietor's private office, the door of which his heavy boot drove half off its hinges.

Dave Bannister was still there, though the cleared appearance of his desk indicated that he was just about to take his departure. And whatever anger he may have felt at this impetuous intrusion changed to blank astonishment when he noted LaRue's gory appearance.

"What the devil!" he exclaimed. "You two must have had it out with knives! I knew Jepson was tough, but I didn't think that he—"

"You theenk too much already," LaRue snapped, his black eyes ablaze. "You theenk LaRue make war on women an' kids, eh! Well, you know different now!"

With a gesture of repugnance, he tossed upon the desk the ten twenty-dollar gold pieces which Bannister had given him a few hours before. And in the same movement, his hand caught the latter by the throat and jammed his head against the wall.

"Listen to me, Bannister! Thees man, Jepson, shall keep his land! If ever again you try to run him off, or try to harm him or any of his family, then I, Lobo LaRue, will come back here an' choke you to death with my bare hands! Like thees, you fat peeg—like thees!"

The fingers of that powerful right hand tightened. Dave Bannister's face turned purple, his terror-filled eyes started from their sockets, he attempted to speak, but could only gibber foolishly.

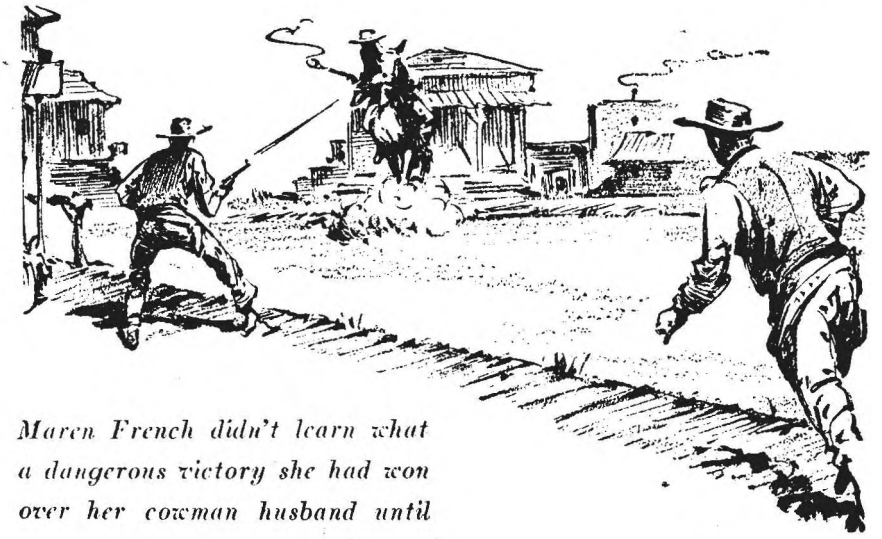
Holding him there a moment longer to make sure that he understood, LaRue dropped him unceremoniously to the floor. Then LaRue kicked the rest of the door off its hinges and strode through the barroom into the street. And men turned aside as he passed, for he was a thing of evil, feared and hated and shunned by all!

THE END

COWBOY FOOLOSOPHY

They may admire, but as a rule,
Few cowpokes really love a mule.
Could be because his stubbornness
Reminds them of their own, I guess!

S. Omar Barker



Maren French didn't learn what a dangerous victory she had won over her cowman husband until

HE SOLD HIS SADDLE

I

DAVE FRENCH sold his saddle the day his son was born. Before that he kept it hanging on the back porch. Sometimes when he went to the store he would pause and blow the dust from it; sometimes he would put his hand on the smooth, oiled leather. He had been a long time working up to that saddle, starting with an old A-forked apple-horned Visalia tree and advancing as he advanced in the cow business. But when Jack came he let it go. There were bills to pay, and anyhow Maren didn't like it. She had always hated the saddle.

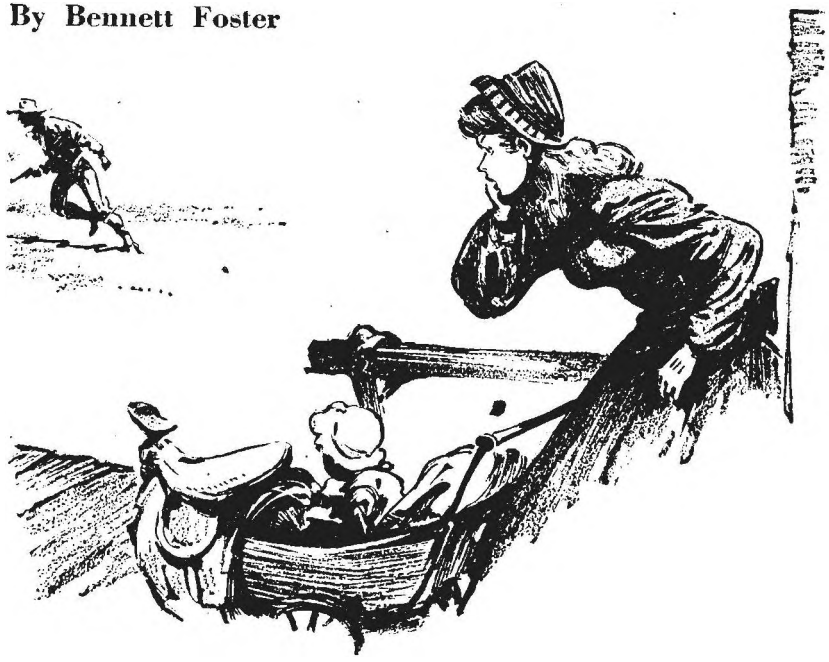
Dave was foreman for the Y Bar outfit when Allen Bethune's orphaned niece came to live there. Bethune brought her out from town and Dave was the first person she met. He had just got to the ranch when Bethune stopped the buckboard and helped the girl alight.

"Well," Bethune said, "she got here, Dave. Maren, this is Dave French."

Maren's hand, warm and soft but with an unsuspected strength, lay in Dave's palm. Her eyes, blue and with long black lashes, smiled at Dave.

"Yessir," Dave said to Al Bethune. And then to Maren, "We've been lookin' forward to your comin'." He flushed and let the hand go. He knew, right then, that things at the Y Bar had changed. He knew that he could never go back to the old

By Bennett Foster



ways when only cattle and grass, horses and men and weather were considered.

Maren arrived at shipping time when the beef was going to market. For the first weeks of her stay she hardly saw Dave French or her uncle. They were gone at daylight and they didn't get back until dark, so tired that they just ate supper and then turned in.

During those first weeks Maren had the place to herself with only Dough Givens, the cook, for a companion.

She turned Dough into a friend and accomplice, and fixed up the house, changing it from the casual clutter of a bachelor layout into the neater comfort of a woman-run outfit. She needed something to do, needed something to take the place of her old home, needed work to still the dull ache her folks' deaths had left her. At the end of two weeks she was through with making changes and, fortunately, two weeks also saw the end of the shipping.

"Now," Allen Bethune said, "we won't be gone so much. Dave, get Maren a gentle horse an' take her with you tomorrow. She can ride ol' Headlight; he's safe. Take her out an' show her around." Allen had placed the Y Bar in Dave French's capable hands; it was only logical that there he should also place his niece.

Although the beef was shipped, there was still plenty to do on the Y

Bar, but there was leisure time, too. Allen Bethune was Maren's uncle; Dough Givens was a superannuated cowhand, fallen to cooking; Ben Peach, the rider, was anyhow fifty years old. But Dave French was young and tall and straight. Dave carried Maren to her first Western dance and led her through the intricacies of her first quadrille.

Days, when crisp New Mexico weather brought color to her cheeks, Dave rode with Maren. Nights, when the wind blew snow flurries around the tight, warm house, Dave, Dough, Ben and Allen sat around the fireplace, eating the corn Maren had popped or the candy she had made.

"Time to turn in," Ben would say. "Comin', Dough?" The two of them would go to the bunkhouse and to bed.

Allen would stretch and yawn. "Good night, Dave. 'Night, Maren." He would clump off to his room. The fire would crackle and hiss as snow came down the chimney. The wind would sound low and lonesome. Dave and Maren would sit watching the flames. That was in winter time.

Spring came after winter; it always does. One day there is snow on the ground, ice in the troughs, old cows in the pen waiting to be fed, and shaggy winter horses looking over the bars of the corral. And then, without your knowing how it happened, the snow is gone and all the little streams run water, and there are long-legged colts beside their mothers, calves on the ground; and under the old grass, green shows.

In April Dave, with Maren, rode the south pasture. The sun was gold and a field lark climbed up to see.

"There's a happy fellow," Dave said. "He's got a wife and family down below, I guess. He's got what he wants."

"What he wants," Maren echoed. And then, not looking at Dave, "What do you want, Dave? What would make you happy?"

Dave's eyes held the light that every woman hopes to find in her man's look and his voice shook when he answered. "You, Maren. You're what I want."

Later they rode on, surrounded by their new-found happiness. Three miles they rode and then across the creek Dave saw a stray in the pasture.

"I've got to look after my job, now," he said and somehow filled the words with portent. "That's a stray heifer an' I want to see her brand. Stay here, Maren."

Across the creek Dave stopped to tighten his cinch, then with his rope down, started for the stray. Sand spouted in little puffs beneath his horse's feet, and the rope circled.

Then, suddenly, the horse and man were down. The heifer stopped to look back curiously and Maren spurred Headlight, heedless of stones and slippery creek bottom. When Dave opened his eyes his head was in Maren's lap and he looked up into her frightened, tear-streaked face.

"I'm all right, Maren," Dave reassured her. "Don't worry. A horse is bound to fall sometimes." He

said no more because Maren kissed him.

Because of the fear he saw in Maren's eyes Dave hid his hurt. The saddle had caught him in the fall and he had three broken ribs.

Getting up, Dave caught his horse, and stood while Maren mounted. They rode home together, Dave making light of the whole business and kidding about the spur tracks he had put on his saddle. But when they got to the ranch he fainted and only Ben Peach's swift aid kept him from falling off his horse. Ben and Allen Bethune carried him into the bunkhouse and Doc Bradley came out, twenty miles from town, and strapped up the ribs.

"You can't kill a cowpuncher," Doc Bradley said. "Don't you worry about this boy."

In three weeks Dave was riding again.

II

Spring gave way to summer and there was heat all across the flats, beating back from the Iron hills. The windmills creaked endlessly and the grass turned brown. It was too hot for Maren to ride nor did she care to.

June ended and July came. On the Iron hills, clouds formed every day and rains swept across the country. The drought was broken and branding began.

Maren, flushed with Saturday's baking, came to the door of the house for there were visitors in the yard, tall men, disguised in dust and weariness, dismounting from tired horses.

"Get a snack on the table, Maren," Bethune called. "The sheriff's here and he wants to eat and go."

At the kitchen table Tom Loudermilk, the sheriff, and two deputies ate and drank coffee. Dutch Ochs, the sheriff drawled, was in the hills, two others with him. They'd killed a man at Rincon, Loudermilk stated without animus, and Dutch Ochs was bad.

Maren, deserting her bread in the oven, went to the door. Ben was penning horses in the corral and Dave was strapping a scabbard to his saddle. The sun winked from a rifle leaning against the fence, and in the kitchen Tom Loudermilk's drawl announced that Ochs would likely fight, a man being hung no higher for two killings than for one.

Maren ran down the steps. Dave was saddling Comet and Ben Peach was changing his rigging to a big black.

"You aren't going, Dave?" Maren caught Dave's arm. "You can't go!"

In the big pen cows and calves, brought in for branding, milled neglected. Dave pulled the latigo tight.

"Tom needs some help," he said. "Ben an' me are goin' with him."

"But you can't!" Sheer terror was in Maren's voice. About the two of them the brightness was a haze and through it the girl looked at a tall, grave-faced man who was a stranger.

"We've got to, honey," the stranger said, and bent to kiss her. Then, with a creak of leather, he was in the saddle and Comet was moving off.

It was dusk when Dave returned. The men rode in and silently dismounted. A limp bundle was lifted from a horse and taken to the barn, and with Sheriff Loudermilk walking watchfully behind them, two men were marched to the bunkhouse. Ben Peach, at the bottom of the steps, reported to Allen Bethune.

"We jumped them in that old shack up Curumpaw Canyon. Had to kill one of them."

"Dave?" Maren breathed her question.

"Dave's all right. He'll be up in a minute. It was him that took Dutch. Dutch was gettin' away, but Dave caught him."

"You help get supper on the table," Bethune told his niece. "We'll be right back." He went down the steps and off toward the bunkhouse with Ben Peach.

From the corral Dave walked toward the kitchen. Maren flew down the steps and into his arms.

Maren and Dave were married after branding time. They had planned a fall wedding but Maren didn't want to wait. The day Tom Loudermilk took Dutch Ochs and his men—one living and one dead—into town. Maren made her decision known.

"Let's get married right away," she said to Dave. "I don't want to wait any longer. I thought a fall wedding, but . . ."

Dave didn't let her finish. He caught her close to him. Her cheek against Dave's, Maren whispered, "I'm afraid, Dave. I was so afraid I'd lose you. We'll be married right away. We'll live in town."

Dave would have drawn back then, but Maren held him close. "Do you love me, Dave?" she whispered. "Do you love me?"

There was just one answer and Dave made it.

The district judge married them. He was sitting in Salinas, holding court, trying Dutch Ochs for murder, and between the sessions of the trial he performed the ceremony. Dave and Maren left for Denver, and Ochs, hearing the news in his cell in jail, cursed slowly.

"Married, is he?" Ochs growled. "All right, let him be married. If it hadn't been for him, I'd have got away. One of these days . . ." He told the jailer what would happen to Dave French one of these days when he, Dutch Ochs, got free from jail.

When Dave and Maren came back from their honeymoon, Dutch Ochs was beginning his life sentence in the penitentiary.

It was a different Dave French that came back. Allen Bethune noted it, Ben Peach saw it. Outwardly there was no change, but inwardly Dave had lost something. He fitted back into place at the Y Bar, helping clean up the ends of branding, but it was plain that his heart was not in his work. Where always he had worked in the lead, now he was in the drags. He was at the house as much as he was in the pasture or the corrals, and even when he was at work his mind was not on his business the way it should have been.

A month after his wedding day, Dave came to Allen Bethune and asked for his time.

"I don't like to leave you," he said, "but Maren wants to live in town. She worries about me all the time I'm out, an' I worry about her. I ain't made you a hand since I came back."

Bethune looked at Dave, noting the uncertainty in his eyes.

"You belong with cattle," Bethune said bluntly. "You'll never be content in town. I'm goin' to talk to Maren."

He talked with her. "Dave's got a good job here," he reasoned with his niece. "I need him an' he needs the work. He's got a little bunch of cattle that I've let him run with mine. The two of you can have the house to live in. I won't bother you. Dave will never find a job in town that will pay him what I pay him or that will give him the opportunity I will."

Maren answered that argument with one of her own. "And what good will those things be if he's dead? I saw his horse fall and break his ribs. Remember that! I saw him go out with the sheriff and I saw the men they brought back. I—"

"But a cowman's got to do those things," Bethune interrupted. "Of course he has to take a chance, but—"

"And that's why we'll live in town!" Maren said triumphantly. "In town when Dave goes to work in the morning I'll know that he'll come home at noon. And anyhow we're going to buy a store and he won't have to work for anybody."

That was the last victorious argument she had used on Dave. Allen Bethune surrendered to it.

Ben Peach learned of the decision and, jogging along with Dave through the south pasture, asked a question.

"I hear you're movin' to town. Is that so?"

"That's right." Dave did not meet his friend's eyes.

Ben thought awhile. "Goin' to sell your saddle," he mused.

Dave had not thought of it in just that way. Over the western ranges they write "finis" to a man's career with those simple words. They say, "He sold his saddle." It is at once a conclusion and an epitaph.

"It's just for awhile," Dave said. "Maren's a town girl an' she wants to live in town. You don't understand, Ben."

"No," agreed Ben, "I reckon I don't *sabe*."

Ben did not argue with his friend; a man does not go to another and tell him that the girl he loves is wrong. Ben went to Maren. A medium-sized man with sparse gray hair and eyes that were faded by staring into distance, he seated himself on the bottom step of the porch and looked up at the girl.

"Dave says you're goin' to live in town."

Maren dropped a long paring from a potato and nodded.

"That's a mistake." Ben produced his papers and tobacco and methodically set about constructing a cigarette.

"Why?" Maren wanted to know.

"Because Dave belongs out here. You're tamperin' with his work."

"Dave loves me. We'll be happy in town." defiantly.

"*You'll* be happy in town." The cigarette trickled smoke. "Not Dave. You've got your mind made up an' there's no use to talk. But some day you'll know different." There was more that Ben Peach wanted to say, but he didn't know how. He did not know how to say that a woman's arms and a woman's lips are compensation for some things, but not for all, and that they cannot keep a man from remembering.

"Aw, what's the use?" Ben asked, and got up from the steps. He was not on hand the day Dave loaded the wagon with his things and with Maren's, and moved into town.

III

Town—Las Bocas—was different from the Y Bar. Dave and Maren bought out Dantry's store. Dave sold his good cows and calves to make the payment. They rented a little house in town. There was a fence around the yard and a cistern in the back. Maren watered the vines that overran the porch. Dave fixed the fence so that the neighbor's chickens would not come through.

In the morning Dave went to work, stopping on the corner to turn and wave. At night he helped Maren with the dishes and told her about the people that had come to trade. On Sunday he went to church with Maren, holding her fingers in his hand while they sat in the pew.

Ranchmen, coming in to trade, bought from Dave French and spoke of the range and cattle. Townspeople visited in his store. At the end of the first month there was money for the bills and accounts on the ledger, some of them good accounts, some not.

"I told you so," Maren said when Dave, at the end of that first month, computed his profits.

"You're a smart woman, honey," Dave praised.

The second month was not so prosperous. People who had traded with the new merchant, drifted back to their old associates. Some of the good accounts were not paid, and none of the bad ones. Still there was money for the bills from the wholesale houses, but there was no rejoicing at the table when the work on the books was done.

"It's just a bad month," Maren comforted. "Next month will be better."

Allen Bethune came to town that week and, as always, visited his niece. They had, those two, no community of interest beside Dave French. Bethune was in the kitchen when he inquired about his one-time foreman.

"Dave's gained eight pounds," Maren answered her uncle. "He's just as well as he can be. He's worried a little about the store because we didn't make as much as last month, but we're awfully happy, Uncle Allen."

"An' Dave's satisfied?" Bethune asked. "He don't want to come back to the ranch?"

"He never mentions the ranch.

He's just as contented as he can be."

Bethune, looking through the kitchen window, saw the saddle hanging on the porch. "If Dave wants to come back, I can use him," he said. "I see he's kept his saddle."

That night when they had gone to bed, Maren lay awake, a vague fear in her, an uneasiness she could not diagnose. Dave shifted and punched his pillow into a mound and Maren, moving when her husband moved, spoke to him.

"Why don't you sell your old saddle, Dave? It just takes up room on the porch."

"I don't know," Dave answered sleepily. "I just want to keep it, I guess."

Bethune's visit had been on Saturday. On Sunday afternoon Maren was reading in the living room when a pleasant bass humming came to her ears. She smiled and went to see what had made Dave so happy. She lost her smile when she saw him. He was on the back porch. He had the saddle down and was rubbing oil into the dark brown leather.

"Hello, honey," he said when he looked up.

Maren, standing in the kitchen door, spoke a little acridly. "If you're looking for something to do, you can fix the screen."

"Pretty soon." Dave rubbed the left jockey of the saddle.

"And the roses have to be covered. You might do that instead of fooling with that old saddle."

"Pretty soon."

"You think more of that old saddle than you do of me!" Maren accused illogically. "You want to go back to the ranch. You don't want to stay here with me. You don't like it here in town."

Dave let the saddle thump down on the floor. "Why, honey," he began, "you don't think that! Here, we'll go fix the roses. You've got it all wrong, Maren. You . . ." But Maren fled, weeping.

Next day she called upon Doc Bradley. The doctor listened, asked questions and smiled quietly.

"About the first of July, I'd say," the doctor announced. "You can expect your baby then." Maren's eyes were wide and Doctor Bradley went on, telling her what to expect and what to do.

Dave was happy with the news and Maren was happy, too—happy in the new tenderness with which Dave surrounded her. But women engaged in the oldest and most absorbing of women's business, do not rationalize, and they have strange fancies. They move by intuition rather than reason and as time went on, Maren's happiness dulled.

What's In A Brand Answers (page 43)

1. T in HORN (Tinhorn); 2. M on ARC (Monarch); 3. W in G, D in G (Wingding); 4. Death Valley; 5. Square Dance; 6. Linkin' high WAY (Lincoln Highway); 7. RKDA: Arcadia; 8. H on KEY, T on K. (Honky-tonk); 9. Hat Check.

Dave's saddle hung on the back porch and fifty times a day she saw it there. Silent and imponderable and with the sheen of oil upon its well-used leather, the saddle seemed to menace her. It was a symbol of the things she feared, of the things she tried to push away, and she hated it. For Maren knew that she had lied to Allen Bethune and that Dave was not completely happy.

A hundred things told her this. Little things: the ring in Dave's voice when he spoke of some old friend, some rider come to town, the eagerness with which he questioned Bethune concerning the Y Bar; just little things.

Christmas came and was gone. The new year came. On New Year's Day Dave worked on his books. That night when the dishes were done and the dish towels hung behind the stove, Dave went to the door and opened it. Standing there, he looked out on the porch. Maren shivered in the cold air that rushed in.

"Come in and close the door, Dave," she said. "I'm cold."

Dave did not turn; apparently he had not heard. He spoke suddenly. "Let's get out of here, Maren. Let's go back to the ranch. Bethune will hire me."

Maren knew that Dave was looking at the saddle. She came up beside him. "But the store, Dave," she said. "You can't leave that."

"I'll sell the store. I owe most of what it will bring, anyhow. Let's go back to the ranch."

Maren's hand touched her husband's shoulder. "I'm cold," she repeated. "Please close the door."

Dave closed the door and turned. He saw the fear in Maren's eyes. He saw her body, heavy with his child. He came to her swiftly. "Forget it, honey," he said. "I was just talking. Forget it. I wouldn't take you out of town now. Of course not."

But the thing had been said, had been placed in the open. The next day when Dave was at work, Maren went to the porch and stood looking at the saddle, her hands tightly clenched at her sides. She saw the spur track across the saddle seat and remembered how it had come to be there. She saw the worn spot beneath the fender and knew that it had been made by a rifle scabbard.

"I hate you!" she told the saddle. "I hate you! You can't have him. He belongs to me!"

IV

The slow months wore away and late in June there came a night when Dave French, trousers pulled over his nightshirt and bare feet heedless of hidden thorns, vaulted the picket fence to call his next door neighbor.

Lights bloomed in the little house and Doctor Bradley came. The bedroom held the sharp scent of chloroform and Maren's eyes were dark with pain. Dave French stood by the bedroom door, opening and closing his big, incompetent hands. And then Jack French wailed thinly, and after a time Dr. Bradley came out chuckling his satisfaction.

Maren's recovery was slow after the baby came. She stayed in bed and Dave hired a woman to do the work. Three weeks after Jack was born Maren made her first shaky tour of the house, Dave walking beside her, his arm around her waist. They went from bedroom to living room, to kitchen, all strange under another woman's care. They paused and Dave opened the back door. On the porch a rope hung down, the loop empty. The saddle was gone.

"Why . . ." Maren said in surprise, "Where is your saddle, Dave?"

"I sold it," Dave answered briefly. "I needed some extra money so I let Dolf Williams have it. Do you think you could go out in the yard a minute? Your delphiniums are beginning to bloom."

"I think I'd better go to bed," Maren answered shakily. "It's time for Jack's feeding."

Dave took her back, helped her into bed and brought young Jack. Maren lay there, feeling her son's greedy lips, watching the life throbbing in the fuzzy fontanel beneath her arm. From her son she raised her eyes and looked at her husband.

Dave stood at the foot of the bed. The weight he had gained was gone, and more with it, so that his clothing hung loosely. He sagged, standing there, and Maren noted for the first time that his shoulders were slumped. She saw that there were wrinkles in his forehead and about his eyes, not creases put there by staring in the sun but by worry. She saw loose flesh along his jaw. And suddenly Maren remembered Ben Peach, sitting on the steps of the Y Bar ranchhouse.

"Dave belongs out here," Ben Peach had said.

Suddenly, forgetting her son, Maren wanted to stretch out her arms to her husband. She wanted to hold him close and cry out that she would make it up to him. That where he went, there she would go, and that no matter what he did, her place would be by his side. She wanted to confess her wrong and ask him for forgiveness. Then young Jack lost the nipple and groped for it and Maren was concerned for her baby again.

They never referred to the saddle after that. Jack French held the attention of his father and mother. He grew as any healthy baby must, and he did those cute and cunning things that babies do.

Allen Bethune came in to see the boy, and Dough Givens came to tiptoe to the crib. Tom Loudermilk, gaunt as a sandhill crane, viewed the miracle in the crib and allowed that, given time, Jack would make a hand. And Ben Peach came to stand beside the crib, to look from the baby to Maren with eyes that told nothing, and to drawl, "Well . . . mebbe he was wuth it!"

The days droned by. Maren had meant to make it up to Dave, she had meant once again to be all things to her man, but the baby took her time and her attention. There were diapers to wash and meals to cook and bottles to boil. There was the

endless round of care a baby demands.

And Dave? There was the store to tend and bills to pay, notes to meet, accounts to make out, customers to serve. Somehow those two were trapped. Somehow they were caught.

A man can't go to the wife he loves and tell her that she has tricked him. He can't tell her that the reason he sits silent at night is because he is beginning to hate her. He can't do that, can he? And a woman can't go to her husband and tell him that she has been wrong, and that she will toss away her place that she has built in the community, that she will give up safety and security and all, if only he will smile at her once more, if only his shoulders will square again and the worry wrinkles leave his face. Or can she? Maren did not know. Dave French didn't know.

The fall was long that year with bright, smiling days. Allen Bethune, calling on his niece, sat in Dave's big chair and held little Jack.

"I've finished shipping, Maren," Bethune said. "I sure wished Dave was there to help."

"Yes?" Maren said.

Bethune reached into his pocket and withdrew his wallet. "When Jack was born," he announced, "I branded a cow for him, branded her calf, too. It was a steer calf and I sold it. Here's the money. Jack's in the cow business."

Maren took the folded bills her uncle held out. There was thirty dollars in her hand. "That's awfully nice of you, Uncle Allen," she said. "I'll put the money in the bank for Jack."

"Nope." Bethune shook his head. "Buy him something that he needs."

They talked awhile longer before Bethune took his leave. When he was gone, Maren finished her work but there was no life in her, no interest. She and Dave had quarreled that morning over so small a thing as a dollar bill. Maren had spent the dollar on a knitted cap for Jack. Dave thought it should have gone to pay the milk bill, and in the quarrel they had lost sight of its origin, saying harsh and hateful things, intent only on hurting each other.

Young Jack woke up, yawning and stretching. Maren took him from the crib, dressed him and, placing him in his buggy, set out for town.

As Maren rolled the buggy along the board sidewalk, Tom Loudermilk, with three men, rode by. The sheriff tipped his hat to Maren.

At the store Maren hesitated, tempted to go in. Then, thinking better of it, she pushed the buggy on toward the bank.

Dolf Williams' saddle shop was beside the bank and when Maren reached it she stopped again. In the window of the shop was a saddle. It had been used. The stirrups hung in place, the cinches dangled below the wooden horse. There was a spur track across the seat and a worn place was visible on the right fender. It was Dave's saddle.

"Buy Jack something that he needs," Allen Bethune had said.

Maren wheeled the buggy toward

the shop door, pushing it open. Dolf Williams, bald and wrinkled, came from his workshop in the rear.

"That saddle in the window," Maren said. "Dave's saddle. How much is it, Mr. Williams?"

V

Down in his store, Dave French sat in the office and talked to Ben Peach. Ben lounged, squatting on his boot heels, his hands, rope scarred and calloused, fashioning a cigarette. About Ben's middle a cartridge belt sagged with the weight of a gun.

"So Dutch Ochs escaped?" Dave questioned. "He got out of the pen?"

"Yeah," Ben drawled.

"And Tom's out after him?"

"Yeah." Ben lighted the cigarette.

Dave looked at his paper-littered desk. On top of the bills piled there, was a letter from old man Dantry. Dantry did not like California or loafing in the sun. He wanted to buy back his old store.

"Why didn't you go with him?" Dave asked.

Ben moved his hand in a small, brushing gesture. "Remember what Dutch said when you took him?" he queried. "Remember what he said in jail?"

"About gettin' me?" Dave scowled.

"Uh huh." Ben studied his cigarette. "I thought I'd stay in town awhile. Tom didn't want me with him very bad, anyhow."

So it had come to this! So it had come to a point where Ben Peach and Tom Loudermilk thought that he, Dave French, needed protection!

"Dutch took to the hills?" Dave asked.

"Uh huh."

Dave French stood up and as he rose, the bad and weary months sloughed from his shoulders. His clothes were tight because he filled them; the sagging flesh along his jaw was taut, and anger burned in his eyes.

"You stay here," he directed. "I'll be right back."

When Dave was gone, Ben pushed himself up and walked toward the front of the store. Stopping by the prune barrel, he selected one and bit into it.

"I dunno," Ben said. "Mebbe . . ."

Dave did not find Maren at the house. She was gone and so was little Jack. Dave retrieved his boots and spurs from the closet and put them on. He could get a horse at the livery barn. From the bottom bureau drawer Dave pulled out a belt and holstered weapon. He lapped the belt about his middle.

SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD PUZZLE

In the living room Dave wrote a note to Maren and then, with a glance about the place, went out. At the gate he paused, looking back. Then, closing the gate, he followed the sidewalk toward town, his boot heels firm on the planks, his spurs jingling.

Ben Peach lounged in the door of French's store, chewing his dried prune. Allen Bethune came out of the blacksmith shop and started across the street.

At Dolf Williams' saddle shop, Maren French pushed her son's buggy through the door. The buggy was freighted with an unaccustomed load. With cinches and stirrups tied so that they would not drag, a saddle rode the buggy. Its leather was well cared for and bright where the sun struck it, and Jack had possessed himself of a saddle string and was chewing on the salty leather.

At the eastern edge of Las Bocas a man, heavy-set and armed, watched a small dust cloud receding toward the hills, then grunted and turned his horse toward the houses.

Maren had almost reached the store when she saw Dave. He was coming toward her, walking briskly. Ben Peach stepped from the door and stared at the baby buggy with its strange burden, while Allen Bethune was halfway across the street, coming toward Maren.

Beyond Ben Peach, Maren saw a heavy-set rider enter the street and saw Dave stop and turn toward him.

For a moment the whole scene froze and was congealed, then broke into swift and fluid motion. The rider raised a gun-tipped arm, Dave French leaned forward, his own arm sweeping up, and in Las Bocas there sounded the heavy crash of gunfire. Then Ben Peach was running down the sidewalk, pistol in hand and Bethune paralleled him in the street. The horse reared and the rider, strangely inept it seemed, tilted in the saddle, slumped and came thrashing down.

Maren forgot Jack, forgot everything. Dave took a slow step toward the body in the street while his wife, still pushing the baby buggy, ran toward him, calling, "Dave! Dave!"

Before she reached her man Maren let the buggy go. Young Jack squalled his fright but clung to the saddle string and his vehicle rolled to a halt, front wheels off the sidewalk. Dave turned when Maren called but had no time to come to her. Before he could move she was there, her arms around him. He dropped his gun and his own arms came up to close hard about his wife while Maren sobbed against his chest. Through the sobbing her words came, disconnected and broken:

"I bought your saddle, Dave! I got it back for you!"

Out in the street Ben Peach holstered his gun and Allen Bethune pulled to a panting halt. Dutch Ochs lay at their feet, unmoving. The one thing Ochs needed now was burial.

"That," said Ben, "finishes that, I guess." He was not looking at Ochs as he spoke, nor yet at Allen Bethune. Ben was staring at the

pair on the sidewalk, at a canted baby buggy that held a yelling youngster and a well-used saddle.

Ben Peach was right, as January proved. January is a frosty month and, on a January morning the men at the Y Bar saddled, then, leaving their horses to soak in the corral, went to the house to drink another cup of coffee.

In the kitchen young Jack French occupied his high chair and beat a tattoo with a spoon upon a dish. Dough Givens washed the breakfast dishes and Allen Bethune, Ben Peach and Dave French stood around the stove.

"We'll move those cows," Dave announced, "an' I think we'd better start to feed from the other stacks."

"Suit yourself," said Allen Bethune. "Anything you want brought out from town?"

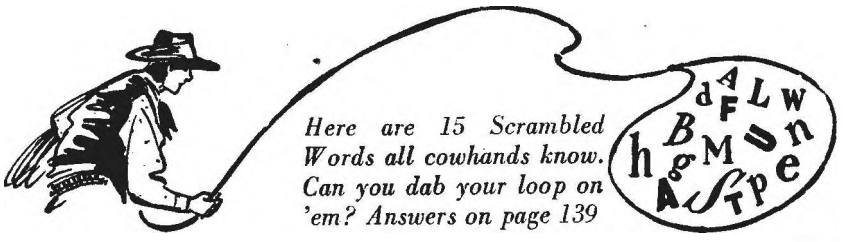
"Ask the boss." Dave answered and turned to smile at Maren by the door. "We'd better go, Ben."

Maren went out with her husband, shivering in the cold but walking with him to the corral, her hands locked on his arm. She stood by the gate while the men mounted and, as tall bay Comet stopped beside her, she put her hand on the saddle.

"We'll be back by noon," Dave said and bent to kiss his wife.

Maren felt his lips, strong and firm and warm upon her own. Under her hand she felt the smooth coldness of the saddle. Then as Comet moved, she stepped back, watching them ride away, watching Dave turn to wave to her. The sun winked in bright reflection from the cantle of Dave's saddle. Maren waved her response. The saddle was carrying her man away, but the saddle would bring him back.

THE END



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That lonely boothill grave deserved an epitaph that couldn't be written until Tom McAfee tracked down the Unholy Three

MANHUNT —TO HELL!

By Joseph Chadwick

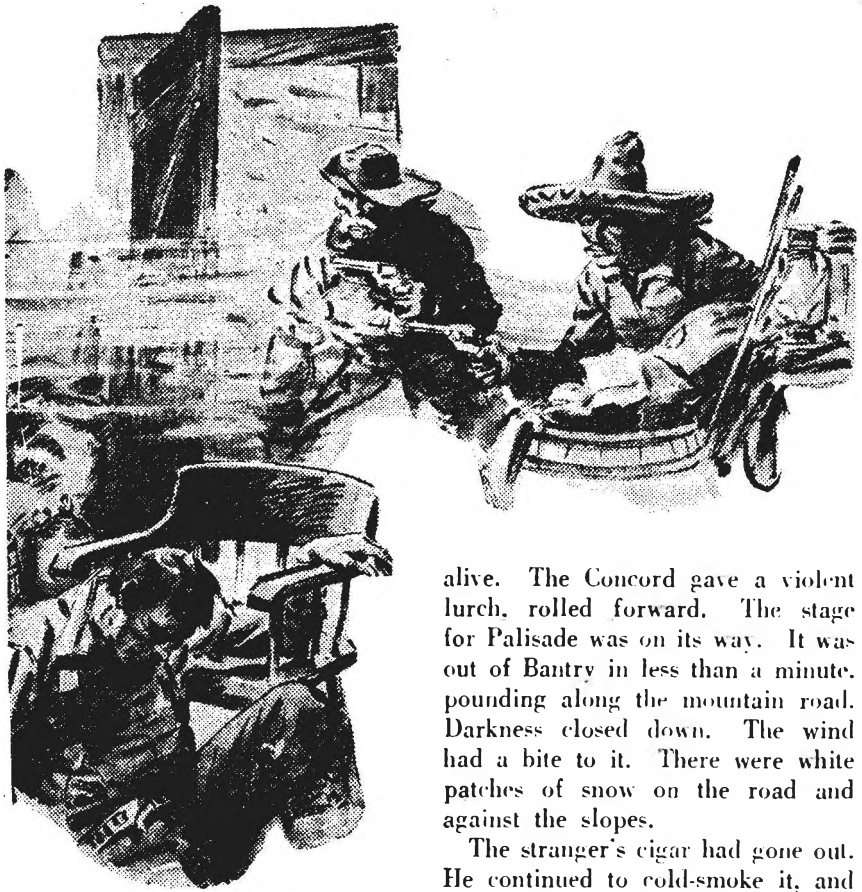
I

THE sundown stage out of Bantry wasn't crowded, but the last passenger to arrive tossed his valise atop the coach and climbed to the box.

"Mind if I ride up here with you?" he asked the driver.

He was a rocky-faced sort who looked as though he didn't care a hoot whether old Hib Reber, handling the ribbons, minded or not. Something about him suggested that he always did as he pleased, no matter how it rubbed other men. His eyes were as chill as the winter air. His mouth, from which a half-smoked cigar jutted, was humorless.

He was dressed in a half town, half rider fashion. That was, his high-heeled boots and broad-brimmed, flat-crowned hat didn't quite match his heavy mackinaw. The man



himself sparked Hib's curiosity, stirred his memory. The stranger ignored the driver's questioning gaze, however, and did not introduce himself.

It was time to hit the trail.

The express company agent appeared in his office door, watch in hand, and gave Hib a nod. Kicking off the brake, Hib yelped and cracked his blacksnake. The six horses in the traces came explosively alive. The Concord gave a violent lurch, rolled forward. The stage for Palisade was on its way. It was out of Bantry in less than a minute, pounding along the mountain road. Darkness closed down. The wind had a bite to it. There were white patches of snow on the road and against the slopes.

The stranger's cigar had gone out. He continued to cold-smoke it, and the way his teeth clamped to the dead butt made old Hib remember.

"Your name's McAfee."

"That's it," the passenger said.

"Marshal at Dodge City."

"Ex-marshal."

"Saw you there, a couple years ago," Hib Reber commented. Now that he had the stranger branded, he wanted to talk. Stage-driving was a lonely kind of job. "Going to Palisade City, eh? Not going to be marshal there, maybe?"

"No," the stranger answered.

"Thought not. Palisade's got a marshal." Hib said. "Maybe you're going to try your luck in the gold fields?"

"A man tries his luck wherever he goes," McAfee replied. "If you must know, I'm going to Palisade to look up my kid brother. Haven't seen him for a couple years. Met a man some months back who claimed he saw the kid in Palisade. Wrote a letter, but it came back marked 'addressee unknown.' Figured I'd come see for myself."

"The postmaster at Palisade should know."

"Not in this case," McAfee stated. "The kid has a habit of changing his name every so often."

Old Hib murmured, "Oh," as though he knew why men changed their names.

Tom McAfee knew that his brother was dead. He hadn't been told so; it was something he felt. This trip to Palisade would end in a visit to the youngster's grave. McAfee was as sure of that as he was certain of his own whereabouts. Twenty-one years old—and dead. It was hard to believe. McAfee didn't want to believe it, yet he wasn't a man who shrank from the truth. He was on his way to visit Dan McAfee's grave.

And then what? McAfee wondered.

He didn't know. It all depended on how the kid had died. If death had been due to natural causes or accident, all right. If Dan had, in his wild way, gotten himself killed in a gun fight fair and square, that too was all right. If something else had happened, as McAfee's feeling, his hunch, told him was so, then his trip wouldn't be finished with a visit to a grave.

The road curved around a steep slope. There was rock wall to the left of the stage; to the right there was a sheer precipice—yawning blackness. If there should be any miscarriage in Hib Reber's driving, the entire outfit—horses, coach, driver, passengers—would go crashing to disaster. But the old man was a wizard with a stagecoach.

"A bad road, this," McAfee remarked.

"The company's never lost a coach on it," stated Hib. "Not to the road. But if you'd mention road agents, that's something else again."

"Holdups, eh?"

"Plenty of them. But only on stages outbound from Palisade—the ones carrying strong boxes," Hib muttered, and swung horses and coach around a sharp bend. The road sloped sharply downward now, and the Concord rocked on its thoroughbraces. "There's a regular wild bunch operating hereabouts. I was jumped two weeks ago, and my shotgun messenger was shot through the shoulder. The road agents got about eight thousand dollars in dust—damn 'em!"

"Any of them known?"

"Nope. They're always masked."

"Seems that something could be done about them," said McAfee, talking around his cigar butt. "How long have they been operating?"

"About six months," Hib told him.

"The first stage was stopped last summer. There was a spell when the bunch laid off, for a couple of months. That was after one of our shotgun messengers was killed. A young fellow named O'Neill. A likable cuss, he was. But brash. He made big talk around Palisade that he was going to wipe out the wild bunch. Me, I figure young O'Neill suspected the identity of one or more of that crowd. Frank Ryerson thinks so, too."

"Ryerson?" questioned McAfee.

"Superintendent of Atlas Mines, Ltd."

McAfee nodded. "I know him," he said. "This O'Neill?"

"A regular buckaroo," Old Hib said. "Handsome, dudish dresser. A sport. But a good gun guard. Always sober when it was time to hit the trail. He did for the Craley brothers, when they tried a stick-up. He got Hank Roman too, with a scatter gun. But none of those three was with the real wild bunch. They were tough, but not smart. It was two months ago that O'Neill got it. He was shot from ambush, at Deep Gorge Creek. The road agents got away with ten thousand in gold bullion, that time. O'Neill left a widow. She's still in Palisade."

"O'Neill," said McAfee.

He took the cigar butt from his mouth, stared at it as though he had never seen it before. His metallic eyes were colder than ever.

At nine o'clock, Hib Reber tooled the outfit into the Emigrant Forks stage station. He and the four passengers from inside the coach entered the log house for the coffee the station agent offered to warm them up. McAfee didn't go inside with them; he remained on the box, as though immune to the cold, and lighted a fresh cigar.

The hostler made a change of horses, hitching up the fresh relay in record time. Hib Reber came out, wiping his whiskery face on his coat sleeve, and climbed up to his perch. He started out as soon as the four passengers were aboard. The road beyond the Forks was less rugged, and the fresh mustangs took to it at a gallop.

"He left a widow, eh?" McAfee said, after a couple fast miles. "This O'Neill, I mean."

"Yeah, He'd only been married a few weeks."

"This widow of his, what's she like?"

"Pretty as a picture, McAfee. The kind that'd turn any man's head, unless he was as old as me. Took her husband's death hard. Still does, for that matter. You can see it in her eyes that she's grieving." Hib paused, spat tobacco juice over the side. "You can't get me to say a word against Mrs. O'Neill," he added. "I figure it's how a woman behaves after she's married that counts."

"Why say something like that, Hib?"

"Well, Danny O'Neill got her out of a honkatonk."

McAfee murmured, "So his first name was Danny." It looked as though he would have to call on the widow as well as visit the grave.

There were snow flurries now, and the cold bit deep. The miles fell away, and at midnight Hib Reber said, "Another hour, and I'll put you down in Palisade. Deep Gorge Creek's just ahead. That's where O'Neill got it. Just over the bridge."

The stagecoach slowed for the crossing, for the bridge was a narrow plank span suspended over nothing but blackness. Hoofs clattered, wheels rumbled. The bridge seemed to sway, its timbers creaking and groaning. Beyond it loomed a tangle of brush, jagged rocks, swirling snow. McAfee said flat-voiced, "Watch it!" He had glimpsed riders.

A gunshot racketed and a voice bellowed, "Pull up, pull up!"

Hib Reber muttered, "Not me," and cracked his whip. McAfee yelled, "Fool! You want to die?" He grabbed the reins, hauled back on them, bringing the horses to a stop as the three masked men rode at the rig.

Old Hib swore, wanted to know if McAfee had no guts. Then he ranted at the road agents, "What's the idea, jumping an inbound stage? You hombres know blamed well I'm not carrying a strong box!"

One of the bandits held a double-barreled shotgun. "End of the month," he said, his voice muffled by his neck-scarf mask. "Time for Atlas to be bringing in specie to pay off its miners. We just want to make sure you're not carrying it, mister."

"If I was carrying treasure, I'd have a shotgun messenger aboard!"

"Looks like you've got one."

"Him?" said Hib, giving McAfee a contemptuous look. "He's just a passenger. You've got him scared green."

"Don't give me that," the shotgun bandit growled. His tone had turned sour. "You"—he indicated McAfee—"start reaching."

"Friend, I'm not armed." McAfee talked around his eternal cigar, and he didn't lift his arms. "My gun's in my traveling bag."

His voice was mild, his face unreadable. But his eyes were narrowed down. With the darkness, the snow and the outlaws' masks, there wasn't much to see. But McAfee was observing what little there was. This man with the shotgun was mounted on a gray gelding; he was bulky in the saddle, and he wore a fur cap and a canvas coat that was probably lined with blanket wool. He grew flustered by McAfee's steady gaze, and muttered, "A man can get himself shot for being stubborn." But he didn't tell McAfee again to put up his hands.

The other two road agents dismounted and began searching the stagecoach. One climbed up and made sure the front boot contained no express shipment. He hefted McAfee's valise atop the coach, was satisfied by its light weight. Descending, he helped his partner go through the rear luggage boot. They ordered the passengers to climb out, then searched the interior for a secret storage place for treasure. They gave up finally, permitted the

passengers to get back inside. and mounted their horses.

"All right, pull out," the bandit with the shotgun growled. "It's lucky for you that you didn't lie to us!"

Hib got underway, muttering a string of oaths. He still believed that he could have gotten past the trio, and he blamed McAfee for getting the stage stopped.

"Thought you had a rep for being tough," he said peevishly.

McAfee ignored that. "They the ones you've been telling me about?" he asked. "The ones that have been pulling most of the holdups—and that killed O'Neill?"

"Yeah, dammit!"

"A man could track them down, if he put his mind to it."

McAfee seemed to be thinking out loud. He also seemed to have made up his mind about something.

II

The stagecoach rolled into Palisade City at midnight, Hib bringing it to a lurching stop before the express company's local office. The snow fell steadily now, and the lighted windows—mostly of the saloons and honkatonks, at this time of night—were seen blurredly as through a filmy curtain. McAfee climbed down and then reached for his valise.

"Hotel's across the street, then to your right," old Hib said.

"Thanks," said McAfee. And added, with dry humor, "No hard feelings over my saving your life?"

He chuckled over Hib's incoherent muttering, then crossed the street and took to the snow-covered board sidewalk. He located the hotel, a two-storied false-fronted building bearing a sign, Palisade House. McAfee mounted to the awninged porch, stamped the snow off his boots and went into the dimly lighted lobby. He crossed to the desk, banged the bell that stood upon it, and was signing the register when a sleepy-eyed youth came from a doorway beyond.

The clerk gave him a key from the rack, said almost surlily, "Room 207—and you're lucky to get it. We're full up."

"Where can a man get a decent drink in this town?"

"Straight across the street, at the Palace," the clerk replied.

"I'll leave my bag here," McAfee said, and turned away.

Tacked to the wall, over by the door, was a notice that was becoming soiled and a little worn. McAfee paused and read:

"REWARD! Five hundred dollars in gold coin will be paid for the apprehension, dead or alive, of the murderers of Shotgun Messenger Danny O'Neill."

McAfee's gaze dropped to the name printed at the bottom of the notice. It was that of the Palisade agent of the Reynolds Express Company.

The door opened and the four passengers from the stage entered. A fifth man followed, closing the door behind him.

"Thinking of collecting that reward, McAfee?" he asked.

McAfee turned slowly, and for a moment didn't recognize the man. Frank Ryerson had grown a moustache and put on weight. Six years ago, when they had gone on a buffalo hunt out of Dodge, Ryerson had been as lean as McAfee. He'd come out from Boston for the sport, like many other Easterners after the railroad was pushed through to the plains country.

Unlike most of the others, Ryerson had returned to the West. He had seen an opportunity for making money, had talked about it to McAfee while shooting buffalo. He made a trip home merely to close out his business there. Evidently he had done well as superintendent of the Atlas Mines. He looked prosperous.

"Glad to see you again, Frank," McAfee said, as they shook hands. "I might collect that reward, at that."

"Well, you're the man to do it."

"Any good man could do it, Frank."

"A United States marshal failed," Ryerson said. "So did our sheriff, from over at Burton. Our town marshal . . . well, he's just good for handling drunks." He reached up, fingered his dapper moustache. His heavy, florid face was thoughtful. "There might," he said, "be more reward than that five hundred dollars the express company is offering."

"So?" said McAfee. "Let's talk about it, over a drink."

A dozen saloons held open house there in the center of town, but McAfee saw that the Palace was the money place. Its bar was long and ornate, and opposite were numerous tables for more leisurely drinking.

The gambling parlor was a separate room at the rear, the dance hall was at the side through an arched doorway. The back-bar mirror reflected the glow of the glittering cut-glass ceiling lamps. The place was painted red, trimmed with gilt. It was crowded, but not uncomfortably so.

Ryerson got glasses and a bottle at the bar, then led McAfee to a corner table where they could talk without being overheard.

"A nice place," McAfee commented, while Ryerson broke the bottle's seal and twisted the corkscrew in. "Must be plenty of money here."

"Merely a boom, Tom," said Ryerson. "One that'll burst like a soap bubble, one of these days. Everybody's trying to get what's to be had, while the getting's good. That goes for the road agents, too."

He drew the cork. It popped loudly.

McAfee's metallic eyes were gazing about. He noticed the girl the moment she came through the archway from the dance hall. She was just ordinary in appearance; young, blond, medium-sized, pretty, dressed in the gaudy way of all honkatonk girls. It was her eyes that caught McAfee's attention. They were wide, a dark blue. And sad. There was a faraway look in them. That was what marked her—for McAfee, at least—as different.

He saw her smile at a man, a red-bearded miner, yet she didn't really

see the fellow. She was doing what a house girl was supposed to do, playing up to the customers, but she was doing it mechanically.

"Not thirsty, Tom?"

Ryerson's voice had turned a little harsh. He had poured the drinks, and he had seen that McAfee's attention was centered on the girl.

"I'm always thirsty," McAfee said. "But that girl . . ."

"No use," Ryerson broke in, his voice still edgy. "She's just here to earn a living. Beyond that she doesn't care. If you're interested, you'd better pick out one of the other girls."

McAfee reached for his glass, wondering what Ryerson was so touchy about. He lifted his glass. "To you, Frank."

They drank.

McAfee offered Ryerson a cigar from his pocket and lighted one for himself. He asked if Ryerson had heard about the stage being stopped and searched, and Ryerson nodded.

"Hib Reber told me, at the same time he told me you'd come to town. That wild bunch preys on Atlas, Tom, and it's worth money to the company to have them hunted down."

"There were only three of them that I saw."

"I know. The Unholy Three, they've been nicknamed."

"You've got no idea who they are?"

"So far, no," said Ryerson. "I've posted a thousand dollars of Atlas' money for any information leading to their arrest." He smiled wryly. "Seems as though nobody needs that money."

"How come they prey on Atlas mostly?" McAfee asked.

"Atlas is the biggest shipper of bullion," replied Ryerson. "It's the only big company and the only owner of a stamp mill here in Palisade City. The others are small operators or individual claim owners. They lose shipments, too, usually dust. But the express company makes good their losses."

"But not Atlas?"

"Reynolds Express isn't Wells Fargo. It's a small outfit, and it'd go bankrupt trying to insure Atlas' shipments—especially with the Unholy Three pulling so many holdups. The express company puts a shotgun messenger on each stage carrying an Atlas shipment, but beyond that the risk is ours. To make up for the failure to guarantee safe delivery, Reynolds Express gives Atlas lower rates."

"A crazy setup," McAfee said thoughtfully. "But I can see that it's about the best you can do with a small stage line."

"It was that," Ryerson said, "or have our shipments refused. Atlas is owned by a group of Denver bankers, and the bullion has got to go through to them—by stage to Bantry and then south by railroad. The owners are hot after me to cut down the losses. It'll be my job unless I do just that—and soon. When I heard that you had arrived, I saw my chance to put a manhunter on the job. Tom, I'll pay you a

thousand dollars for each of the Unholy Three—dead or alive."

McAfee looked surprised. "That's big money," he commented.

"For a big job," Ryerson told him.

"There's just one thing," McAfee said, not looking at his companion but regarding the glowing end of his cigar. He held the cigar in his hand, and directly in line with it, at another table across the barroom, was the girl with eyes that bothered him. "Hib Reber was telling me about a shotgun messenger being killed," he went on. "This Danny O'Neill. Hib figures that O'Neill knew the identity of the Unholy Three. He said you figure the same thing."

"Hib is right. I think O'Neill knew something."

"What makes you think that."

"Well, the night before O'Neill was killed, he passed me here in the Palace. I was in the gambling room, at the roulette layout, and didn't pay too much atention. You see, O'Neill was a little drunk. He held up a paper as he passed me, and said, 'See this, Mr. Ryerson? This is what'll hang the Unholy Three.' That's all I've got to go on. O'Neill was killed guarding a stage the next day."

"A paper, eh? Now, I wonder what happened to it?"

"It wasn't on the body, afterwards."

"The road agents take it, after killing him?"

Ryerson shook his head. "No. They didn't search him, at all."

"Maybe his widow would know about it."

"Maria?" said Ryerson, his tone sharpening. "No. I asked her." He refilled the glasses. "If it's a deal, let's drink on it."

McAfee reached for his glass. They drank on it.

After Ryerson was gone, having said he was an early riser and must turn in, McAfee remained at the table. He drank no more but made his cigar last until, about two-thirty, the crowd was thinned out. He rose when he saw the girl who had caught his eye come from the dance hall with a coat over her gaudy dress and a shawl tied about her head. McAfee went out ahead of her, then tossed his cigar into the snow when she appeared.

Her glance met his, and she shied away.

McAfee said, "It's all right, Mrs. O'Neill." He paused, waited, but she did not deny the name. "I just want to walk home with you, as far as your door. My name's McAfee." He saw that his name made no impression upon her and he had a sudden doubt that Danny O'Neill had been his brother. Then realized that Danny, claiming the name O'Neill, wouldn't have talked of a brother of another name, even to his wife.

III

The girl said, "I'll walk alone," in a toneless voice. But McAfee took her arm, gave her a smile such as was rare with him, and piloted her down the steps. The snow was inches

deep now, and still coming down. They pushed through it for some little distance and came to a small frame house that looked a bit tidier than most of those in the canvas and plank town of Palisade.

The girl said, "Well, thanks . . ." and drew away from McAfee.

"I'd like to talk to you."

"No!"

"About . . . well, about Danny."

Her lips parted, began to tremble, and McAfee thought she would begin to cry with her heartbreak. But evidently Maria O'Neill had cried herself out long ago. Her eyes searched McAfee's face. She must have seen something there that gave her confidence. "Come in," she said, and led him into her house.

She lighted the table lamp in the parlor, a comfortable-looking room but cold due to the lack of a fire in the stove in the corner. McAfee looked about and thought, *So this is how Danny had it before the end.* His face turned bleak. The end had come too soon. He saw Maria watching him, her eyes puzzled.

"If you'll start a fire in the kitchen stove, we'll have some coffee," she said, and surprised him by smiling. "While you're doing it, I'll change my dress."

McAfee had a fire going in both the kitchen and the parlor when she came from the bedroom in a gingham dress and with her hair plaited and wound about her head. Her face was washed clean of powder and paint and she seemed like a different person. She looked about eighteen years old to McAfee.

"I don't know why I trust you," she said, busying herself filling the coffeepot. "I never thought I'd bring a man here."

"Danny wouldn't mind my being here, Maria."

"No?"

"I had a brother," McAfee said slowly. "He was a little wild, but no more than a lot of young fellows. But he got in with bad company—got in trouble that almost sent him to prison. I guess he was ashamed. Anyway, he pulled out and I didn't see him again. That was more than two years ago. He changed his name a couple of times. I tried to locate him, but didn't have any luck until a few months ago. When I was told that he'd been seen in Palisade, I didn't come as soon as I should have . . . . Did your Danny ever mention a brother?"

"Yes," said Maria. "A brother named Tom."

McAfee nodded.

Maria added, "He was proud of his brother. He liked to boast to me that Tom was marshal of Dodge City. I . . . I didn't know that Danny's name was anything but O'Neill."

Suddenly her control was gone. She wilted, covered her face with her hands and began to sob heartbrokenly. McAfee rose quickly and crossed to her, but for once in his life he did not know how to handle a situation. All he could think to do was to put his arm about her, and then he felt guilty about that.

McAfee told himself again and

again that this girl had courage. They sat at the table, after Maria got a grip on herself, and sipped hot coffee and ate a little of the food she had set out. She told McAfee of her loneliness, of how happy she had been with Danny. He had been the best of husbands. She had been glad to get away from that honkatonk. She was back there now, because . . . well, she had to earn a livelihood. No, Danny had never seemed wild to her. Just happy and full of life. Papers?

The question made her frown.

"There are a few papers," she said slowly. "I'll show them to you before you leave, Tom. Why are they important?"

He told her what Frank Ryerson had said about some paper Danny had shown him the night before Danny was ambushed.

"I don't know of any such paper," she said. "And Frank Ryerson . . ."

"What about him?" McAfee asked, when she paused.

"Nothing I guess," she answered slowly. "It's just that . . . well, I don't like Frank Ryerson very much. He . . . well, before Danny came along Frank played up to me. He wanted me to marry him. He kept telling me what a good catch he was for . . . for a girl like me. Now that I'm back at the Palace, he keeps watching me. . . . Oh, I just don't like him!"

"The night before Danny was killed," McAfee said, "was he drinking?"

"I don't know," answered Maria, her brow knit. "Maybe a little. He never drank heavily, after we were married. Did Frank Ryerson . . ."

"Maybe Ryerson was mistaken."

"I'll get the papers," Maria told him, and, still frowning with thought, rose and went into the parlor.

When she returned with a small packet of letters and other papers such as any man might collect, McAfee saw that she looked done in. He realized that this had been a strain on her, that talking of Danny had upset her more than she showed. He stood up, reached for his hat and coat, took the papers from her and stuffed them into his pocket.

"I'll look them over in my hotel room," he told her, "and bring them back in the morning. If it's all right with you."

Maria nodded, managed a faint smile.

It was there and McAfee, sitting on the edge of the bed and puffing on a cigar, thought with bewilderment, *Ryerson said he asked her and she knew nothing about it.* He didn't understand that, but he did comprehend this paper that had been mixed in with Danny's hoarded letters, receipted bills and records of wages and expenditures. It was a dodger, a man-wanted circular issued two years ago by the sheriff at Carson City, Nevada.

The wanted outlaw was named Matt Hogarth, and there was a two-hundred-dollar reward for him. He had held up a Carson-Virginia City stage. There was a blurred picture of him—a heavy-faced man with dark

eyes, black hair. a scar across his left cheek.

The description added a little more: Hogarth was six feet tall. weighed about a hundred and ninety pounds. walked with a slight limp, and the scar was from a knife wound. . . . But more important was the notation penciled. in block letters, on the reverse side. McAfee read it again: "Matt Harvey is one of the Unholy Three, sure!" McAfee didn't need anyone to tell him that Matt Hogarth and Matt Harvey were one and the same. . . . But other aspects of the business puzzled him.

Danny had given Frank Ryerson a glimpse of the dodger. and said that it would hang the outlaw trio. Why hadn't he given it to Ryerson — or to a lawman. McAfee asked himself. It might have been because Danny was drunk. as Ryerson claimed. Yet Maria denied that Danny was in the habit of getting drunk. Of course. Ryerson could have been mistaken, or Maria might not want to admit such a thing about the man she had loved.

There was something more that bewildered McAfee. He couldn't see why Danny had taken the dodger home and placed it among his other papers. He might have been drunk, at that, McAfee thought. But Ryerson had said that he asked Maria about such a paper and she had known nothing about it. McAfee argued with himself that perhaps the girl had been so overcome with grief at the time she didn't make a real search for the paper.

But none of that really mattered. The important thing was that Danny had in some manner gotten a line on the road agents. And that line could be followed to its end.

McAfee refolded the dodger, placed it in his pocket. He bundled the other papers together and placed them in his mackinaw pocket. to return them to Maria.

McAfee had breakfast in the hotel dining room, then asked the way to Palisade City's cemetery. It was north through the gulch in which the gold camp was located, in a lonely spot. The snow was unbroken by any boot tracks but McAfee's. He found Danny O'Neill's grave at once. It was one of about two dozen in the cemetery. and had the newest board marked. Hat in hand. head bowed. McAfee stood by the grave. and his face again took on that bleak look. . . .

Later, back in the center of town. McAfee turned into a plank building that bore a sign reading: "Atlas Mines, Ltd. Frank Ryerson. Superintendent."

An old man was perched on a high stool at a bookkeeper's desk. Ryerson sat at a roll-top desk. There was a big safe against the rear wall, a hand-drawn map of the district and showing the Atlas properties on a side wall. Half a dozen chairs for visitors stood just inside the door. Ryerson looked up, smiled and gave McAfee a hearty "Good-morning!"

McAfee moved a chair over by the desk and sat down. He took the dodger from his pocket and, after unfolding it, lay it before Ryerson.

"You know that man, Frank?"

"Hogarth?" said Ryerson studying the dodger. "I don't know. The picture seems familiar."

"Look on the other side."

Ryerson turned it over, read the penciled notation and looked up with surprise on his florid face.

"Matt Harvey!" he exclaimed. "Sure; I know him. Everybody around Palisade does. He's a packer. He runs a pack string between here and Prospect Bar, a mining camp about thirty miles north. But he can't be—" He broke off, stared at the dodger again. "You got this—where?"

"From O'Neill's wife."

"It's the paper Danny showed me that night?"

"It must be," McAfee said. "It's the only one I found that had anything to do with those road agents. This Matt Harvey . . . he's the man the dodger calls Matt Hogarth?"

Ryerson nodded. He looked shocked and incredulous. "I can't believe that of Matt. We've sat in the same poker games. We've drunk together. I'd have sworn he was honest. But now that I think of it . . . well, a packer could do plenty of night riding. Packers are always on the move, and nobody has reason to keep track of them."

"Does Matt Harvey have anybody working for him?"

"A couple of fellows. Tough hands, come to think of it," Ryerson said. "Ben Rory and a Mexican called Black Tomas."

"Where's their headquarters?"

"About seven miles north of here, at Hatchet Creek," Ryerson said. He slammed his fist down onto the desk, making the inkwell jump. "The more I think about it, the more likely it seems to me that Matt Harvey and his two hired hands are the Unholy Three. Tom, you get the proof and bring them in—and three thousand dollars of Atlas' money is yours!"

"I'll get the proof," McAfee said flatly. "There won't be any doubt when the job's done. And I'll take this dodger with me."

He took back the paper, carefully put it away in his pocket.

He turned to the door, then paused. He didn't know what prompted him to say it, but he couldn't down the urge.

"Even if there wasn't any bounty offered, I'd go after them," he said. "You see, Danny O'Neill was my brother."

He had expected to see surprise on Ryerson's face, but not alarm. Yet it was there. It was there for a brief instant, then gone. McAfee went out, telling himself that he had been mistaken. But he knew he hadn't. For some reason, Frank Ryerson had been jolted to the core on learning that Danny O'Neill had been Tom McAfee's brother.

IV

McAfee made three stops during the next hour. He went to the general store and bought a Winchester rifle and a box of cartridges. He visited the livery barn and hired a saddle mount. Then he rode to Maria O'Neill's little house, the

rifle in the saddle boot. Smoke was curling from the pipe chimney that jutted from the snow-covered roof.

Dismounting, McAfee tethered the horse to the hitching post. He was surprised, and felt a little guilty, at his eagerness. Somehow, it didn't seem right that he should *want* to see Maria.

He knocked, and his pulse raced while he waited.

He called himself a fool, reminded himself that Maria was a widow of only two months—and his brother's widow, at that. He told himself that he was at least ten years older than she. He argued with himself that he wasn't the marrying kind. . . . None of that did any good. When Maria opened the door, McAfee knew that he had lost his heart to her.

She smiled at him, invited him in. He stepped into the little parlor, removing his hat, and gave her the packet of papers. Maria placed them in the drawer of the center table.

"You found what you needed, Tom?"

"Yes. I think I know who killed Danny," he said, and saw the shadow come into her eyes. "There was a reward dodger among those papers. It names a man whom Danny thought was one of the Unholy Three. You never noticed it?"

"No . . . I guess I never looked through those papers."

"Not even when Frank Ryerson asked about such a paper?"

"He asked . . . I don't remember him asking me anything like that."

McAfee frowned. "Now, that's odd," he said. "Frank told me Danny had had such a paper. He said that he'd mentioned it to you."

"Maybe he did," Maria said uncertainly. "Maybe I was so upset at the time . . . by Danny's death . . . that I didn't pay much attention."

"Well, it doesn't matter," McAfee said.

But later, riding from Palisade, it still puzzled him. Either Frank Ryerson was lying, or the girl's memory was faulty. Not only about the dodger, but about Danny's having been drunk the night before he was ambushed. And McAfee found it easier to believe that Ryerson was lying than that Maria was mistaken. But why, he asked himself. What was Ryerson up to?

He couldn't figure it out.

A deep-rutted road ran north from Palisade to a logging camp in the hills, but beyond, there was only a narrow trail. McAfee inquired of a

"Gosh—they say I'm invited to a necktie party!"

man at the sawmill, learned that the trail led to Matt Harvey's place on Hatchet Creek and on to the mining camp of Prospect Bar.

"Not much of a place, Prospect," the sawmill hand said. "Nothing much at Harvey's headquarters, either."

McAfee nodded, said "Thanks," and rode on.

He traveled without haste. There was in him a reluctance that came to a man about to tackle a difficult chore. Despite the fact that he had spent most of his adult life as a lawman, first as a Texas Ranger and then as a deputy sheriff and town marshal, McAfee always experienced uneasiness when a manhunt neared the showdown. He didn't consider himself a coward, yet at such times he did know fear.

It was a reasonable sort of fear, however, born of the knowledge that he was gambling his life—and fed by the belief that one day his luck would fail him. He knew that the Unholy Three were killers. Danny's murder was proof of that. But McAfee had yet to turn back from a dangerous trail. He rounded a timbered slope, and saw Matt Harvey's place just ahead.

There was a cluster of half a dozen log buildings standing in a clearing by an ice-fringed stream. The largest building was the barn where Harvey kept his pack animals —and his horses for night riding, McAfee wondered.

The next largest building was a squat one-storied affair. Smoke curled from its stone chimney. It bore a crudely painted sign over its doorway that read, McAfee saw as he drew close: "Matt Harvey, Freighter & Merchant." Evidently Matt Harvey ran a store along with his packing and his night riding.

The other four buildings were small cabins, and a dusky-skinned woman appeared at the door of one to stare at McAfee with open curiosity.

Two men were inside the barn; McAfee could see them through the open doorway. He swung over to the building with the sign and dismounted, leaving his horse ground-hitched. The snow crunched noisily under his boots as he moved to the door. He shoved the door open, stepped in to a big room.

A burly man was seated by a pot-bellied stove. His chair was tilted back, his feet were propped up on the stove's fender. He had a lazy look, and his voice had a drowsy sound as he said, "Come in, stranger. Help yourself to a drink and sit by the fire."

It was the man pictured on the dodger—Matt Hogarth, who now called himself Matt Harvey. He had ink-black eyes, and his heavy face had a purplish cast from the myriad tiny veins that webbed it. His loose lips formed what passed for a welcoming smile. McAfee was sure the man recognized him from the stage. He looked about, and the room was part storeroom and part barroom. He crossed and stepped behind the bar, picked up a glass and filled it from a bottle.

Harvey was watching him narrowly. "Passing through to Prospect Bar?" he asked.

McAfee said, "No," and drank. He made a face, for the whiskey was a poor grade of rotgut. Taking out a cigar, he lighted up, leaving his overcoat unbuttoned so that, anytime now, he could get at his gun. He moved to the stove, held his hands out to it to warm them. He had placed himself opposite Harvey and facing the door. There was another door, to an adjoining room, and it bothered him a little.

"You're not on your way to Prospect Bar?" Harvey asked.

"No. I'll be going back to Palisade shortly."

"So you rode up here to see somebody," said Harvey. "That means you came to see me. What's on your mind, stranger?"

"Danny O'Neill's killing."

Harvey's boots dropped off the fender, the front legs of his chair hit the floor with a thud. He stared at McAfee as though he'd been hit a surprise blow, and he no longer looked loose and lazy. He was tensed, appeared ready to lunge forward in an attack. His right hand had leapt to his holstered gun. McAfee had never seen a man so surprised, or so guilty looking. But though jolted badly, Matt Harvey showed no fear.

"Queer, that bringing you here," he muttered. "Who are you?"

"The name's McAfee. But I'm Danny's brother."

"Go on, McAfee. Keep talking!"

"I was on the stage last night, Harvey," McAfee said. "You were the road agent with the shotgun. You're one of the Unholy Three, and you ambushed Danny O'Neill. He'd got a line on you, somehow, and bragged that he'd use what he'd found out to hang you. You and Ben Rory and Black Tomas."

Harvey's eyes were ugly. He forced a grin that turned out a sneer. "Do dead men talk nowadays, McAfee?" he asked.

"The man who put me onto you is far from dead, Harvey," said McAfee. "He's alive enough to pay a thousand dollars for each of the Unholy Three." He saw surprise loosen up Harvey's heavy face, heard the man mutter, almost inaudibly, "Ryerson!" He said. "He'll pay it for you dead or alive. The choice is up to you."

Sweat suddenly beaded Harvey's heavily veined face.

Voices sounded outside.

Harvey glanced—with hope—toward the door. He opened his mouth and bawled, "Ben . . . Tomas!" as he grabbed for his gun.

McAfee's six-gun was already drawn. Clubbing down, he struck Matt Harvey twice on the head with the barrel. Harvey's lurch from the chair ended on the floor, where he lay in a limp heap. There had been weight behind those blows, and McAfee felt the jar of them clear to his shoulder. He shifted his position, placing the bulky stove between himself and the door. Harvey's bellow had warned the men outside. The door burst open, the pair leapt in.

"Drop your guns!" McAfee yelled.

That halted them, but neither the Mexican or the ratty-faced hard-case obeyed McAfee's order. When they saw Harvey sprawled there, and McAfee behind the stove, they swung their guns up, and blazed away.

McAfee shot Ben Rory through the right shoulder. Then, when the outlaw made a border shift with his weapon, shot his through the chest. Black Tomas' bullets rang as they hit the stove, sang weirdly as they ricocheted from it. McAfee shouted again, giving Tomas another chance. The Mexican cursed him, leapt for cover behind an untidy heap of merchandise. His gun blasted once more, then McAfee targeted him with two shots. Black Tomas went down cursing..then sprawled out limp and still.

The place was suddenly as quiet as a tomb, hazy with a shroud of powdersmoke. Then Matt Harvey groaned and began to move.

McAfee picked up Harvey's gun. He crossed the room, found the dead men's weapons and tossed all three behind the bar. By then Matt Harvey was slowly picking himself up. He stood swaying, blood from a scalp cut trickling down his face.

"What're you going to do with me?" he muttered.

"I'm going to turn you over to the law," answered McAfee. "To hang."

McAfee saw a coat and hat hanging on the wall. He pulled them down, made sure the coat pockets were empty, and flung them to Harvey. Still dazed, the outlaw put them on. It was a broad-brimmed black hat and woolen coat instead of the fur cap and canvas coat Harvey wore for his night riding.

McAfee prodded the man from the log house, across to the barn, ordered him to saddle a horse. There was no sign of the gray gelding Harvey had ridden for the stage holdup. McAfee knew then that the Unholy Three had a hideout somewhere away from their respectable-appearing headquarters.

When they mounted and rode out, half a dozen women and kids watched them from the row of cabins. He saw nothing on their faces to tell him that they resented Matt Harvey being taken away at gunpoint. He called to them to bury the two dead men, and one of the women nodded.

McAfee holstered his six-gun, but rode warily behind his prisoner. He had a hunch that Matt Harvey wasn't going to be taken to Palisade without making at least one attempt at escape.

V

It began to snow as they neared the logging camp, which was but two miles from Palisade City, this time in earnest. A howling wind whipped through the foothills, and the temperature dropped lower by the minute. The swirling snow was a murky white curtain. McAfee didn't like it. If the storm kept up, if it became a real blizzard, Matt Harvey might risk a bullet and make a dash for it—and get away. Such a snowfall made a man all but blind.

McAfee took his gun from its holster, thrust it into his overcoat

pocket, then buttoned up the coat to stop its wild flapping in the wind. He swung his mount in alongside his prisoner, on the right side.

Harvey gave him a mocking look. "Worried, eh?" he said. "You'd better worry, McAfee. Because you're not taking me in for the gallows!"

"A bullet through your guts will suit me," McAfee said, through cold-numbed lips. His hands were growing stiff inside his gloves. He was worried. Half-frozen hands wouldn't be much good with a gun. And if Harvey gigged his horse close and grabbed at him. . . . McAfee wasn't sure he could handle the burly outlaw in a desperate try at escape.

"Ryerson offered you that bounty, didn't he?" Harvey demanded. "Thought so," he said, catching McAfee's nod. He swore savagely. "He was in on it, McAfee! Ryerson got half the loot every time we took an Atlas shipment off a stage!"

"What?"

"I'm telling you, dammit! He tipped me off when bullion was to be shipped, then Ben and Tomas and I pulled the holdups. We divvied with him, fifty-fifty!"

"Go on, Harvey."

"Then his nerve cracked, when O'Neill was killed," Harvey said, almost with wicked relish. He was squealing and enjoying it. "Ryerson made a secret deal with Black Tomas, one I didn't know about until afterwards. He got Tomas to kill that shotgun messenger. Then he got scared, wanted to quit the game. But I told him none of us was quitting. So then he hired you to get rid of us."

McAfee said nothing. He was jolted, yet his surprise wasn't as great as it might have been. He remembered how startled Ryerson had looked on learning that Danny O'Neill had been his—McAfee's—brother. He recalled, too, how some of the things Ryerson told him hadn't jibed with what Maria had said.

"He wanted us killed so he could crawl out from under," Harvey went on, his voice full of hate for the man who'd betrayed him. "Maybe he figured on grabbing our share of the loot, too. The sneaking son knows where we've got it cached!"

"Why'd he get Black Tomas to kill Danny?" McAfee asked.

"Ryerson claimed that O'Neill was onto me and the other two."

"Was that his real reason, Matt?"

"Well, there's the girl—O'Neill's wife. Ryerson always had his eye on her. He figured that he'd have a chance with her, once she was a widow."

McAfee swore under his breath. Aloud, he said, "Where's your part of the loot cached, Matt? It's no good to you now, and it should be returned to its owners."

Matt Harvey was silent for a moment, then he shrugged his thick shoulders. "There's a trap door in the floor behind the bar in my place," he said, in what seemed resignation. Then his voice rose with sudden excitement. "But knowing won't do you any good, McAfee!"

His movement was too swift to avoid. McAfee felt one hand close

viselike on his left shoulder, the other on his neck. He couldn't break loose, couldn't get his gun from his coat pocket. He did the only thing possible—kicked free of the stirrups, shoved toward his attacker, and slipped from the saddle. He had hoped to drag Harvey down with him, but the outlaw let go of him. McAfee fell in a heap into the snow, rolled over, came to his knees, watching the outlaw.

Harvey was drawing the rifle from the saddle boot of McAfee's horse. The outlaw got it clear of the scabbard; he swung his horse about, jerked the rifle to his shoulder. McAfee got his six-gun out at last, and his target was but ten feet away. Matt Harvey got in one shot. McAfee two. . . .

Harvey gasped, began to slump in the saddle. He tried to steady himself, to level the rifle again, but his horse was spooked and, suddenly plunging, threw him to the snow. The outlaw was dying when McAfee reached him. He lasted only long enough to curse McAfee some more, and then say, "Get Ryerson! You get that double-crossing son, McAfee!"

McAfee wasn't sure that he could do it.

He was in agonizing pain and losing a lot of blood. Matt Harvey's shot had caught him in the left side.

Harvey's mount had bolted, but the livery barn horse stood droopingly with rump to the gale. McAfee caught hold of the saddlehorn, managed to center the stirrup with his second try. He hauled himself up and rode on through the storm, leaving Matt Harvey's body where it lay. The pain in his side was so bad it was making his brain reel.

But he was upon the roadway now, entering the gulch entrance, and the town was not far ahead. McAfee gritted his teeth and willed himself to hang on.

Reaching town, he made his way to Maria's house. He dismounted and tied the sorrel's reins together and looped them over the saddle horn. He slapped the animal on the rump, saw it start out to find its own way to the livery barn. Frank Ryerson would hear that the horse came in with an empty saddle, and that was all to the good. McAfee didn't want to come face to face with Ryerson until he was in shape for a showdown. When trapped, the man was apt to be as deadly a killer as the Unholy Three.

The snow was piling up against the front door. Maria opened to McAfee's knock, gasped, "Tom, you're hurt!" and drew him inside.

She held his arm, leading him into the bedroom, helped him out of his overcoat, his suit coat, vest, string tie and bloodstained shirt. Her eyes were frightened as she stared at his pain-stiffened face. He asked her to heat water . . . and yes, she told him, she did have a carbolic solution. She hurried off to the kitchen.

All McAfee's pain came from fractured ribs. The rifle slug had made an ugly tear in the flesh, broken the ribs, but done no more damage. He was, however, suffering the ner-

vous shock that comes of a gunshot wound. But Maria's gentle hands had a soothing affect.

She cleansed the wound with the fiery carbolic; she cut bandages from a sheet and bound McAfee tightly about the middle. A doctor, had there been one in Palisade City, would have done no more. The bandaging held McAfee stiff, supported his fractured ribs, and so eased the pain considerably.

Maria insisted that he rest. He gave in to her urging, and slept for several hours. The blizzard was still raging when he woke. He could hear the roar and howl and shriek of it.

Getting up from the bed, McAfee started to dress. He found a clean shirt on the chair; it had belonged to Danny, of course. When he stepped into the little parlor, he found Maria seated in a rocking-chair near the stove. She had some sewing on her lap. It seemed to McAfee that some of the sadness had gone out of her eyes. She smiled at him, asked how he felt. He replied that he felt sound enough. His gaze sought the clock on the wall. It was a little after eight.

Maria caught his look. "I'll fix supper for us," she told him.

McAfee shook his head. "Not for me," he said. "There's something I've got to do. I found the Unholy Three, Maria. They'll never stop another stage. But the job still isn't done. Frank Ryerson was in it with them."

Maria's eyes widened at that.

McAfee told her what Matt Harvey had said about Ryerson being in on the robbery of the stages carrying bullion shipments from the Atlas Mines. As he talked, he reloaded his six-gun with cartridges from his gunbelt.

"Ryerson wanted to break with them," he said, "but he was in too deep. Matt Harvey wouldn't let him quit. Ryerson saw his chance when I showed up. He figured that I'd hunt them down for the reward he offered. He was counting on Matt Harvey and the other two putting up a fight—and on my killing them before they had a chance to talk and squeal on him."

He smiled humorlessly. "It was a sound scheme," he said. "Only Ryerson was wrong about my killing them as soon as they showed fight. I gave them a chance and that meant Harvey had time to squeal. I knew Ryerson back in Dodge six years ago. He was a shrewd one even then, and quick-witted. I guess he took me for not being very bright, except with a gun. Else he wouldn't have tried such a tinhorn scheme as baiting me with that dodger."

"Baiting you?" Maria asked.

McAfee nodded. "The way it looks," he said. "Danny came by that dodger when he was drifting around, before he settled in Palisade. He discovered that it fitted Matt Harvey. So he showed it to Ryerson. I figure Ryerson kept it, promising to give it to the sheriff at Burton. Instead, Ryerson tipped off Matt Harvey—and Danny was killed. After Danny's death, Ryerson lost his nerve. But

Harvey wouldn't let him quit the setup. So Ryerson baited me—with an offer of bounty and by telling me there was such a paper.

"He didn't dare say that the paper was in his possession. That would have made me suspicious. It would have made any lawman suspicious. and that's why he didn't turn the law on the Unholy Three. So he got to thinking. He left me at the Palace, came here to your house and planted the dodger among Danny's papers on the table. He knew you'd be at the Palace until late. It was snowing. so there was little chance of anybody seeing him. It was probably easy enough for him to get in through a window. . . ."

Maria shuddered. "He's worse than I suspected," she said hollowly.

McAfee nodded. "He's ambitious—greedy. But he wasn't quite smart enough. He slipped up a couple of times, before he'd planned it all. He tried to say he hadn't gotten a look at the paper—because Danny was drunk when he flashed it. You told me Danny didn't drink heavily after you were married. Ryerson slipped up, too, by saying he'd asked you about such a paper. You told me he hadn't." McAfee's voice hardened. "Frank Ryerson is as guilty as the Unholy Three—and I've got to settle with him."

"Yes," said Maria. "But not tonight. You're hurt and . . ."

"If he loses any more of his nerve, he'll run," McAfee told her. "Once he's gone from Palisade, I may not be able to locate him."

"The stage won't leave in this storm, Tom."

McAfee smiled thinly. "Somehow, it's got to be now," he said.

When he put on his hat, clumsily got into his overcoat, Maria lay aside her sewing. She rose and put on her coat and shawl. McAfee frowned. "Where are you going?" he asked sharply.

"It's time I went to the Palace," Maria answered.

McAfee's frown darkened into a scowl. "I don't like your going to that place."

"I have to be there, Tom," Maria insisted gently.

VI

They left the house, and the storm raged at them as they made their way to the Palace. They were alone on the street except for a freight wagon that came lumbering in from the south road. In passing, McAfee saw that the windows of the Atlas Mines office were lighted. He knew where to find Frank Ryerson. That suited him. He didn't want a showdown in some public place.

He took Maria all the way to the Palace. "I'll come here when it's over," he said.

He faced the gale now, and bent against it. The snow was drifted in places and slowed his pace. Reaching Atlas' building, he didn't knock but shoved open the door and stepped quickly inside. Frank Ryerson was sorting out papers at his roll-top desk, and looked up startled.

"Tom! Why, I thought . . ."

McAfee closed the door, stood with his back to it.

"What did you think, Frank?"

"The liveryman said your horse came in alone, with a bloody saddle," Ryerson told him. "He told it in the Palace this afternoon. I thought that you'd been killed!"

"The Unholy Three weren't that tough, Frank," McAfee said. "Ben Rory and Black Tomas are dead at Hatchet Creek, and Matt Harvey's body is lying in the snow between here and the logging camp."

"You killed them all?" Ryerson asked, in a shaken voice.

"Sure. Wasn't that what you wanted?" McAfee said. "You figured that they'd put up a fight and that I'd have to kill them, didn't you?" He paused, watching the man's florid face. He thought he saw relief in Ryerson's eyes, yet it was tempered by uneasiness. Thief he might be, but Frank Ryerson was unnerved by killings.

"You said something about a bounty, Frank," McAfee reminded him.

Ryerson said, "Yes, of course."

He left the desk, went to the safe. He took out a metal box, removed a leather pouch that appeared to be heavy with gold coin. He returned to the desk.

"I have it ready for you, Tom. Three thousand dollars." His smile was forced. "I knew you could handle those three."

McAfee crossed to the desk, took the pouch, thrust it into his overcoat pocket. The coat hung open, so that he could reach his gun. He saw a six-gun in one of the open desk drawers, close to Ryerson's hand. McAfee's face was grayish, his knees were shaky. His wound had weakened him more than he thought. He moved back, leaned against the wall beside the door.

"Like you put it, Frank," he said slowly, "the Palisade boom won't last forever, and a man's got to make his pile while he can. That's to be expected. It's human nature, to grab while the grabbing's good. But what does for a man like Matt Harvey isn't good for one like you."

"What do you mean?" Ryerson asked, frowning.

"Atlas was paying you a salary, but it wasn't enough for you," McAfee told him. "You wanted to cash in on the bullion from the Atlas properties. There are different kinds of high-grading, Frank, but yours was the worst kind—because you teamed up with a bunch of road agents who were killers!"

Ryerson stared at him, horror in his eyes. He reached out a hand, fumbled for his chair, slumped into it. "Harvey . . . he told you?" he stammered, almost incoherently. "He said that I . . ."

"He even claimed that you wanted Danny O'Neill killed, Frank."

"Tom, we're friends!" Ryerson cried, terror making him beg. "Look; I'll share with you. I've got plenty cached away. And I know where Matt Harvey hid all his loot!"

"I know where Matt's loot is," McAfee shot back at him. "What I'm wondering is where yours is."

Sudden hope mingled with a look of slyness in Ryerson's eyes. "It's a deal, then?" he asked. "We divide the loot and forget the rest?"

"Where do you have it hidden, Frank?"

"Not here in Palisade."

"You're lying. How could you have moved bullion out of town?"

"I've got a way, Tom," Ryerson said, worried again. "I'm asking you is it a deal?" Somewhere he got hold of a measure of courage. "It's got to be a deal," he went on. "I won't go to prison and I don't mean to hang. That's how it is, Tom. I'll pay for my freedom if only you'll be reasonable."

"Where do you have it hid?" McAfee said again, his voice knife-sharp. "Talk up, and then we'll bargain."

"It's at Bantry."

"You're lying, dammit!"

"It's the truth," Ryerson said. "I was afraid to keep the gold here. Somebody might have got suspicious. There's an old man named Simmons, a freighter. He lives at Bantry. His wife was sick sometime back, and Simmons needed money. I gave it to him. He takes the gold out for me and hides it at his place. Now I've been fair with you, Tom. You—"

The door whipped open.

McAfee swung around, startled. For an instant he thought the storm had burst the door open, because of a faulty latch. But now a man stepped in, quickly closing it. An old man. His hat brim was turned down, his collar up. A woolen muffler was wrapped about his neck. The cold had his nose nipped red. Snow clung to his shaggy gray moustache.

"Howdy, Mr. Ryerson," he drawled. He glanced at McAfee. "You Tom McAfee, who used to be marshal at Dodge?"

McAfee swung back to face Ryerson, not answering. He was none too soon, for Ryerson had jumped out of his chair, on the oldster's entrance, and now grabbed the gun from the desk drawer.

"I told you, McAfee!" he yelled. "I won't go to prison or hang!"

His gun blasted.

Two slugs ripped through the plank walls before McAfee got his own weapon out. McAfee saw, from the corner of his eye, that the old man was trying to draw a gun from under his coat. It seemed an eternity before he got his gun up. He was sure that Ryerson, despite his wildness, would target him any instant.

Ryerson was forcing himself to take aim, for his third shot, as McAfee fired. Ryerson's gun wavered as it blasted; for the man was hit and reeled backwards. He collided with the chair, toppled over with it, crashed to the floor.

McAfee swung his gun toward the old man, who still hadn't gotten his weapon out of his coat pocket.

"Don't try it!" McAfee yelled.

"Hold on now, McAfee!" the oldster howled. "I'm the law!"

"You're Simmons — Ryerson's friend!"

"You're loco," the old man said. "I'm Tad Wyler, marshal of Palisade City. I came here to side you. That widow girl, Miz O'Neill, came to my office with a story about Frank Ryerson being in with the Unholy Three and that he'd kill you. Why, shucks, man; if I hadn't got here in time, you'd have been a goner!" He stopped jabbering, grinned sheepishly. "Well, I sure meant to help," he added. "You mean to say that Ryerson really was working with the Unholy Three?"

McAfee nodded. He understood now why Ryerson had grabbed for his gun. Recognizing Tad Wyler, Ryerson had thought McAfee had brought the lawman there to make the arrest. Up until that moment, Ryerson had believed that he could buy McAfee off.

"He was working with that bunch," McAfee said. "You listen close, and I'll tell you where the loot of all those stagecoach holdups is cached. You can see that it's returned to its rightful owners. . . ."

McAfee had told Maria that he would come to the Palace after it was over. He went instead to the little house that was tidier than any other in Palisade City. The door opened before he had a chance to knock, and Maria drew him in out of the storm. He could see the look of relief in her eyes.

"You didn't intend to go to the Palace," he said accusingly.

"No. I was afraid for you, Tom."

"Well, the town marshal got there in time," he told her. He took the bounty money from his pocket, laid it on the table. "There's no need for you to go back to the Palace, at all. That's Atlas money. You rate it because Danny died trying to protect an Atlas bullion shipment. You'll not go back, Maria?"

She met his glance steadily. "No, I'll never go back," she promised. "Tom, I . . . well, won't I see you again?"

McAfee had already turned to the door.

"I'll be back when that money's used up," he said. "So long, Maria."

He went out into the storm, because he couldn't trust himself to stay longer. He had to remember that Maria was a widow but a short time—his brother's widow, at that. But Tom McAfee knew, looking into the storm toward where the cemetery was located, that Danny wouldn't object to his coming back—after a proper wait.

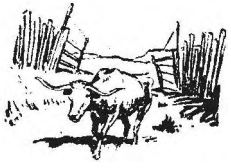
THE END

Scrambled Words Answers (page 115)

1. pigpen 2. otter 3. honey 4. paraffin 5. chore 6. bale 7. peak 8. earthworm 9. quail 10. pacer 11. currycomb 12. ham 13. quarry 14. reap 15. mill

RANGE SAVVY

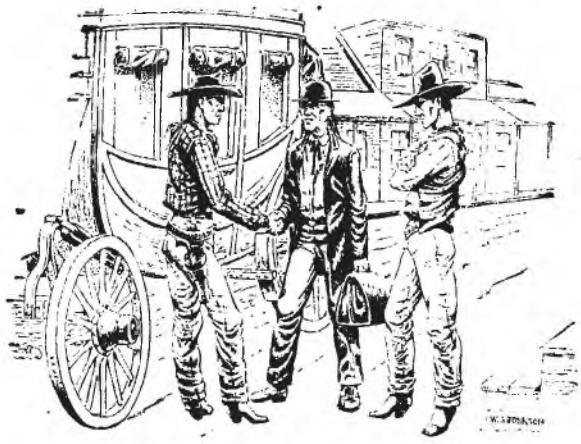
By Gene King



Trapping wild horses was an old Indian stunt later taken up by the wild horse hunters of the early West. Now a similar system is being used on the range to bring in many wise old cow-country steers that ranch owners discovered have been eluding cowboys at the regular branding and "beef-cut" roundups. One large outfit has been setting the traps at waterholes. The traps are wide, fenced-in enclosures with gates fixed to let the thirsty old-timers in, yet prevent their getting out afterward. Reports state that to date quite a catch of wily eight- and nine-year-old steers as well as unbranded bulls and old cows—worth about $150 each at present market prices—have been trapped in this manner.

This one is for the gals. Especially those who want cowboy husbands—tall, dark and handsome, or otherwise. Horace Greeley's early-day advice, "Go West, young man," holds doubly true today for marital-minded females. While recent statistics point up a deplorable shortage of marriageable males in the U. S. as a whole, the condition does not apply in many of the cow-country areas of the West. Outside of Alaska, the best bet—Alaska has 45 men to every girl—next best prospects are Nevada, Wyoming, Idaho, Arizona, Montana, Washington, Oregon and—believe it or not—California.

That much-talked-about bugaboo, inflation, knows no regional boundaries. It has hit the West too. Specifically the livestock country where enormous quantities of cattle and sheep are annually grazed on lease holdings in the public range at so much per head of livestock. Recently it has been announced that grazing fees on public ranges in ten Western States would be raised—the increase amounting to from 5 to 8 cents per head per month on cattle and horses; from 1 to 1¾ cents on sheep and goats. More than two million cattle and over seven million sheep are affected by the new rates.



HANG-ROPE PRELUDE

By BARNIE STACY

How far could Sheriff Eagan trust the doomed outlaw on whom he had been forced to pin a deputy's badge?

IT WAS not coincidence that had Sheriff Buck Eagan waiting at the station when the west-bound stage rolled to a stop in Toyahville. Sometimes it was helpful to see what kind of live cargo those cross-country coaches spilled out on the town.

Still, he later reflected, it was a mighty lucky thing he happened to be close at hand when the old man climbed out and in a cracked voice, tinged with excited expectancy, started inquiring as to where he might find his boy, Charley Winters.

The eager query hit the leathery lawman with a jarring impact when the oldster went on, "Charley written me he's runnin' one of the biggest ranches hereabouts. Figger most everybody ought to know my boy."

Buck, stunned, almost strangled, and it was a moment before he could stifle a gasp and think of a reply. Swiftly he sized up the oldster, whose assumption was partly correct. Almost everybody did know Blackleg Charley Winters by reputation. But not as a respected rancher. They knew and hated him as a cold-blooded killer. As a member of a notorious cutthroat gang of rustlers, stage and bank robbers. And if the

sheriff hadn't been on hand to head it off, someone less considerate than Buck almost certainly would have blurted the truth: "Shucks, yes. We know the murderin' varmint. He's yonder in jail, waitin' to keep a hang-rope appointment tomorrow!"

Buck, glancing defiantly about, took the old man's battered, dust-covered valise, grabbed his arm, and hustled him beyond the glowering crowd of curious spectators.

"Why, sure, Mr. Winters," he groped wildly for words, "reckon I do know your son. You say he wasn't expectin' you?"

"Why, yes. That's right." The oldster nodded, pleased. "I'm bound for 'Frisco, to live with my married daughter there. Their ma, she died last month, back in Missouri."

Buck's practical brain threshed about wildly, as he hurriedly steered his charge into Soldano's Lone Star hotel, with bar and dining room on the ground floor. It was mighty bad, he reflected, for a man to have all his speed compressed into a trigger finger, and none above the eyebrows. This doting parent's happy, almost childlike air of excited expectancy hit him hard. Like a hot skinning knife plunged into his innards, then twisted.

The old fellow's thinning hair was white, as was the cropped, scraggly mustache. Faded, bluish-gray eyes peered through thick-lensed, steel-rimmed spectacles. He was tall, stooped, and although his rusty black suit was faded and worn, he carried himself with dignity. A plumb fine, upstanding old gent, Buck thought. And now fate was fixing to hand him a mess of grisly jokers. And somehow he, Buck, had to cover up. Keep the oldster from finding out that he'd sired a mangy, no-good, lobo whelp.

Desperate, Buck snatched words from thin air. He heard his own strained voice blurt, "Why, sir, it just so happens that your Charley boy is one of my deputies. Awful fine boy. He's due back from a rustler trail shortly and I'll fetch him."

They faced the bar and the barkeep stared, slack-jawed. Buck turned and glared toward the scattering of a dozen-odd loungers. "Men," he proclaimed defiantly, "this here is our mutual friend, Charley Winters,' pappy. Step up, shake hands, and let's show him a sample of Toyahville horspitality." He dropped carelessly back, pressed a finger to lips, patted, significantly, the ugly black butt of his six-gun. The clear meaning of the challenge was not lost to them. Hostility which had flared at mention of the hated name changed to sullen acceptance as they shuffled forward to grasp, limply, the bony old hand.

Buck threw a gold coin on the bar. "The drinks for the house," he announced, "are on me. Reckon Mr. Winters can stand a toddy, to cut the road dust in his gullet."

He left them, then, staring wrathful, puzzled, silent. "I'll fetch Charley shortly, sir," he called over his shoulder.

But outside, as he clumped along the boardwalk, his shoulders sagged. He cursed himself, softly, for a

chicken-hearted fool. Now he thought of a dozen other lies, all plausible, that a nimbler mind could have invented. But it was too late for regret. One thing was sure: He'd have to get the old man out of town on the next stage west, at daylight.

Two of his tough deputies, Jack Horn and Bick Spade, loafing in the front office, listened, with deepening frowns, as he talked, low-toned.

"Boss, you're beggin' for trouble," Bick warned. "That Charley's a mean snake."

"I know," the lawman groaned. "It's for the old un. But it still makes me a damned fool." He opened a door and moved into the cell corridor, knowing he could depend on this loyal pair. But that arrogant, jeering renegade back here in a cell was something else again. He doubted if there was room in his icy heart for sentiment or the slightest touch of parental affection.

Buck stood thoughtfully before the barred door a full minute before he spoke. Blackleg Charley, lounging on a cot, stared back at him contemptuously. Through the outside window the lowering sun cast a shadow of the stark, skeletonlike, newly built scaffold on the cell floor.

"I still say that's wasted timber, lawdog," Charley sneered. "I ain't goin' to hang."

"Charley," Buck spoke in a quiet tone. "I'm wonderin' if there's a speck of decency in you, anywhere. Because," he went on softly, "now's the time to show it. Your dad's here. He don't know how rotten his own flesh and blood has turned. And I aim to help you keep him from findin' out."

The doomed outlaw underwent an abrupt but puzzling change. He lunged half up, fists clenched. His face darkened with sudden rage for a moment. Then he sank back, lowered his head into hands, and moaned, "Great guns! The old man. Why'd he have to pick a time like this?" It was hard to tell if contrition figured in his emotions. Somehow it struck the watching sheriff as something like baffled rage.

"Charley, being a father can be an awful heartbreakin' chore," Buck said. "I know, bein' one. But if you've got enough feelin' in your calloused heart to play the game with me we'll send your pa on his way, come morning, with a heart bustin' with pride 'stead of shame and sorrow. I'll tell him that I'm forced to send you on a long trail tomorrow, and that he might just as well go on to 'Frisco. It won't be a whole lie, at that. I'll fix it so's you can spend the night with him, at the hotel."

"Damn your meddlin' soul, star toter!" Charley blazed furiously. Fleetingly he stared at the gruesome shadow on the floor.

"I ain't askin' you for any pledge," Buck told him. "Your promise wouldn't be worth a hoot. Anybody that can shoot beggin' men, with hands up, off stage boxes, or in teller's cages, ain't likely to be bothered with promises. What I'm relyin' on, you'll savvy. Guns'll be lined on you

every second, case you get any foolish ideers."

The condemned killer got up, paced the floor like a caged animal. The old, reckless bravado had drained out of him. "It's a stacked deck!" he gritted, but somehow in the tone inflection, Buck read assent.

"My deputies'll escort you to the hotel in ten minutes," the sheriff instructed. "You'll be wearin' a deputy's badge. And an old gun, with a busted hammer, to make you look the part. I'll go ahead now, and try to prepare the boys to fall in with the play. Won't be easy. Some of your murdered victims was their friends."

When Buck got back to Soldano's, old man Winters was proudly showing around a tintype. It pictured a towheaded tad of two or so on a woman's knee. Beside her stood an older girl, and behind, a hand resting on the woman's shoulder, stood a young man who closely resembled the Charley Winters of today.

"He always was a good boy, sheriff." The old man pointed out the baby. "Good to me and his ma. He got restless, come West when he was seventeen, ain't been back since. But he written us twicet a year, reg'lar, and sent home money. Always promised to pay us a visit, but never got around to it."

Buck maneuvered the customers to one side and briefed them on the play. There were plenty of scowls and mutterings, but at last they grudgingly agreed, for Buck Eagan wasn't a man they liked to cross.

Blackleg Charley came in, tailed by deputies. He waved jovially at the townsmen, managed a crooked grin. "H'ya, fellers," he greeted them, and got a growled acknowledgment.

Buck Eagan was remembering painfully that the time wasn't so far gone when another Charley Winters —a happy-go-lucky grinning young man—would have been hailed with friendly greetings of genuine liking. That was when he had been a forty-a-month top cowhand, before he had fallen in with the infamous Black Hole Crowd. Before he'd been lured by the bait of easy money, little work and high adventure that eventually made it easy for him to kill fellow men. The sheriff had seen it happen to many an easy-going cowpoke in his day.

Even now, in his late twenties, with brownish-blond hair, pale blue eyes, flanked by grin crinkles, Charley Winters was a handsome young fellow. Tall and straight, he belied the generally accepted belief that a renegade's features gave him away.

The meeting of father and son was reservedly affectionate, as between all males who try to curb their emotions. They embraced lightly.

"Pa, you're lookin' awful well," Charley said. "Spry as an old Dominecker rooster. How're ma and sis?"

The oldster's eyes misted a little and there was a catch in his voice as he stooped, fumbled in the valise, and came up with a large photograph. "Your ma passed on last month, son. Just before she died

she made me promise to give you this picture."

Charley's face went pale, and he steadied himself against the bar as he looked at the photograph. Buck, peering over his shoulder, saw a sweet-faced, white-haired old lady. It was hard to read his feelings, but after a few seconds he shoved the picture inside his shirt front.

"She didn't have to change none," he said huskily. "She always was an angel."

They were lighting the kerosene chandeliers when Buck said, "I want you and your pa to eat supper with me. Then you can go up to your room, have the rest of the night alone. I'm sure sorry I got to send Charley on that long trail tomorrer, Mr. Winters. But since I must, you may as well leave a call for the daylight stage."

Afterward, in the lobby, the sheriff found an opportunity to warn Charley, "There'll be a man outside your door, and another'n under your window. For the oldster's sake I hope you don't get any foolish notions . . . "

"Lawdog, please go take a long jump into hell!" Charley ground out.

The sheriff sprawled in a chair in the lobby. A turmoil of troubled thoughts drove away sleep. In a way he could feel a kinship with those two upstairs. His own wife had passed on years before, leaving his pride to focus on the boy. Dick, he knew with gratitude, was a fine youngster. But supposing something should happen . . . The thought brought a smothering sensation.

He must have dozed toward morning, as his first sensation was one of his chair quivering. Then came the sound of the explosion. He leaped up, sensing that the blast had come from the direction of the jail. He raced outside, loosening gun in holster, ran along the side of the hotel to the dark alley, then down it toward the adobe jail. The sound of rapid gunfire, hoof beats and shouts beat against his ears. Windows were slamming up, lights were coming on, accompanied by yells.

He pulled up short at the corner of the building next to the jail, and was in time to see a form running away from a gaping hole blown in the jail side. The form yelped, "Blast it, old Charley ain't in there! That damned sheriff's moved him."

Buck aimed hastily and fired, and was astonished to see the form stumble, fall, get up and fall again. The whole town was coming alive now, and he could make out some dozen horsemen in the street fronting the jail. "It's gettin' too hot here," one of them howled. "Let's ride out."

Buck emptied his six into their midst, heard one man scream, and then suddenly he froze, started swearing. Two figures had joined the fight in the street, were throwing lead into the fleeing horsemen. It was the deputies, detailed to guard Charley. They'd let themselves be lured from their posts by the excitement. With the suspicion, Buck was pounding back down the alley, up the back stairway. The light was

on in the old man's room. and Buck almost fell inside. He stood there, gaping. blinking his eyes.

'Charley. in his underwear, was sitting on the bed. calmly smoking a cigarette. Behind him the old man snored loudly. Charley's lips twisted into a grin. "Lookin' for somebody, sheriff?" he asked mockingly.

The lawman's voice was almost a reverent whisper. "Charley . . . you knew the boys were comin' for you tonight!"

"Well, I bragged I'd never hang, didn't I? But I didn't know the cards was stacked against me, then." The young outlaw shrugged, twisted around to rest his eyes on the tired. lined face of the sleeper. "Life ain't been too gentle with him. He had this much comin', I reckon."

Buck went slowly down the stairs to await the coming of the dawn. The deputies had returned, sheepishly, to announce that three of the gang had been downed. The sheriff didn't bother to reprimand their laxity.

In an hour a gray, misty shroud proclaimed the coming of dawn. The old man and Charley came down, and the three of them ate breakfast, mostly in silence. Daylight came slowly, and it was still gloomy when Charley and the sheriff walked to the stage station with old Mr. Winters.

Standing by the stage, Charley said, as if anxious to get it over with, "Reckon it's time to say good-by, pa. Me, I've got to take part in a little hangin' chore. A hangin' ain't nice to look at. You take care of yourself, pa; and tell sis howdy for me. I'll be seein' you."

He gave the beaming old man a quick hug, walked hastily away. Buck shook the oldster's hand, wordlessly, fell in behind his prisoner.

A few minutes later. when the stage rattled past the jail, Mr. Winters was hunkered on the box beside the driver. On the scaffold Buck, nervously adjusting the black hood, saw the old man squint through the murky half light, and waved at him. The oldster waved back. called shrilly. "Good-by, Charley boy."

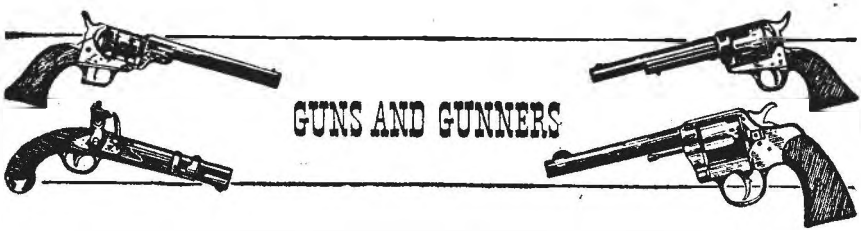
Then. as related by the stage driver on his return trip, the old fellow was fit to bust with pride.

"It's powerful comfortin' to claim a son that's made good," he said. "But I guess there's unpleasant sides to Charley's job. It's funny, though," he went on thoughtfully, "it looked like that hooded feller under the gibbet waved at me, too. Reckon it's my old watery eyes, and the dim light."

A moment later. fighting against the nausea, Buck Eagan tripped the trap. "Good-by, Blackleg Charley," he said softly. "I allow you can at least figger on one tally on the credit side, up yonder."

There would be more lies, and letters to write, but that was in the distant future. Today Buck Eagan had felt the warmth of a prideful father's smile, and that was enough to compensate for many things.

THE END



By Captain Philip B. Sharpe

Readers interested in buying the Enfield rifles and parts offered for sale by the Army should write directly to the Director of Civilian Marksmanship, Department of the Army, Washington 25, D. C., asking for an order blank and price list of available supplies.

With the exception of miscellaneous foreign guns, the famous Single Action Colt Frontier model is the subject of more inquiries than any other weapon. It is surprising to learn that few people other than collectors realize that there were many variations of what is generally known as "The gun that made the West."

In the first place, the Single Action Army and the Colt Frontier model are one and the same. The Army model was the first—the factory designed it, and started production in 1871. Old factory records revealed that the Cavalry model had a 7½ inch barrel, while the Army type, often called the Artillery model has a 5½ inch barrel. Colt developed the .45 cartridge with a 235-grain lead bullet and 40 grains of black powder but, as loaded by the Army, the powder charge was reduced to 28 grains.

In 1873 Colt made this available to civilians, calling it the Frontier. The public named that heavy .45 load, in this civilian gun, the Peacemaker, and the name stuck. Colt even adopted it for a while in .45 caliber only—other calibers were still called the Frontier.

In 1873 Winchester came out with their famous lever-action rifle of Model 1873 in the .44-40 caliber. Colt immediately made the Frontier model to handle this cartridge so the same cartridge could be used in both rifle and revolver. Since this was the only cartridge made for this rifle, Colt marked the barrels of their revolvers "Winchester."

In 1874 Winchester developed the .38-40 and a couple of years later the .32-20. Colt immediately made single action guns to handle these cartridges and usually marked them after 1874 as ".44 W.C.F.", ".38 W.C.F." and ".32 W.C.F."

Ned Buntline, famous writer and character of the old West, had a pair of these Frontier models made up with 12-inch barrels and shoulder stocks and presented them to Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson. These were called "Buntline Specials."

The old Frontier was made in other calibers, including .22 rimfire, .32 Colt centerfire, .32 Smith & Wesson,

.32 Colt centerfire (short, long and special), .41 Colt, .44 Russian, .44 Colt, .44 Smith & Wesson Special, .357 Magnum and .45 Auto.

Models were made without the ejector rod and with barrels as short as 2 inches.

The real change was in the Bisley model. This was designed as a target gun with both fixed ordinary type sights and adjustable target types. On this model the frame was altered considerably, with the grip curving downward. A low hammer spur was used.

The Bisley model was named for the famous pistol range at Bisley, England. The gun was made from 1896 to 1912, and in most calibers except .22.

One special Bisley model was produced, but in such small quantities that it is a rare collectors' item today. There was no recess in the frame for the ejector rod, and the barrel was only 3 inches long.

Was there a double action version of the Single Action Army? Definitely yes—two of them.

Still a third version is often found, but this has an entirely different frame and was called the Lightning model. It was made in .38 and .41 calibers only and was Colt's first double action revolver.

The Double Action Army and Double Action Frontier were made on almost the same frame as the old Single Action, and first appeared in 1877. The top half of the gun was the old type, but the lower, or grip, section had a slight spur at the top of the grip to prevent hand slippage, and the frame was rounded at the rear to form what is today called a "birdshead" grip or round butt.

Overall length of this gun with the standard 7½ inch barrel was 12½ inches. It had a round disc in the left side of the frame, held in place by the hammer screw. When this was removed, the "works" was exposed. Since this was a double action model (it could also be hand-cocked to perform single action) the trigger was located in the center of a larger-than-normal trigger guard. Although Colt records indicate that this was made only in .45 caliber and with the long barrel, I have seen one of them in a collection with a 5½ inch barrel. There is no record of other calibers being produced, and while the Army bought a few of them, it never adopted it.

The other double action model is today a prized item to collectors. Known as the Philippine model, only a few were made for the Army for a cavalry tryout. This was fitted with a 6-inch barrel on the standard double action frame, and had an overall length of 11 inches. The only difference was in the unusually large trigger guard and very long trigger with its tip curled forward.

Captain Sharpe is back after more than three years in the Army and your letters concerning firearms will receive his prompt attention. Address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns And Gunners Dept Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N Y Be sure you print your name clearly and enclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.

MINES AND MINING

By John A. Thompson

THE wild, high mountain region of east-central Idaho, back towards the Montana border in Lemhi County is good prospecting country. It also affords some of the finest fishing, hunting and camping-out areas in the entire West.

The combination is hard to beat. Yet it prompts a friendly warning to reader W.U., of Pleasant Hill, Ohio, who plans, his recent letter said, a spring trip out there with gold placer prospecting the main objective. Both W.U. and his companions are experienced campers and they like the fishing and hunting most outdoor trips entail.

That's all to the good. But remember W.U., and all you other enthusiasts with a combination prospecting and fishing trip in mind, that prospecting is a business much like any other. Success generally involves a steady amount of hard work.

The man who goes into the hills and casually stubs his toe on a bonanza, or even a workable mining property is one in a million. It's been done. But not often enough to be pattern forming.

By and large the majority of the world's—and the West's—important mineral discoveries have been made by professional ore hunters. Such men make the business of looking for minable metal deposits a full-time job. Whether they are looking for gold, silver, copper, lead, tungsten, uranium or any of the other many important commercial metals—even iron.

On the other hand when a prospecting trip leads to top-notch wilderness fishing country, or a chance to bag a venison roast in season, there is certainly no harm in a bit of extracurricular activity now and then.

The danger lies, as far as prospecting success is concerned, not in a little fishing, or an occasional Sunday deer hunt but in overdoing it and turning what started out as a prospecting trip into just another camping sortie into the mountains. Amateurs, novice prospectors on their first trip out are particularly prone to drop the pick and shovel for the rod and reel too often.

The best plan is to have, as far as possible, a regular schedule. Put in a good day in the actual business of prospecting and confine your fishing to early morning, or a little pre-supper recess in early evening. The fish bite best then anyhow and you don't lose a day's work.

W.U. queried us about this fishing

angle. As for the east-central Idaho country, it is a natural for grand campsites and unbeatable fishing streams. On the local game list in that section you can find chiefly deer —for table meat—but there are also plenty of bear. Game birds consist of pheasant, grouse and quail. For predatory animal hunting there are cougar, coyotes and lynx in the dense, tall-forested woods.

Dropping into the region from Montana via Route 93 south from Missoula, Gibbonsville is the first Idaho settlement you strike. Once a bonanza mining camp, it is mostly a ghost town now. You can, however, get meals and find overnight cabins there. And in the surrounding mountain streams you may still locate a pay streak or a modest patch of placer ground.

On down the mountains you come to North Fork, the junction of the North Fork and the Salmon River—the famous gold-placer-bearing River-Of-No-Return. Up the river to Salmon, the county seat of Lemhi County, which has a population of about one thousand. There is a fine camp ground at Island Park.

From Salmon you can push on into the wilderness area of the Yellowjackets—likely placer prospecting country particularly up towards the headwaters of some of the lesser known mountain creeks. The road is rough and rugged—dirt, not paved or even graveled and graded. It leads through and past Leesburg, a ghost town and former boom mining camp that once had a mile-long Main street. The section is still placer country for prospectors willing to push up the mountains and tackle the old gold-bearing streams.

Beyond Leesburg the road continues to Forney and turns west into the Yellowjackets, terminating at Yellowjacket about 15 miles out from Salmon. Going farther into the Yellowjacket Mountains means abandoning the car and hiking or packing in to a wilderness area that even today has been only sketchily prospected.

To give you an idea of how rich this Lemhi County section of Idaho has proved in the past, there is the astounding production figure of better than sixteen million dollars in gold taken from the placer diggings around Leesburg during that ghost town's heyday. Most of the gold came from Nappias Creek. The five prospectors who made the original discovery back in 1866 are said to have averaged about $30,000 a week from their claims for several summers.

Today the old bonanza diggings have been worked and reworked. But up in the Yellowjackets . . . it's still anybody's guess what may be found. And anybody's chance of making a new discovery.

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, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., will bring a prompt, authoritative, personal reply.

WHERE TO GO

By John North

Mr. North will be glad to send interested readers an address from which an excellent booklet covering routes, mileage, regulations, road data and stopping places along the Pan-American Highway can be obtained. Enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope along with your request.

THE long-distance-minded motor tripper and the lad who likes to autocamp or do his adventuring by car had better brush up on his Spanish. The Pan-American Highway that will take you from any point in the U. S. down to the southern tip of South America is well out of the dream-boat stage. It is virtually a reality now.

Of the enormous total of nearly 16,000 miles included in the new highway system, more than 83%—some 13,000 miles—are either first-class paved roads or graveled and graded. Less than 600 miles of the entire route have yet to be constructed.

You can start planning your trip any time you are ready. Get out a map—a big one of the whole western hemisphere—and trace the route you will some day be taking with as much safety and comfort as you have when you buzz out on a regular vacation auto trip inside the U. S. A.

The Pan-American Highway is not just one road. It is a gigantic, fascinating highway system linking the capitals of all the American countries, North, South and Central America, with each other, and eventually with Alaska via the wartime Alaska road from Canada to Fairbanks. It has already immeasurably widened the adventure horizons of American motorists everywhere.

Reader J.E., of Macon, Georgia, queried us recently on the new road, its general course and present state of progress. So we got busy and did some firsthand checking up on it for him.

Roughly speaking, the route lies south from the Rio Grande down through Mexico to Talisman Bridge. That's the first 1,750-mile lap. Then it goes through the Central American Republics, and south into South America. It keeps on through Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Chile with long and fascinating side trips over into Bolivia, Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil.

Part of the route tools up mountain ranges like the Andes, crossing them at passes 15,000 feet above sea level. Part runs through endless miles of lush green tropical jungle

country where flocks of parrots and rainbow-hued macaws fly through the trees and monkeys chatter at you from the roadside. There are days of travel through barren deserts, and in places the route leads past the long-abandoned Indian cities that were once the pride of the great Inca chiefs.

As for the gaps or present road blocks to making the entire trip by car, they are just four in number. The first is between Comitan and Tapachula in southern Mexico. The second is the section between southern Costa Rica and northern Panama.

Perhaps the worst gap is from Panama City east through the dense Darien jungle. That one hasn't even been surveyed yet. The only other gap is a section in South America from southern Ecuador to the Peruvian border.

All the gaps can be by-passed, some by railroad, others by a sea trip. Once they have been overcome a whole continent is yours to explore by car. However, there are several sections of the road that are impassable during the rainy season, though they are open and quite readily negotiable during the rest of the year.

It is not possible, of course, to squeeze within the brief space available detailed routes along the various sections of such a huge road network as the one that comprises the Pan-American highway system. However such routings are available, together with important information regarding the various documents required, customs procedures at the borders of the different countries crossed and the driver's license regulations.

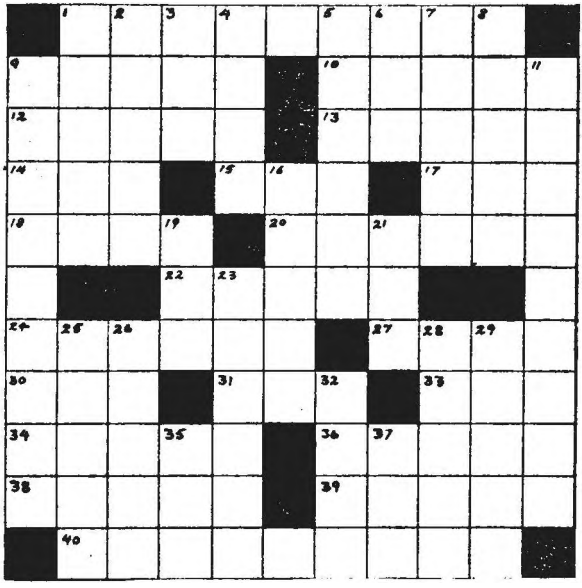
At present the latter are—as far as our own personal opinion is concerned—a confusing hodge-podge. It is to be hoped that as increased travel over the road builds up, not only from U. S. visitors but between citizens of the different South American countries as well, some sort of uniform regulations can be drawn up and agreed upon by the countries involved. Uniform traffic rules, speed limits and the like would also be a great help.

Take the matter of driver's licenses. In one country your home State license is okay; in another it is good for thirty days; in a third for a different period of time. Regulations vary widely.

Similarly, many of the countries require some sort of bond posting when you drive across their borders —a safeguard against your selling the car without paying import duties. Mainly it adds up to red tape.

Anyhow, red tape or no, the Pan-American Highway does afford thousands of miles of excellent roads new to most U. S. auto trippers and well worth the thrill of traveling over.

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 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y



CROSSWORD PUZZLE

ACROSS

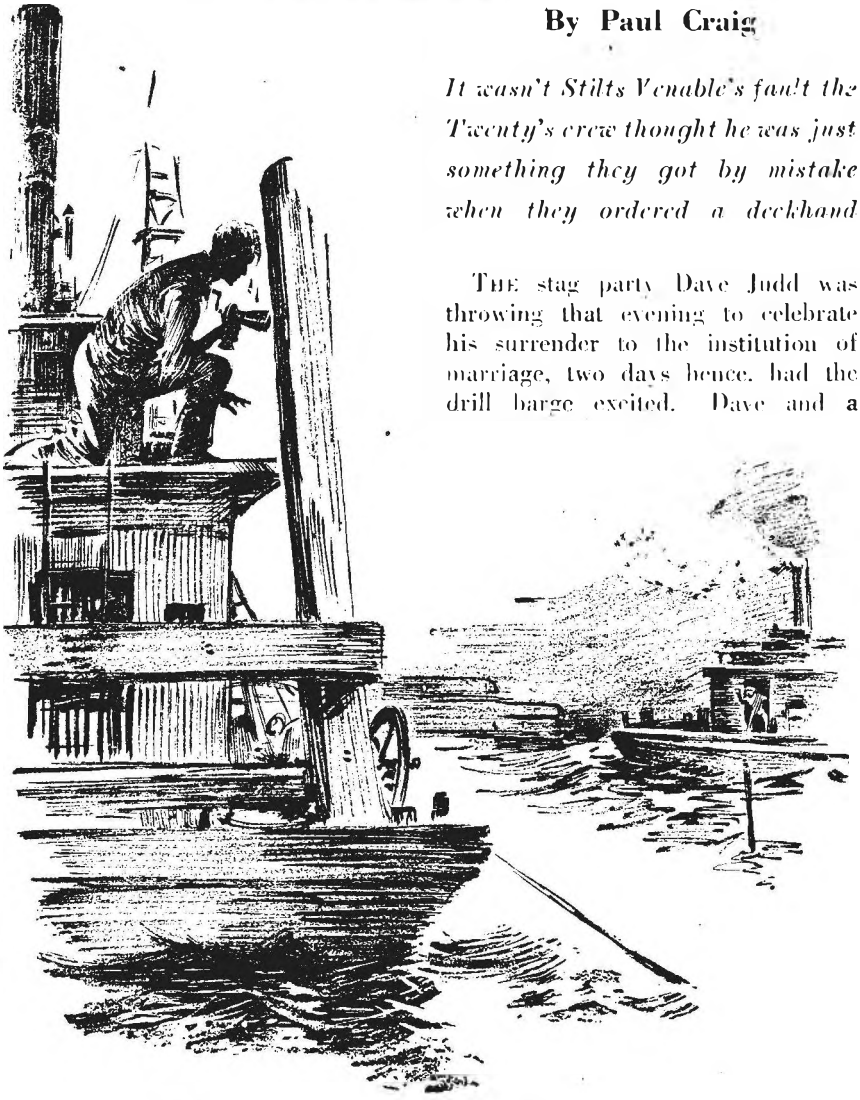
1. Halter
9. Wise man
10. Oneness among many
12. Repeat someone's exact words
13. Musical comedy
14. Vessel for ashes
15. Get hitched
17. Girl's name
18. In mid-ocean
20. Winder of fishing tackle
22. Make a hit
24. Camera stand
27. First name of first maker of copper-riveted cowpoke pants
30. Eternity
31. Cemetery tree
33. Forefront
34. Western entertainment
36. Mimicking
38. Perch a house on sticks
39. Rolls the bones
40. Complete turns; head over heels

DOWN

1. Divisions of time
2. Without company
3. Folding bed
4. Savvied
5. Unjustifiable homicide
6. The first
7. Competitor
8. Piano practice piece
9. Settlers on government land
11. Animals with one birthday behind them
16. Wear away into a Dust Bowl
19. Viper
21. Slippery customer
23. Prairie wolf
25. Digs around like a hog
26. Indian: Spanish
28. Dispossess
29. Weathercocks
32. Bankrolls
35. Shade tree
37. Baked dessert

(The solution of this puzzle may be found on page 113)

STARRY-EYED HELLION



By Paul Craig

It wasn't Stilts Venable's fault the Twenty's crew thought he was just something they got by mistake when they ordered a deckhand

THE stag party Dave Judd was throwing that evening to celebrate his surrender to the institution of marriage, two days hence, had the drill barge excited. Dave and a

couple others, young Stilts Venable noticed, were getting in a few advance licks. Drinking was sternly forbidden on the drill rig by district office rules. But when a man stepped through the door of the little washroom on the starboard side he immediately came under the bill of rights. His privacy was respected.

Mort Ormandy, the super, conveniently attended to his reports up in the deckhouse over the engine room. The boys would be knocking off work in another hour, anyhow. Since marriage came so infrequently to the free and lusty crew of Drill Barge 20, Redburn District, U.S. Army Engineers, an infraction of somebody else's rules could be ignored so long as the work was done.

Stilts felt the excitement of the occasion and tried to hide his own heavy heart. He wouldn't be on the party, for the simple reason that he had not been asked. He had not been asked for the plainer reason that he just wasn't one of the boys, no matter how hard he tried to be. And he wasn't one of the boys because of things far beyond his control: the hereditary factors that had produced his six feet four of lathlike frame, an age that had produced only a fuzzlike scattering of beard on his hollow cheeks, and the circumstance that had caused him to report for duty on an engineer rig proudly manned by the cream of the crop, physically speaking.

His excessive height had gained him no consideration. It was the fact that they were drilling the Hell Chute Rapids stretch of the Ratapan that had made the contrast so clear. The rapids were directly off the river town of Curryville. While her big air drill growled and chuckled and when the grids were blasted in an enormous upheaval of water, townsters gathered shoreside to watch.

Frequently there were pretty girls. This ingredient appearing in the audience never failed to bring out the best in the Twenty. The drill rattled louder, the blasts blew higher. Sunburned gladiators, peeled to the waist and half barefoot, bounced up and down ladders, swung on lines or took stance on some conspicuous spot on deck.

But not Stilts Venable. The first day aboard, joyous at becoming a member of such a crew, he had peeled off his shirt. A stovepipe torso, prominently ribbed, had emerged for shoreside eyes. It was Dave Judd, the drill operator, who had yelled, "Either put that kid's shirt on him or nail his shoes to the deck so he'll look like a hog-post!"

That had started the teasing, and Stilts hadn't minded—openly. He had grinned good-naturedly when the boys elaborately put his shirt back on him, hurriedly as though covering up the family skeleton and thus avoiding damage to the Twenty's standing in the feminine eyes ashore.

At twenty, Stilts still hoped for more growth and kept getting it, all upward or outward from his toes. It was his first real job, for he was a farm boy accustomed to work for his father for found, clothes and the occasional use of the family car, and

he had fallen in love with the noisy but efficient Twenty. He had learned his simple but toilsome duties quickly and well and never griped when the other two deckhands pushed some of their own work off on him. But he was a callow kid among grown rivermen, a stretched-out lunk in an assortment of Greek gods.

He knew the physical assets of each of the other six men in the crew from long admiration and secret envy. Dave Judd was square as a block of granite and, during repairs, he would carry the big jackhammer around in one hand. Bill Wilcox, who operated the tender, *Growler*, was built on more wedgy lines, but his muscles rippled in the hot sun. The others were the same, each possessing physical excellence in some respect. There was no doubt that they all knew it. They had everything, so they proceeded to get all they could out of living. And in their eyes they made the Twenty the best doggoned outfit in the district. It was apparent that they considered young Stilts Venable a joke played on them by the district office personnel section.

At four o'clock Mort Ormandy came down the ladder and motioned to Wilcox. "Take me ashore, Bill. I'm leaving early. Got to go over to Conner Junction to the dentist." He stepped over to the drill tower, and Dave Judd shut down the air to hear. "Take over, Dave," Ormandy called. "I'll get back in time for the party. Meanwhile, take it easy."

Dave grinned and nodded and hit the air again. The big drill chattered, the air compressor racing to fill the demand for its product.

The launch was used mainly for moving the drill rig from one position to another. For other errands the crew used the sea sled with the two jumbo kickers. Wilcox jerked the outboards into motion with the starting rope, then cut out into the fast channel and the half mile run down to the landing. It made Stilts' stomach swing heavily. The only thing about this job that scared the daylights out of him was the business of riding that flat, spanking sea sled over the rapids.

The whole crew made a trip to the washroom then, with the exception of Stilts. That was another thing wrong with him. Whiskey made him sick, girls scared him, and he was a stretched-out kind of runt. He knew that these things had kept him from being asked on the stag party. There was nothing malicious about the boys. When they had cooked up the celebration, they simply hadn't considered him. Too young. Too puny even to register. Something they'd got by mistake when they ordered a deckhand.

It was two minutes of five when the trouble happened. Dave Judd was a crack drill operator, and if he hadn't had a few he would never have stuck that steel deep in the rocky hole it was cutting. The air shut down with a sharp snort, and the compressor's heavy chatter was immediately replaced by Dave's hearty swearing. Everyone knew what had happened, and everybody but Stilts groaned.

"Holy smokes, it might take half

the night to get it loose!" Lorn Nelson moaned.

Judd's utterances were growing coherent. "She's stuck tighter than a bull's eye in fly time!" He uncoupled the air hammer, leaving the long drill steel jutting out of the water like a lone hair, its bit end deeply imbedded in solid rock. Until it was removed the Twenty couldn't be warped ashore on the breast line without leaving a deadly menace to navigation.

Stilts almost hoped that the stag party was off so that he would not have to endure his feeling of isolation. He put the thought out of his mind as unseeming.

The bottle came out openly, and they had a healthy snort, but nobody offered it to Stilts, who would have had to refuse, anyhow. Since they had already started their celebration, it seemed to lessen the problem.

Bill Wilcox had come back with the sea sled, and he spoke up brightly. "Look, Dave, both the *Holly* and the *Titan*'re downstream. Neither one could be back up here before tomorrow afternoon. Why don't we leave the blasted thing and pull it out first thing tomorrow?"

"If we're able to pull anything," somebody added.

Dave considered the suggestion with interest. The two boats mentioned were tubs shoving gasoline barges up to Crow's Point. Both had gone down empty early that afternoon, and neither could possibly be back under twenty-four hours with a new load. They comprised the only navigation the upper Ratapan had known in months.

"We could hang a red lantern on it," Hank Pettigrew offered.

Drill Barge 20 would have worked half the night, ordinarily, to leave things shipshape when they tied up. But this was no ordinary occasion, and the crew had let its party pick up too much momentum already to give unbiased thought to the matter. There were some electric lanterns with red bull's-eyes in the gear locker.

Dave nodded. "Okay, boys, let's tie her up!"

The warning light on the contrary drill steel was conspicuous enough, they saw when they had pulled out of the channel and made fast and started down the rapids in the big sea sled. Dave Judd passed the bottle again, and by the time they made the landing they had forgotten the incident. They scattered with, "See you guys pretty soon!" All were eager to get cleaned up and settled to the night's important business.

Stilts was staying in the hot little two-story hotel with most of the others, but he left them on the street, claiming he wanted to run his car over to the garage to have the carburetor checked. The jallopy had been his first investment when he had achieved his own income and its need was a fib, for he tended to everything with his own hands. But it peeled him loose from the bunch gracefully, which was what he wanted.

A little later he went up the hotel stairs by himself, taking two at a time as easily as most men take one, and cleaned up. He waited there for

a couple of hours, then went over to the restaurant to get his supper. He admitted to himself that right up to the last he had hoped that somebody would think to tell him to come over and at least watch the fun.

Down next to the river was a restaurant with a back room it rented out for parties, and the boys had taken this over for the evening. Stilts ate his own breaded veal cutlets without relish. Afterward, he thought, he might get his car and swing down river to Goose Landing and see a show in the dinky little theater there.

Yet he loitered on the street till full night had fallen, and though there were a few townsters stirring, it was deeply lonely. He made a guilty swing down toward the river, then turned back, angry with himself. He got into the jallopy and headed for Goose Landing and its movie.

Stilts was half, there when he whirled the car off the pavement that closely hugged the river. In this open country distances were vast, and he could clearly see the lights below on the river. Red and green running lights of some craft, and she was coming upstream.

He stared in disbelief. The boys had been sound in figuring that neither the *Molly* nor the *Titan* could make the run down to Langford, fill their big steel barges at the tank farm, and get back here before late tomorrow. It was impossible, yet there was a rig coming up and Stilts' own eyes confirmed it.

The boys had lost their hundred-to-one gamble against this happening, and the reason slowly dawned on Stilts. There was another tank farm up at Crow's Landing, distributing to a vast wheat country that was farmed entirely by machinery. Harvest was coming on, though only a clodhopper like Stilts Venable would know that, and the oil company was building up its reserve. It had simply put on an extra outfit.

Hunched over the steering-wheel, Stilts found that he was trembling. And that was silly. He was too inexperienced to know what that upthrusting drill steel in the channel would do if a thin-skinned oil barge hit it, but he didn't like what his imagination did with the idea. The barge captain would naturally give it a wide berth when he saw the red light. He didn't know about the channel itself, but from the surface look there was plenty of room for the barges to swing by.

Stilts ridiculed himself for being so scared suddenly, yet something made him swing the car around. At first he had a half-formed idea of at least breaking in on the party and telling Mort Ormandy. By the time he reached Curryville he had changed his mind. Dave Judd had been responsible for leaving that steel there. He would consider that Stilts had jumped at the chance to call the boss' attention to it, now that it had been proved a risky thing to do.

Anyhow, this unexpected rig probably would chug right on up the river. They certainly wouldn't plow head on into a red light. The pilot would know whether there was water enough to pass to the side. If there

wasn't, he could drop back down to the landing and hunt up the army engineers, himself. It was none of Stilts Venable's business.

Parking the car, Stilts walked down to the landing, worry still haunting him. The boat and barge were only a few hundred yards downstream from him. He stared up the half-mile rapids, then, and for the second time concern ran through him. He could see the dark shape of the drill barge and her standing lights. But that was all. He could not see that extra light on the drill steel. He figured he should be able to see it if the boat was going to detect it in time.

He lost a moment in indecision. There was no time to return uptown for one of the boys, anyhow. The river craft was coming steadily on. There was a way he could see whether everything was all right, up there, if he could manage it. He had always kept his eyes open on the job, picking up things whether they were a part of his work or not. He knew how they started the kickers on the sea sled. He could probably run it up there and back. The only trouble was, the thought gave him an awful twisting feeling in his stomach.

Stilts knew he had to do it for his own peace of mind—as least travel far enough up the rapids to raise the light and make sure the boat could see it in time to take warning. He stepped into the flat sea sled and experienced a feeling of dismay mingled with relief. He had forgotten that it was always left chained and padlocked so it could not be moved or have the kickers stolen. He couldn't break it loose with less than a sledge hammer and cold chisel, and even if he did he would probably find himself drowned or in jail.

Worry pestered him and he put his long legs to work, getting some good out of them, at least, as they sent him along the river bank at a rapid clip. He was probably moving faster than the oil barges which had the rapids to battle. Anyhow, he could see whether that light was burning or not. When he had covered half the distance a cold paralysis was creeping over him. The warning light still was not visible. Then he had covered all the distance, and there definitely was no light.

He understood it by now. He couldn't remember ever having seen those electric lanterns used, and the dry batteries were probably weak. The bull's-eye had pointed west, the full late sun glinting in it redly as they pulled away. It had seemed plenty powerful, then, but in the full darkness it was too weak to be seen even from the shore. Or else its juice had been used up completely.

Stilts wondered if he could attract their attention by running back down a ways and yelling his head off. Yet he hated to think what it would mean, even if he succeeded. The pilot would demand a full explanation, and his company would raise Ned. The district office, in turn, would cut Dave Judd off at the knees, and probably Mort Ormandy for letting it happen. And though Judd had teased the daylights out of him, Stilts remembered that Dave was going to be married.

Stilts went into action again, an idea forming that he dared not think about. A quick back glance told him that the gasoline barge had been slowed considerably by the rapids and was now about abreast of the landing. He sped on upstream for a distance, then swung down the sandy beach to the water. He unlaced his shoes, kicked them off, then hit the water head-on.

One thing that he had learned in the creek back home was to swim like a fish. But this was no creek. Stilts tried to forget that it was a hundred times wider, a hundred times wilder. It was too bad they had not been tying up on this side, but the slack water was on the other, and the Twenty was over there. Stilts swam as hard as he could, knowing the current carried him farther downstream than he progressed across. He had tried to figure is so he would hit the drill barge, at the worst catch either the headline or the short-snubbed offshore breastline and pull himself in.

It seemed an eternity that he struggled with the racing water. He lost bearing and distance—everything except the will to drive his long arms. If he missed the drill barge, he aimed to hit the far shore somewhere below. He was submerged sometimes, but mostly he could just about breathe with tortured lungs.

He ploughed shoulder-on into the headline. As he clutched it, an enormous sense of mastery flooded him with the knowledge that he had beat the rapids. Yet his time sense was upset. He couldn't see the running lights below. He began to drag himself through the water, pulling along the line. The hulk of the barge loomed, and he swung himself aboard.

He still had no idea if his crazy plan would work, but it was his only possible chance. He raced up the ladder onto the engine room roof. There was a hand-operated klaxon horn up there, infrequently used to signal when the Twenty was working with a dredge or sweeping barge. He saw the running lights now. Close. He found the horn, gripped its handle and waited.

Not till the rig was off his quarter did he let it rip, and it was like twisting the tail of a bull. Anguished sound howled across the benighted river. The gasoline barge had been aware of the drill barge's standing lights and given her clearance. She was in the middle of the channel but traveling dead against the upthrusting drill steel. At the first gush of sound the pilot heeled her over instinctively. She passed abreast, well over and out of danger.

Stilts sagged to his knees then, the strength running out of him. The gasoline rig plowed on, thinking it a prank probably but not caring to try to heave to in the fast water. The pilothouse door opened and somebody shook his fist. Stilts could afford to grin now, and he indulged the notion.

When the aft lights of the gas rig had winked out above, Stilts for the first time began to get mad. So he should risk *his* neck to get Dave

Judd out of trouble. Judd, who had told the boys to put Stilts Venable's shirt back on so he wouldn't disgrace the outfit! Who hadn't even bothered to ask him to the party!

Stilts knew one thing. He didn't want them ever to learn he had been sap enough to do this thing. He could go ashore on this side easily, hoof it down below the rapids and swing back over in quieter water. Yet what if still another rig came along? There wasn't a thousand-to-one chance of it, but he wasn't trusting the averages at the moment. He was soaked to the skin, with his teeth chattering, and he'd be hanged if he'd stay here all night for them.

At that moment he heard an explosive *put-put* downstream and climbed to his feet. The sea sled! It dawned on him then that the town was to leeward, and the siren's awful blast could be heard there. It seemed to have penetrated the smoke and alcoholic fumes of the party, and somebody was coming up to see what the trouble was. Very well. Let them do a little puzzling, and fix their light or pull the drill out as they should have in the first place. Stilts dropped down the ladder, went overboard shoreside, made the bank and had disappeared into darkness when the sea sled roared up.

Stilts was the last one to the landing, the next morning, keeping sea sled and bleary-eyed crew held up for a couple of minutes. Even then he did not hurry. He was aware of eyes on him searchingly, but he paid

no attention. Bill Wilcox started the kickers and they growled up the channel. There was real worry on the faces of Mort Ormandy and Dave Judd.

It was sort of like sucking on a piece of licorice, Stilts thought, all through that morning. The fact that nobody spoke to him of the incident informed him that they suspected him. Yet he never let on and did his work quietly. He could be amused, now, that they hadn't even known about the gasoline barge till she had passed the Twenty. He knew they were racking their brains to figure out how the barge had missed the drill steel with the light out and where that unholy noise had come from.

They had shut down for noon, and Stilts had eaten his lunch, when Mort Ormandy motioned from topside for him to come up. There was a jaunty set to Stilts' shoulders as he climbed the ladder. He wasn't awed of them any longer. He didn't want any more of their ridicule, even if it was good-natured, and his manner advertised it.

Dave Judd was up there with Ormandy. Stilts had never seen him look so sober.

"We know it was you, Stilts," said Ormandy, with a tight grin. "The only thing is, how the devil did you get out here? The only way we can figure is that you swam it, and nobody could swim that."

Stilts shrugged disinterestedly.

"I've already carved about half of Dave's hide off!" Ormandy resumed. "When I think what could have happened! If Dave wasn't taking on a woman to support in a couple of days, damned if I wouldn't fire him! But I think he's learned a lesson. And, Stilts, before I can figure out if I can squelch this, I've got to know what all took place."

Stilts grinned, finally. "All right, it was me, and I swam it. I gave them the klaxon and they shied over enough to miss the steel. I think they figured it was a prank and they'll forget all about it by the time they come down again. Nobody was hurt."

Ormandy gave Judd a final, hard look of disapproval. "You owe this fella your job, Dave."

Judd swallowed and nodded. "Are you telling me? Thanks, Stilts."

Stilts shrugged and turned out onto the weather deck. He wanted to forget it, as did the rest, and everybody knew that no fool chances like that would ever be taken on the old Twenty again. Then Stilts heard steps behind him and Dave Judd's voice.

"Warming up, Stilts. Why don't you peel off that hot shirt?"

Stilts turned. Judd was grinning, his own saddle-brown, powerful shoulders bare to the hot sun. Stilts couldn't help the jerking feeling in his throat. He grinned back and nearly ripped the buttons from his shirt as he pulled it off his shoulders.

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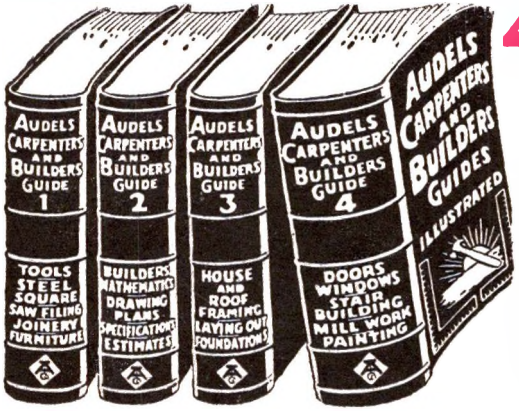

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