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POWDERSMOKE PAYMASTERS

A Preacher Devlin Novel
By L. L. FOREMAN

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Tally Branding*

THIS TUMBLEWEED'S LODGED

Howard L. Springer, of Sigourney, Iowa, who has been reading Western Story "for approximately thirty years," is a man who has been places and done things. And throughout his interesting and varied career, W. S. has evidently played the role of his good companion.

"Although I was born on an Iowa farm," he writes, "my dad was a real Westerner, who was a part-time cowboy and scout at Fort Kearney in 1874 and Valentine and other northwestern Nebraska towns which were plenty wild at that time. Maybe that's why I decided to become a cowboy.

"I'm a printer now," he continues, "but I guess I've had about forty different kinds of jobs in my fifty-nine years, and including time put in on ranches, I've been a section hand, fireman, clerk, drayman, etc., etc.,—I could write a book about my various adventures! The most exciting of these have been vicarious, however—reading the fine stories of Zane Grey, Jack London, Peter B. Kyne,

Rex Beach, Max Brand (there's one author Western Story introduced me to), Walt Coburn, L. L. Foreman, Wayne D. Overholser and many others.

"I read other Western magazines but when I get a copy of Western Story I know that I'll enjoy nearly every page. Always start with Phil Sharpe's Guns and Gunners Department as I am somewhat of a nut about shooting irons. And incidentally I sure like the handy pocket size of the magazine and can't spend 25¢ for anything now that gives me so much enjoyment.

"Those imitation brands you're running now, I think, are corny. And I've seen plenty *real* brands in my time! Always have liked horses and ridden a lot and I've found plenty of snaky broncs that gave me a cushion of daylight when I tried to ride them—association rules. One of those broncs was a regular "geography," he got around so much! But I haven't straddled a horse that even crow-hopped now for twenty-five years. I guess I'm just a tumbleweed that's lodged."

* Reg. U.S. Pat. Off.

HOWDY, BOB—AND WELCOME!

"I read my first (March issue) Western Story today," writes Bob Long, of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, "and you can count on me to be a steady reader hereafter. The story I liked best was Walt Coburn's Loco Jones. I'll be looking forward to his next novel."

PIONEER'S DIET

"Seems to me," observes Alice T. Wakefield, of Chicago, Illinois, "that you've pretty well covered all phases of life in the West but, as a housewife, I'm interested in how they got by when it came time to eat?"

"Most of the characters in your stories seem to thrive on a diet of beans and bacon, but I'll bet their womenfolks must have whipped up something more tempting, at least on special occasions. How about an article on Western dishes that they dreamed up? It might give us modern gals some new ideas on what to put in the feedbag."

LIKES LAUGHS

And from New Haven, Connecticut, Martin Chorbik, who has just received his April issue, notes: "Sure glad to see that you're including more humorous stories in the magazine lately. I get a big kick out of the cartoons, especially those by Goodwin and Wetterberg. Howard Haynes' The Widder's Might in this issue was pretty good but it takes S. Omar Barker to really go to town when it comes to laughs.

"What's become of those Romeo Jones yarns he writes? And that New Mexican hot shot, El Coyote? I hope

we'll meet up with those hambres along the trail—but soon!"

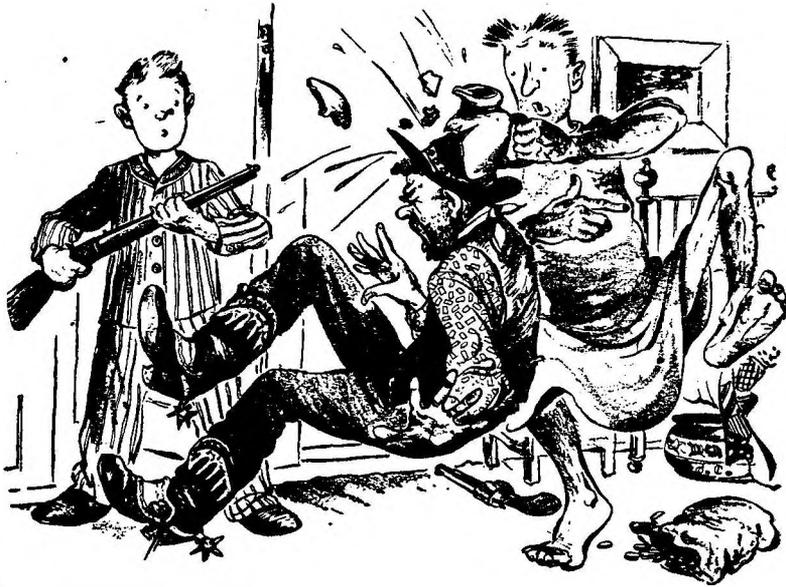
OUTDOORS FAN'S SUGGESTION

"I liked Michael Oblinger's Old Baldy The Killer in the March issue very much," A. T. Kirkaldy, of Toronto, Canada, informs us, "and it wasn't merely because of the Canadian setting. Besides the conventional cattle-country fiction, I'm very keen on stories of the great open spaces and wild life. Oblinger, whose work I've followed for some time now, does some beauties!

"Western Story, which I read regularly, should have at least one story in every issue on fishing, hunting or just a straight animal yarn. Other authors who are tops in this field are Seth Ranger, Jim Kjelgaard and Ralph Yergen. I hope you'll follow my suggestion."

COMING NEXT MONTH ★ ★ ★

Two outstanding novels of Western adventure—a four-star story of rodeo life in the Southwest by Walt Coburn and a vivid drama of the old stage-coach trails by William Schuyler . . . **Three** action-packed novelettes of the range country by Eli Colter and Robert Julian Rouse, Ray Palmer Tracy and Joseph Chadwick . . . **Memorable** short stories by such top favorites as Tom W. Blackburn and Michael Oblinger, with a Fourth of July laugh festival by S. Omar Barker for good measure . . . **Plus** many other illustrated features and the usual personal service departments.



THE HERO

By Wayne D. Overholser

Knapp Bonner built himself quite a trigger rep in Bowstring, but most folks reckoned the only thing he could shoot off was his mouth

JIMMY BONNER had never understood why his folks didn't like Cousin Knapp. He hadn't seen Knapp for three years, but he remembered him as if it had been only last week. Six feet two, Cousin Knapp was, and as straight as the barrel of Jimmy's .22 except for his legs which were bowed enough for you to throw a beer keg between them. Cousin Knapp often said that himself.

And his clothes! That was what Jimmy remembered the best. Green silk shirt. Orange neckerchief. Cream-colored Stetson banded with a rattlesnake skin. Expensive spike-heeled boots. A spotted calfskin vest. And two pearl-handled guns corded down on his thighs. Cousin Knapp was a sight to make your eyes pop out, and Jimmy's had popped all the time Knapp had been in Bowstring.

It wasn't that Jimmy's folks *said* they didn't like Knapp. Jimmy could tell by the way they acted. Like his mother sitting down and crying after Knapp had ridden out of town, and his dad patting her on the back and muttering, "Danged bragging fool! Mortgaged his horse to buy those duds, or I miss my guess." And his mother stopping her crying long enough to say, "John, I'd have gone crazy if I'd listened to him another five minutes."

That had been three years ago. The only times they'd heard from Knapp since then had been at Christmas when he'd write long letters filled with exciting stories of his bear hunts and gun fights and his narrow escapes when he'd ridden as deputy beside the sheriff after bank robbers.

Jimmy's dad always read the letters and then threw them away, saying something like, "Knapp's the only Bonner I know of who's long on wind and short on guts." Jimmy's mother never even read them. But she did read the letter that came on the last day of July, and she immediately started to cry. It was addressed to Jimmy, and was very short for one of Knapp's letters.

Dear Jimmy,

I know you'll be tickled to here I'm coming to see you agen. Ill make this a little letter so I can tell you all thats happened. Beelieve me Iv had some hare raisin times since I wrote last. Ill reach the Hat Crick brig Saturday noon. You meat me there, Jimmy. Well ride into town and blow Bow-string up. Yessir, well blow it up proper.

Cousin Knapp.

Jimmy couldn't see anything to get upset about, but his dad did when he got home from the bank. "Been saving his money for three years to have another blowout." He threw the letter into the fireplace. "Well, Ann, we'll have to grin and bear it." "I'll take my .22 when I go to meet him," Jimmy said.

"No, you won't," his mother said flatly. "You aren't even going."

That was when Jimmy felt like crying. He probably would have if his father hadn't said, "Now let's not be hasty, Ann. Might be a good idea to let Jimmy go. Just keep your .22 at home, son."

A quick look passed between his mother and father that Jimmy didn't understand. His mother took a long breath. "Go out and water Sandy," she told him.

"I watered him this morning," Jimmy protested.

"It's a hot day. He might be thirsty again."

Jimmy went out through the back door, steps lagging. He stopped to pick up a marble and heard his father say, "The only reason Knapp's coming back is to let Jimmy worship him, but Jimmy's old enough now to see through him."

Jimmy went on to the barn and untied Sandy. He thought about it all the way to the trough and back, but he couldn't see any sense to what his father had said. He couldn't see through Cousin Knapp no matter how old he got. Not a big-boned, hard-muscled man like Cousin Knapp.

Jimmy was waiting on the Hat Creek bridge half an hour before noon. Knapp was there right on time, dressed just like Jimmy remembered except that this time he had a fine saddle and he was forking the most beautiful bay gelding Jimmy had ever seen.

"Say, it's sure good to see you, Jimmy boy," Knapp boomed when he came up. He held out a big caloused hand. "Why, you've grown a foot, haven't you?"

"Almost," Jimmy said.

Knapp pulled his bay in beside Sandy and they hit a good pace for Bowstring, Knapp riding high and handsome in his saddle. Jimmy kept looking at him out of the corner of his eyes. There was something about Cousin Knapp that wasn't just the way he'd remembered him. Jimmy couldn't tell what it was except that Knapp reminded him a little of a cowboy actor in a play he'd seen last winter.

"Well sir, I've sure had a time since I was here," Knapp said in his loud voice. "Been mining above Cripple Crick a piece, and I struck it." He slapped a heavy sack tied to his saddlehorn. "See that, Jimmy? Gold. Yessir, gold. I sold that claim for ten thousand dollars. Now I'm gonna buy me the best danged outfit in the country. You know of any, Jimmy?"

"Old man Paris'll sell his spread," Jimmy said. "It's up the creek about three miles. Want to see it?"

"Not today. We'll just ride into

town and have ourselves a time. Still like gumdrops, Jimmy?"

"Sure."

"Well, we'll get some. We sure will. Nothing's too good for you, Jimmy."

"I've got a .22. Maybe we could do some shooting. You reckon your six-gun can outshoot my rifle?"

"Why, sure. There's no rifle on the western slope that can shoot as good as these here Colts."

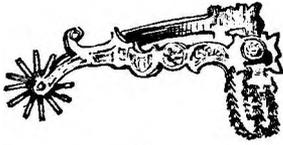
"Let's try it when we get home."

Knapp cleared his throat and looked down the road. "Well, to tell you the truth, my eyes kind of hurt today. Been on the trail a long time. Sun and dust. You know how it is. Kind of makes you squint."

"Sure," Jimmy said, and let it go, but he was disappointed. He'd been thinking about a match with Cousin Knapp ever since his father had suggested it the night before, but maybe Knapp's eyes would feel better in the morning.

Everybody looked at them when they rode into town and dismounted in front of Henry Paul's Mercantile. The sheriff was standing in front of his office and Doc Peters was just climbing down from his buggy. Miss Tollard—that was Jimmy's teacher—was coming out of the Mercantile. They all stopped and looked, and the sheriff grinned as if he'd just thought of a joke.

There was a stranger on the street who looked at Cousin Knapp, too, a little dark-eyed man who wore a black



stubble and was dusty as if he'd just come in from a long ride.

Knapp slapped the sack. "Wonder if I ought to put that gold in your pa's bank?"

"He's still open," Jimmy said.

Knapp considered. "Maybe I'll just keep it on me. You know, ten thousand is a lot of money to put into a bank. George might not want to be responsible for it."

"He wouldn't care. Why, the Bar Z sold a herd the other day, and dad said old Henry Diggs brought in twenty thousand dollars."

"Well, that's all right for them that lives here." Knapp slapped the sack again. "Trouble is, I'm not real well known hereabouts, so it might be better if I kept the cash on me. I want to look at some big outfits tomorrow and when I see something I want, I'll buy it right then. That's the way I'm made."

The dark-eyed stranger moved across the street and stood at the end of the hitch pole rolling a cigarette. The sheriff came up and held out his hand. "How are you, Knapp? Fine horse you're riding."

Knapp shook the lawman's hand with long pumplike strokes. "That he is, sheriff. Finest animal I could find in South Park. I just struck it rich above Cripple Creek a piece. I

sold my claim for ten thousand dollars and I'm hunting a place to light." He looked at Jimmy as if thunderstruck. "Say, I forgot all about them gumdrops. Now you go in and get a big sack. Tell that Henry to give you good measure or I'll come in and mop the floor up with him. Yessir, I'll mop the floor up good."

Knapp made a ceremony out of digging a dime out of his pocket and handed it to Jimmy with a flourish. Jimmy turned into the store, hearing the sheriff say, "I reckon you can find something hereabouts for ten thousand, Knapp."

When Jimmy came back, Knapp was standing alone beside the horses. The little dark-eyed man was still at the end of the hitch pole, a quizzical look on his knobby face. Jimmy held out the sack and Knapp helped himself.

"Thank you, Jimmy. You're as generous as you always were. Well, let's get along to the old homestead. I don't reckon I'll be riding any this afternoon. Time enough tomorrow."

They mounted and rode away, the dark-eyed man watching them until they were out of sight around the locust trees on the corner.

"Did you see that fellow standing at the end of the hitchrack?" Jimmy asked his cousin.

"Sure. What about him?"

"I dunno. Didn't look like the fellers you see around here. Kind o' mean-looking."

"Well, if he bothers you any, just let me know. I'll mop up the street

with him. Yessir, just let him make a move, and I'll mop up the street with him."

When they reached the house, Jimmy said, "I'll put your horse away, Knapp. You go on in."

"Thank you, Jimmy. I'll sure do that." Knapp swung down and untied his sack. "I'll keep this with me. I don't reckon anything ever gets stolen in Bowstring, but there's no sense taking chances. A man don't come to ten thousand dollars every day. No sir!"

"I never saw that much before," Jimmy said. "I'd sure hang onto it."

"I aim to." Knapp turned toward the house. "You come on in when you get done with the horses. I want to tell you about the time me and the Cripple Creek marshal gunned down the Horrible Gang when they came out of the bank."

When Jimmy finished in the barn and went into the house, Knapp was at the table popping pieces of steak into his mouth and telling Jimmy's mother about his strike and his sack of gold.

"You'd better take it to the bank," Mrs. Bonner said. "We never keep that much money in the house."

Knapp took time to put down his fork and pat his gun butts. "Don't you worry none, Annie. I'll shoot the pants off anybody that comes sneaking around here. Yessir, I'll shoot their pants off an inch at a time."

Mrs. Bonner set a plate on the table. "Here's your supper, Jimmy."

She gave him a pat on the back, and walked out of the kitchen.

"What's the matter with your ma?" Knapp asked. "She looks downright puny."

"Dunno. She was all right when I left this morning."

"Excitement, I guess. Shouldn't have sprung the news on her I'd hit it lucky, I guess. Women are mighty funny animals, Jimmy. Yessir, mighty funny. I was engaged once, but it was sure a mistake. She busted it . . . I mean I saw it wasn't gonna go, so I got my ring back from her. Sure a good thing I did 'cause she married another feller the next week."

Food put a brake on Cousin Knapp's tongue for a time, but after the peach pie was gone, three-fourths of it down Knapp's throat, he moved into full speed again. There was the tale of a bear hunt on Pike's Peak after he'd related the finish of the Horrible Gang. Then the yarn about the time he'd dived into the Royal Gorge from the rim and saved a beautiful girl from being battered to pieces on the rocks.

It was almost dusk when Jimmy's folks came in. His mother started supper and Jimmy had to cut some wood. He didn't know until he got outside that his ears were humming. He fed and watered the horses. Then his mother reminded him he hadn't gathered the eggs. By the time he came in, supper was ready and his father was holding his head as if he had a headache.

Supper was a little boring to

Jimmy because Knapp, having eaten a late dinner, wasn't very hungry and he used the time to tell the stories he'd told Jimmy in the afternoon.

Jimmy's mother kept going into the kitchen for this or that, and when the meal was finished, she said she guessed she'd leave the dishes. Mr. Bonner said they had a date to play cards at Henry Paul's place, and they'd have to go or they'd be late.

"You sleep in the room at the head of the stairs, Knapp," Mrs. Bonner said. "The same one you had the last time."

"I remember." Knapp gave way to the luxury of a yawn, and Mr. Bonner took advantage of the moment of silence to say, "Jimmy, you've had quite a ride going to meet Knapp. There'll be plenty of time tomorrow to talk, so you'd better go to bed."

"Say, that reminds me of an old fellow in Cañon City who went to bed and discovered a cougar between the blankets. He let out a holler they heard plumb down to Pueblo and yelled for me. I came in with both guns a-smoking . . ."

"You get to bed right now, Jimmy," Mr. Bonner shouted, and fled.

". . . And I shot that lion right between the eyes, but something went wrong. That animal's head must have been made of solid bone because the bullet bounced off and -slapped into the ceiling. There wasn't nothing to do but go it hand to hand. I had a knife in my belt and I managed to pull it out while I choked the animal with my left hand. There he was, a-snarling and a-growling and a-

spitting. He had teeth six inches long. Never saw the like of it. I plunged my knife into his chest, but I might as well have saved myself the trouble 'cause he was dead. I'd choked him to death."

"I guess I'll go to bed," Jimmy said. "You going to sleep with your money?"

"Yessir, I'll keep it right beside my head. Or maybe I'll use it for a pillow. Imagine me using ten thousand dollars for a pillow, me, Knapp Bonner."

"Yeah, imagine it," Jimmy said. "Well, guess I'll go to bed."

Jimmy laid awake a long time staring at a black ceiling. The Horrible Gang. Bear hunting on Pike's Peak. Jumping into the Royal Gorge. Choking cougars. He rubbed his eyes. It seemed as if the room was filled with spitting, scratching, howling monsters. He had never been so tired before in his life, and all he'd done was to listen to Knapp and ride to Hat Creek and back. He'd ridden to Hat Creek lots of times and it had never made him tired before. He dropped off to sleep and woke in a cold sweat. Something was wrong!

Jimmy lay there, his heart pounding. At first he thought he'd had a dream about the Horrible Gang. Then he heard Cousin Knapp say, "Don't kill me. You can have the sack."

"Damn you, I ought to shoot you between the eyes," a man's voice growled. "Nothing but pennies in that sack. And them two guns!

Pearl handles and as worthless as a kid's toy!"

Jimmy knew he wasn't having a dream. Cousin Knapp was cornered. Jimmy tiptoed toward the door, expecting to hear Knapp jump out of bed and beat the man to death. But nothing happened. The man was cursing Knapp in a cold, deliberate tone for having pennies instead of the gold he'd bragged about.

"I'm gonna have a look around the house now that I'm here," the man said. "This is the banker's house, ain't it?"

"Sure," Knapp quavered. "You'll probably find a lot of diamonds and jewels and things."

Something was wrong! Really wrong, or Cousin Knapp would have handled the situation before now. Jimmy picked up his .22 and slipped down the hall. The door of Knapp's room was wide open, lamplight spilling into the hall and across the head of the stairs.

"You'd better be right," the man was saying, "or I'll skin you alive. Making me risk my neck just on account of your brags."

Then Jimmy was in the doorway, the hammer of his .22 back. He said, "Hook the moon, mister," in a tough voice, the way Cousin Knapp had talked when he'd finished off the Horrible Gang and had them cornered in the Bucket of Red Blood Saloon.

The man wheeled toward the door and stopped. It was the dark-eyed little stranger who had been watching Cousin Knapp from the end of the hitch pole that afternoon.

"Take it easy, kid," the man whispered. "Don't squeeze that trigger no harder."

"You're coming with me," Jimmy ordered. "I don't care if I haven't got anything but my pajamas on. I'm taking you to the sheriff."

The dark-eyed little man had his, back to Knapp. He was watching Jimmy, eyes glued on the muzzle of the boy's .22. That was when Knapp crawled out of bed, picked up the water pitcher on the stand and hit the little man on the head. The man went down and out in a splatter of broken crockery and water, and Knapp was on top of him in a dead faint.

There was a lot of commotion after that. Mr. Bonner ran in with the sheriff when Jimmy yelled, and both of them laughed fit to kill when the dark-eyed little man came to and hollered about not knowing there was a Billy the Kid in the house. The sheriff carted the man off to jail and Mr. Bonner was downstairs with Mrs. Bonner when Knapp came around.

He sat on the bed, as groggy as if he'd been the one who got hit on the head.

"Why did he keep saying you had



pennies instead of gold in that sack?" Jimmy asked.

With great dignity Knapp got up and started dressing. "The damned fool was drunk, Jimmy. That's why he couldn't tell copper from gold. A man should never be drunk when he tries a holdup. If he hadn't been, I never could have sneaked up on him and knocked him out with a single blow of my fist. It reminds me of the time . . ."

"You hit him with the pitcher," Jimmy said, pointing to the broken crockery on the floor.

"I must have knocked it off when I got out of bed. No, I hit him with my fist." Knapp buckled on his gun belt and picked up his sack. "It reminds me of the fist fight I had in Cheyenne last winter with Iron Chin McGinnity. I hit him once, just once, and when they picked up his head in the alley, they found his chin had been splintered clean up into his eyes."

Knapp walked down the stairs, a very dignified man. When he came into the living room, he said slowly, "George, I am not a fool. There has been skulduggery in this household, and don't try to lie out of it. You hired that man to invade your own house. I shall take the hint."

"Good-by," Mrs. Bonner said.

Knapp walked out as if he hadn't heard. The door had hardly closed when Mr. Bonner started to laugh. He fell into a chair and slapped his

leg and laughed until he cried. Jimmy, watching from the head of the stairs, didn't understand. There were several things he didn't understand. Like why the dark-eyed little man couldn't tell the difference between gold and copper. He hadn't looked drunk and he hadn't acted drunk. And Knapp saying Mr. Bonner had hired him to invade his own house.

"Go back to bed, sweetheart," his mother called up to him. "I'm sure that's all the excitement for tonight."

Then Mr. Bonner quit laughing. He looked up the stairs and there was pride in his eyes. He said, "Jimmy, you and I ought to take a trip."

"Where?"

"Where would you like to go?"

Jimmy considered. "Well, I'd like to see the Royal Gorge. I want to see how far Cousin Knapp jumped when he saved that beautiful girl from being smashed to death on the rocks."

Mr. Bonner choked and looked at his wife and finally managed, "Why sure, Jimmy. Sure."

"Go on to bed now," Mrs. Bonner said.

Jimmy went back along the hall to his room, walking slowly because he was thinking about the trip to the Royal Gorge. There was a growing suspicion in his mind that Cousin Knapp was a liar. When he saw how deep the Gorge was, he'd know.

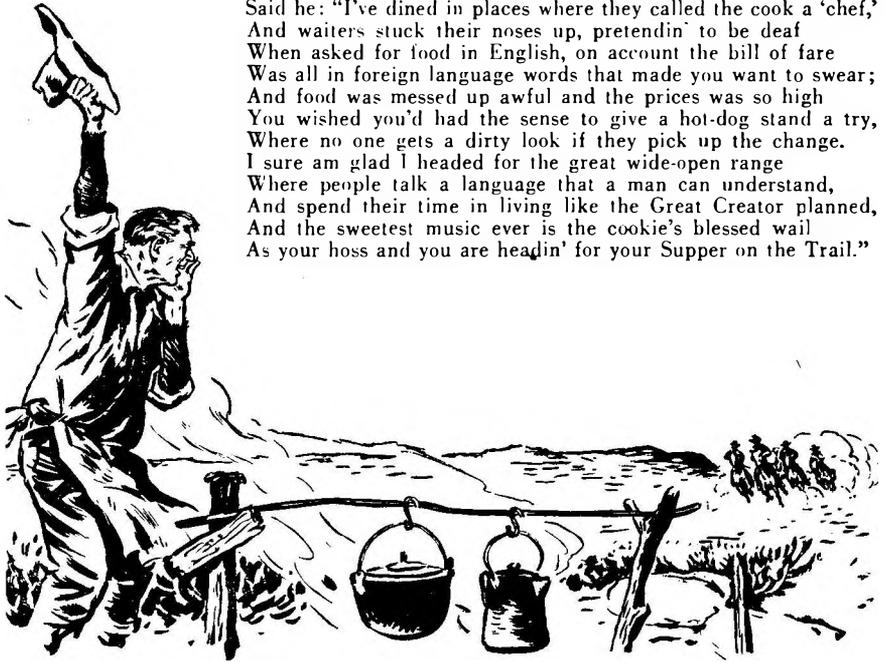
THE END

By Alfred I. Tooke

SUPPER ON THE TRAIL

I hired out as wrangler with a herd upon the trail,
And spent the whole day waiting for the cookie's blessed wail.
When he yelled "Come 'n' git it!" I was Johnny-on-the-spot.
I cut myself a rib off that was juicy, sweet and hot.
There weren't no fancy trimmin's, but beside the greasewood fire,
I reckoned I had everything a mortal could desire.
We ate that meal a-listenin' to the music of the herd,
And was so doggoned busy not a durned one said a word.

When the coffeepot was empty and the ribs was all picked clean,
And nothin' but a pile of empty dishes could be seen,
We passed around the makin's and each rolled himself a smoke.
Then a cowboy poked the embers and my sentiments he spoke.
Said he: "I've dined in places where they called the cook a 'chef,'
And waiters stuck their noses up, pretendin' to be deaf
When asked for food in English, on account the bill of fare
Was all in foreign language words that made you want to swear;
And food was messed up awful and the prices was so high
You wished you'd had the sense to give a hot-dog stand a try,
Where no one gets a dirty look if they pick up the change.
I sure am glad I headed for the great wide-open range
Where people talk a language that a man can understand,
And spend their time in living like the Great Creator planned,
And the sweetest music ever is the cookie's blessed wail
As your hoss and you are headin' for your Supper on the Trail."

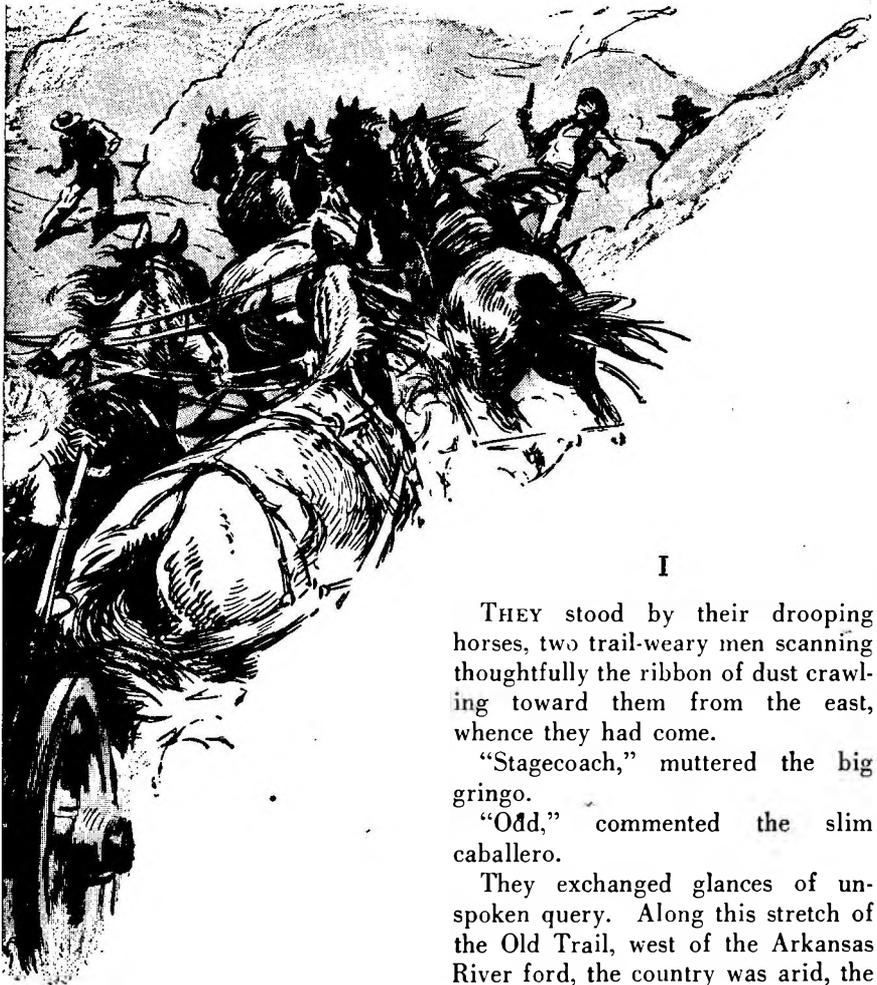


POWDERSMOKE PAYMASTERS

By L. L. Foreman



Getting drafted into the Army would have solved all the Preacher's problems—if only he could have kept his back trail from catching up with him!



I

THEY stood by their drooping horses, two trail-weary men scanning thoughtfully the ribbon of dust crawling toward them from the east, whence they had come.

"Stagecoach," muttered the big gringo.

"Odd," commented the slim caballero.

They exchanged glances of unspoken query. Along this stretch of the Old Trail, west of the Arkansas River ford, the country was arid, the

soil gravelly, and the parched and scanty grass crunched under the feet like charred paper. The sand hills south of the river rose high, their limestone ledges as whitely naked as protruding bones, hiding whatever patient watchers might be lurking behind them.

It was an abandoned and lonely piece of trail, which was why they were using it. Travelers bound southwest to Santa Fe were making the dry scrape down through the desert route these days. It was said that old Chief Mochta's folks were still out to collect hair along here, since the destruction of their Sand Creek camp by a mob of gun-blazing boneheads who didn't know a warrior from a squaw.

For a pair of salty sinners who weren't too fussy about meeting angry Cheyennes as long as they weren't armed with warrants, this was a good route. The only one left to them, for that matter. To get through, however, called for unwearied horses and an easing of saddle soreness. They sure didn't figure to walk it.

The coming stagecoach posed a problem for them. It could be a blind, a trap loaded with sharpshooters. Whoever was aboard would most likely have heard all about the disastrous bust-up back in Kinsley. Furthermore, if the stage was bound through, its destination could hardly be anywhere else but the Fort Lamar and Clay City terminal, which wasn't a bit to their liking.

Without waste of speech, they

shrugged and reached the decision that they might as well stand pat. They both had a cynical opinion of Luck, but a tough and seasoned reliance on their ability to make the most of a gamble. Anyhow, after the hard travel and lean rations, they and their horses needed a spell of rest.

The stagecoach lumbered along in the dry ruts. It was the heavy type, pulled by six horses. No graceful sheering, scrollwork, or other fancy trimmings. The thorough-braces were of thick, spliced steerhide, allowing the coach to rock fore and aft, and absorbing the shocks. The horses were good, but they weren't racers. This was a working outfit, built to take plenty of battering on any old road.

Nor did the driver flaunt the sprawling arrogance of his kind. He sat alone on the box, foot resting on the brake and his hat cuffed back, a dusty, carelessly clad young fellow who might have been a cowpuncher. He eyed alertly enough, though, the two men waiting on the trail. He hauled on the lines, booted the brake, and brought his coach to a standstill.

"You gents must've broke all riding records!" he remarked. "Real horses you got, looks to me!"

They were magnificent horses, one a powerful black, the other a lean-limbed palomino.

"Your eyes don't deceive you!" said the tall gringo, leading the black to the rear. His deep voice carried a harsh note of caution. Along with his uncommon size and height, he had an air of gravity, of remoteness. At

first glance he might have been taken for a misplaced minister. His black broadcloth coat, knee length, could have been worn to church by a clergyman, if given a dusting and tailored down to fit. His wide, flat-crowned hat could have hung in a rectory without arousing comment.

But the pair of broad gunbelts, glimpsed under the coat, wasn't a ministerial adornment. The sweeping brim of the black hat had a go-to-hell tilt, and the face under it would have discouraged any congregation topside of Satan's cellars. It was a dark, strong-featured face, the nose a bold beak jutting above a wide mouth lined with a hint of sardonic humor. The granite-gray eyes, deep set and observant, held a chill force.

The caballero glanced into the coach, saw that it contained only a single passenger, and tied his palomino behind alongside the black. There was nothing grave or remote about him, in dress or manner. His sombrero showed some stains and fire spots, and its silver braid had grown tarnished, but it was a highly expensive one. His short *charro* jacket, beginning to fray at the pockets, fitted him like a glove. His boots were scuffed, but he sported silver spurs as smoothly polished with use as the bone gun butts that swung at his hips. He had elegance, the scarred, hard-worn elegance of a handsome tomcat that had battled around plenty and was perfectly ready to spit in the eye of the devil and his dog.

They unsaddled their horses.

Finding the rear boot of the coach loaded up with bulky canvas sacks, they slung their saddles onto the top deck, gave the horses a quick rub-down, and climbed up.

"Going to ride up here with me, eh, gents?" the driver said. "Where you can look around and see . . . uh . . . the scenery! The fare's twenty dollars each. Make yourself easy, Mr. Delvin—you, too, *Señor de Risa!*" He spoke the names quietly, solemnly, letting them know that he was aware of who they were, and he chose not to notice their swift, questioning scrutiny.

He knew them from hearsay and tall reputation, this tired, hard-hunted pair of hell-raising longriders. They guessed that, and it didn't surprise them. It was what they had expected.

The soldiers were after them this time. Not lawmen, who could be sensibly inclined to look the other way as they passed. Full troops of cavalymen were scouting the trails with explicit orders to bring them in. The word was out that their last and only chance to escape was to try crossing the high mountains into New Mexico, then on down the long slant to Arizona and their old stamping grounds along the Mexican border. They had hundreds of miles to go, but if they could stay ahead of pursuit, slip past the army forts and hostile towns and get south of the mountains, they might make it.

Preacher Delvin climbed behind the driver and counted out his fare.

High-stakes gambler and gunfighter, he wasn't the kind of man to haggle. He added an extra ten dollars. What he needed he usually got, and what he got he paid for—plus bullets for bonus if the bill called for it.

"Pay your fare, Rico," he said.

Don Ricardo de Risa, twice a revolutionary general, occasionally a bandit when pressed, frequently a self-styled *hidalgo* of blue blood and purple lineage, and at all times a cheerfully immoral adventurer and impetuous gunsmoke artist, paid up and also put in ten extra.

"What is your name?" he inquired of the driver.

"Shay Calhoun. Thanks."

"You're welcome. I trust," said the Don kindly, "that you will not be tempted to any foolish act that would cause you to be remembered as the *late* Shay Calhoun!"

The passenger inside the coach stuck his head out. In a voice of command he demanded to know how long this halt was going to last, and made remarks about the service.

"Who's he?" Delvin inquired.

Shay Calhoun grinned. "Starchy duck, ain't he? Kinda new to the country, I guess. Got a big eye out for Indians. He don't seem to trust my guarantee I'll get him through safe."

"Neither do I!"

"Maybe not. Far's Indians are concerned, though, I'm good friends with these Cheyennes. I'm the only man who can make this route. Some of old Mochta's boys gen'rally meet

me and ride along a ways. I carry coffee and tobacco for 'em."

The stagecoach rolled on, the passenger below muttering about the state of the road. Delvin and Don Ricardo didn't care much for the state in general. They, too, were a long, long way from home.

II

It evidently wasn't natural for Shay Calhoun to be reticent. He spoke of what he'd heard about the Kinsley affair, and opined that the army was a tough proposition to tangle with.

Devlin, chewing an unlighted cigar and taking his ease, observed tolerantly that the army was probably okay if you didn't knock an inspector general downstairs.

It had been an accident, more or less, during a riot that followed a poker session in the Breyere House in Kinsley. The inspector general wasn't in the game. He was in his hotel room, no doubt penning important reports of his inspection of the local army post. Emerging from his room to investigate the disturbance, he collided into Devlin and the Don—who happened to be inspecting around for the handiest exit, while holding off a bunch of short sports from the barroom downstairs. Don Ricardo backed into the army man and pushed him away.

One thing leading to another, the inspector general bounced off Devlin's shoulder and took a spinning header over the banisters and down

the stairs. The stairs being crowded at the moment, he got stepped on. He roared for troops, and somebody not in favor hit him with the night clerk's potted geranium. When troops arrived, somebody else fired a shot and brought on a fast little skirmish in the hotel lobby.

It was all laid on Devlin and Don Ricardo. The unfortunate inspector general believed it, and dictated his official report of it in bed. He proclaimed that a dastardly attempt had obviously been made to murder him and lure the troops into an ambush, and he called for a thorough investigation of all persons concerned. He commanded that no possible means be spared to capture the ringleaders, those sinister, seditious assassins known as Preacher Devlin and Don Ricardo de Risa.

The unregenerate pair of far-wandering longriders, suddenly homesick for the border country, hit the trail fast.

Seeing that Devlin and Don Ricardo weren't inclined to discuss their personal affairs much, Shay Calhoun spoke of his own. He was the sole owner of this stage line, he divulged. It sounded big until he added that this was the sole coach and he the sole driver. It was a short-run line, too, as lines went.

"I could build it up, though, if I got a mail contract," he said. "I've agreed to carry gov'ment mail for a year, to show I can do it. I figured it would be just the regular mail sack that's no trouble to pack, and so

I agreed to carry it for pract'ly nothing this first year. But there's about a ton of it back there in the boot, as usual. It's breaking me, because it leaves no room for good-paying express stuff."

He shook his head disgustedly. "Brock Hudson is behind it. He's got it in for me. He and all his men, they keep on ordering whole sets of free gov'ment books—land surveys and reports and things, that nobody reads. They're big and heavy as hell. Brock Hudson is the biggest sutler for two hundred miles around. Got a supply station at Fort Lamar. Owns the hotel in Clay City, too. He's not an army man, but he sure struts it at the fort. I've even heard him tell off Major Lowry, the commander."

Devlin had never heard of any Brock Hudson or Major Lowry, nor had the Don. Their curiosity about army doings was confined to their back trail. It was a toss-up whether or not the discovery had yet been made that they hadn't struck south over the desert route.

Peering ahead, Shay Calhoun exclaimed, "Durn it. Sandy Ford's washed out! Must've had some heavy rains north in the hills. We can't cross her till she's down. Oh, well, I'm not running on any fast schedule, anyhow."

Devlin flicked him a bleak look. "Maybe you're not, but we sure are!" The creek was draining a muddy stream down into the river, and until it ran dry its sandy bed would sink the wheels. "So we build a crossin'!"

"How? No rocks. No timber."

"We'll do what we can. Let's unload those sacks, Rico!"

The passenger inside the coach expostulated sternly when he saw what was afoot. "Wilful destruction of government property!" he stormed, stepping out. He was a man with a brisk, officious manner, wearing a big Dragoon gun belted over his shooting jacket.

Shay Calhoun added his strenuous objections. "I'll lose my mail contract! I'll lose my bond! I'll lose—"

Devlin shouldered them both aside. "You'll lose your damn head, you don't get out o' the way!" He heaved a bulky sack into the muddy water and went back for another.

"I shall report this!" vowed the scandalized passenger. "Federal offense!"

Devlin and the Don, not interested in classifying their offenses, built up the ford. It took most of the canvas sacks, and left the coach a lot lighter. They climbed back onto their seats, surveyed their work, and pronounced it sound and satisfactory.

"Push on, driver!" Devlin ordered.

Tardily, a group of young Cheyenne friends came riding down the sand hills across the river, whooping their greetings to Shay Calhoun. They hit the river with a tremendous splashing, making a game of it, holding their rifles high. Shay Calhoun waved to them, grinning, and shouted something about their being too late to help out on the ford.

"Indian attack!" snapped the pas-

senger, unholstering his gun. "Keep your heads, men!"

Shay dived at him. "Don't shoot! They're—"

He wasn't quick enough. The passenger sent him a glance of cool contempt, and his gun blared at the river. Admirably steady and sure of himself, he thumbed the hammer back and sighted for another shot. Shay knocked him down, turned, and made urgent signs to the young Cheyennes.

One of them was floundering in the river, shot off his pony. The others pulled up, gathered around him, and fished him out. They retreated to the opposite bank, astonished and angry, shaking their rifles. They fired back only once.

The single shot cracked from among them, as the passenger, swearing in a cold wrath at Shay, sprang up and again got his gun leveled. The Indians rode back over the sand hills and vanished with their wounded youth then. The big Dragoon gun stayed silent.

Don Ricardo leaned over the side of the coach and studied briefly the fallen, motionless passenger. "Damn it!" he said annoyedly. "Now we have to bury him!"

Shay raised a dissent. "I'll have to take him on into Clay City, and report what happened. His relatives have got to be located and —"

Devlin interrupted him. "He shot first, an' was goin' to shoot again. He made a mistake, an' he paid for it! But will that take the blame off those

Cheyenne kids? Knowin' you're friends with 'em, who'll believe your story? Soldiers will be ordered out to hunt 'em down. There'll be killings done on both sides. You want that?"

"Also," put in Don Ricardo, "what of your guarantee of safety? This, if it gets known, will certainly break you! We will bury him and forget it—as a favor to you! It saves trouble, no?"

"You mean," retorted Shay, "it saves you two from attention and trouble when we get to Clay City!"

The Don rested his fingers lightly on his gunbelts. "A dead man may rest as well one place as another, as far as I have observed." He flashed white teeth in a gentle smile. "Or two men, for that matter!"

Shay finally admitted the point. Maybe, he said, he was being led astray by bad company.

So they gave the too-soon shooter a reasonably good burial beside the Old Trail, crossed Sandy Ford on a firm foundation of printed data and traveled on. Due to the delay, Shay predicted that they wouldn't make Clay City till dark. His two dangerous passengers didn't mind that.

III

It was nearing sundown when the sharp-eyed Don drew attention to a line of horsemen filing out from the hills on the north. The horsemen were moving down at an angle that would bring them some distance behind the coach.

"Who are those hombres?" the Don asked Shay.

Shay scanned them. "Can't tell yet. Is that a red shirt in front? Then I guess it must be Old Toll and some of the Shantytown bunch. Wonder what they're up to out here?"

"*Quien sabe?*" murmured the Don, touching glances with Devlin. "Are you carrying anything valuable? Outside of us, that is!"

Shay shook his head. "Not as far's I know. Tom Trace wouldn't rob me, anyhow. He's a brushy booger, but we're friends."

"You seem to get along with all the brushy boogers hereabouts!" Devlin commented. "Who's this Toll Trace. Name's familiar."

"He's sort of king of Shantytown. Owns the Golden Wheel there. Shantytown is across the river from Fort Lamar. About the only law in it is Old Toll—and if you know him it should give you some idea of what Shantytown's like! Full of thieves, card sharks and boogers on the dodge! Helluva place!"

The sun sank away. The blue grayness faded and night came. The noise of the wheels and the team made it impossible to catch any sounds of riders following behind. Darkness blanked out all but the outlines of the trail and the hills massed on both sides.

Devlin was peering rearward, speculating about the Shantytown riders. So he missed the first sight of the men who loomed up on the trail ahead. He didn't know about them till Shay sang out a query and a gun

flared in reply. He slewed around and faced front, with Don Ricardo, and both of them dipped their hands fast.

Dark shapes in the night were running at the team. A rifle began exploding cartridges, and a bullet cut the brass rail of the top deck and went droning off. Don Ricardo ducked and came up again, shooting, while Devlin's plain pair of long-barreled guns barked solidly together. They needed no preparation, and surprise was something they could never afford.

The busy rifle quit abruptly. The nearest of the running men spilled headlong under the hoofs of the team. Don Ricardo prodded Shay with a smoking gun. "Don't stop, or it will be your last! Lay on the whip and ride them down!" He blazed shots over Shay's head, stinging his neck with the side flashes, and men stumbled clear of the scared, plunging team.

"Blast him an' his safe guarantee!" came Devlin's growl. "We oughta sue him, Rico!"

Shay made his long whip sing. Voices in the darkness were shouting at him to pull up, but his passengers were giving him different orders—and they were in the right spot to fling him off the box and take over the outfit if they had to. The team lunged forward, the coach jerking and swaying, the two led horses snorting in the rear.

"Who were they?" Shay yelled back, both hands occupied.

"You tell us! You know all the boogers around here!" Devlin, balancing precariously, reloaded his heavy guns. "A hell of a country, this!" He listened for sounds of pursuit. What came was a sudden new outbreak of firing and shouts. He guessed the Shantytown riders must have come along and barged into the confusion back there. Whoever they were who had attacked the stagecoach, they evidently weren't Shantytowners.

Devlin shook his head. A hell of a country. All cluttered up with duty-bound soldiers, green horn shooters, and damnfool jiggers who jumped out at you in the dark. He wished he were well over the mountains and way back down in that good old Spanish-flavored land where a man could live and let live as long as he was moderately polite and wore his guns to the gambling tables.

"Swing off the trail when you can," Devlin told Shay, "an' land us in a more private spot somewhere. Looks like we better hole up the night, Rico. This damn trail's too populated after dark!"

"All right," Shay responded. "I know a good spot. Could find it with my eyes shut," he claimed, and half an hour later, a mile off the trail, he all but ran the outfit into a creek.

He swung the leaders hard over and plowed the bank with the off-wheels, pulling clear, but the front one smashed full into a rubble of half-buried rocks. With a splintering crunch, the wheel went to pot, the coach canted over like a goat leaning

on one shoulder, and the team stood snorting and pawing.

Devlin, unseated by the unexpected turn, tilt, and sudden stop, managed to stay aboard by straddling the brass rail when he rammed into it. "Did the danged horses have their eyes shut too?" he rasped. "Hey, we've lost Rico!"

"I am here!" came Don Ricardo's voice sepulchraly from the bottom of the creek. Rising, dripping wet, the Don rescued his sombrero and gazed moodily about him. Down where he came from, this would have been an arroyo, dust dry except once in a blue moon. This was a creek. It had water in it. "What a country!" he muttered, and Devlin nodded.

"I'll build a fire and get to work on that wheel," Shay said.

"You'll light no fire here, an' you'll make no noise!" Devlin corrected, tending to his horse. "We'll fix it in the mornin'. Meantime, stay quiet. Don't even snore in your sleep!"

Under a high sun the stagecoach belatedly approached Fort Lamar. Devlin and Don Ricardo rode inside the coach with the leather curtains down. There was always the possibility that the order for their arrest had gone ahead of them, along with their descriptions.

By leaving the curtains unfastened they were able to see out, without being seen. They couldn't do as much for their horses. Still, a couple of horses led behind a stagecoach wasn't uncommon, and they had

worked on them during the night with chalk and clay.

Gazing out at the fort, Don Ricardo remarked hopefully that perhaps they could get by without being spotted, and win a little time for a rest somewhere and a meal.

From here, on the last long curve of the trail, they were able to view Fort Lamar and, a mile farther on, the roofs of Clay City. They paid some regards to Shantytown, too, lying across the river from the fort. Even at this distance, the difference between Clay City and Shantytown was striking.

Clay City looked like the kind of a town where tradesmen attended orderly civic meetings, paid taxes and upheld the law. Shantytown, typical of its kind, was a haphazard jumble of rickety shacks and hangouts. Obviously a sinful settlement where folks shunned law, despised order and collected taxes from the Clay City sports and payday soldiers who crossed over on dark nights for a frolic in the deadfalls.

Three riders—a girl and two army officers—trotted out of the fort and turned toward town. The girl glanced back, saw the stagecoach coming, and spoke to the two men. All three halted, waiting.

"Who're they?" Devlin called up to Shay. "More friends o' yours?"

"Sure," came Shay's response. "Major Lowry and his daughter, Ruth. And Captain Hedsford. He's second-in-command to the major."

Reluctant to make their acquaintance, Devlin and the Don drew well

back, peering around the edge of a leather curtain. They saw the girl smile and wave.

"You're late this trip, Shay," she called out as the stage drew up. She was a brown-eyed girl with a gay young mouth and a direct gaze that might have seemed bold had it been less engagingly candid. "We were going in to town to see if you'd brought any mail for the fort. I don't mean government books!" Her laugh was sympathetic.

"I guess I've got some for you in the regular mailsack, here, Ruth." Shay answered, and there was a lift to his voice as he spoke to her. "Wait, I'll sort it out."

"Don't bother, Calhoun," put in Captain Hedsford somewhat sharply. He was a strapping young officer, immaculately uniformed, and he obviously disliked the first-name familiarity between his commander's daughter and a wildcat stage driver.

Major Lowry, less formal, asked, "Nothing else, Shay? I thought surely you'd be carrying the . . . er . . . h'm." He frowned worriedly and didn't finish. He had a haggard face, and a strangely nervous habit of twitching his gray mustache. "Yes, we'll ride in. I must see . . . er . . . somebody in town."

It took no extraordinary insight to perceive that a rivalry lay between Shay Calhoun and Captain Hedsford. The way each tried to monopolize Ruth Lowry's attention, during the mile ride to town, was funny enough to cause Don Ricardo to chuckle hushedly and wag his head.

It occurred to Devlin that it was also funny for him and Rico to be riding right by an army fort, in a stagecoach escorted by the commander and the second-in-command. "Just so our driver don't spill the outfit, hangin' after that gal!" he muttered to Rico. "Right now he's got no more idea where the road goes than a drunk Piute ridin' a blind burro backwards!"

Clay City, from what they could see of it, was about what it had appeared to be, except for some of the inhabitants. The team pulled over to the Prince William Hotel, and Shay got down. The girl and the two officers put up their mounts at the hitchrack. The hotel bore signs of prosperity, plus respectability.

It was the men idling outside who didn't quite fit into the picture. Not that they were rowdy-looking. There wasn't a gun in sight among them. But Devlin and Don Ricardo swapped weighted glances, after a quick inspection, and knew that these men weren't loafers, languidly watching the arrival of the stage. The expressions were wrong. They scrutinized the coach with peculiar intentness, and stared at Shay with something like angry puzzlement. What they were wearing under their coats was anybody's guess.

"Morning, major! Morning, Captain!" Uttering affable greetings, the man who emerged from the hotel lobby bowed to Ruth Lowry. "Good morning, Miss Ruth!" He had the shape of an egg, but his bow was nimble. His round, pale eyes played

over the girl. His town clothes were neat, and he had small feet and fat little hands, oddly at variance with his large balloon face.

"Good morning, Mr. Hudson," returned the girl.

"I'd like a word with you, Brock," said the major.

Brock Hudson nodded and followed the major inside. Shay sailed the mailsack onto the porch, after Captain Hedsford took Ruth Lowry's arm and walked away with her. One of the idling men said, "Take that sack in to the desk, feller!"

"You take it!" Shay retorted and drove off. In a yard outside the far edge of town he halted, got down, and looked into the coach. "All out!" he announced. "This here's the home station."

Devlin and the Don stepped out, stretched their legs, and gazed around. "He has good stables, I see," mentioned the Don approvingly. "And an excellent cabin. I wonder if he can cook?"

"Well, we can try him out!"

They moved in. They would leave, Devlin informed their not-too-willing host, some time in the night. "Meantime, stick around where we can see you, huh?" he suggested, hauling out a roll of bills and peeling off one. "See that you earn this!"

They felt better after a meal. Devlin found a cigar, and relaxed in a chair. Don Ricardo recovered some of his old debonair cheerfulness, and hummed as he brushed dried mud from his sombrero.

Shay went out to the coach and came in lugging a handbag and a heavy leather satchel. "My late lamented passenger's belongings," he explained. "I better dig into it, and find out who he was and where to send it."

They nodded, indifferent about it. They were only mildly curious when Shay, examining some papers that he drew from the handbag, began mumbling dismayedly to himself. Turning matters over, they agreed that the hue and cry had most likely not reached Fort Lamar as yet, otherwise Shay would have been asked about it. Everything was fine. Luck was with them and they knew how to use it. Tonight, unknown and unseen . . .

They quit talking. There were noises outside the cabin. They rose silently from their chairs, gazed swiftly through the window, and ducked back. Don Ricardo swore softly, and his ready hands stroked his bone-handled guns.

Devlin whipped a bleak stare at Shay. "More friends o' yours?" he growled. "Hombre out front wearin' a badge, an' he's got all that hotel crowd along!"

"And soldiers!" breathed the Don. "Amigo—look! The major, the captain, and a *cuadrilla* of cavalry!"

IV

Shay, looking haunted, stuffed the papers back into the handbag. "Badge?" he said vaguely. "Oh—Sheriff Gilhorn. No friend of mine.

That's him talking now. What's he say?"

What the sheriff was saying, loudly, was, "Come out o' there, Calhoun! I got a warrant for you—for the murder an' robbery of your passenger!"

"Huh?" Shay gulped. "Me?"

Major Lowry came on into the yard, followed by Captain Hedsford and Brock Hudson. The squad of troopers, at a barked command from their sergeant, dismounted and stood ready.

"What are the facts on this, sheriff?" the major called out.

"Plenty enough for a warrant!" retorted the sheriff with surly insolence. "Last night we rode out to meet the stage an' guard it in, an' Calhoun fired on us! Today he shows up without his passenger, who I hear was carrying money—an' I bet we find that money in the cabin! I been suspicious of him all along. He's friends with Cheyennes an' Shantytowners!"

A heavy thump caused Devlin and the Don to whirl around, guns drawn. The leather satchel was gone, and Shay was shoving a steel strong box under his bed. Somebody pounded on the door.

"Come out, Calhoun!" bellowed the sheriff. "Or have we got to bust in an' get you?"

Don Ricardo gazed after the strong box, then at Shay, before turning to line his guns at the door. His smile was both reckless and resigned, and he nodded casually to

Devlin. "End of the trip, amigo—and we paid our fare to get here!"

Devlin clamped hard on his cigar, thinking fast. His glance came to rest on the handbag. It was stamped with the owner's initials—W. T. W.

"Sheath your shooters, Rico," he said, "an' stand by. I doubt this'll pass, but it's maybe worth tryin'." He picked up the handbag and started toward the door with it.

Shay gasped, and took a step after him. "Man, you're crazy! You don't know who—"

But Devlin yanked the door open and stepped out. He ran a deliberate survey over all the guns leveled at him, and cocked a dark eyebrow at the sheriff. "Is this a joke?" he demanded. His deep voice cut into the hush. Every eye in the yard was fixed on his tall, commanding figure. "Don't point those damn guns at me! I don't like it!"

He scowled severely at them. "I approve your regard for my welfare, but to arrest anybody for my murder might be going too far! As you can see, I'm not a corpse yet and nobody's robbed me."

"Stop!" Shay whispered urgently behind him. "You don't know . . ."

"Shut up!" Devlin muttered, heeling him in the shins.

The sheriff was gaping bewilderedly like a man who had run head-on into a botch while faithfully following orders. Brock Hudson's round eyes had shrunk to tiny quering discs. Major Lowry's expression was a strange mixture of relief and worry.

"Furthermore," Devlin went on grandly, pushing his bluff, "I take this opportunity to recommend Mr. Calhoun. Very fine driver! Except for a small incident or two, I enjoyed a comfortable journey as his passenger."

Major Lowry came forward. His mustache twitched and his haggard eyes looked more sunken than ever. He halted before Devlin and glanced down at the initials on the handbag. He saluted. "Glad you arrived safely." His voice sounded stiff and hoarse. "Your quarters are ready at the fort, sir!"

Devlin blinked twice and bit through his cigar. "H'm? Quarters? At the fort?" He caught himself quickly. "Oh, yes! Uh . . . just a minute! Left something inside."

He ducked back into the cabin. "Who in hell am I?" he asked Shay in a hurried mutter. "I mean, who was that hombre we buried?"

Shay shut his eyes and groaned. "I tried to tell you! I went through his papers and orders. You're Colonel Wallace T. Wallington! You've been sent here to investigate the major! You're to take command of the fort! You!"

Even Don Ricardo was impressed.

Devlin, after nearly swallowing his cigar and staring blankly at nothing, walked out again. The bluff was on. He was in it up to his neck, and the only course left was to hang on until he could get off, if it didn't blow up on him meanwhile. He didn't know a deployed column from a right dress, and his manual of arms consisted of a

one-two performance without benefit of command. But he guessed he'd have to play the big eagle, the ramrod with military *sabre*, the boss of Fort Lamar.

He was in the army now!

"Excuse me, please!" It was Brock Hudson who spoke, his manner respectful. "May I ask why the colonel chose to pass by the fort and through town so secretly?"

All eyes fastened on Devlin again. A veteran gambler, Devlin didn't hold with hedging a bet. He eyed Hudson and snapped, "I had my reasons for privacy! May I ask how the sheriff knew I was on that stagecoach?"

Sheriff Gilhorn, glancing uneasily at Hudson, mumbled that he'd got it from a roundabout source. He added that he and the posse had ridden forth to guard the stage from a bunch of Shantytowners, who he'd heard had set out to waylay it.

"Where did you hear of that?" Devlin broke in.

"From a . . . a roundabout source," stammered the sheriff unhappily.

"Humph!" Devlin gave a formidable military snort. "You're a roundabout kind of character! Too many roundabout sources round here!"

"Anyhow," the sheriff grumbled, "me an' the posse got hell shot out of us! That's another charge I got against Calhoun!" He went shambling to the cabin, and clumped inside.

He came backing out hastily, his face the color of wet dough. "Hey!" he blurted. "There's a Mex . . ."

He didn't need to finish. Don Ricardo appeared in the doorway. Lounging deceptively at ease, thumbs hooked in his crossed gun belts, the Don looked lean, lethal, chillingly efficient. He sent Devlin a wry glance, and raised one shoulder in a brief, fatalistic shrug.

Devlin drew a deep breath, and used it for another loud parade-ground snort, better than the first one. "Humph! Sorry if that blundering fool disturbed you, general! Seems he wants to arrest somebody for that trifling incident on the trail last night. Hah!"

"Hah!" echoed the Don, a trifle uncertainly.

"Sheriff," Devlin stated, "I'll inform you right now that we are the ones who fired on you and your confounded posse! We army men go armed—and when fools jump out at us in the dark, we shoot! Right, general?"

"Right, colonel!"

Devlin turned to the major. "Major Lowry, meet General Hotentote!" While he was striving to figure out a reason why a Mexican general should be traipsing around this far north, the Don himself came up with a pip.

"Of the *Division Inteligencia*," murmured the Don, putting a professionally expert ease into his heel-clicking salute and snappy bow. "My mission is that of confidential military observer for the Army of the Republic of Mexico—by the courtesy of your esteemed government, which has granted me the privilege of travel-

ing incognito under the excellent guidance of the colonel."

He spoke glibly, suavely, lathering compliments on all that he had observed, and expressed his approval of the Monroe Doctrine. Devlin admired the rich and fluent flow, and only hoped the Don wouldn't work up to producing a deck of cards and suggesting a friendly game.

They shook hands all around, and Don Ricardo graciously promised the squad sergeant a medal. Major Lowry spoke again of quarters in readiness at the fort, and added that the general could also be accommodated.

"H'm!" said the colonel.

"Ahem!" said the general. "I'm afraid my attire is hardly suitable. Our baggage has been delayed."

"Perhaps," Brock Hudson proposed, "the gentlemen would prefer to stay at the hotel, as my guests, until their baggage arrives."

The gentlemen so preferred and said so together. Hudson bowed and assured them that he was honored. Major Lowry looked like a condemned man who has won a temporary reprieve.

Brock Hudson's Prince William Hotel turned out to resemble in some ways the character of its owner. It was heavily built and well furnished, and had an air of being adaptable to any free-spending customer's private whim. Devlin let a masked youth take the handbag, and he and Don Ricardo were escorted to a double room. Hudson invited them

to his rooms for a drink, and they accepted.

He set out whiskey, cigars and cigarettes, and sat smiling at them. His rooms were so overly filled with ornamental furniture and thick rugs, they seemed crowded, stuffy. No sounds penetrated from the outside.

"May I ask, colonel," Hudson inquired, "what you plan to do with that payroll?"

"Payroll? What payroll?" Devlin chose a cigar from the box, aware that Don Ricardo had suddenly become very still and bright-eyed. "Where did you hear of that?"

Hudson's smile deepened. "From a roundabout source! Not from our witless sheriff. All he knows is what I care to tell him. He didn't know, for instance, that Calhoun's passenger was Colonel Wallington—coming to relieve Major Lowry of his command and investigate his administration of the fort. He didn't know, either, that the colonel was also bringing the payroll! What have you done with it . . . er . . . colonel? It's not in that handbag. Just between us, I think you'd better produce it!"

Devlin bit into the cigar, thinking of the heavy leather satchel in Shay Calhoun's strong box. "Why?"

Hudson leaned back and placed his chubby fingers together. "Because I know who you are! I haven't always lived in these parts!"

Devlin sat forward and poured himself another drink, letting his coat gape open. "Maybe you won't much longer!"

The stout man laughed. "I wonder

what you two did with the colonel! Not that I care, believe me! It's the payroll I'm interested in. You can't get away with it! You can't even get away without it, if I don't want you to! But I want you to get away—after I've got that payroll. Let's be reasonable."

"Robbin' the army ain't exactly reasonable!" observed Devlin. "They'll hunt till they find it!"

"They'll hunt," Hudson agreed. "They won't find it, because at first they'll be hunting for Colonel Wallington, thinking he must have made off with it after getting here. They'll realize their mistake after they check up, of course, but by then I'll have the money safely cached, and you'll be over the mountains and far away! I'll need the time, too, to cover up some matters at the fort before another new commander is sent out here."

"He a friend o' yours, the major?"

"I expect to marry his daughter." Hudson gazed placidly at his finger tips. "I suppose Calhoun knows, eh? He'll have to be attended to! I'll take care of that. . . All you have to do is give up the payroll to me, and I'll see that you get clear."

He spread his fingers and placed them carefully together again. "You're a tough pair, but a lot of tough ones have come my way. Some of them are working for me now, those who were reasonable. A nod from me, and they'll never let you out of here alive! A word, and every trooper in the fort will be coming

at you for the murder and robbery of Colonel Wallington! I know what I'm doing. I always know, and I never lose. All men, the best and the worst, learn that in time!"

Pride had crept into his tone and manner, the hungry, envious pride of a monstrous little man who hated bigger men and constantly schemed to conquer them. Warped ambition, greater than greed, was what was prodding him. This fat, pale egotist, cloaking his dark frustrations under an almost servile exterior, was dangerous.

"In other words," he said, "it's the payroll or your lives! Don't try to cheat me! I want all of it! It should run to well over forty thousand dollars, and I'll count every dime!"

Right there was where he talked too much. Don Ricardo leaned forward with an impulsive jerk, and breathed, "Forty thousand dollars!"

Hudson flinched instinctively. His round eyes widened, and he snatched a velvet-covered bell cord hanging by his chair. The Don reached for his drink with his left hand. Hudson watched him pick it up and finish it, and he slowly relaxed. Still using his left hand, the Don set down his emptied glass and bent farther forward to get the bottle. And then his right arm whipped over. There was a flash of a silver-mounted gun barrel, a quiet thud as it struck, and Hudson lolled in his chair, knocked out quicker than he'd ever broken any man.

The Don sprang up, holstering his

gun. "Forty thousand dollars!" he breathed again, and darted to the door, Devlin hard on his heels.

V

The sun was going down, and the town rested in the interval between the end of the day's tasks and the start of the evening's diversions. A few soldiers lounged about, off duty, among them the squad sergeant Don Ricardo had promised to decorate. The stores were closing, the saloons hadn't yet lighted up, and all the hitchracks were empty except the one at the livery, where a bony old saddle nag stood snoozing alongside a one-horse buggy that the liveryman was languidly readying.

Half a dozen men on the hotel porch turned their heads as Devlin and Don Ricardo came out. Without a word, five of them got up and followed. The sixth man entered the hotel.

"That one," murmured the Don, "has gone to report to Hudson! And our horses are in Calhoun's stable. Damnation! We must move fast! When Hudson wakes up . . ."

"Either you should've held your hand, or else clipped him harder! Sometimes you get too previous, Rico! Like now. Slow down. You could sprint to Calhoun's strong box, an' still have those five hombres right on your tail!"

They slowed to a brisk march, befitting military men. The five men following matched their pace accordingly. "Wait, I'll get rid of 'em!"

Devlin muttered, and crossed over to the squad sergeant.

"Sergeant!"

"Sir?"

"Those men there." Devlin indicated them. "I strongly suspect them of . . . uh . . . malfeasance and barratry! Fall in every soldier in town, and arrest them!"

The sergeant batted his eyes. "Excuse me, sir, did you say battery? Assault and battery is civilian stuff, sir. Sheriff's business."

"A gun battery, sergeant! They stole it!"

"Oh! Yes, sir! That's different! Hey, you guys!"

Devlin heard a horse start off down the street, and turned quickly. Don Ricardo was riding off on the bony saddle nag, and the liveryman was pocketing some coins and gazing after him. Devlin spat an oath. Sometimes, sure enough, Rico was mighty impetuous and previous—especially when it involved loot to the tune of over forty thousand dollars, cash money. It took something of that kind to impel Rico to forget fraternity and friendship.

"Blast his double-crossin' soul!" growled Devlin, striding to the livery. "I had *my* eye on that horse!"

The liveryman didn't quibble over the commandeering of the buggy. He didn't have time. Devlin jumped in, threw him ten dollars, and slapped the horse with his hat. The horse, a staid brown mare who hadn't experienced such robust familiarity in

many a year, broke into a skittish gallop.

Shay Calhoun's modest stage depot and cabin lay about a quarter mile back from the river. The lower ground between it and the river was overgrown with wild gooseberry. Devlin, scanning the terrain while jolting along in the buggy, took note of a figure on the south river bank. The light was poor, but as the figure crossed higher ground, a glow of the sunset touched it for a moment. Devlin narrowed a speculative stare after it. It was Shay Calhoun, hurrying on foot to Shantytown.

The bony saddle nag stood near the open cabin door, breathing hard. Devlin halted the bemused mare. A terrific pounding was going on in the cabin. He walked in, and had the rare pleasure of witnessing Don Ricardo actually working at muscular labor.

The Don was making such noise he couldn't hear anything else. He was wholly absorbed in what he was doing. He had the strong box out on the floor, and was vigorously attacking it with an ax. Sparks flew from the mangled ax, but the steel strong box was holding up stoutly.

Devlin touched him on the back. "Try the handle!"

Disturbed at his work, the Don messed up a hefty swing. The ax glanced off the strong box and spun him off balance on his high-heeled boots. Devlin ducked, the ax sailed over him, and Don Ricardo got his legs tangled and went to his knees.

"Try the handle, I said—not prayer!" Devlin told him.

Don Ricardo flung him an irritable look. "Calhoun is not here, nor the key." Impatiently, he grabbed the handle and twisted it. "*Mil diablos!*" he muttered, embarrassed. "It isn't locked!" He wrenched open the strong box, and gave a cry of anguish. "Empty! That robber! He's taken it!"

Devlin nodded dourly, his eyes saturnine. "So I guessed!" He raised his head, listening, and strode out swiftly. "Hit out, Rico! Hudson's blown up the works on us!"

The Don came flying out, and for an instant he stood glowering with Devlin at the long column of riders thundering at them from town. There was no time for them to get their horses from the stables, much less saddle them. Don Ricardo laughed harshly and vaulted onto the nag. "We didn't last long, colonel!"

"Sure didn't, general! Let's resign!" Devlin took a running jump into the buggy, hit the mare, and headed her into the gooseberry bushes.

The mare didn't like it, and shied, but once Devlin got her into it she did a fair job of threading on through. From the sounds, Don Ricardo was having trouble with his nag. The sounds drew farther off in the brush, and when Devlin broke through to the river he sighted the Don far downstream, forcing his sorry mount across. Devlin wished him luck. He'd need plenty, to get

away on that balky, anvil-footed plug.

As for himself, Devlin had no intention of relying on the mare and buggy for a getaway from well-mounted troopers and the sheriff's Hudson-picked posse. He drove the mare along the bank, gave her a final clout on the flanks with his hat, and jumped from the bouncing buggy. Rolling down the bank, he lay listening for a moment, then got up and set off in the other direction upstream.

The lid was blown off and he was left afoot, about as hotly hunted as a man could get, wanted badly by both the civil and military authorities—and by Brock Hudson who, seeing that battered strong box, would certainly figure that he and Rico had broken it open and put the gypsy touch on the payroll. To the Kinsley crimes, Devlin guessed, were now heaped charges of murder of an army officer, robbery of an army payroll, impersonation, assault and battery.

"An' maybe barratry, for all I know, whatever that is," Devlin muttered.

He heard the horsemen charge over the river, a boiling, clattering roar, and a voice that sounded like Captain Hedsford's rapping out a command. He wouldn't have bet a dime on Rico's chances, all those toughened leather pounders racing after him, carbines loose in their saddle boots and their holster flaps tucked back.

Minutes later, while he crouched under the river bank where it edged the town, the flat rattle of a few distant shots told him that his dime

would have been lost. The pursuit had caught up with Rico. There were no more shots, and after a while Devlin heard the drumming of the mounted column returning.

It was full dark now, and the lights were on in town. He shook his head slightly, somberly, and waded into the river. A lot of men he'd known, good and bad, had gone down, yet it was queerly hard to believe that the end had finally come to that smiling, jaunty, hell-for-leather cuss of a Rico.

Searching for a man in a place like Shantytown presented problems.

Any inquiring stranger could expect nothing but trouble. Recalling that Shay Calhoun had mentioned the Golden Wheel as being Toll Trace's establishment, Devlin looked for it, but even locating that wasn't easy. He identified it at last by the yellow wagon wheel hanging above the door.

It was a sprawling big shack that had been built onto and enlarged at odd times, becoming a patchwork of jutting rooms and lean-to wings. Like the rest of the shanties, its windows were small and few. But for the wagon wheel, it would have been difficult to know the main door from several others. But the hum of voices, clink of bottles and coins, and an occasional women's laugh were clear indications that there was a saloon inside.

Devlin pushed open the door and walked in. He was indifferent to the slackening of talk that greeted his entrance. It was to be expected in a

dive of this kind. And this was a dive. Its tone was set by the women, by the rough plank bar, by the plain-topped gambling tables. A barroom could cater to every brand of man, and remain a reputable saloon. Where there were women, there you had a dive.

"Whiskey an' a cigar," Devlin told the bartender.

"Short shot an' a long smoke," the bartender acknowledged, serving. He bounced Devlin's silver dollar loudly on the bar, caught it, and moved away. The talk slackened again.

It was routine, Devlin recognized, to signal the house that a stranger was present. Sooner or later the boss would be coming along to look him over.

The boss did. He came from behind a blanket-hung doorway. Even in that thorny crowd of cutthroats and outcasts he captured attention, not only because of his flaming red shirt and Indian moccasins, but by his barbaric air. He was ancient, yet his body was erect and massive, and he held his thick arms and legs spread like a wrestler. His mane of coarse white hair was knotted Indian-fashion at the back and bound in a red rag. At his belt hung a knife in a beaded buckskin sheath, his only weapon.

There must have been something out of the ordinary in his manner, for the talk ceased altogether. He eyed Devlin steadily, and the tall gun master sent him a nod.

"Lo, there, Trace! Long time no see."

"How, Devlin. Yeah, long time." Old Toll Trace's voice was a guttural rasp. "Kiowa horse camp down in the Old Territory, wa'nt it? You won all our horses!" He was openly and brazenly what he was, an old renegade who had lived most of his life among Indians and could never tolerate any semblance of white man's law.

He drew the hanging blanket aside and motioned for Devlin to enter, and in the continued hush Devlin walked past him into a small room barely furnished with a table and chairs built of crates. There were two meager windows, high up, and between them a closed door. On the table stood a whiskey bottle and a tin water pail and dipper. Two dripping candles flickered in sconces cut from old tomato cans and nailed to the wall.

Shay Calhoun sat at the table.

Devlin pulled up a chair. "Well, Calhoun, I reckon you know why I'm here!" he remarked. His tone was without threat, but not his eyes. He was in a dangerous mood.

Shay said, "You'll never get it!"

Devlin's holsters thumped the chair as he sat down. He spread his coat. "The jig's busted. They got Rico tonight. They're after me, an' I doubt I'll make it out o' this damned country if I don't rig up a deal! A payroll deal!"

"Who with?" asked Shay.

"The major. He an' Hudson are two of a kind, I reckon!"

"Tom Lowry's no crook!" It was Toll Trace who spoke, and he growled it angrily.

"No?" Devlin shifted a trifle. The old savage could probably throw that rawhide-handled sticker in a flash. "I wouldn't say you're qualified to judge! Nor Calhoun!"

"You're wrong there," Shay said. "I haven't stolen that payroll. I took it so you and de Risa wouldn't get it—and I came here so you wouldn't get *me*! It belongs to the army. Toll has sent word to the major to come on over. You don't believe it? He'll be here any time now!"

Devlin saw his last card go. He angled for another. "The major looked okay to me, I admit. I'm judgin' by what Hudson let out to me."

Old Toll came over to the table. "Hudson's a liar!" He hit the table with his fist, and the bottle danced. "Tom Lowry's a good man, y'hear? The trouble he's in is all Hudson's doing. Sellin' short-weight supplies to the fort! Chargin' for stuff never delivered! Graft! Lendin' out his stinkin' money to the soldiers at high int'rest! Hudson! I've run with the worst, but I never done the slimy things he's done!"

He had worked himself up into a rage. "Blackmail!" His eyes blazed. "Tom told him about a colonel comin' out to investigate. No time to straighten things out 'fore he got here. Tom told me, too. I knew what

Hudson's move would be. That's why I took some o' the boys out to trail the stage in. Sheriff's posse is all Hudson's men—an' you can bet they had private orders from Hudson to gun that colonel an' Calhoun! He needed time to straighten out things at the fort. To cover up for himself, not Tom!"

Devlin ran a glance over the two small windows. A blur showed behind each of them. It was still unnaturally quiet out in the barroom. "If the major is so straight, how come he let Hudson get away with it all?" he queried, and knew at once that he shouldn't have asked that.

Old Toll's eyes grew shrewd. "Hudson didn't tell you, huh? How much d'you know, anyhow?"

"What you've told me!"

Slowly, the king of Shantytown sat down, straddling the chair, hands on his knees. "Blast you, don't move! I got a man at each window, an' another at the door—an' forty more in the bar!" He flipped his knife from his sheath. It was a skinning knife, fashioned from a file, laboriously heated, hammered and tempered, its edge worn to a curve. "I've whacked a man's head off with this! I can do it again! Faster'n any man can pull a gun!"

Devlin rolled his chewed cigar to the other side of his mouth. "Black-mail, you said, h'm? Gen'rally speakin', that can't be done to a man who's got nothin' to be ashamed of. Cuttin' my head off sure won't do a thing to convince me that the major's got nothin' to hide!"

Old Toll winced. His knuckles tightened on the knife. "Tom Lowry's my son!" he said, and Devlin knew that Toll wouldn't have let that out if the old renegade didn't intend to kill him.

VI

Devlin was of the opinion that having Old Toll for a father was something anybody would want to hide. It didn't seem the right time to say so, though. What he said was, "An' Hudson knows it, huh?"

Old Toll tapped the blade on the table. It rang like glass. "So do you, now! Hudson threatened to let it out. It'd ruin Tom's army career. These days, an officer is s'posed to be better'n the son of a *chi-kis-in* renegade an' a Kiowa squaw! But it was on account of his daughter he had to give in. She don't know I'm her grandfather. She never will, if I can help it!"

He squinted consideringly at Devlin's throat, and pushed the bottle over. "Have a drink. Tilt 'er right up!" He sat still, waiting, talking on. "Shay, here, I can trust him not to tell her. He'd like to marry her. But he ain't goin' to. She'll marry Cap'n Hedsford. His family's rich folks. She'll be a high lady, my gran'daughter will!"

Muffled voices spoke outside. The door was pulled open, and in walked Major Lowry. Somebody outside shoved the door shut again. The major glared startledly at Devlin. "You! What the—"

"Take it easy, Tom. He's cov-

ered!" Old Toll had slipped the knife away as soon as his distinguished son entered. "He came lookin' for the payroll. Said he aimed to strike a deal with you."

"Impudent devil!" The major overcame his first shock. He eyed Devlin grimly. "I've got quarters in the fort for you, all right! Your Mexican friend is already there—in chains! Where is the payroll, Shay?"

"I couldn't risk bringing it over here, major," Shay answered. "Not that much cash! These Shantytown boogers would even gang up on Toll for a lot less! Best I could do was hide it. I didn't have much time, either. So I stuffed it in a sack of those gov'ment books that's left in the stage boot!"

Devlin, his musings dark and no-ways cheering, picked up the bottle. "Reckon I can use that drink now, Trace!"

"I'll send a squad to get the payroll," the major told Shay. "Some of the sheriff's men are on watch at your place, and I can trust them no more than I do any Shantytowners!"

Devlin drank, and replaced the bottle. "Coffin varnish!" he grunted, filling the dipper from the water pail. "That's the wryest rye—" He broke off.

A noisy commotion had burst out somewhere in the night. Shouts echoed over the river, followed by a flurry of gun reports, then the sharp and hurried notes of a bugle. Major Lowry sprang up.

"Trouble at the fort!" he exclaimed. "That's general alarm!"

Taking advantage of the distraction, Devlin made the alarm more general by flinging the dipper of water at the candles and diving at the door as they sputtered out. He crashed open the door and hurtled on through, stroking out his guns.

The man on the other side got banged twice, first by the door and then by Devlin who fell over him. The two watchers at the window spun around, guns tipped to shoot. One of them, a shorty, forgot he was standing on a box and took an inglorious tumble. Devlin flopped over, fired, and spilled the other. The major's pistol flared from the darkened room a shade too late. Devlin was up and gone.

Except for the horses, it seemed deserted at Shay's place. The door of the unlighted cabin was closed. The horses in the stables were making no uneasy noises. The curtains of the stagecoach, standing in the yard, were drawn down as they had been before.

Crouched low, Devlin skirted the corral and came up behind the cabin. He had no time to spend searching out the sheriff's watchers, and he decided that he might as well take it for granted that they were hiding in the stagecoach or the cabin, or both, where they could see the stables. The sky was clear and starlit, and a sliver of bright moon was up.

He waited, ears and eyes alert. The sounds at the fort had soon

ended, followed by the drumming of many troopers riding out on the gallop, and he guessed the major must have got back there by now. A leather thorough-brace creaked faintly. Somebody, some, restless bean brain, had shifted cautiously inside the curtained coach.

He heard then what he was listening for—a tiny rustle—and his gray eyes glimmered. Old Toll was coming up through the brush from the river, stalking him. Shay Calhoun, too, no doubt. It would be Shay who made that small noise, not the wary old squawman.

Devlin let another moment go by before he ripped three shots into the coach, one for each curtain on the side toward him, and that ended the silence. Two cursing men leaped from the coach and started for the cabin.

“Hey, you gone crazy in there?” one of them snarled. “Who the hell you shootin’ at?”

The cabin door scraped open. “Look out, you dumb ducks! Them shots came from—”

Four fast reports cracked from the brush, and the speaker sighed surprisedly and collapsed. One of the pair from the coach dropped without a sound. The other gasped an oath, turned, and began running. A red-shirted figure advancing up out of the brush paused, fired again, and came on. The fleeing man slowed, stiff-legged, and went down.

Old Toll padded into the yard, Shay hurrying up after him. The squawman dropped his emptied car-

bine, drew his knife, and prowled to the cabin. “Any more?” he rumbled. “That’s all, Shay, I reckon—an’ Devlin ain’t one of ’em! Huh!”

“Pretty fair shootin’, though!” said Devlin. He stood at the corner of the cabin, directly behind them both. “No, don’t turn, Trace, or I’ll sure ruin your hair ribbon! You, Calhoun, pass me his knife. Easy now! Don’t cut y’self. You’ll need your hands to drive tonight. *Bueno!* Trace will help you hitch up a team to the stage. I’ll look on, an’ correct any errors!”

“What the blazes you up to?” Old Toll exploded. “You think you can lift the payroll an’ the stage, both?”

“No,” said Devlin. “I figure to borrow ’em for a while. Get busy!”

VII

Fort Lamar was built in the form of a square, the barracks on one side, officers’ quarters and commissary on the other, stables and guardhouse in the rear. The square was closed by a high wall in front with double gates.

A sentry gave his challenge as the stagecoach rolled up. Devlin, lying flat on top under a blanket, a gun in one hand and the payroll satchel in the other, poked Shay in the ribs with the muzzle. As a reminder to behave, he also poked Old Toll, who rode beside Shay on the driver’s box.

Shay called out, “Okay, soldier, I’m bringing in the payroll.”

The stage passed on in. Devlin only hoped that getting out again

would be as simple. He raised his head when Shay drew up before the first door of the officers' quarters. "This the major's house? All right, get down, both o' you, an' step in ahead o' me. Seems mighty quiet round here. Don't knock. Just walk right in!"

They found Major Lowry sitting slumped at a table, his face buried in his hands. He raised his head and stared blindly at them. His haggard face was gray, and Old Toll rasped, "Tom, what's wrong? What was the ruckus over here?"

The major raised a trembling hand to his mustache, from old habit. "Band of Cheyennes," he said huskily. "They crept up. Must have known most of the command is out scouring for Devlin. Killed two sentries, wounded Captain Hedsford—and rode off with Ruth! When I got here, Hedsford had already started after them with every available man left. I—"

"Don't sound right to me!" Shay broke in, his face growing as gray as the major's. "No Cheyennes I know would raid an army post to kidnap a girl!"

"They'd only do it for horses an' guns," Old Toll concurred. "Injuns ain't crazy like whites! What else, Tom?"

The major fumbled a sheet of paper. "This came a few minutes ago. It was delivered by a man from the hotel. It's from Hudson." He spread it out and read, "'Dear Major: I am happy to report that the posse rescued Ruth from some In-

dians and brought her here to the hotel. She is safe in my rooms. . . .'"

Shay jerked. "That don't sound right, either!"

"Safe?" Old Toll blared. "There? I'd sooner Cheyennes had her! That hotel's a worse dive than mine, under all the fancy trimmin's! I know!"

The major nodded numbly and read on. "'By now, my dear major, I believe you have located the payroll. The Mexican did not have it when caught. Devlin evidently got it. He was seen in the Golden Wheel, tonight. So were you. The conclusion is obvious to me. I suggest that the payroll be brought to the hotel for safety. Your prisoner, the Mexican, should be turned over to the sheriff—also Devlin, if your esteemed father has not buried a knife in his back. I shall expect you to follow my suggestion within an hour and avoid serious misfortune. No armed escort is necessary.'"

The smug, malicious tone of the message reeked of the character of the man who had written it. Inflated with secret conceit, viciously cunning rather than clever, and utterly lacking all scruples, Brock Hudson could take pleasure in mockery at a man he had all but broken.

He had told a fact when he stated that he took no chances. There was nothing to incriminate him in the message. He would be careful that nothing incriminated him, whatever happened to Ruth, the payroll, the major. The blame would be borne by others—and Devlin had a definite

conviction that he and Rico were the elected ones.

Devlin thumped the satchel on the table and tapped it with the long barrel of his gun. "I came here to make a deal with you, major," he said gruffly. "The payroll for Rico's release an' a head start for us to get out o' the country. All you'd need do is announce a mistake's been made concernin' us. We didn't kill that colonel, anyhow. Calhoun can tell you. All we did was bury him!"

Shay nodded. "True. But the heck with that! Ruth—"

"Wait!" Devlin cut in. "Major, I'll raise the ante. That fat hombre wants me an' Rico, along with the payroll. All right, so you three take us in! We'll give him all he wants an' some extra! How 'bout it, Trace?"

The old outcast's eyes glamed murderously. "Gimme my knife! Give the nod, Tom! Let's go!"

The coach was unlucky, complained Don Ricardo, riding in it, and this trip into town was entirely insane. He admitted that it was somewhat better than being chained in a cell, but he protested that Devlin should have consulted him before committin' him to such a suicidal folly.

"I have not even been introduced to the young lady!" he added as an afterthought.

"Quit gripin', jailbird, or we'll toss you back in the *juzgado*!" growled Devlin. He knew that the Don was merely sounding off to cover

up his vast relief at getting out of the guardhouse. "The deal's on, an' you're nothin' but a chip in the ante! Think how happy it'll make Hudson to see us with our hands tied! Here's the hotel—get out!"

Holsters empty and their hands roped behind them, they climbed out awkwardly and paced up the porch steps. Old Toll, knife out, trod close behind with the major, who carried the satchel and rested a hand on the butt of his holstered pistol. Shay jumped down from the box and brought up the rear with Old Toll's short, heavy-caliber carbine. They trooped into the hotel.

Devlin's eyes froze, and the Don let out a slow, soft breath. The lobby held nearly a score of armed men, all standing at one end, silently watching them enter. They weren't grinning triumphantly. They hadn't the swagger of men witnessing surrender, but of men who had a task yet to do.

Old Toll steered the captive pair to the clerk's desk. "Where's the sheriff?" he asked. Nobody answered. He shrugged, and laid four six-shooters on the desk. "Checkin' in their guns!"

Hudson appeared, coming through from the adjoining bar, smiling, as neat and polite as ever. "Ah, good evening, major! Brought in both those scoundrels, I see! Fine, fine! And there's our Shantytown friend! How are you, Trace? And you, Calhoun? My, my, this is a pleasure! May I . . . er . . . take your bag, Major?"

He took it, but not in his hands.

For the major walked up to him and said, "You may!" And smashed him full in his round, pale face with it. And pulled his pistol and fired point-blank. The major did it calmly, gravely, a military precision in every move, as if he had often gone over it in his mind and knew exactly how it should be done.

Old Toll, also a precisionist in his way, executed two lightning strokes with his knife through ropes without shaving a wrist. "Turn your smoke loose, brothers—here we go!" he rumbled, and plunged at the startled mob of Hudson gunmen.

Devlin and the Don scooped their guns from the desk, and whirled, shooting. They stalked a roaring course through the shot-swept lobby together, not hurrying too much, a two-man trigger team coolly on the rampage. They were no more alike than a timber wolf and a tomcat, but each took care of his own side and worried none about the other. In trouble they were twins.

Shay ranged up, carbine blaring, and was first to reach the stairs. Devlin let the hammer down on a bald bouncer taking aim at Shay from the barroom; and the bouncer quit. That young stagecoacher was hell-on-wheels when he got going.

Old Toll had gone boogeroo, growling and snarling, slashing out with his knife. Ancient as he was, he bounded around like a mad goat. He was wrecking the nerves and health of the Hudson men, giving them more of a trigger task than wages could square.

Major Lowry still stood over Hudson. There was a great stain spreading down his blue coat, and he swayed, but he hardly appeared aware that he was hit. He was emptying his pistol in the fat, fallen body. He looked gravely happy.

Devlin and the Don backed together up the stairs, guns thudding. "The Breyere House all over again, but worse!" sighed the Don, cutting a shot at a sniper hunched behind a lobby chair. "Sometimes, amigo, I wonder if we are not a trifle too unruly!"

They gained the head of the stairs. Shay hadn't left much for them to do up there. The mask-faced youth and another flunky lay stretched in the hall where he had clubbed them out of his way. Shay came out of Hudson's rooms with Ruth, and Devlin called to him, "Get her out the back, pronto! Some o' those jiggers down there are slidin' out the windows!"

"And some of them took that payroll!" groaned the Don. "Let's get out and go after them! The major is down, and so is the old *bárbaro*! There is nothing more to—Listen! *Mil diablos!* Soldiers!"

They sped through to the rear. And sped back again. Cavalrymen were dismounting behind the hotel. Devlin and Rico got to the front stairs again and looked down, straight into the grim eyes of Captain Hedsford. The lobby was blue with uniforms.

Sadly, Don Ricardo took out a cigarette. "It will be a comfort," he muttered to Devlin, "to have your company in that damned *juzgado!*"

Captain Hedsford said tightly, "Wish we'd got back sooner, major. We've caught that pair—Devlin and de Risa! Most of the others are being held. Can I . . . can I do anything for you, sir?" He wasn't so immaculate now. His left arm hung in a sling. He was covered with dust and one of his shoulder straps was shot ragged.

The major was in a different plight. They had laid him on a couch. "Yes. I'd like you to help Toll Trace home."

"He's dead, sir."

"Oh." The major whispered something about happy hunting grounds, and smiled faintly. His wandering eyes met Devlin's and a look of recollection came into them. "Those two men, captain. Release them, please. All a mistake."

"But, major . . ."

"That's my order! I . . . think"—the major closed his eyes peacefully—"it's my . . . last. Take command."

The captain said, "Yes, sir." He saluted, and held the salute for a moment. After a while he turned slowly and paced out, motioning for Devlin and the Don to follow.

He said to them outside, "Those so-called Cheyenne raiders ran into a cavalry detachment from Kinsley in the dark, and got themselves fired on. One of them was killed. When I wiped off his face paint I found he was a man who worked for Hudson. The Kinsley detachment is coming on. Their mounts are about used up, and so are they. They're hunting for a

couple of outlaws. I'm not exactly inclined to obey the major's last order! Colonel Wallington—"

"Was shot," Devlin stated firmly, "by some fellers dressed like Cheyennes, as Calhoun can tell you!"

"I see. But I can't release you. Not while the payroll is still missing!"

Devlin shook his head. "It's not missing. Just in case things got too bad, I emptied the satchel an' crammed in a few o' those gov'ment books! The cash all there in the same mailsack, in the boot!" He grinned dryly at Don Ricardo. "Don't look so sorry, Rico! We still got our poker winnin's from . . . uh . . . the last place we played!"

Captain Hedsford stared at them both, stepped to the coach. He searched the boot and nodded. As he came back he glanced into the hotel, and flinched. Ruth was sobbing in Shay's arms.

"That young Calhoun," Devlin remarked, "is sure in line for a long contract! He'll be a big stage-line operator some day."

"What about me?" inquired the captain huskily.

"You'll be a general."

"And you?"

"Well, I don't see any promotion for us! Nor retirement pay!"

The captain managed a grin. "Good-by. And good luck."

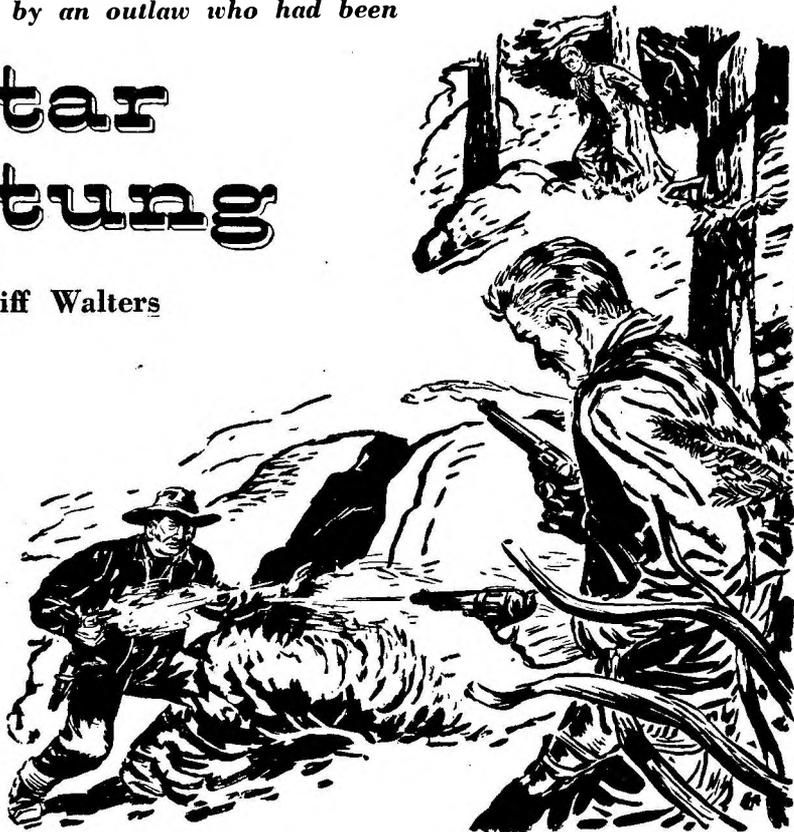
"Same to you, soldier," said Devlin. "Rico, get away from that coach! C'mon, we got to travel light an' long! Let's go!"

THE END

*Would Sheriff Fenton be tolled into
a trap by an outlaw who had been*

Star Stung

By **Cliff Walters**



A TALL, graying man with a star on his light-tanned buckskin vest entered the Lark Bend general store and nodded a greeting to the paunchy proprietor, Alf Gerard.

"Any word about Scar Briscoe yet, Jim?" Gerard asked.

"Nope," answered Sheriff Jim Fenton and he sounded as though he might be a little weary of making the same reply to a question put to him so

often this past week. "I'll have a pound of coffee, Alf, and . . ."

"I wish some of them state prison officials was in your boots!" Gerard mumbled darkly. "You round Scar Briscoe up, after he's come within an ace of killin' a deputy over in the next county. Then, after the coyote gets off with a life sentence—because he's got enough loot money cached to hire a fancy-priced lawyer—they

send him out on a convict road gang and let him get away!"

"They didn't 'let' him get away," Jim corrected, his voice as mild as his calm blue eyes. "And they want him back bad enough, or they wouldn't have hiked the reward on him up to a thousand dollars, dead or alive. Uh . . . better give me a cady of matches, too, Alf, and a can of them . . ."

"It sure puts *you* on a hot griddle," the paunchy merchant insisted. "Everybody knows Briscoe swore he'd get your scalp sooner or later. And them half-asleep convict herders give him the chance! Folks wonder how you can sleep at night, alone in your little house, knowin' that at any hour . . . any minute . . ."

"If I was spooky, Alf, I wouldn't be wearin' this star," Jim interrupted gently. "Now give me them matches and that coffee 'fore I throw you in jail for ignorin' a lawman's orders. I'm goin' back and pick out an ax handle, too, Alf; that is, if you've got any straighter'n them half-a-barrel hoops you had a month ago."

Jim was selecting a handle when a young stranger tied a sorrel saddle horse and a brown pack horse to the store hitching rack. The stranger, as tall and broad of shoulder as the sheriff, carried a pair of canvas panniers into the store and ordered some grub.

When each pannier was half full, the young man tossed a fifty dollar bill on the counter.

"Ain't you got nothin' smaller'n

that, mister?" asked Gerard. "I'm kind o' short on change this mornin'."

"That's the smallest I've got," was the reply.

"Well, I guess I can make it," the storekeeper said, and began counting out change.

Pocketing his money, the young man asked, "Can I leave this grub in here while I go over to the saloon for a few minutes?"

"Sure." Gerard replied, grinning. "And hoist a couple for me, stranger!"

As the screen door slammed, Jim Fenton moved leisurely toward the front and looked at the two horses tied to the rack.

"Find an ax handle, Jim?" asked the storekeeper.

"Not yet. I'm goin' over to the saloon."

"Go ahead," Gerard said. "Ask the stranger the same question you've been askin' every other passin' rider: Has he seen a dark-eyed gent, medium-tall, with a bullet brand on his left cheekbone?"

By the time Jim was halfway across the dusty street of the little range town cupped in the foothills, he could hear harsh words emanating from the open door of the saloon. By the time he walked into the place, fists were flying. The fists of the young stranger, and the fists of Beefy Walsh, the new barkeep.

"Fork over the rest of my change, you light-fingered coyote!" the stranger was yelling, and he smashed a hard blow to Walsh's face.

"Here's what *you* get!" Walsh bel-
lowed, and tried to land a retaliatory
blow which his customer neatly
ducked.

"Hey, you two!" Jim Fenton called.

Neither contestant paid any heed.
They were going at it hammer and
tongs. A hard smash caught Walsh
on the mouth and cost him two gold
teeth of which he was proud. An-
other vicious punch to his drooping
jaw floored him. He landed on a
broken glass which cut the back of
his thick neck.

"Stand back, you!" Jim commanded
the victor of the fray. And the
sheriff's old six-shooter had come out
of its holster.

"Don't pull your gun on this
stranger, Jim!" rumbled Bourbon
Brown, a chronic saloon loafer. "It's
time that somebody big enough to do
it was callin' Beefy Walsh on his
short-changin'!"

"Yeah," agreed one of Bourbon's
cronies. "It's time—"

"I give him a twenty and he offered
me change for a ten!" growled the
stranger. "He'll make things right
or I'll beat him to death!" His gray
eyes smoldered.

Lifting his stern gaze from the
floored barkeep who was groaning
as he rolled over on his side and
pressed a hand to his bleeding neck,
Jim said, "You're goin' to jail, Mister
Stranger! What *is* your name?"

"Ray Blake!" was the curt reply.
"But you're not goin' to jail me for
standin' up for my rights!"

"You bet you ain't!" yelled Bour-
bon Brown drunkenly.

"Ain't I?" Jim countered calmly.
"Start walkin' toward jail, Mr. Blake.
Maybe you'll cool off in a few days."

The younger man hesitated. It
looked for a moment as though he
might fling himself at the sheriff.
He didn't. Swearing at the injustice
to which he was being subjected, he
headed in the direction Jim indicated.
Bourbon Brown and his tipsy crony
voiced their displeasure loudly.

"Shut up, you thirsty crowbaits!"
Jim ordered.

"Sure—if the law says so," mum-
bled Brown. "But you'd do better,
Mr. Fenton, to be out huntin' Scar
Briscoe than mixin' up in saloon
brawls and takin' sides!"

Jim shot a hard look at the thick-
tongued speaker. Bourbon Brown
promptly shut up, and Jim marched
his sullen prisoner toward the little
log jail at the edge of town.

Jim locked his prisoner up, then
went to the store hitching rack and
led the prisoner's two horses over
to the livery stable.

Later when Jim took a tray of
dinner from the Maverick Café over
to the jail, the prisoner said, "You've
got to let me out o' here, sheriff. I've
got to get out!" His voice had a
pleading note in it.

"Why?" Jim asked flatly.

"'Cause I've got eight head of
white-face bulls penned up in a little
old log corral in a draw up on the
mountain slope, six-seven miles from
here. I was takin' 'em over the
mountain for my boss, who traded for

'em a while ago. I run out o' grub and—"

"And out of whiskey?" Jim cut in. "What cow outfit you ridin' for—over across the mountain."

"Scotty McNabb," was the answer. "The Diamond Y. Them bulls can't be left there in that out-o-the-way place to die of thirst. Let me pay a fine and—"

"You're stayin' here for a while," Jim interrupted. "Tell your bull story to somebody else. I'm not lettin' you bait me into turnin' you loose!" He started away.

"I tell you I'm *not* lyin'!" pleaded the prisoner. "Them bulls'll die if somebody don't get up there and turn 'em out o' that corral!"

"Where is this corral?" Jim demanded.

"I . . . I don't know how to tell you exactly. I'm a stranger on this range. I'd know how to get back to the place, though. Let me ride up there with you. Handcuff me to my saddle and keep the six-shooter you took off me if you want to, but let me get up there and turn them dumb animals out o' their death trap!"

Jim Fenton frowned, yet he seemed to be wavering a little under the prisoner's frantic persuasion. Finally he said, "Well, if you're *sure* you're not tryin' to pull some trick on me . . ."

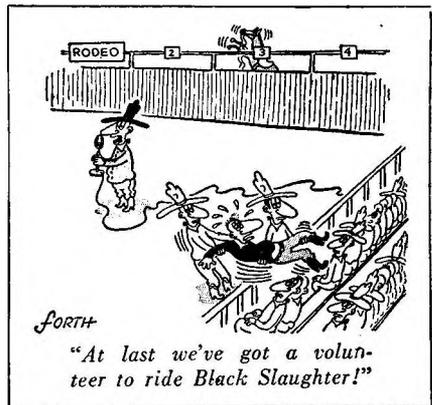
"I swear I'm not!"

"We'll start up there in an hour or so then," Jim said. "I'll fetch your sorrel saddle horse when I come back. We'll leave your pack horse in town, though, Mr. Blake."

Jim and his handcuffed prisoner rode out of town an hour later, while Bourbon Brown, glaring resentfully, watched from the saloon doorway. The two riders trailed up the spine of a high ridge leading toward the Campfire Mountains. Jim, astride his black, Ranger, the fastest horse, and the best mount in this part of the State, gazed down at a little valley off to the west of the ridge. He would buy that little ranch down there some day—if and when he had saved enough money. Maybe he'd have to serve another term as sheriff to do it, but he'd manage.

The rangy black and the prisoner's sorrel trailed on, the sorrel puffing a little harder than the black as the mountain slope steepened. Jim studied the trail. He read the tracks of two horses that had headed toward town earlier this morning.

The two riders crossed Bell Creek, and wound around the side of the mountain looming beyond. An hour went by. Two. Finally the prisoner



nodded his blond head toward a patch of jackpines in a shallow, rock-walled ravine a mile away.

"That's the place," he said.

When they were about a quarter of a mile below the mouth of that timbered ravine, Jim pulled Ranger to a halt.

"We'll stop here a minute, Blake," he announced, "and change hats and vests. You wear mine and I'll wear yours."

"Why?" the prisoner demanded sharply. "What's eatin' you?"

"Get off that horse," Jim ordered.

The younger man made no move to obey. His gray eyes shot a quick glance toward the ravine ahead. Jim reached up and grabbed him, jerking him down from his saddle.

"You wise—" The prisoner's handcuffed hands came down hard against Jim's face. Anger glinted in the lawman's blue eyes as he grabbed the handcuffs and, with surprising power, dragged his prisoner toward a nearby jackpine that stood alone.

A moment later, displaying still more power, and a tricky hold that left the fuming prisoner helpless, Jim anchored the man to the tree.

"What's eatin' you?" snarled the prisoner.

"What's eatin' you?" Jim countered. "You seem mighty upset all of a sudden. Now I'll borrow your big black hat and your sorrel horse and ride on alone—and turn them bulls out."

Jim rode slowly, warily for a few hundred yards. Then, behind him, Blake cut loose with a wild yell.

Jim reined the sorrel into a rocky cove and slid from the saddle. His blue gaze swept the mouth of the rugged ravine. The seconds ticked by. Suddenly he caught a movement near a jackpine. Then he sighted the squat figure of a man darting from behind that jackpine to the next one.

"The sheriff!" Blake yelled frantically. "He's in them rocks to your left!"

The squat man turned. He had a six-shooter in each hand. Now he glimpsed a black hat above a jutting rock. He blasted two quick shots at the headpiece. Lead pecked at the rock and whined off into space. Gun echoes rolled along the timbered ravine. And the sorrel horse from which Jim had dismounted snorted, wheeled on his hind feet and trotted back toward Jim's black horse.

The squat man who had fired two shots now ran toward a new and nearer position, a big split rock that had a growth of brush rooted in its silt-filled crevice. It was only a few feet away. Yet, as the squat man bounded across that few feet, the old black gun in Jim Fenton's hand roared—and a bullet bit through the running man's side.

He stumbled, caught his balance and whipped both guns up at Jim who had stepped into view.

Lead whizzed above Jim's head, lead screaming so close that it would have torn the nerves of most men. It didn't seem to bother Jim. His old black gun was poised with grim steadiness as he lanced another bullet at the squat man, just before the latter

gained the shelter of the brush-grown rock toward which he had sprung,

This time a bullet tore through the squat man's chest. And, as he swayed and desperately tried to lift the gun in his right hand for a shot, Jim put another leaden slug through his ribs.

Jim moved slowly. He looked down at the dead man who had an ugly scar on his cheek bone.

"Well, Mr. Briscoe," Jim mused, "it looks like you won't be goin' back to the pen, after all."

Jim walked back to his prisoner, who stood anchored to a jackpine, his face pale and his eyes staring.

"Now that that chore's taken care of, shall we go up to the old log corral and turn them white-face bulls loose, Mr. Blake?" Jim asked.

"You—killed Scar Briscoe?" blurted the younger man.

Jim nodded. "Sorry about your sidekick, Roy *Blaine*. It might've worked—the trap you and him set—if I'd been a little blinder."

"You know my name's Blaine, not Blake?"

"I know a horse thief by the name of Roy Blaine served a couple years in the pen and was turned loose shortly after Scar Briscoe went there. I heard, too, that a gent ridin' a sorrel horse with a white hind foot had been seen around a convict road camp the day before Briscoe escaped." Jim pointed to the sorrel standing near Ranger. "You rode him through some deep gumbo mud, Blaine, but the mud dried and the white foot was

beginnin' to show through 'fore we left town."

Roy Blaine trembled, said nothing.

"Besides, I knew the saloon brawl was a fake," Jim went on. "Walsh didn't short-change you. Or else you lied when you told the storekeeper this morning that you didn't have any bill smaller than a fifty. I noticed the biggest bill Gerard gave you in change was a ten. Where did you get that fifty?"

"It came out of Scar Briscoe's cache—over on the head of Granite Crick," Blaine faltered.

"He told you he'd split that cache with you if you could get him out o' that convict road camp?" Jim asked.

"Yeah. He cooked up the whole thing. I wish now . . ."

"Maybe you also wish you hadn't said you was workin' for the Diamond Y outfit—on the other side of the mountain," Jim said. "Old Scotty McNabb, who owns it, is one of the few cattle men in the State that raises native black Angus cattle. He doesn't have any Hereford bulls."

"Pretty smart, ain't you?" growled Blaine, lips twitching.

"Not very," Jim Fenton answered. "If I had been, maybe long ago I'd have saved enough to buy a certain little ranch we passed on the way up here. Now, though, I think I *can* buy it—with the thousand dollar bounty on Scar Briscoe. Sorry Briscoe put a bullet hole in your hat, Blaine. Sorry, too, that you'll have to walk back to jail leadin' the sorrel. But Briscoe can't walk. Shall we get goin'?"

THE END

BLIZZARD RIDER



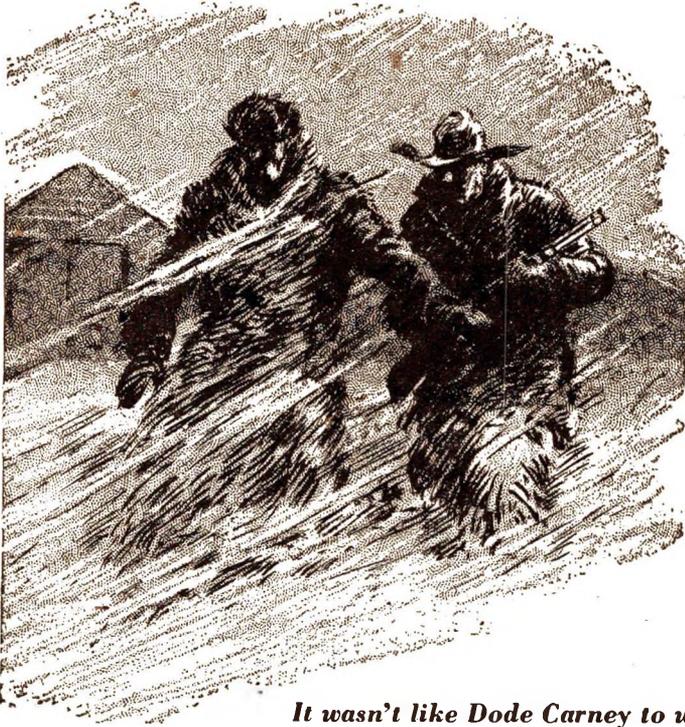
I

THE BLIZZARD caught Dode Carney out in the broad middle of nowhere. Leaving Trail City that morning at daybreak, he had headed east and a little north until he sighted Square Butte on the far skyline. He had been told to keep Square Butte right between the ears of his horse until he got

within about ten miles of it. That should fetch him to the roundup crossing on Greasewood Creek. When he crossed the creek he was to follow the roundup trail straight to the headquarters ranch of the Half Moon outfit.

"From there on, Carney, you're on your own."

"Yeah," Carney said tonelessly.



*It wasn't like Dode Carney to welsh on a debt
—even the debt he owed a crooked tinhorn
who had cold-decked him into a range war*

“But be almighty certain that you foller directions, Carney. If you git lost, you're apt to find yourself in the rustler country. And you can hope for no mercy from them cattle-rustlin' nesters.”

“Fair-weather directions,” Dode Carney told himself bitterly. Now all the landmarks had been blotted out by the storm.

The sky was overcast when he pulled out from Trail City, Wyoming.

A raw wind had come up and even before it began spitting hard dry snow, Carney's horse kept edging away and wanted to travel with his rump to the wind. The rider had to keep reining the big stout gelding back so as to keep that Square Butte between his horse's ears. The left side of Dode Carney's face felt stiff and numb where the raw wind whipped the snow against it. He kept sliding his left foot free and kicking

it against the stirrup because it felt frozen and numb as a chunk of wood. He had a mind to turn back.

But there was a stubborn streak in Dode Carney. The more he wanted to turn back to Trail City with its promise of a round-bellied warm stove and the companionship of men, and perhaps the chance to sit into a poker game, the more stubbornly he fought back the notion.

"You done played your string out in town, Carney," he told himself. "What money you didn't poker away, you spent acrost the mahogany. Keep a-driftin'. You hired out for a tough hand. Play your string out, win or lose. And you ain't got much to lose."

There was a grim, stubborn line to his blunt jaw. His puckered eyes were as gray as the winter sky, and as bleak.

About noon the storm had closed in and it had become a blizzard. No landmarks at all. Visibility was cut to a few hundred feet. Horse and rider moved inside that closed-in world. Dode tried for a while to keep his horse on its cross-wind course. Then he gave it up as a bad job and horse and rider drifted with the storm.

Dode Carney was dressed for winter weather. Angora chaps and one-buckle cowboy overshoes with the rubber heel deep to hold his high-heeled boots. Long tapaderos, sheepskin lined to cover the stirrups. He'd whacked off his buffalo coat to saddle length. He wore red flannel un-

derwear and a heavy blue flannel shirt and buckskin foxed California wool pants. He had a range dude's aversion to wearing a cap but his hat was tied down by a black silk muffler that covered his ears. Though he had shaved that morning before breakfast, the wiry black stubble was cropping through his weathered skin. He wore heavy buckskin gloves. It didn't seem as though a man could freeze to death, wearing all the clothes he had on him.

There was a quart bottle of whiskey in Dode's chaps pocket, the seal unbroken. It was a parting gift from High Collar George, owner of the Silver Dollar saloon and gambling house at Trail City. The saloonman's last name was George. His given name had been forgotten and replaced by the nickname "High Collar." A fancy dresser, a town sport and a ruthless gambler, he had ice water for blood in his veins.

He had taken Dode Carney, a stranger in a strange land, for all the folding money in the money belt the cowboy wore buckled on against his hide. He'd let Carney get into the Silver Dollar for a couple of thousand in I.O.U.'s. before he called him into his private office.

"You've rode your luck out, Carney, and I'm cuttin' you down. I got about two thousand dollars in I.O.U.'s. What do you aim to do about your gamblin' debts? You don't look like a welsher."

Dode Carney was a cowhand and a good one. Or he had been, until he had won the bronc riding and steer

roping at some Fourth of July contest. Then he'd quit punching cows for forty a month, to follow the rodeos.

Dode Carney stood there in High Collar George's office. In his polished shop-made high-heeled boots, he was of average height and built like a middleweight prize fighter. Blunt-featured, with wiry black hair, a sardonic grin on his wide mouth. His eyes looked out from under heavy black brows and they were cold and gray. And they looked into the shrewd, hard, opaque black eyes of High Collar George.

Carney knew that this professional gambler would never have let him get that deep in a gambling debt to the Silver Dollar unless he stood a gambler's chance of getting his money back with compound double interest. But Dode Carney was close runner-up on the list for world champion cowboy. And he had it figured that his rep as a rodeo cowboy contestant was what High Collar George had in mind when he let him get into debt. The gambler could win it all back in a single day, by paying Dode Carney's entrance fees.

"There's a rodeo at Fort Worth," said Dode. "At Tucson. San Antonio. Silver City, New Mexico. Take your choice. I'll win, hands down."

High Collar George had smiled thinly. His eyes were cold. "Texas, Arizona, New Mexico are all too far south. To hell with your rodeos. Forget your Wild West shows."

Dode knew what was coming, even before High Collar George spoke.

"I'm loanin' you to the Half Moon Cattle Company."

The gambler wasn't loaning Dode Carney to the Half Moon to ride the rough string or do any fancy roping. Dode knew that there was a range war brewing.

"Or perhaps you'd like to work out your gamblin' debt here," High Collar George suggested dryly. "Swampin' out. Cleanin' spittoons and sweepin' sawdust off the floor. You ain't good enough to bank a gamblin' game and there ain't a job for you tendin' bar. But I kin always use a swamper."

"Looks like I'm ketched in the bear trap, mister."

"You baited it. Don't reach for a cryin' towel."

"When do I start workin' for the Half Moon?" Dode Carney's voice sounded gritty.

"You pull out in the morning. Leave your private horse. I'll send your bed with the freight wagon that's takin' the winter's grub supply out to the Half Moon. Say nothin' to nobody. There's a big grain-fed brown geldin' in the livery barn with a blotched brand on his left shoulder. Saddle him up and drift yonderly at daybreak. I'll stake you to a .30-30 Winchester. The Half Moon furnishes cartridges free. You stand a chance of comin' out next spring rollin' in foldin' money. I'll tell you how to git there."

Dode Carney rode now with his

back to the blizzard, with High Collar George's parting gift of a town bottle in his chaps pocket. And with a bitterness eating his heart. No mention had been made concerning the sort of job he had been loaned out on a gambling debt to work at.

The Half Moon Cattle Company was one of the biggest cow outfits in Wyoming. And there was a war on against the little nester outfits that fringed around the Half Moon boundaries. Rumor had it that the Half Moon was hiring gun-slingers, that a fat bounty had been more or less secretly put on the hides of some of those nesters. High Collar George was sending Dode Carney out to the Half Moon headquarters ranch for a bounty hunter. He was loaning Dode Carney's services to the Half Moon for a killer. And amen to that.

II

Dode Carney was no killer. He would take his own part if he got crowded into it. Drunk or sober, he was never quarrelsome. There was no killer instinct in him. He could fight in any kind of a ruckus once he got into it, and no holds barred. If he had to use a gun, he would use it.

But to hire out as a killer! A cold-blooded murdering killer! To gun a man he had nothing against, for the bounty money on his hide. That was altogether something else and Dode had no stomach for it. And even as he left the cow town of Trail City behind him and, according to in-

structions, kept Square Butte between his horse's ears and had it in mind to reach the Half Moon headquarters ranch by dark, Dode Carney knew in his own heart he would not turn bounty hunter killer for any man, regardless of the gambler's debt he held sort of sacred. . . . There was bound to be some way out.

There was nothing, Dode told himself, like being lost in a blizzard on a strange range, to make a man take tally on his misspent life. But after those first bitter regrets which a man is bound to have when he checks back on his mistakes, there was nothing to make him feel sorry for himself in any part of it. No self-pity.

Dode Carney had ridden out a few blizzards in his life. A little frost bite would toughen his hide. It was good medicine for a man who'd been doing too much roundsiding in town. He was dressed warmly enough. He had as good a horse as he'd ever ridden to pack him.

The big brown gelding between his legs seemed to know where he was headed. He acted as though he was headed for home. Not just drifting, rump to the storm, because he had swung off to the south and Dode felt the wind driving the snow against the right side of his face. The brand on the big brown's shoulder had been blotched. Even if Dode had read the original brand beneath the blotch, it would probably have meant nothing to him because he'd never worked as a cowhand in Wyoming. And save for the well-known big brands in the country, he was ignorant. The little

nester irons didn't mean a thing to him.

A horse in a bad storm is apt to head for the place he was raised. Unless that place is straight into the storm. And the big brown gelding was acting as if he was headed for home.

It was getting dark rapidly and Dode peered through the snowstorm in hopes of sighting trees or a lot of heavy brush so that he could build a fire. He couldn't see more than a hundred feet and, so far as he could tell, it was all bald, rolling prairie country sparsely spotted with sagebrush or greasewood. Nary a tree in sight.

A man is apt to travel in circles in a blizzard. Apt to rein his horse thataway. Dode had heard tell how a man, even on a range he knew, could ride round in a circle and get nowhere.

His whole face was numb and stiff and no longer cold, even when he rubbed snow on it till the hide peeled. So he could not tell if the big brown gelding was holding to its course with the wind a couple of compass points on the right side of his face. The horse kept traveling on, getting a little more leg weary all the time. But he shuffled on at that running walk.

Dode Carney was taking no chances, running no risks of reining the horse and throwing him off the course. He leaned across the lowered neck and slid the split-ear headstall off and let the bit slide from the horse's mouth. Hanging the bridle

from his saddlehorn, he let the big brown gelding pick its own route.

"It's up to you, Brown Jug." His stiff lips flattened in a sort of grin. "Hop to it, pardner. I'm checking the bet to you."

Dode had named the horse "Brown Jug" after a pensioned-off rope horse he'd once owned.

The storm was closing in. The whole world was bunched up in this black snowstorm. Dode Carney was empty-bellied and cold, deep inside. He kept dozing off. He had a sack of tobacco and cigarette papers in his overcoat pocket but his hands were too cramped with cold to get a cigarette rolled. He managed to spill some of the flaky tobacco into the palm of his gloved hand and he kept rubbing tobacco into his eyes to sting the drowsiness out of them.

Dode did not know when the big brown gelding came to a halt. He could feel no change in the movement of the horse under him. It could have been the man knew when the horse stopped, or it might have been almost any length of time before he realized he was sitting a horse that had stopped in its tracks.

He reached out with a groping movement of his arm in the dark and his gloved hand struck something solid. It was the log wall of a building. And he knew that the big brown gelding had found home.

Dode Carney used all his numb strength to dismount. Then he fell sprawling headlong in the snow. He got up on all fours and crawled,

bracing himself against the logs, until he was able to stand.

The horse muzzled his face with a cold nose and Dode felt the animal's warm breath. He knew the horse's head was against the barn door. Then he found the latch and lifted it and the door opened. It was warmer in the barn. A horse nickered and the gelding nickered back.

There were loose matches in Dode's buffalo coat pocket. He snapped the match stems on half a dozen before he got one lit. There was a lantern hung from the ridge log within arm's reach and he managed to light it. He unsaddled the horse who had gone into a vacant stall and had its head buried in a mangerful of hay.

Then Dode stamped his feet and swung his arms until it felt as though millions of needles were shooting through to his hands and feet. He got the barn door shut against the storm. And then and not until then, did Dode Carney break the seal of the whiskey bottle. The neck of the bottle rattled against his teeth and he spilled some.

The whiskey was icy cold but as he gulped it down, it burned its way into his gullet and gradually its warm glow spread through his empty belly. And he stood there and let its warmth thaw out the chill in his blood. Alone in the warm barn with the barn door closed, Dode Carney nibbled at his bottle of whiskey—compliments, he told himself, of High Collar George—until the liquor thawed him out and the painful needling pains were

dulled, and he felt sort of giddy and light-headed.

"I'm gettin' drunk," Dode told himself. "I'm gittin' drunker'n seven hundred dollars."

He wanted to give the Brown Jug a shot of High Collar George's whiskey. He walked into the stall and put his arms around the horse's neck and told the big game-hearted brown gelding how much he loved him.

"No love any man ever had for the purtiest gal on earth, kin touch it. You're mine, big feller. You damned ol' Brown Jug . . ."

There were four other saddle horses in the barn and a work team in a double stall.

Two of those horses wore saddles, the cinches loosened. And, maudlin tipsy as he was, it struck Dode Carney as being strange that the horses were still saddled. It seemed as if a man who had put up for the night, would unsaddle his horse.

Dode was weaving a little on his cold, cramped legs which were unsteady from booze. He walked out of the stall and took a look at the two saddled horses. There was the Half Moon brand on each of those saddled horses. The Half Moon brand on the left shoulder stood out plain even on the winter coat.

That struck Dode, tipsy and half-frozen as he was, as being odd. This wasn't Half Moon range. Those two Half Moon cowhands were off their range. And their horses had been left saddled for a fast getaway. . . .

Dode might have heard some sound outside because he went rigid. There it was again. And this time he identified the sound. It was the muffled sound of a gunshot.

Dode Carney's saddle lay where he had pulled it off, the Winchester in its scabbard. He dragged the rig into the saddle room and threw his blanket over it.

He was half frozen and exhausted, and the whiskey, splashed in on a cold empty belly, made him sort of light-headed. What he did was partly done from instinct now. He sensed danger. He was a stranger on a strange range where there was a range war starting. Dode Carney told himself he was in a dangerous sort of tight. To get a tail holt on himself and play it close to his belly button.

The saddle and harness room was fairly large. A saddle was on one of the several large wooden staubs that fitted into auger holes in the logs. Horse collars and sets of work harness hung by the flames with the chain tugs hanging. There were several pack saddles, kyak boxes and old strips of canvas tarps and saddle blankets, and all the odds and ends thrown into a saddle room for a ketch-all.

Dode tipped the lever that lifted the lantern chimney and blew out the light. He stumbled a time or two in the dark as he made his way into the saddle room and pulled the door towards him, leaving a crack about six inches to sight through. Then he crouched there behind the partly

open door and slid his six-shooter from the pocket of his chaps. He set the bottle down carefully on the floor and waited.

He didn't have long to wait. Somebody shoved the barn door open and there was the sound of a flat-toned voice.

"Light the lantern, Fisher." Then the barn door slammed shut.

Somebody struck a match and in the match flare Dode Carney saw three men. Two of the men had six-shooters in their hands.

The third man had no gun. He was a grizzled man in his sixties. Tall and rawboned, a week's growth of graying red whiskers covered his jaw. A homely man with rugged, jutting features. From under shaggy eyebrows glinted a pair of hard green eyes. He looked for all the world like some dangerous animal trapped and at bay. But there was no fear in his eyes, no fright in his voice when he spoke. Only hate and contempt and loathing for the two men.

"That was damned cold-blooded downright murder. That kid was only a button. Sixteen-seventeen years old."

"Big enough to pack a gun, Fisher. And old enough to tell what he seen. Get that lantern lit and we'll have us a medicine talk."

The man they called Fisher levered the lantern chimney and held a match to the wick. It flared into light and the big man let out a little grunt when his bare hand touched the lantern chimney and found it hot.

The two armed men paid him no attention. Their guns covered him and they watched him narrowly in case he showed fight.

One was short and wiry and hatchet-faced, with beady pale eyes. He was the one who owned the toneless voice.

The other man was tall, slim and long-muscled. Mean-looking, with a mouth that was twisted in a snarl.

The two men with the guns were cautious about getting within arm's reach of the big rawboned Fisher. When the lantern was lit, they backed away and stood with their backs to the closed barn door.

"All you got to do, Fisher," spoke the toneless voice of the hatchet-faced man, "is sign over your outfit, lock, stock and barrel, to High Collar George. Then you ride away from it and quit the country."

"I'll see you in hell first, Dupee."

"Or you might use horse sense, Fisher," said the other man. "Throw in with the Half Moon."

"You white-livered coward, Ives! You lowdown polecat!"

III

Something clicked in Dode Carney's fogged brain. Clicked like the hammer of a six-shooter being thumbed back.

Dupee. He'd heard the name, Dupee. The man was a notorious killer. His gun had been for hire wherever there was a range war.

"You ain't givin' us much choice, Fisher," said Dupee.

"When Joe Ives fetched you to my place," said Fisher, "you didn't ask for any choice. Because a bounty hunter like you, Dupee, makes his own choice. There's a thousand dollars' bounty on me put on by the Half Moon and laid on the line in cash money that's waitin' for you when you git the job done. High Collar George will pay it over to you and no questions asked. You'd be lyin' if you claimed you wanted any choice, Dupee."

The tall man had backed away from Fisher, who stood there, spraddle-legged, with his big fists doubled.

"You had your chance to sell out to the Half Moon, Fisher. Just like I done. High Collar George whittled me down on price. But even rock-bottom price beats what Dupee will do to you. We've bin neighbors a long time, Ike. I shore hate to see this happen to you."

"It won't be nowheres near as bad as what's happened to you, Joe Ives. When you lost your guts and sold out to High Collar George and his Half Moon outfit, you sold all rights to your manhood. Even Dupee here hates your guts."

"Lead his horse out, Ives," said Dupee, "and throw his saddle on him. We'll take Fisher out in the blizzard and freeze him to death. Leave his frozen carcass out yonder and lead his horse back. There won't be a mark on him, unless the wolves and coyotes git to him. No bullet hole in him. We'll be back in plenty of time for early breakfast."

Both Dupee and Joe Ives were

dressed warmly. But Ike Fisher was bare-headed and wore no overcoat nor overshoes. He was dressed in an old pair of blanket-lined canvas overalls and a faded old blue flannel shirt.

Dode Carney had just come in out of the blizzard and he knew that big Ike Fisher wouldn't be able to last long. He'd be frozen to death in a few hours. It was a hellish thing to do to any man.

"You got too many friends, Fisher," said Dupee. "You got a wife and family livin' in Trail City. If you was to git shot, it would make a sort of martyr out of you. This way, you got ketched in the blizzard and froze to death."

Dupee's mouth was like a steel trap. There was a cunning look in his pale eyes.

"I got the bill of sale all drawed up and ready for you to sign on the dotted line. You got a wife and family to consider."

"I'm considerin' my missus and kids, Dupee. They'd want it no other way than I'm a-doin' it. This outfit's signed over to them when I'm murdered. And even High Collar George and his Half Moon don't dast rob a widow with kids. Let's quit augerin' about this murder and git it done with."

Dupee tightened his saddle cinch and led his horse out by its hackamore rope.

There was a scared look on Joe Ives' lean face when he led out Ike Fisher's horse. His eyes kept shift-

ing and darting looks all around the barn.

"There's a saddle horse in that stall that wasn't here when we put up our horses, Dupee." Ives spoke in a harsh whisper. "There's still snow left on the horse and it ain't had time to melt off."

Dupee was quick-witted, cunning. His hand was on the barn door latch. He was small enough to hide between his saddled horse and the door that he was slowly opening. He was cunning enough to know that if a man was hidden here in the barn, that man would be in the dark. And he was in the lantern light.

"You're spooky, Ives. Git Fisher's saddle and throw it on that horse. Rattle your hocks, man."

Joe Ives started into the saddle room, then froze in his boot tracks.

"Here's where I take chips in the game, men." Dode Carney's gun hammer clicked loudly as he thumbed it back. Then his voice cracked like a bullwhip. "Flatten out, Fisher!"

Ike Fisher dove at Joe Ives' legs like a football player making a low tackle. Ives went down with a heavy crash. His cocked gun was on a hair trigger and it exploded with a deafening roar. Then Fisher had the gun.

Dupee yanked the barn door open and his horse, spooked by the gun explosion, lunged out through the open door and into the storm-filled night. Dupee had hold of the saddlehorn. He swung across the saddle with a pony-express mount and was gone in the night.

The gun in Ike Fisher's hand

clubbed down across Joe Ives' skull and the man went limp. Then Fisher was up on his feet and had the barn door slammed shut.

Dode Carney rose from his crouch. He picked up the bottle. His gait was a little weaving as he stepped out of the harness room and into the lantern light with a bottle of whiskey in one hand and his six-shooter in the other. He lowered the gun hammer and grinned stiff-lipped at Ike Fisher.

Strangers to each other and this was their first meeting.

A slow grin spread across Fisher's homely, whiskered face as his green eyes stared at Dode Carney.

"Whoever you are, stranger," Ike Fisher spoke quietly, "I shore owe you somethin'."

"I'll settle for that big brown geldin' that fetched me here. He must be yourn or he wouldn't have brung me here in the blizzard."

Fisher cut a look at the horse and nodded.

"He was stole from me when he was two years old. He's all yourn." His green eyes puckered. "I'm Ike Fisher. Who are you?"

"Dode Carney."

"The world champion cowboy?"

"Almost. But not quite on top of the heap."

"Well, I'll be damned."

There was a dangerous glint in the hard green eyes of Ike Fisher as he looked at Dode Carney.

"Mebbyso you overheard enough of the talk to give you some idee what's bin goin' on, feller."

"You don't need to put it into sign language for me."

Joe Ives let out a groan. He lay there on the dirt floor of the barn, afraid to move. The fear of death in him showed naked and stark in his eyes.

Ike Fisher walked over to the man and stood looking down at him as he lay there. There was no mercy in Fisher's hard green eyes. He looked as though he wanted to kill Joe Ives with his bare hands. Then without a single word of profanity or blasphemy, he spoke.

It was not to Joe Ives that he was speaking. Nor to Dode Carney. He seemed to be summing up all that he had in the way of bitter contempt for the man. And he was voicing his thoughts aloud.

"Joe Ives never amounted to much. He was a sorry cowhand anywheres you put him. But to hear him tell it, he was a top hand. Ives liked to run a whizzer on any man he thought he could whip. He'd gun-whipped a few when they was too drunk to fight back. But even then he'd git in the first lick and he usually had a gun in his hand and bent the barrel of the gun across a man's skull. But when a man called Ives' bluff, he'd back down. He never had what a man uses for guts.

"Ives never forgot," Fisher went on. "And he never forgave a man who had called his bluff. He'd wait till the sign was right, then he'd git even. I can name half a dozen nester ranchers that never stole cattle. Till

they had to rustle cattle from the Half Moon to get back what the Half Moon was stealing from them. But Joe Ives wasn't among 'em. Ives was a cow thief. He stole that big brown gelding you rode here. I never had proof but I know that. And he was one nester who deserved the bad rep as a cow thief.

"When High Collar George got hold of the Half Moon," continued Fisher, "he played it foxy. High Collar George is no cowman and he's got sense enough to know it. He's a saloonman and a gambler and he stays in town. He's got him a pardner and a good un. Nate Quarels. Quarels runs the Half Moon.

"Nate Quarels is as good a cowman as ever hit Wyoming. Crooked as snake tracks. Tough as a boot. But he knows better than to try to double-cross High Collar George. They make a hard pair to beat. Together they got the world cheated. But take either one of 'em alone and he couldn't last long. They got Dupee hired as a killer. And he earns his bounty money Cold-blooded as a snake and he's got cunnin'. Mostly Dupee plays it lone-handed. Sometimes he uses Joe Ives."

Ike Fisher was shivering and his face was pinched with cold. He reached down and yanked off Joe Ives' fur cap and pulled it on. Then he told the man to shed his coonskin coat. He leaned over and unfastened the buckskin loops from the frogs and yanked off the coonskin coat and put it on. Fear showed in Ives' eyes.

It was stamped on his face. He sat there on the dirt floor, shivering.

Ike Fisher's eyes were slivers. He stared down at Joe Ives. Then he hit him savagely in the face.

"That's for Warren Jones." Then he yanked the man up onto his feet and told him to unsaddle his Half Moon horse. He led his own horse back into its stall.

"Warren Jones," Ike told Dode, "is the grandson of one of my neighbors. A sixteen-year-old kid. He was out rawhidin' for any cattle that needed feedin'. A shore good boy. He saw the blizzard comin' and he made it here to my place. He aimed to stay here until the storm let up. Young Warren was here when Dupee and Joe Ives come to kill me. I begged 'em to let the kid alone. But they murdered him, Dupee shot him. Then he told Joe Ives to put a bullet into the kid. So's there'd be the two of them in on that cold-blooded damned murder. Ives shot him."

"Dupee made me do it, Ike!" Joe Ives was shivering with cold and fear. "High Collar George and Nate Quarels has enough on me to send me to the pen for cattle rustlin'. Dupee didn't know where your place was located and Quarels made me go along to pilot him here. Warren Jones was dead anyhow. Dupee would have killed me if I hadn't put a bullet into the kid. What . . . what do you aim to do with me, Ike?"

"Shut up, Ives. Take that lantern and head for the cabin."

Dode Carney was more sober now than drunk. He held the bottle in

his hand. There was a mirthless, hard-lipped grin on his face.

"I got into gamblin' debt to High Collar George," he said. "He sent me to work for the Half Moon. I got a letter to Nate Quarels in my pocket. High Collar George give me this bottle of booze, to take along. I'm welshin' on that gamblin' debt. And his whiskey don't taste good."

Dode tipped the bottle and the whiskey gurgled out onto the dirt floor of the barn. Ike Fisher watched until the bottle was emptied, then he said, "Take the lantern, Ives."

Fisher opened the barn door and Joe Ives, hatless and in his shirt sleeves, stumbled out into the black blizzard, gripping the handle of the lighted lantern.

Fisher let Dode out and then closed the door. There was a heavy steel bolt on the inside. The rancher slid the long bar from the outside and pulled out the wagon rod that fastened it.

"That locks the barn door. Anybody'd have to chop the door down to git in from the outside."

Fisher had Joe Ives' six-shooter. Dode had his gun and he carried his saddle gun.

IV

Outside it was pitch dark and bitter cold. The storm whirled around them. Dode followed behind Ike Fisher. It was about a hundred yards to the ranchhouse. A light showed in the house, blurred and dim, hardly visible in the storm.

Ahead of them went Joe Ives, carrying the lantern. They could barely make him out and then he was only a blurred form moving with the lantern.

Ives was about halfway to the ranchhouse. From somewhere nearby in the black blizzard came the sharp crack of a .30-30 saddle carbine. Ives let out a hoarse scream. They saw him stumble and go down, sprawled, and the harsh scream was muffled in the snow as he toppled over on his face. The lantern light guttered as it hit the snow and then the light went out.

Ike Fisher and Dode Carney stood crouched in the black storm. Their guns gripped in their hands, they stayed there for quite a while. Eyes straining to peer into the black storm, they listened intently to see if they heard any sound.

"Dupee might have rode off"—Ike Fisher's voice was so low-pitched Dode could scarcely hear him—"or he might be waitin' for us in the cabin. But there's no use in us spendin' the night out here. You foller close behind."

They moved cautiously now. Ike Fisher stopped once and Dode Carney all but stumbled over him where he squatted in the darkness. Fisher had come up on Joe Ives where he lay sprawled in the snow.

"Deader'n 'hell." Ike said, his voice a whisper. "I'm goin' around to the side door. The light's in the kitchen and we don't want to lamp-light ourselves when we go in. You better hang onto my coat."

Dode Carney was shivering and numb from cold. He had to clamp his jaws to keep his teeth from rattling. He gripped the thick fur of the coonskin coat and when Fisher moved on, Dode was pulled along. It seemed to take hours before they stood there in the lea of the log cabin. Ike Fisher opened the door and the air was warm inside. Together they went in and the rancher closed the door quietly. He slid the bolt. He whispered for Dode to stay there, and then went outside.

He was gone a long time. Dode crouched there against the wall, shivering and trying to stay quiet. Then finally Ike Fisher came back in, carrying a lighted lantern. He had a gun in his hand.

"We got the house to ourselves. Looks like Dupee pulled out. Come on into the kitchen and thaw out. I'll make some fresh coffee."

Dode was so numb and stiff the rancher had to help him navigate. There was a fire in the kitchen stove and Fisher put Dode in a big kitchen armchair and helped him unbuckle his overshoes and shed his overcoat.

There was something just inside the kitchen door covered over with a blanket. From under the edge of the blanket a lot of blood stained the scrubbed pine-board floor.

"Warren Jones." Fisher's voice was gritty. "I shore dread breakin' the news to his Grandpaw and sister. They're all that's left. Warren's maw died. And Dupee killed his daddy. Grandpaw Jones is crippled and al-

most blind from cataracts coverin' both eyes. But ol' Grandpaw wouldn't leave his ranch. Wouldn't sell. Couldn't be scared off. And Warren and his sister Toby wouldn't leave the old man there alone. I wanted 'em to go to Trail City when I moved my wife and kids to town. Tried to talk Grandpaw Jones into movin' in here with me. But the old man's ornery stubborn and the young uns wouldn't quit him. This damned range war is shore hell on old folks and wimmin and the young uns."

The doors were bolted and the heavy window blinds pulled down. Outside, the blizzard moaned and whined and piled the drifting snow against the log walls.

Ike Fisher talked quietly. And all the time both men kept listening. Perhaps Dupee was out there on the prowl. He might take a notion to start shooting through the curtained windows.

Dupee might try to get into the barn. Turn out what horses were stabled there and set them afoot. But the rancher explained how that heavy steel bar held the barn door locked on the inside. Dupee would be wasting his time and strength out in the black storm trying to get that barn door opened.

"He might hole up in the cattle shed or the blacksmith shop to wait for daybreak. But if I sight that killer it will be acrost gun sights and I won't shoot to miss. I doubt if he'll let daybreak ketch him hangin' around here."

Fisher made the coffee strong and

black and by the time it warmed Dode Carney's innards, the rancher had a bait of hot grub set on the kitchen table.

Dode took High Collar George's letter from his pocket and tossed it on the table and told Fisher to open it.

"That gamblin' man don't say much," Fisher said when he read it. "He plays 'em close to his belly." He read it aloud:

The bearer of this note is Dode Carney. I hold his I.O.U.'s for two thousand dollars. See to it that he works it out. But don't trust him anywheres. If he gets out of line you know what to do about it.

That was all. It was not signed and it was addressed to no one. Ike Fisher put it back in the envelope and handed it to Dode Carney. Dode lit his cigarette and touched the match to the letter. They watched it burn.

"You ain't the first man," Ike said, "to git poked into that Half Moon outfit. A few of 'em stayed on and Nate Quarels put 'em to rustlin' cattle. If Dupee sized 'em up for a man he could use, he took 'em, like he taken Joe Ives. But I never knowed a one of 'em to git cut in on Dupee's bounty money. When the killin' was done and over with, the man's dead carcass was left behind. Dupee ain't splittin' anything with any man."

"But if I was to try to quit the country?" asked Dode Carney.

"Dupee would overtake you and he'd kill you where he found you."

"That's how High Collar George

put it. But not into those words. He don't like welshers."

"The dealers at the Silver Dollar are crooked. But even if a sucker is smart enough to ketch 'em dealin' from a cold deck, and he's damn fool enough to holler, it's that sucker's hard luck. There's more than one man planted there in the Trail City boothill to prove it."

"I'm welshin' on that gamblin' debt."

"Yeah. I know, I'll do my damndest to slip you out o' the country. Directly the storm's over I'll pass you along and no questions asked. You'll git a relay of fast horses and your trail covered."

"I'm not quittin' the country, Ike."

"Don't be a damned fool. This ain't your war."

"Mebby not."

"You're too young to die, when it ain't none of your quarrel, Dode."

"High Collar George cold-decked me into this range war. I'm welshin' on a gamblin' debt. But I'm not runnin' away from it. I'm playin' my string out, Ike."

"If that's the way you gotta have it." Ike did not argue it further.

The two men stayed awake the rest of the night, drinking coffee and smoking as they tried to figure out their plans. They carried the dead body of young Warren Jones into a bedroom and laid it on Ike's bed, covering it with a blanket.

Never at any time did they forget that Dupee was somewhere outside in the blizzard. They tried to figure

out what the bounty hunter would do.

Ike Fisher was of the opinion that Dupee had mistaken Joe Ives for him and had killed him. Ike had taken Ives' fur cap and coonskin coat. In the black blizzard all that Dupee could see was a bareheaded man in his shirt and without a coat or overcoat walking ahead with the lantern. Dupee had murdered Joe Ives by mistake.

"Dupee don't know who you are, Dode. He never sighted you. You was only a voice there in the saddle room. He'd figure it was some nester calling his hand. Dupee figures it was me he killed. There's a bounty on my hide and Dupee had come to collect it." Ike grinned mirthlessly.

"That's why I slipped outside and fetched Joe Ives' carcass inside," he continued. "It was when we got in the house and I left you in the dark. I made sure Dupee wasn't in the house. Then I slipped out another door and I fetched Ives in before Dupee got a chance to make certain the man he killed wasn't me. Joe Ives' carcass is in the storeroom. You want a look at him?"

Dode said he had no hankerin' to look at a dead Joe Ives.

They kept waiting the rest of the night, half-expecting some trick Dupee might try. Neither man got close to the windows. Though the window panes were covered with a heavy coating of frost and the blinds pulled, a man standing close to a window might cast a shadow to shoot at.

They ate breakfast before daylight.

Then when the first streak of dawn showed in the stormy blackness, Dode told Ike to stay inside.

"Remember, Ike, you're dead." Dode argued the rancher down. "I'll prow around. You're dead. And Joe Ives is my prisoner. I'm one of your nester neighbors that happened to show up last night."

Dode was gone a long time. When Ike let him in there was a half-grin on his frost-bitten face. The storm was slacking up with the sunrise.

"I found sign. Dupee spent most of the night in the cattle shed. He shoveled hay from the haystack and piled it inside. He fed his horse and then he crawled deep into the haypile. He must pack a watch. When it read about an hour before daybreak, Dupee pulled out, because his horse tracks was partly snowed over. He wasn't risking being shot at when he rode away at daybreak. Dupee has pulled out. I'll gamble on that. And I'm willin' to gamble further that Dupee, once he gits his bearin's in the storm, will head for Trail City. Furthermore, he'll collect the bounty money on the hide of Ike Fisher, and High Collar George will pay it on the line. Dupee probably figures to hell with Joe Ives and whatever becomes of him."

"Sounds reasonable. Dupee would leave his only friend in a tight—if ever he had a friend—and save his own hide," said Ike Fisher.

"Just the same," said Dode. "You stay inside. Don't show yourself. I'll water the horses and feed 'em. You say it's about five miles to the

Jones place. I'll borrow your fresh horse and take the bad news to Grandpaw Jones and the Warren kid's sister. You stay inside. Don't show yourself. Lay low till I git back."

Dode Carney had plenty of time to think things out on his way to the Jones ranch. The storm was slacking up. There was no wind and the snow that was falling came down in large soft flakes. Dode kept turning over in his mind the parting words of Ike Fisher.

"When you take the bad news to Grandpaw Jones and Toby, you just keep on goin'. Grandpaw will tell you how to git to the next ranch. Change horses and keep driftin'. Don't never come back. We're into it because we can't pull out. But it ain't your war. You keep driftin' on till you're outa the country. I'm shore obliged. But I hope this is good-by for keeps." Ike held out his hand.

"I'll be comin' back, Ike. I left my Brown Jug horse here." Dode ignored the proffered handshake.

Dode rode up to the barn at the Jones place. The door was open. He was about to dismount when a creaky voice snarled a sharp warning.

"Just set that geldin' and keep your hands up. You don't ketch me in the same bear trap twice. Look him over, Toby, but stand to one side. I got a sawed-off shotgun in my hands, both barrels loaded with buckshot. Stand clear, Toby, so's you

won't git hit by ary buckshot that scatters."

Dode sat his horse, his gloved hands lifted high. The girl Toby came out of the barn. She had a six-shooter in her hand. She looked like a boy in her work clothes. Her pants were shoved in high four-buckle overshoes. Her coat was made from a scarlet Hudson's Bay blanket. A muskrat fur cap with the ear flaps dangling sat at an angle on her head, her tawny hair cut off to shoulder length. She had a short nose and a firm chin, and her lips were a tight line. From under almost black eyebrows her eyes were narrowed. They were dark brown, with amber lights. Slim as a boy, she stood no higher than five feet. But Dode Carney was willing to bet she knew how to handle that gun and wouldn't hesitate to use it.

"I spent the night with Ike Fisher," Dode explained. "He wrote a note and told me to give it to you. So's your Grandpaw wouldn't shoot me. It'll tell you who I am."

"I know who you are. I saw you win the bronc riding and get first money in the steer roping at Cheyenne. You're Dode Carney." But Toby's eyes didn't lose their hard look of suspicion. Her gun was still pointed at him. "A stranger showed up at daybreak. When I opened the door he had a gun in his hand. He told me he'd kill me if Grandpaw didn't lay down his shotgun. He made me feed him and stake him to a fresh horse. He asked the way to Trail City and rode off on one of our

horses. He left a leg-weary Half Moon horse here. After he'd gone, Grandpaw said he answered the description of Dupee. He rode off, headed for town, like he was in a hurry. Now what fetches Dode Carney here?"

"I got bad news, lady. Your brother Warren was killed by Dupee. I'm sorry to break the news to you thisaway."

"Dupee beat you to it." Toby's voice sounded brittle. But there were no tears in her eyes. "He was plenty brutal about it. He gave Grandpaw and me short notice to quit the country. He said that he'd killed Ike Fisher. That it didn't pay to be stubborn when the Half Moon gave orders. You claim you have a letter from Ike Fisher. Reach for it slow and toss it to me with your left hand."

"Ike was alive when he wrote this not an hour ago," Dode told her. "Dupee killed Joe Ives by mistake. He mistook Joe Ives for Ike Fisher last night. I'm on your side. Tell your Grandpaw not to get quick triggered."

He reached slowly into his overcoat pocket and got the letter Ike had written and tossed it in the snow at the girl's feet.

Toby read the note quickly. Ike Fisher had worded it so that there could be no shadow of doubt that he had penciled the note.

"It's all right, Grandpaw. Put away your scatter gun. Dode Carney, Ike says, will do to take along. And from what Ike says, he's r'arin' to go.

Ike says to pass Dode Carney along if I can talk him into quitting the country."

"You'd be wastin' breath, ma'am." Dode spoke quietly.

"I'm not wasting breath. Step down and put up your horse. There's a pot of coffee on the stove. I was harnessing a team. I'm taking the bobsled to fetch Warren home. I'm not talking you out of it."

"I'll go back with you," said Dode Carney.

A white-bearded, white-maned man limped out of the barn. He had a sawed-off double-barreled shotgun cradled in the crook of his left arm.

"You better go slow, Toby, takin' in a stranger, thataway." He peered from half-blind eyes. "I trust no stranger."

"Ike says he's all right." Toby's voice was toneless. "We're short-handed for killers."

Dode Carney dismounted and stood close to Toby Jones. She was looking straight into his eyes. And behind the hardness of her eyes there lay deep, bitter grief like a dark shadow.

"Yes," Dode told her, "you need a killer."

Their eyes met and held as though there was a pact made between them. A grim pact.

"Warren and I were at Cheyenne together," Toby told him. "There was a picture of you in the paper. I brought the paper back and my brother Warren talked about you all the way home. You were a sort of big hero to him. He'd be proud to know that Dode Carney. . . ."

"I'll not let your brother down, Toby."

V

That was what they called the Big March Blizzard. It slacked up for a day and then turned into one of the worst blizzards in Wyoming history. It lasted for a couple of days and nights and then broke. The gray sky cleared but the sun had no warmth in it as it glared down on the piled snowdrifts. The drifts covered piled-up dead carcasses of big native steers in the cut coulees, and the cattle outfits took a terrific loss. Horses, humped rumps to the wind and close-bunched, died in the storm.

Men on horseback were caught in the storm, and those men and their horses died and were buried in the deep high snowdrifts until the warm Chinook wind cut those drifts and melted them into snow water. Then coulees ran deep. A man on horseback had to ride the ridges until the swollen creeks went down. Meanwhile, the wolves and coyotes snarled and ripped at the frozen meat, the dead carcasses of cattle and horses and men, scattering their bones.

There was no way of telling how many men perished in the Big March Blizzard. No way of tallying them, when the Chinook wind laid bare the Wyoming prairie country.

"Did a man named Dode Carney," High Collar George asked the Half Moon ramrod, Nate Quarels, when he finally came to town, "ever show up out at the ranch?"

"Dode Carney, the rodeo cowboy? Nope. He never showed up."

"He pulled out the morning the blizzard hit. You sure he didn't show up at the headquarters ranch? He could have used another name. He could have passed himself off as a grubline rider lost in the blizzard and laid over until the storm ended and then pulled out. You're damned certain, Quarels?"

"I know Dode Carney by sight. I'd know him by any name if he ever showed up. Dode Carney never showed up then or at any time at the ranch."

Nate Quarels was a tall, slim man with long, whipcord muscles. He had a lean, hard face, coarse black hair and a pair of pale eyes that were neither blue or gray. His drooping mustache hid the cruel hard corners of his thin-lipped mouth.

The ramrod of the Half Moon never drank except when he came to town. He allowed no booze or gambling on the ranch. But when he came to town Nate Quarels got drunk. He was sullen and treacherous, a good man to let alone when he was drinking.

He was in High Collar George's office at the Silver Dollar Saloon. The door was closed. The saloonman and gambler leaned back in a swivel chair behind his roll-topped desk. And there was a ledger open on the desk.

Dupee sat in a barroom chair tilted back against the wall. He had been there when Nate Quarels came in.

Quarels leaned with his back against the closed door. He'd had a

few drinks at the bar before he came into the office—the beginning of his town jag. His cold pale eyes watched Dupee and High Collar George.

"Why?" Quarels broke the short silence that was beginning to grow tense.

"Mebbyso Dode Carney got caught in the blizzard and died somewhere between town and the ranch. He's into my gambling debt for two thousand dollars. But I'm not crossing Carney's name off the ledger as dead. Not yet."

High Collar George dipped his pen in a bottle of red ink. He wrote opposite the name of Dode Carney the one word: "Welsher."

He laid the pen down. Then he turned to Dupee and his opaque black eyes were flinty.

"That checks the bet to you, Dupee."

"How much bounty?" asked Dupee.

"A thousand dollars."

"Dode Carney is a top hand around the rodeos." The killer's voice was as cold as his eyes. "Double that."

"One thousand dollars. Take it or leave it, Dupee."

Dupee said nothing. His hatchet face showed no expression. But his eyes were wicked. His cheek bones wore the black scars of deep frostbite. The lobes of both ears were frozen off. He walked now with a halting stiff gait. All the toes of both feet had been so badly frozen they had to be amputated. But he'd taken good care of his hands. Those

killer's hands were his tools of trade. He'd nursed them through the blizzard.

"I'll tap your safe for a few thousand," said Quarels. "Then I'll git back to my drinkin'."

"I'll tell you when to go, Quarels. And it might be you'll have to cut your drunk short. I paid the bounty on Ike Fisher's hide to Dupee when he came back to town half-frozen."

Quarels looked hard at the killer. Under his drooping black mustache his lips flattened in a mirthless grin. Then the Half Moon ramrod turned his grin on High Collar George.

"They say," Quarels told the gambler, "there's a sucker born every minute."

"Meanin'?" High Collar George's voice was flat-toned.

"I passed Ike Fisher's wife on the street. She was dressed in black. But she's still here in Trail City. Ike Fisher's widdier would take her kids and go back to her home folks in New Mexico, if Ike was dead."

"I killed Ike Fisher," Dupee made it a flat statement.

"I got that word to you, Quarels," said High Collar George. "I told you to send a couple of men to take over the Ike Fisher place."

"Yeah. I got word, all right. I sent two of the toughest hands you farmed out to me. And they come back feelin' sorry fer themselves. Seems like they rode up within gun range. Then somebody busted each of their gun arms with a bullet. Each of them tough hands was shot through

the right shoulder. I patched 'em up and told 'em to drift yonderly. I wasn't runnin' no hospital. Looks like if Dupee told the truth, then Ike Fisher has shore come back to life. When the Ike Fisher place is vacant, I'll send a couple more tough hands over. I'm too short-handed as it is to git any more men crippled."

"I killed Ike Fisher." Dupee's eyes narrowed.

"A wolfer always has to fetch in the pelt to collect the bounty." Quarels spoke to High Collar George but his eyes watched Dupee.

Dupee wore two guns in double-rigged shoulder holsters that strapped neatly as a pair of shoulder braces under his coat. He was quick and deadly as chain lightning.

Quarels had his hand on his gun. The few drinks he had taken were beginning to work.

High Collar George needed both men. He had purposely, covertly been ribbing the enmity between Nate Quarels and Dupee. Little things, that increased their hatred for each other. There was a reason for it. High Collar George stayed here in town. Quarels stayed out at the Half Moon Ranch. Dupee worked out from the headquarters ranch most of the time. If Quarels and Dupee got on too friendly terms they might throw in together and double-cross High Collar George.

"Take it easy, you two," High Collar George said quietly. "We're all in a tight. And there's the old saying that thieves had better hang

together or the law will hang them separately. There's something gone damned wrong. There's a lot of ugly talk here in town.

"Dupee heard it while he was laid up in the hospital havin' his toes trimmed off. He was scared even to take the pills the doc gave him to kill the pain, for fear he'd get doped and groggy if somebody walked in on him to kill him. So he lay there and toughed it out and he kept his guns strapped on over his hospital night-shirt. Dupee's never lied to me. I never hesitated handing him over any bounty money. When he said he'd killed Ike Fisher, I laid it on the line and no questions asked. Dupee don't talk. He never told how he got the job done. He was damn near dead when I lifted him out of his saddle and got him in the hospital. But I asked no questions. I'm asking no questions now. That's that. But I've got ways of listening to what goes on around town. And the talk is getting ugly and dangerous. You've just come in from the Half Moon Ranch, Quarels. What news did you fetch to town?"

• "We've bin wiped out," said Quarels grimly. "That March blizzard wiped us out o' the cattle business."

"I've got the money to buy cattle to restock the range. What news?" High Collar George pulled open a desk drawer. He set a bottle of whiskey and three shot glasses on the desk.

Nate Quarels walked over, poured a drink and tossed it down. Then

a second drink. He poured a third drink and held the glass in his hand.

"You want news?" His voice had an ugly sound. "I fetched no news. We're out o' the cow business. And, one by one or in pairs, my tough cowhand outfit has rode over the hill and far away and quit the country. Like as not, when I git back, there won't be a man left. I'm lucky if the Chink cook is still on the job. I've heard talk and I'll pass it on for what it's worth. There's a black-whiskered stranger ridin' the ridges. He stops a Half Moon cowhand and there's a gun in his hand. He gives that man his last warnin' to quit the Half Moon and leave the country. If he runs into that man again, he'll kill him. He must tell it shore scary, because that man quits the country. That's all. If you want news, ask Dupee. Ask him two questions. Ask him what become of Joe Ives. Ask him what happened to the Warren Jones kid. I'm checkin' the bet to Dupee."

Dupee's frost-scarred face never changed expression. He sat tense as a coiled rattler about to strike. His eyes were murderous.

High Collar George questioned the kiffer with his eyes. But he did not put it into words.

There was a silence in the small office and it was tense and strained.

Then the door opened slowly. As it started to open, each of the three men had a gun in his hand. The guns pointed at the opening door.

Toby Jones shoved the door open. She stood there, framed in the door-

way. It was night and there was a big Rochester lamp hung over the desk on a bracket, shedding its light on the three men. Another lamp shone in the short corridor where the card rooms were. And Toby Jones stood there with the hall light behind her, looking small and trim in her tailored black suit. She wore a pair of black shop-made boots. A new black Stetson hat was pulled at a slight tilt on her short tawny hair. There was a paleness that showed through her tanned skin. Her brown eyes looked almost black in the lamp-light.

Toby looked at their drawn guns. Guns that lowered and were shoved back in their holsters.

There was a faint smile of contempt on her mouth as she watched them put away their guns.

High Collar George made a motion to quit his chair. Nate Quarels started to take off his hat. Dupee sat there tense but he kept his hand on the butt of his gun.

"I'm giving you three murderers short notice"—Toby's brittle voice sounded like breaking glass—"to quit the country!"

High Collar George sat back in his chair. Nate Quarels forgot to take off his hat. Dupee sat there eying her like he'd size up a man he was about to kill.

Toby's eyes cut across them like a quirt. She looked at Dupee.

"You'd kill a woman. You'd kill me. Like you murdered my young brother Warren—a sixteen-year-old kid who was unarmed. You and Joe

Ives had taken the boy's gun away and then you killed him, murdered him in cold blood there in Ike Fisher's cabin. You were coming back to kill my Grandpaw, a blind cripple. You would have murdered us both. And High Collar George would have paid you well to do the job. You would kill me right now. Except for this!"

Then High Collar George and Quarels saw the gun in the girl's black-gloved hand. It was a little double-barreled .44 derringer and it was pointed straight at Dupee.

"If you feel lucky, Dupee, fill your hand!"

The killer's hand came slowly away from his gun.

"The stagecoach pulls out in fifteen minutes," Toby said. "You three murderers had better be on it. That's your final warning."

Toby was backing out the door slowly, Dupee watching her through slitted eyes. Nate Quarels had the glass of whiskey in his hand. He lifted it. Then with a deft flip, he threw the raw whiskey into Dupee's eyes. Dupee snarled as the whiskey blinded him. But he did not draw either gun.

"Thanks, Quarels." Toby Jones pulled the door shut on them.

VI

Nate Quarels stood over Dupee with his six-shooter in his hand while he watched the bounty hunter take a clean white handkerchief and wipe the whiskey from his eyes.

"You'd've shot that girl." Quarels

was breathing heavily. "You shot a sixteen-year-old kid after you and Joe Ives taken his gun. You were going back to murder a blind cripple. What kind of a lowdown thing are you, Dupee? Gimme one reason why I shouldn't make you swaller this gun barrel, then pull the trigger. Just one reason why I shouldn't kill you right now. Talk fast!"

Sweat beaded Quarels' face. He wasn't bluffing. He meant to kill Dupee. He stood over the gunman who still sat in his chair, wiping his eyes.

Dupee showed no fear. Blinking his eyes that were inflamed and blood-shot from the raw whiskey, he looked past Nate Quarels' big bulk and at High Collar George.

"The boss man," said Dupee flatly, "will give you your one reason." His lipless mouth twisted in a sardonic smile.

"Put up your gun, Quarels," said High Collar George quietly, "or I'll bust your spine with a bullet. I'm in a tight. I need both of you gents. But if I have to make a choice of one or the other, I'll take Dupee along and wipe you out if that's the only way. You better put up that gun, Quarels."

There was a short-barreled belly gun in High Collar George's hand. Quarels saw it out of the corner of his eye.

"Trail City," said High Collar George, "is planning on giving a necktie party. With the three of us the guests of honor. Dishonor is the better word. They're holding a lynch-

ing bee. And the whole cow country has been invited. The invitations went out by word of mouth. So if we don't want all three of us hung, we'd better sluff our personal quarrels and work together. Because to-night's the night."

Quarels stepped back against the wall and away from Dupee. He lowered his gun.

"Toby Jones wasn't bluffing," the gambler went on in that deadly quiet tone of voice. "She gave us that short warning. Perhaps she don't like hangings. Dupee would have been a damned fool to kill the girl. But you'd be a bigger fool, Quarels, if you figured you could quit us now and go over to the other side. You're in this too deep, tarred with the same brush. You're only fooling yourself when you figure you've kept your hands clean. Just because you haven't done any actual killing. You and I, Quarels, are as guilty as hell and we know it. We paid Dupee to do the actual gun work."

"We didn't hire him to kill Warren Jones."

"Check it off as an accident. One of those things."

"He'd have killed Toby Jones."

"Yeah. She told you 'Thanks, Quarels', and give you a smile. You're stuck on the gal. Have bin for a long time. You're willin' to double-cross us, in hopes you'd stand a chance. A snowball in hell would stand a better chance. Once upon a time you went to Toby's father with a deal. You told her father you'd cross me up and throw in with the nesters if

Toby would marry you. He run you off his ranch. So you put a bounty on his head and Dupee did the killin'.

"I've had my pick of any girl in Trail City," High Collar George went on. "Because Toby Jones shied off, I wanted her. I tried to make a deal with her. Call the nester war off, if she'd marry me. She laughed in my face. Yeah, Dupee would have killed Toby Jones. Because she's the only woman he ever wanted, mebbly. But he's never had the chance to tell her so. And he knows she'd sooner kill herself than let him touch her with his murderin' hands. So Dupee figures if he can't have her, no man can. And he'd kill her. The only woman he ever wanted."

A slow dark flush crept across Dupee's frost-scarred face. High Collar George had probed deep.

"Drop it," Dupee said flatly.

He rolled and lit a thin cigarette. Briefly he told them why he figured Warren Jones had to be killed, giving his cold-blooded reason. It was according to his lights as a professional killer.

"You claim Ike Fisher's alive. I told High Collar George what I thought was the truth. But I'm beginning to doubt it. I shot the man at night and in a heavy blizzard. Later when I went back to my kill, it was gone. The man was bareheaded and in his shirt sleeves. Perhaps Ike Fisher took Joe Ives' fur cap and coonskin coat there at the barn. Whoever was hid in the barn that spoiled the plan I had to send Ike Fisher out

to freeze to death, was with Ike Fisher when he left the barn and headed for the cabin. If they sent Joe Ives ahead with the lantern, then I killed Ives, mistaking him for Ike Fisher. Any man can make a mistake. And to hell with it. How are we goin' to beat that hangman's rope?"

"Shoot our way out." High Collar George squatted in front of the big steel safe. He worked the combination and the safe door swung open.

The gambler took out three new money belts. The money pockets bulged. He said he'd had a hunch this would happen.

There sounded a cautious rapping on the door. The three men inside drew their guns.

"Come in!" High Collar George called out flatly.

The door opened and the bartender shoved his head inside. He spoke in a whiskey-husk voice.

"We got company. Ike Fisher. And a black-whiskered man that says he's Dode Carney, the Welsher. Dode Carney says he hasn't a dollar to his name but he's lookin' for you. He says he wants to pay off that tinhorn gamblin' debt. Ike Fisher said to tell you that if you had Nate Quarels and the bounty-hunter killer Dupee in the office, to fetch 'em along. Fisher claims he's got a personal debt of his own to settle. And Dode Carney said to tell Dupee he's pickin' up somethin' for young Warren Jones."

The bartender pulled his head back quickly and shut the door.

"Buckle these on." High Collar George tossed each of them a money belt and buckled on the other. "We're goin' out the back door."

Then he left the safe open. The open ledger lay on his desk. He turned the lamp wick down and put out the light.

Dupee opened the door and Quarels was the first man to step out. He blew out the lighted lamp in the corridor. High Collar George was the last man to leave the office. He closed the door softly.

Quarels had picked up the bottle of whiskey. The three men crouched there in the dark. The gurgle in the bottle Quarels tipped up was the only sound in the darkness. When Quarels put the bottle down on the floor it was empty.

They made no sound as they moved down the short dark hallway and past the closed doors of the card rooms.

High Collar George was in the lead. He kept the back door locked and he had the key. He turned the key in the lock and the door opened without a sound on well-oiled hinges.

Something moved outside in the dark. Then the click-click of gun hammers. High Collar George slammed the door shut and jumped back. The roar of the double-barreled shotgun outside was loud. The door was riddled by a double charge of buckshot.

VII

Dode Carney and Ike Fisher stood at the bar. Each had a boot heel

hooked on the brass rail. There was a bar bottle and two shot glasses in front of them. Dode was admiring his heavy growth of wiry black beard in the bar mirror.

"First time I ever seen the brush in a lookin' glass, Ike. I'm a tough-lookin' hard-case customer. No wonder I spooked the Half Moon renegades off. But the dang black brush itches."

"No worse," said Fisher, "than these strawberry-roan whiskers itch."

But they were watching in the mirror on the back bar for any sign of life in the corridor. It was shut off from the saloon by a door. Both men were waiting for that door to open.

The saloon had emptied when Ike Fisher and Dode Carney came in. The tinhorn dealers, the bouncers, even the bleary-eyed swamper had left. And when the bartender had delivered his message he came into the saloon untying the strings that fastened his bar apron and he tossed it across the bar and reached for his hat and coat.

"The three of 'em was in there," he said in his whiskey-husk voice and went out through the swinging half doors.

Men lined the bars at the half dozen saloons along the street. Armed men. Waiting. At the saloon across the street three brand-new hemp ropes, each of them with a hangman's knot, lay coiled neatly on the bar.

Dode Carney and Ike Fisher stood there in silence, listening. Their

glasses were filled but the drinks were untouched.

The loud explosion of Grandpaw Jones' double-barreled sawed-off shotgun sounded loud as a cannon blast out back. But inside the saloon it sounded dulled and muffled.

"That's Grandpaw." • Ike Fisher grinned. "Herdin' 'em back."

Dode Carney and Ike Fisher stepped away from the bar. They moved to the door that led into the corridor.

Each card room had a window. Quarels tried to open the door of one card room. From inside sounded the blast of a .45 and its bullet ripped through the door. Quarels jumped back, cursing.

"We got a game in here!" called a harsh voice through the gun echoes.

Dupee and High Collar George each stood back and jangled the door knobs on two other card rooms. With the same result. A bullet ripped through each door.

"We got a game goin' in here! Private!"

There was no way out. The three men had to go out through the saloon. High Collar George was sweating. He wore a high, starched white collar that gave him his nickname and the high collar was choking him. He ripped his red silk necktie and tore the high collar off. The bets were all down and this was the showdown. Time to turn the cards face up. And High Collar George didn't have the guts.

"Earn your money, Dupee," he

muttered. "Open that door to the saloon."

Dupee had a gun in each hand. His laugh was short, brittle. "I got both hands filled."

They were all three close to the door that led into the saloon. Nate Quarels had drunk a quart of whiskey and it was taking effect.

"You yellow bellies!" His voice lifted to a wild shout. He kicked the door loose from its flimsy lock and it was flung open.

Quarels' eyes were bloodshot slivers. He stepped out into what looked like an empty saloon, with a drunken swagger and a cocked six-shooter in his hand.

"I need a drink to take the taste of them two cowards out o' my mouth."

Nate Quarels headed for the bar bottle. Crouched in the short hallway, High Collar George and Dupee watched him. Quarels reached the bar. He gripped its edge in one big hand and vaulted over it, landing crouched on the other side. His eyes cut a swift look in either direction. He'd expected to find Ike Fisher and Dode Carney crouched behind the bar.

"By hell, and no bartender!" Quarels straightened up, slowly. From behind the bar he could see Ike Fisher and Dode Carney flattened against the wall on either side of the doorway. Perhaps the booze gave him guts and cunning. Or maybe sober he would have played it the same way. Because he stood up to his full six-foot bulk, and put his hat,

that had fallen off, back on his sweat-matted head. He set out shot glasses and banged the bar with the bar bottle.

"Drinks on the house!" Quarels bellowed. "Come out of your coyote hole and prove that you're men." He laid his six-shooter on the bar and tipped the bottle.

Back along the short hallway, the card-room doors opened. A voice called harshly from the dark hallway.

"We got you lamplighted. You own the Silver Dollar, High Collar George. Take your bounty hunter and buy him a drink. Or we'll smoke you out!"

High Collar George looked naked without his high-choked white collar as he walked into the saloon, his belly gun in his hand. His face was clammy with cold sweat and his eyes watched the swinging half doors. If he could get through those doors alive, he stood a gambling chance.

Dupee came after him, a gun in each hand, hobbling stiffly on his maimed feet. He was watching the front door. Watching the drunken Quarels behind the bar.

Quarels, his teeth bared in a snarling grin, had a bottle in his hand and his gun was laid on the bar. He reached back with one foot and found the door and shut it, closing off the short hallway. High Collar George was halfway across the saloon and traveling crabwise towards the front end of the bar near the door.

"Hold on, Dupee!" Ike Fisher's voice was sharp as a pistol crack.

Dupee whirled. Whirled awk-

wardly on his maimed, clumsy toeless feet. They threw him off balance and he staggered a little as both guns spewed flame.

Fisher's gun spat fire a split-second sooner. His .45 slug struck Dupee in the face along the side of his jaw and tore a gaping hole where it mushroomed out. Dupee's head jerked and Fisher sent his next bullet into the man's chest. His third shot was a gut shot.

Dode Carney fired as High Collar George whirled around. The bullet hit the gambler in the belly. High Collar George doubled up but he kept shooting. And Dode, crouched against the wall, was shooting at the man as fast as he could thumb back his gun hammer and pull the trigger. Dode Carney did not miss a shot. His second bullet tore through the gambler's ribs and into his heart. High Collar George's legs buckled and he went down, dead before he hit the ground.

Dupee went over backwards and landed on his back in a twisted heap.

Dode Carney and Ike Fisher saw their men go down. They turned their guns on Nate Quarels.

Quarels stood there, head and shoulders and belly above the bar. His six-shooter lay on the bar. He had to steady himself with his left hand. His gun hand held the bar bottle. He was sweating and his big white teeth showed in a snarling grin.

"My old man"—Quarels' voice was thick—"told me a long time ago I'd hang by my neck. Go ahead. Bring on your damned rope."

Ike Fisher took his six-shooter off the bar and shoved it into the waistband of his Levi overalls.

Toby Jones led her Grandpaw in from the short hallway and behind them came half a dozen men. Others came crowding in through the swinging half doors.

"I ain't too high-chinned prideful to take a drink in the Silver Dollar, now that High Collar George don't own it no more." Grandpaw Jones peered through half-blind eyes at the man behind the bar. "By the hell, if it ain't you, Quarels."

Quarels let go the bar to take off his hat. He slammed it on the bar.

"A saloon ain't no place for a lady." He looked at Toby. "You send her out o' here, Grandpaw. Fu'thermore, no lady wants to watch a hangin'." He jerked at the buckle of the money belt High Collar George had given him. Yanking it loose, he tossed it on the bar.

"Buy yourself a red outfit, Miss Toby. Dress, hat, slippers. It's my favor-ite color."

A snap on one of the money pouches had come unfastened. Some iron washers and white paper cut the size of banknotes showed.

Quarels stared, blinking his eyes. Then he ripped open the other pouches. All held iron washers and worthless paper.

"Why, the damned tinhorn!" Quarels said. "Take a look at what Dupee got for a payoff."

There was nothing but the same worthless trash in Dupee's money belt when they examined it.

But when they unbuckled the money belt from around High Collar George's middle it was crammed with neat rolls of hundred dollar bills.

Toby Jones stayed there with her Grandpaw while they held a sort of kangaroo court on Nate Quarels.

"The best you can prove against Nate Quarels is cattle rustling. He saved my life. Dupee would have shot me if Quarels hadn't thrown that glass of whiskey in his eyes," argued Toby. "Turn Nate Quarels loose and tell him to quit the country. If he comes back, hang him."

Dode Carney and Ike Fisher said Quarels could have spoiled their game. But he'd baited the gun trap. They, too, voted to turn him loose and run him out of the country. To be killed on sight if ever he came back.

Nate Quarels was drunk. Drunker, perhaps than he'd ever been in his life. He stood on his feet, spread-legged, weaving.

"I'm shore obliged to you, Miss Toby. And to you, Dode Carney and Ike Fisher. But I reckon you'd better hang me." He stood there, looking straight into Grandpaw Jones' half-blind eyes. "Toby Jones' father run me off. You was there, Grandpaw. I got drunk when I got back to town. When Dupee showed up, I put a thousand dollar bounty on Toby Jones' father. Dupee killed him and claimed the bounty. You'd better hang me, and the sooner the quicker."

"Toby's father," creaked Grandpaw Jones, "was bushwhacked by

Dupee before you ever reached town. High Collar George paid him the bounty money. If you paid Dupee, you paid him for a job he'd already done. Turn Nate Quarels loose and to hell and gone out o' the country!"

They turned Quarels loose at sunrise and ordered him to quit the country and never return. Nate Quarels rode away with his bottle down the outlaw trail. To be killed later in a drunken ruckus with the outlaws in the Hole-in-the-Wall.

High Collar George's money was split among the nesters he'd robbed. Two thousand dollars of it went to Dode Carney. Trail City gave the Half Moon outfit to Dode Carney and Toby for a wedding present.

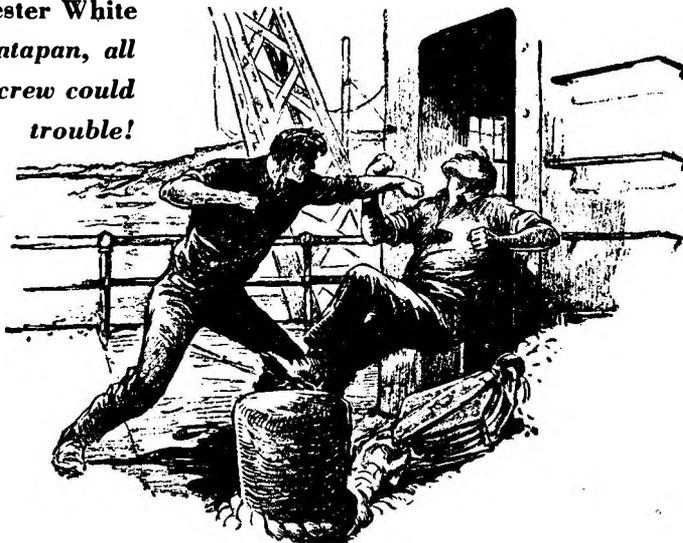
Grandpaw Jones gave the bride away and Ike Fisher was best man. The crowd gathered at the Silver Dollar after the wedding, and the drinks were free. The saloon had been given to the bartender.

When Dode Carney quit the rodeo circuit they all said they'd lost a world champion cowboy. But Dode had no regrets. He had his Half Moon outfit and his wife Toby. And whenever he needed advice about handling his cow outfit or his wife, he told Ike Fisher, all he had to do was to go to old Grandpaw Jones and get more crochety, cranky advice than any man needed.

"I'll hang and rattle," creaked old Grandpaw Jones, "till I'm a great-grandpaw. Then I'll hand my outfit over to the young un."

THE END

With the Sylvester White lost on the Ratapan, all that dredging crew could dig up was trouble!



Caffrey Cracks Down

By Giff Cheshire

THERE were enough churning stomachs and splitting heads in the Army Engineers' panel truck that morning to run the big dredge anchored down on Potter's Rapids, if the energy could have been harnessed. The driver made his morning pick-up swing through the straggling streets of Potter's Landing, where the crew was basing at present, then pulled down through the trailer camp, where the married ones dwelt. For once nobody talked much as the panel growled and bounced over the rutted dirt road to the river, except to argue over who was going to open the many gates.

The crew was climbing out on the sandy beach, where the tender *Paloma*

was tied up, when it dawned on Sam Caffrey that something was peculiarly wrong with the picture out on the water. Sam had been on the party, which had started, as so many did, by somebody dropping in on somebody else, then the pair dropping in on yet another. Sam couldn't remember at whose place the snowball had finally halted. He wasn't even trying, for the smallest thought rasped through his brain like a sandstorm.

He was quite certain that something was out of place, there on the river, and he stared across the broad, swift reach of the rapids.

Then somebody exploded. "Holy smokes! Where's the *White*?"

Sam understood then. It was the big dredge that was out of place; in fact, it was completely out of the picture.

Pete Loman, a deckhand, moaned. "Government property, too! Or was it expendable?"

"Well, we sure can't dredge without a dredge," said Dunc Sand, the other deckhand. He stretched out on the beach and closed his eyes.

All the physical malaise went out of big Sam, to be replaced by mental anguish. If it was a joke, it was a lousy one. There were no sloughs and little slack water on this stretch of the upper Ratapan. At night they merely warped the big dipper dredge in on her shore-breast line, keeping the other end and the head and stern lines taut on their big anchors. It was sufficient to hold the *Sylvester White* and a trainload of elephants, besides.

But this time it had undoubtedly failed to hold the *White*, for she simply wasn't there, any more.

A cream-colored convertible was coming out the long road from town. Matt Quist provided his own transportation to and from work, which was strange when you considered there were government vehicles and gasoline available. But not so strange when you considered Matt Quist. His father-in-law was the area engineer, which simply put Matt on a higher social level.

Al Lamark, the engineman, looked at Sam in deep concern. "They'll sure peel my hide off."

The boat operator had gone aboard the launch and was warming her twin engines. Sam prodded Dunc Sand awake with his toe and waved the crew aboard the *Paloma*. The *White* might be miles downstream by now, but she was sure going to have to run for it to outdistance him. Matt Quist parked his car and swung aboard at the last moment, everyone hoping he would miss his jump and fall in the river.

The *Paloma* swung downstream, below the rapids. There was a bend a quarter mile below, and as they rounded it a concerted shout went up. Broadside against a towhead, another quarter mile farther, was the *Sylvester White*, hung up like a breachy old milk cow with her hind legs caught in the fence. Homer Tell goosed the *Paloma*, and she swung to ahead of the stray craft.

Her relieved crew went up like pirates boarding a galley. A hasty inspection showed Sam that the dredge had suffered no damage, her flat-bottomed hull having evaded rocks, and hung up finally on sand. They put the tender behind her and made the sheepish run back to the rapids, and by midmorning were dredging industriously again.

Not still then did the powwow take place up in the deckhouse over the engine room. It was strictly between Sam and Al Lamark, the crusty old engineman. Each harbored worry enough for a dozen men their size.

Al looked at Sam thoughtfully. "Sam, there's only one answer to this. That doggoned Quist."

Sam nodded reluctantly, unable to deny it. "I wonder how many of the others think so."

"Well, they all saw him go back after his lunch box, last night," said Al. "We couldn't see from the *Paloma* but I'd bet my shirt he slacked off the shore line. That let the *White* drift out into the current after we left, and she pulled her anchors. Great Scott, what if she'd bashed her hull or capsized or wound up a hundred miles below? Damn his hide, even if he didn't have anything to do with it! The other boys'd keep their mouths shut. But not Matt Quist! You'll have to report it, and we'll have everybody up here from the D. E. to the district office messenger!"

It was worse than that, though Sam was the only one aboard who knew it—with the probable exception of Matt Quist. The last time, Eustace Swift, who filled the exalted offices of Area Engineer and Quist's daddy-in-law, was out, he had given Sam what amounted to a final warning.

"You run the sloppiest outfit in the district, Caffrey!" Swift had said in icy tones. "Letting your men swim during hours! They drink enough coffee on duty to float the rig! And I'm aware of a number of cases where you've covered up serious infractions of the rules for them."

Big Sam had made the only reply that counted with him, but which seemed to weigh little with Swift. "There ain't an outfit in the district gets in more effective work, either.

As to swimming, it gets a hundred ten in the shade up here, and we ain't planted any trees in the Ratapan yet. As to coffee, they like it, and so do I: As to reporting them when they make a misstep, I don't work that way. If it's bad enough, I lick the guy and we shake hands and do some more dredging." Swift had been transferred to the area only six months before, or he wouldn't have to be told these things.

"I won't have a sloppy outfit in my area!" Swift had stormed.

It was the term "sloppy" that lit Sam's fuse. No rig in the Redburn District sported brighter paint than the *Sylvester White*, stowed her gear more shipshape nor scooped more gravel out of the river channel. There wasn't a man on the dredge but would have taken warning from the twin lights burning in Sam's eyes, but Swift didn't. Sam was too smart to give the man a clear-cut case of insubordination, though. He merely stood there unmoved, and this stolidity only disturbed Swift the more.

"Caffrey!" Swift rapped out, "you'll crack down!"

Now, looking into the angry, anxious face of his engineman, Sam said, "Al, we're only guessing that Quist loosened that shore line. I'm not saying he didn't. I saw him go back into the engine room for his lunch box last night when we pulled ashore, claiming he'd forgot it. He could've done it. And our being on a bust in town last night won't make it look so good. But I still don't

think we've got grounds to accuse that boy."

Al went to the hot plate, where a coffeepot was kept bubbling. He filled a cracked cup. "If they say that line loosened out of carelessness, they'll blame it on me. And I'm not taking that—not when I'm going to retire in three years, eight months and twenty-one days." He gulped the coffee, set the cup down with a bang and left.

Big Sam Caffrey used the sudden privacy to emit a deep sigh. Maybe she was a loose ship, but there wasn't a man aboard who wasn't tops at his job and did it with a little to boot. Sam had seen too many operations reports from other outfits not to know how the *White* stood in performance. She might be a loose ship, but she was an efficient and happy one and he had been proud to be her master. This humiliating business of her slipping her anchors gave him a sick feeling in his middle.

Eustace Swift couldn't get him fired. Sam's record was too good for that. Yet in the rigidly ruled government service there were many devices to be practiced by cunning men. Swift could use the incident to get him transferred to some distasteful, dead-end job of which the big Redburn District had its share. Sam had no slightest doubt that Eustace Swift would do exactly that.

He considered the possibility of covering the accident up. Except for Matt Quist, it could be done easily, for he doubted that anybody shoreside had seen the *White* in her

disgraceful position. He knew that none of the river craft plying the Ratapan had passed since quitting time the day before.

A thought that Sam did not like kept crowding into his mind. He had accepted Matt Quist aboard with reluctance after Eustace Swift had taken over the upper Ratapan area, disliking favoritism as well as the spy system by which men of Swift's ilk worked. He would have preferred to promote somebody from the deck when his assistant super was given command of a new dredge in another district. But such matters were handled in the district office, and who had showed up to take the job but Swift's own son-in-law?

Now Sam was seeing a beautiful chance to rig Matt Quist, while saving his own and Al Lamark's necks. The crew would swear to a man that it had seen young Matt Quist go back into the engine room, the night before. With a little encouragement, they'd make it look blacker than the inside of a stove pipe for Quist.

Sam was convinced that Quist had tried to job him—and had probably succeeded. Everyone knew the lad's burning ambition. Should the command of this little dipper dredge be vacated summarily by transfer, Quist would get it as long as his father-in-law held the strings in his hands.

So why not get the jump and make a report flatly accusing Matt Quist? Maybe he owed that to old Al Lamark, who was winding up a lifetime of government service. Yet the thought

was distasteful to Sam. He had never worked that way. When he had trouble on his rig he settled it himself. When he got a promotion or pay increase, it was because he had long since earned it. And when he made the mistakes every man makes in the course of time, he owned up to it, took his lacing and tried to avoid a repetition. He sort of wanted to keep things that way.

Young Quist came up the ladder, then, and Sam studied him as head and shoulders came into view. At first Sam had felt a little sorry for Matt. Though Sam had lost none of his taste for hearty living, middle age had tempered him with human insight. Matt was touchy about his relationship to Eustace Swift, not exactly proud of the sharp-nosed supervisor, and he seemed to feel the isolation this gave him in relation to the crew. He was capable and, so far, decent enough in his actions. The boy, Sam felt, was handicapped by having to be better than he really was to justify the extra pull he possessed.

Sally Swift Quist, who lived with Matt in a hot, cramped trailer in Potter's Landing while this job was in progress, was a nice girl who must have had a wonderful mother. Matt had been a deckhand on the old hopper, *General Tarbell*, when they were married and since then he had come up fast. And he was well aware that it outlawed him among his fellows.

Sam thought that this hurt Matt and kept that strong, sullen look in

his eye. The boys would never think of dropping in on Matt and Sally, of an evening, as they did with other married couples.

Quist came in, poured himself a cup of coffee and kept silent. Sam knew the boy wanted to introduce the subject of the accident and was waiting for Sam to do it. Sam didn't, instead looking out the small windows running along the four sides of the deckhouse. The dredge was working like a clock, as if remorseful over its escapade, the big Whirley seated in the bow of the scowl-like hull stretching its steel neck and duck-diving and snapping its huge jaws into the shoal. It emerged streaming and swung to disgorge into the disposal barge.

A strange thought rose in Sam. He could break this boy or be broken by him. He could ruin Matt Quist and settle with Eustace Swift, with interest. He speculated on this thought for a moment, then swiveled on the drafting stool that was his perch. He yawned tiredly.

"She's a long life and a hard one, Matt. Guess old Al Lamark's lucky. Three-four years more and he'll retire. He's got ten acres of filberts he's going to get rich off of. I've seen 'em. He's spent the last eighteen years planning and building up his place. Ever have him tell you the actual number of days he's got to wait yet?"

Matt looked at Sam in a sharp, close way. He drained his coffee cup and wiped his mouth with the

back of his hand. "Never talked to him much." He remained behind his defensive barrier, alert and ready, suspicious because he had expected anything else at this point but idle gossip. It made Sam pretty sure Matt had something on his mind.

"When I first come to work for the department, back in '26," Sam resumed, "Al already had his engine-man's rating. As high as he could go, and he's known it all those years. But do you think he's so anxious to get out of the service and retire? Huh-uh. That counting it off's just a way he has of covering up his feelings, the same as that bark of his. Old as Al is, the boys went and drug him into the party, last night. Al cussed 'em out for a bunch of stews, but he was tickled pink. And still on his feet when some I could name were under the table, over at Pete Loman's place." Sam grinned. "No, sir, Al's had a lot of satisfaction, even if he never got very high above the deck."

Matt Quist shrugged and left, but Sam thought there was a trace of wistfulness in his face. He had lost the common touch in cutting corners, and he knew it. Maybe some place inside of him there was regret. Alone, Sam grinned sourly. He had told himself that he was making his appeal for old Al's sake, but he admitted it was also for his own. And maybe Matt's. If the lad could be persuaded not to pass this morning's incident on to his father-in-law, maybe it could be drowned in the Ratapan and forgotten. It would be better for

everybody, Matt as much as anybody else, and surely for Sally. As for himself, he would make no report, and the rest was up to Matt.

They moved to a new setting just before noon, the dredge shaking from her rumbling hoists. The crew ate its lunch, afterward, and immediately proceeded to dunk its hangover in the cold river. They were having such a good time when one o'clock came that Sam hated to break it up. He spotted them an extra fifteen minutes.

Dunc Sand was making a dive off the engine-room roof when the auto horn sounded ashore, about five hundred yards upstream. Throwing his gaze that way, Sam nearly bit the stem off his pipe when he saw it was a sedan with the familiar insignia of the department painted redly on either side. The boys came out of the water like wet chickens, scurrying to get on the job.

Sam's heart sank to his ankles. He didn't have to wait for the *Paloma* to return to know who it was. The area office was some fifty miles down river, and Eustace Swift used a broken rhythm on his visits to the various jobs in the area, relishing it when he caught a crew flat-footed. There was no question that he had seen the swimming party from up there.

There was even a mournful look in the way Homer Tell handled the *Paloma* as she dropped back down to the dredge a few minutes later and swung in against the fenders. Swift jumped over her rail onto the *White's* deck. He was the correct engineer in

every respect, complete with whipcord breeches and laced boots.

The *White* was hard at work, the Whirley turning on its big treads and sticking its bill into the river bottom. The boys usually went half naked, anyhow, and their gleaming skins could have been wet with sweat. Yet Eustace Swift ignored the industrious sight, heading immediately for the topside ladder, a jerk of his head ordering Sam to follow. The man craved private council.

Sam followed the booted legs up the ladder. Inside the long, broad deckhouse perched on top the engine-room roof, Eustace Swift turned with blazing eyes, behind which lurked a certain note of gratification.

"Were those your men I saw swimming at twelve minutes past one, Caffrey?"

Sam said nothing. They couldn't very well have been anybody else's men, and he was saving his breath for more important work. Mechanically he poured himself a cup of coffee, and immediately put it down with a guilty look. Then suddenly there were sounds of feet on the ladder, and both looked to see the head of Matt Quist appear. Sam suppressed a moan in the nick of time.

Though usually he disdained to discuss official business for the crew's plebeian ears, Swift did not object to Quist's presence. The two nodded, and Sam saw that same sullenness in the lad's eyes. He had dirty work to do, and he had to defend himself

Caffrey Cracks Down

before Sam and himself with a defiant attitude.

"Caffrey tell you about the dredge breaking loose last night?" asked Quist, apparently meaning to waste no time.

Sam sighed. The kid had asked for it. Sam's heel rapped thrice on the engine-room roof, which was a signal for old Al Lamark to come topside. He hated it, but for Al's sake he had to drive this kid's story back down his treacherous throat.

Eustace Swift turned a half-pleased look on Sam. "It did, eh? How come?"

Sam shifted weight. He wanted Al here before he accused Quist. He needed the substantiation, and he figured Al was entitled to see the look that would be on Eustace Swift's face. Then Sam was displaying a strange look of his own.

Matt Quist took the reply to Swift's question away from Sam. "I turned it loose by slacking the shore line. And you can make a report on it, to the district office."

The area engineer let his weight land limply on a straight-back chair. "Are you crazy, Matt?"

Quist grinned coldly. "Huh-uh. Sane, finally. Swift, you hated me for degrading your daughter by marrying her when I was only an ignorant deckhand on a hopper dredge, and you set out to lift me up to the proper level." There was a look of deep disgust in his eyes, directed at himself as well as his father-in-law. "The devil of it is, it took your own daughter to open my eyes to it. Yeah,

I got scared after I done that, last night, and I told her. And she told me I had to own up and take my medicine."

Swift got back on his feet, his cheeks white, his eyes suddenly burning with anger. "You young whipper-snapper, have you been trying to turn my daughter against me?"

"Huh-uh. We're a pair of despicable lugs, but she loves the both of us. Make your report, Eustace Swift. By damn, I'm going to see that you do! And when I'm out of the mess, I'm going to get a job I can handle again! Deckhand, engine wiper—I don't give a hoot so long as I travel under my own steam!"

It sickened Sam to see the look that crawled over Swift's face. There was no sense of triumph in having the man turn to him so pleadingly. It was Matt's triumph, over a starchy father-in-law, and over himself. Yet Swift knew that he couldn't try to hush this up. The Redburn district was full of men who hated his guts.

"Very well, Quist," Swift said finally. "I'll make the report."

"Just a minute," said Sam. He looked at Swift calmly. "I told you once before I intended to handle things on this dredge in my own way, as long as I turned in the work."

Old Al came in then, in response to Sam's signal. Sam knew how much Al would like to see Swift's humiliation published all over the district, and Sam Caffrey himself wouldn't exactly find such a thing unpleasant. Yet he had defied Swift in

living by his own principles, and they were good even in Swift's case.

Sam looked at Matt. "Take off your shirt. I'm going to whip the hell out of you. And you'd better fight to win, or I'll bust down your nose and kick in your teeth."

After a long breath, he saw Al Lamark nod in confirmation.

There was a sudden gleam in Matt's eyes. He had seen this happen before, and it made him one with the others. Like the rest, he would trim Sam Caffrey if he could. It was the oldest method going of settling a dispute, of establishing authority, of delivering punishment, but one that the *White's* crew had found particularly satisfying. It had made her a good ship, if a loose one, and one that got the work done.

They went at it. Eustace Swift pushed back into a corner and watched, probably hoping to see them bash each other's brains out. His presence did not prevent the crew from rushing topside at the first racket, and Wes Owen summarily shut down the big shovel, lowering its big boom inboard and hustling up the ladder.

Sam made it tough for Matt Quist and found it plenty tough, himself. He was the heavier, but Matt was younger and plenty good with his dukes. A couple of times Matt showed him some new astronomy. It was peculiar to the dredge that, though they had seen Sam Caffrey trim down an upstart more than once, each time they grew as susper.sive as if it were

a pair of unknowns battling. Bulging eyes followed the battlers around the rocking deckhouse.

Sam cut the throttle presently. It was a special punch of his, short-traveling but loaded with mayhem. Matt hit the deck with a thud, and Dunc Sand went mechanically to fetch a pail of river water.

A half hour later the *White* was operating again, shovel gouging, hull trembling. The crew had forgotten the fight already, and Sam knew they would consider the loosened shore line finished business. They had all got the hell out of them, including himself and young Matt Quist, and would dredge like nobody's business till the next time.

Eustace Swift had maintained the longest silence Sam had ever had from him. Then, to Sam's surprise, he went and poured himself a cup of coffee, right during duty hours.

At last he said, "You're a white man, Sam. Had I been in your place I'd have spread me all over the landscape. But I've got to admit Matt was right. I tried to tailor him into a credit to the family. I kept preaching advancement. And he figured he had to make it, one way or the other. It's my fault he tried to make his next one the way he did."

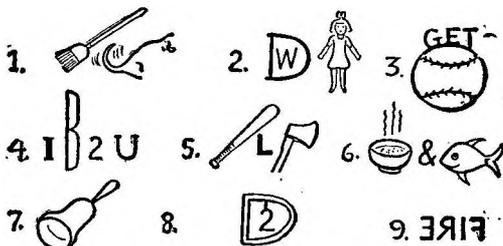
Sam grinned at him. "Go tell that to Matt, Eustace. See if you can win his friendship. Like he said, you've got a girl that loves the pair of you."

THE END

WHAT'S IN A BRAND?

By JACK LUZZATTO

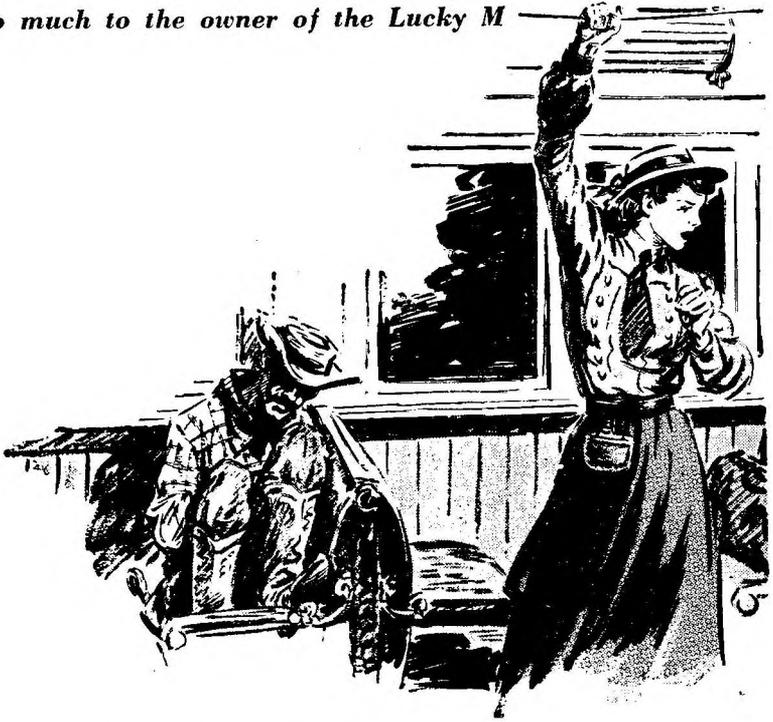
Most of these are fairly easy to solve, but you may come against some opposition with No. 7. If you can crack that problem in two minutes or even five, you're a pretty sharp brand reader. Thanks must go to Kenneth H. Cassens, a previous winner, for donating No. 3 to this department. As for No. 4, no cow could carry a more specific statement on his hide. We think you'll find these a lot of fun to do. If you must look up the answers, you'll find them on page 129.



No. 1 sent in by Charles Blackie Burke, Danville, Illinois.
No. 2 sent in by Beverly Campbell, Painesville, Ohio.

Can you work-out an *original* brand? Mr. Luzzatto will pay \$5 for each contribution suitable for use in this department. Address him in care of Street & Smith's Western Store, P. O. Box 489, Elizabeth, N. J. Be sure to enclose a three cent stamp for material which is not available.

Kern Falcon knew the law on both sides of the Rio wanted him, but he couldn't figure what made him worth so much to the owner of the Lucky M



Straight Trail

I

KERN FALCON lounged slack and at ease with his after-dinner cigar as the train rolled toward Marfa. He had made his study of the passengers in his own car and of the ones on either side of him and decided there was no immediate danger. The Texas Rangers would not figure him to be so

bold as to take a train from Laredo. However, the gun thrust in his trousers' waistband, and hidden by his expensive broadcloth coat, was reassuring.

The only person Kern had found to interest him on the train was the girl three seats ahead. With the blackest of hair and dark eyes in an oval, bronzed face, she was as pretty



as the night-darkening Pecos country lunging past the coach window. He stared at the back of that black hair now through the haze of his cigar smoke, admiring the saucy way the straw sailor perched atop her head.

But as much as he looked at ease, even a casual observer would have noticed the alertness in his cool, brown eyes. And slack as he was, there were signs that said the muscles of his long flat body were ready to react and lightning-fast. His face was dark-burned and strongly featured, the broad nose above full lips flared a little with boldness. He took his

study from the back of the girl's head and blew smoke at the swaying coach ceiling. When he looked out of the window night had completely taken over.

Kern's thoughts raced on to Marfa. There seemed to be an ironic clack to the train wheels. Tom McBride needed help and had sent for him. And after what Tom had done to him . . . McBride had signed his own death warrant by revealing his whereabouts to Kern. He'd get help, all right. Help right out of this world. No man could cross Kern Falcon and live. . . .

The puncher came from the coach ahead, swaying a little more than the roll of the coach suggested he should. In his hand he held a bottle. His head was down, his gaze intent on the coach aisle until he came opposite the girl. He braced himself between the two seats and gave her a long stare.

"Have a drink, sister?" he invited. He shook the bottle at her.

The girl stirred restlessly and shrunk against the window side of the seat. She did not answer.

The cowboy persisted. "Come on. You look lonesome, kid." He spun around and plopped into the seat beside her.

Kern carefully laid his half-smoked cigar on the window ledge and got up. Two steps took him to the side of the puncher and he reached out and grabbed the man by the scuff of the shirt, jerking him to his feet and around. The man's bottle spilled whiskey down the front of Kern's coat and the smell of it stung his nostrils. He drew back his fist.

"Please . . ." the girl said quickly.

Her voice held Kern's arm on the half cock as he looked at her. There was no excitement or alarm in her dark eyes. In this moment she showed Kern she was a girl with knowledge of this land and its violent men and accustomed to being annoyed.

Two punchers who had been in the back of the coach were coming up now. "What's this? What's this?" one demanded sharply. They crowded Kern close.

Holding to the swaying puncher,

Kern said, "Stand clear. I can handle this." There was something about this drunk that had turned him wary.

The train bucked around a curve and the drunk laughed, spilling some more whiskey on Kern's coat. He said, "Have another, friend."

Kern slapped him hard across the mouth. The two punchers were crowding him again and he turned and shoved a forearm at them. "Damn it," he said, "stand clear!" Then thunder was rolling through his head.

He wasn't out completely. He felt hands grabbing him and holding him. He staggered as the train lurched to a sudden stop. He could dimly hear voices . . . The girl's:

"Our friend's drunk. We'll take him off right here. The ranch isn't far."

A strange voice said, "We're ten miles from Marfa, lady. You shouldn't have jerked that emergency cord. We could take care of him." That would be the conductor.

"He'll be taken care of," the girl promised. "All right, boys."

Then Kern knew he was being hustled off the train. Half-consciously he knew now what had been so peculiar about that drunk. There had been no smell of liquor on the man's breath. The first odors had come when the bottle had been spilled on Kern's coat. What the devil? He was being shanghaied.

When the fresh air hit his nostrils and he felt the gravel of the road bed under his feet, Kern managed a savage turn. Then he sailed into complete blackness.

When Kern Falcon opened his eyes he was on a blanket beside a brush fire. Before he revealed his consciousness he inflated his stomach a little. His gun was gone. He sat up.

The three punchers of the train and the girl faced him across the fire. There was a fourth puncher now, hunkered down with them. He was young with the dark skin of the Mexican. The girl had changed clothes. She wore Levis, plaid shirt and black, flat-crowned sombrero; and although her beauty was disturbing, Kern found it did not curb his steadily growing anger.

She said, "Rowley belted you a good one that last time."

One of the punchers grinned.

"Lilly Langtry lost a great partner by not knowing you," Kern muttered and gingerly felt his head. Beside the ache, his neck was a little stiff. "If there's any of that whiskey left I'll take a little inside."

At a nod from the girl, Rowley passed him the half-empty bottle and Kern took a long pull. The warmth of it surged against the ache in his head. When he emptied the bottle, he shied it into the brush. That spooked the horses and it was then he saw the six vague shapes tethered to the mesquite. Kern looked back at the five people grouped around him.

"I'm Raven McBride," said the girl.

Kern put a sharp interest on her. Did she know he was on his way to face her father through gunsmoke? If she did, Kern knew he would never make it from the looks of the punchers across the fire. He kept his

voice even. "Tom McBride's daughter?"

She nodded.

"He spoke of having a brat," said Kern, "but I never thought he meant it just that way until now."

The four punchers growled and teetered forward on their toes. Raven said sharply, "Easy, boys. Falcon, I know my father sent for you. I think I know why you've come." A shadow crossed her face. "Tom McBride is dead, Falcon. Bushwhacked."

Kern looked at the fire. Tom McBride dead, cut down from rimrock. Well, he deserved it, but in this moment Kern felt cheated. "I'm sorry to hear that," was all he said.

The punchers had settled back, their eyes narrow and hard through the fire glow. It was plain to see that they would go to hell and back for this girl. Well, they could go to hell and stay there; and she could, too.

"To what," asked Kern with mock courtesy, "do I owe this pleasant surprise. My fame . . . honor . . . money?"

"Partially the first," acknowledged Raven bluntly. "My father always said that Kern Falcon could trail-drive cattle faster and safer than any man he had ever known. When I knew he had sent for you and heard you were in Laredo—I decided to hire you."

Kern's eyes widened with surprise. The daughter of the man he had come to kill wanting to hire him. "Hire me?" he echoed. Then he was com-

posed again and added: "What was my answer?"

Raven stared into the fire for a moment. That shadow crossed her face again, but when she raised her eyes to him and looked across the dancing flames she was holding her emotions hard. There was a calm self-assurance in her that rubbed Kern.

"I knew what that answer would be," she said, "so I started your wages the moment the train pulled out of the depot."

Kern grinned maliciously. "Fine," he said. "Pay me off. I quit."

Now his blandness needled her and spots of color came into her cheeks. The punchers continued to stare steadily and stoically at Kern through the flames.

"To refresh your memory a little, Falcon," Raven said, "you're a wanted man in the Big Bend country and Mexico. You've just broken jail down there by the gulf. When you were second in command of the Hartley Bunch you figured in the wet stock drive to Tres Cruces. You planned the steal at Monterey and have given the law plenty of trouble on both sides of the Rio. Either the Rangers or the Rurales would like to get their hands on you."

"And to refresh your knowledge," said Kern flatly, "it was your father who crossed me on that Matamoros deal and got me tossed into that stinkin' Mex jail."

"He didn't intend to," said Raven adamantly. "What you thought was

a cross was due to me. I sent him word that mother was dying and to come quickly. He couldn't wait to tell you. When he got caught, he talked to clear himself so he could be at mother's bedside before she passed away. He didn't quite make it—and he always regretted what he'd done to you. He always figured on making it up some way."

"I believe that," said Kern dryly.

Raven's voice took on an exasperated edge. "I don't care whether you do or not. Being aware that half of Texas has dealt in wet stock, I'm not holding your past against you. I understand you quit the Hartley Bunch to take the straight trail. That's good enough for me. What I need is a good trail-drive man. There's parts of the Lucky 11 herd . . . that is . . ." And when Kern's grin widened, she rushed on, "that must be moved fast up the trail. You can get them there if anyone can."

Kern bowed his head in mock acceptance of the compliment. "Just what," he asked, "made you think I would accept such a deal? Tom McBride was a friend once, but he crossed me. He's gone and that's settled. Hartley and the boys have moved north and I'm shut of them. I'm through poundin' leather. I've got a little stake and I'm headin' New Mex way. There I'm making my own business."

Raven stared at him for a long moment, trying to pierce the stubbornness he pushed out at her.

"You've little choice but to accept," she said finally.

Kern laughed. "Lady, you picked the wrong man to threaten. I wouldn't help a McBride count a million in gold if you were giving me half."

But he was seeing something in this girl that disturbed him. There was a near man's toughness in her eyes and her chin was outthrust a little.

"I don't know about that," she said. "You drive or else . . ."

Kern glanced around at her men. They were teetering a little restlessly now and they were watching him as hawks watch the squirming of their prey.

"Or else?" echoed Kern softly.

"Trail or jail. Your choice."

There was some sort of desperation within the girl driving her to make that statement. What that desperation was, Kern could not tell. He saw she was not bluffing. The trail to Abilene or be turned over to the Rangers . . .

Then he thought suddenly of the Hartley Bunch's destination for future operations. They were working up the trail. Maybe he *wasn't* quite through with the old days. Maybe a McBride could be made to pay, after all, for that jail trick. It was obvious there were stolen cattle in the Lucky M herd. If not, why the haste? Why, if a man worked it right he could get his start with a herd and still have his money stake. When this picture took form in Kern's mind, the amusement he drew from it

deepened the seams fanning away from the corners of his eyes.

"I'd rather," he said at long last, "pound a saddle than prison rocks."

II

The tension went out of the group. The Lucky M punchers looked at one another and nodded knowingly. Kern Falcon noticed that the Mexican boy just kept staring at him. There was an almost childlike fascination and devotion in the boy's eyes.

Raven McBride reached around behind her and tossed Kern's gun onto the blanket at his feet. The punchers froze when they saw how fast Kern's fingers closed around the butt.

"My father always maintained that your word was good," Raven said.

Kern flipped the gun up and steadied it on her as he looked down at it. "The same," he said, "couldn't be said of him." She stared steadily back at him, unmoved by the bore of the weapon. Kern jammed the gun in his trousers' band and Rowley Wells murmured, "Ah," no longer able to contain himself.

"Cinco, let's get to riding," Raven said.

The Mexican boy turned from the fire and brought the horses. As he handed the reins of one to Kern, he said, "Eet ees a pleasure to ride with so great an outlaw, *señor*. You once befriended my father."

Kern canted his head in acknowledgment of the compliment and smiled at this stroke of luck. He

could use this boy when the time came.

Bob Conroy and Dandy Brown, the other two punchers, kicked out the fire and they all swung up. With the men following behind Raven and Kern, the girl said, "To be frank, Falcon, I'm trusting you only as far as I can see. And when I'm not looking—someone else will be."

"I'm deeply honored," answered Kern testily.

They cut straight away from the railroad tracks through the mesquite. The Pecos country rolled into the night, a dark sea of undulating brush beneath the starshine. Then a tawny Chihuahua moon came out of the Rio Grande and added its ghostly light.

As they rode, the picture that had formed in Kern's mind after Raven's threat of jail became a plan. He could barely keep from laughing aloud to himself. The Lucky M herd was as good as his. That would be Tom McBride's payoff for the year in jail. When they got up around the Blackjack forests of the Cimarron where the Hartley Bunch was operating, it would be simple to make a deal with Bat.

And Bat would be primed and ready. A messenger sent ahead . . . Kern thought of the Mexican boy riding behind him. He'd have a talk with Cinco. Already filled with hero worship for a man who had befriended his father, the boy looked like an easy one to influence.

It was midnight when the group reined into the Lucky M ranch yard.

Cattle lowed plaintively in the distance telling Kern that the herd was gathered and ready to roll. The riders dismounted and Cinco led their horses away.

Before the house, Raven said, "We'll go over everything in the morning, Falcon, to see if I've forgotten anything. I'd like to start as soon as possible." And when she noticed him silently grinning at her through the darkness, she added abruptly, "Good night," and turned into the house.

Kern followed the others to the bunkhouse. As they entered, a lone man looked up from a game of solitaire. He was tall, topping Kern's height by an inch and he was a good fifteen pounds heavier. He was handsome in a heavy sort of way and his gray eyes bored into Kern's now.

"Bib Mitchell, segundo," said Rowley Wells perfunctorily.

There was something vaguely familiar about this man but Kern could not place it. Bib made no move, just sat there holding the deck of cards motionless the while he made his study of Kern. Then he said, "I know you're a heller with the women as well as with someone else's cattle, Falcon. Around here or on the trail, you'll stick strictly to the herd."

Kern's left eyebrow arched and his forehead puckered a little. The men had paused by their bunks looking at the two of them.

"Why, now," said Kern, and he was smiling, "I haven't seen anything around to take my mind off the herd."

Bib Mitchell settled back in his chair and a grin came to his heavy lips. There was a flare of triumph in his eyes.

"You strike me as a right sensible man," he said.

"You strike me," countered Kern deceptively, "as one who should mind his own business better."

This quick turn of talk turned the punchers rigid. Kern had his man spotted now. Mitchell had been a small operator along the line, always trying to get into the notorious Hartley Bunch.

Bib's grin became a frozen crease across his face and color rushed into his cheeks. His chair came down, the slap of the legs hitting the floor loud in the room. Carefully, he laid his deck of cards down on the table.

But he made no further move. He read the sign in Kern Falcon's eyes plainly—a sign no man could hide and another could not misunderstand. He sat quite still, for he was astute enough to make his own time and his own odds, and so he rode out this terrible moment. Sweat began to bead his forehead.

The Mexican boy, walking into this tension, broke it. Kern shrugged and moved to a vacant bunk. Cinco looked at Bib, then at Kern. He went quickly to his bunk and crawled in.

When they were all stretched out and the room dark, Kern lay with his hands behind his head. Carefully, he thought out his plans. Raven McBride had done the wrong thing when she shanghai'd him. There

was a restless movement in a bunk across the room and Kern knew that Bib Mitchell, too, was still awake.

The next morning Rowley Wells outfitted Kern from the slop chest. His eyes narrowed as Kern picked out an old, worn holster and belt. Tying it down to his thigh, Kern slipped his gun into it and flipped it several times. Rowley was obviously awed at the speed with which the new crewman drew.

The breakfast triangle laid its clanging waves across the yard and the men trooped toward the cook shack adjoining the main house. The Mexican boy fell in beside Kern as they made their way past the trail wagons in the yard.

"I'm trying to remember your father," Kern remarked.

"Mike Muldoon," said the boy proudly and raised his sombrero at Kern's quizzical glance. The hat covered a shock of fiery red hair. "Irish, too," grinned the boy. "I am the fifth een the family. I am the wrangler, *señor*."

Kern remembered now. He had helped Mike Muldoon out of a saloon jam that had not been of his making. "Glad to have you along, Cinco," he said. "I'll look at the remuda later."

The boy's face lit up and his chest swelled with importance. "At your service, *señor*," he said solemnly.

Kern was grinning when he entered the cook shack. This kid was made to order for him.

Raven was already at the head of the table. Her dark hair fell below

her shoulders and made a three-sided frame for her face. Kern roughly shook off the startling physical reaction that hit him. After a night's rest, the girl seemed even more beautiful and the disturbance she caused within him made him angry with himself.

At her nod he sat down on her left and lifted his coffee cup. He was blowing on it gently as Bib Mitchell came in and would have passed behind him. Kern turned ever so slightly in his chair and Mitchell backed off and went around the table to take his place at Raven's right. The men at the table were still-held in this moment, then fell to helping themselves from the steaming platters. Raven frowned down at her plate.

Marty Tolę, the bewhiskered cook, came in, a coffee pot in one hand. He scrubbed the other on his flour-sack apron. Stopping behind Kern, he said belligerently, "I'm the cook. Any objections?"

"I never," Kern answered gravely, "argue with a cook. You think I want to pack my lunch all the way to Abilene?"

Old Marty grinned and went to refilling the cups.

With the meal finished, the hands went out to begin the countless chores that were necessary to ready for the trail. Kern and Raven toured the wagons. He was a little surprised at her ability to organize and choose so well. There was plenty of spare gear, the equipment was in good shape and there were no extra comforts taking up valuable space.

"You didn't need me," he said when they were done. "You're ready."

"It's the trail," she countered, but she seemed pleased with his compliment. "None of the men have the experience for that. When can we leave? Bib said . . ." She paused and looked sharply at him. "You don't like him."

Kern shrugged. "I didn't think of it quite that way. But now that you mention it—I don't. Out there," he pointed toward the north, "you can have him in your arms, but keep him out of my hair."

That stung Raven and her lips drew tightly together. "When a man," she said hotly, "gets into my arms, he'll be a good one."

A smile broke from the corners of Kern's lips as he looked at her. She was willfully set against him in this moment and it put a rashness in him. Laughing softly, he reached out and swept her close. There was a fraction of this moment when her tight-creased lips bloomed and all her warm softness was against him. It put Kern into a swirling void and he felt trapped. The hammering of her heart seemed to be beating a message as old as the land into him.

Then she was tearing away from him, shoving hard against his chest, storm raging across her face. He saw that she was hurt and deeply disgusted with herself for this moment of weakening. She punched him solidly in the neck with a clenched fist and stood there before him shaking with fury.

"Part payment for breaking up my peace of mind," Kern said soberly. Then he turned and headed for the barn.

Bib Mitchell saw the whole play from the corral and now he angled to intercept Kern. His head was drawn down on his shoulders and his arms were bent at his sides. The men working around the yard paused and watched the meeting of these two.

Bib put himself in Kern's way and there was a deep hate in his eyes. Kern came up to him, showing him a composure that infuriated Mitchell beyond reason.

"Damn you!" he said. "You went too far."

"Seems that no one likes what I do," Kern said indifferently.

Bib swung and Kern went up against that arm, blocking it and sinking his own fist into Mitchell's belly. The man gasped and bent over. When he straightened, he reached out to grab Kern by the neck. Dust kicked up at their feet and the sharp bark of a gun turned them both still.

Raven held a smoking pistol in her hand. "Save the energy for the trail," she commanded sharply. "You're each ramrodding your own departments, but neither one of you better forget that I'm boss of the whole shebang. There'll be no fighting."

Bib laid his hot, hard glance on Kern. "There'll be a time she won't
Straight Trail

be there to protect you," he mumbled and walked away.

Kern looked at Raven for a long moment. She flushed angrily and turned into the house. But she left behind her an indelible impression. Here was a strong girl, game as they came. Kern had to admit grudgingly that she kept upsetting his thoughts; and no matter how he fought against his emotions she could start them to boiling again.

Cinco Muldoon came up beside him. "Señor, you watch these Mitchell," he warned. "He's a *muy malo hombre*."

Kern looked down at the boy and smiled, taking him into his confidence as he would a man. "I'll keep eyes in the back of my head," he assured him. "Let's take a look at your remuda."

III

"Señor," said Cinco Muldoon, "I've cut out your string."

Kern followed the boy to the corral and looked over his horses. He nodded approval. "You know your broncs," he murmured.

The boy said proudly, "*Si, Señor*. I also know people. Besides being the greatest cattle rustler een all Texas—you are one great lover, *señor*. *Señorita* McBride, she approves. Thees little love tap she hit you—eet was nothing. Women are like that. But thees Bib, he too has eyes for her."

Kern changed the subject by saying

confidentially, "Cinco, I need your help."

"My life ees yours, *señor*."

"Do you have a *compadre* who will ride ahead on the trail and deliver a message for me? I will pay him well. But he must be a man we can trust."

"*Seguro*—sure. Manuelito Perez. He will ride for you, *señor*, or I cut out his heart."

"Get him here as quickly as you can—ready to ride."

Cinco nodded and went for his saddle.

Preparations for the trail were complete at evening time. Kern had seen the herd, fifteen hundred head of fine stock. He saw that half of them wore a Mexican brand and he knew he had guessed right the reason Raven McBride was in such a hurry to drive. She was no different from any other rancher in this Big Bend country when it came to closing her eyes to wet stock. Mitchell had probably rustled them for her; and Old Tom had been bushwhacked in the deal. Yet, she had threatened Kern Falcon with prison if he didn't trail her stolen cattle.

Night was fully on the land when Cinco brought Manuelito Perez. With the men in the bunkhouse making their last checks of their gear, Kern said for all to hear:

"Manuelito, you start out and keep going. Pass the word along the trail that Kern Falcon's taking a herd through to Abilene and wants no interference. When you get as far as Dragoon, you wait there for us."

Manuelito nodded and left the bunkhouse. Kern followed him out and said, "Perez, when you get to Dragoon, find Bat Hartley and tell him I've got a deal. I'll see him in town." He pressed several gold coins into Perez' hand. The Mexican swung into his saddle and rode into the night.

In the darkness of the bunkhouse, Kern lay awake for a long while. He had wanted all these Lucky M hands to know about that messenger. There had been nothing suspicious in the orders he had given that they had heard. They were those of a man throwing his fame out in front of him. But Bat Hartley would understand. . . . With a grin of satisfaction, Kern fell into a deep sleep.

The weeks rolled on. Kern Falcon proved his reputation as a trail driver. The Pecos country dropped behind, then the Brazos, and they came to the Canadian.

The herd was in good shape despite the speed. Kern had an uncanny sense of how fast to push them. He pounded more leather than any man in the outfit and earned their grudging respect and admiration. Earned it from all except Bib Mitchell. That man grew more sullen and thoughtful with each passing day. There was something on his mind and Kern was wary.

And Kern had come to see Raven McBride in a new light. Although she consulted with Mitchell more than she did with him, she asked no favors

and did a man's work. She asked no quarter and gave none. Kern found himself thinking about her as he rode. Her face was everywhere in the night and in the bitter, biting dust of the day. He fought against those pictures, but to no avail. His plan to strip her of this herd to gain revenge for what her father did was a sour thing within him now. The amusing irony of it was long since gone. Raven was not responsible for what her father had done to him. And this thought grew to be a pounding rhythm within him.

For he found himself missing her and worrying about her when she rode out and his eyes were drawn to her when she was about the fire. Her indifference to him carried a hurt now and it was an emotion he could not conquer. He was in love with her even if she seemed carefully to avoid noticing it.

But Raven had noticed. She had watched his curtness toward her fall away and felt the impact of his eyes even when she was not looking at him. And she remembered too well that bold, rash kiss there in the ranch yard and the thrill of it never died within her. But knowing his reputation and the reason he had been heading toward Marfa, she could not bring herself to show her inner feelings. The trail was still long and Kern Falcon had plenty of proving up to do before Raven McBride revealed the real reason she had forced him into this trip.

The Canadian dropped behind and but a few days ahead lay the Cim-

arron and the Blackjack forests. And this day when the herd was bedded for the night camp, Bib Mitchell failed to ride in.

"Has anyone seen him?" asked Raven.

Dandy Brown answered. "He was riding point. Dusty as hell. Nothing could have happened to him, though, or I would have seen."

Reluctantly Kern picked a few men and made a search. They found nothing. Upon his return, he said to Raven, "He must have just gotten tired of it all."

"That doesn't make sense," she countered.

"It doesn't," Kern agreed pointedly.

Raven found his eyes and saw their meaning. She flushed a little; then, shrugging, she turned away and went to her blankets there beneath the cook's wagon.

Two nights after that three men rode into the firelight and lit down. Kern's eyes narrowed. The three were Midge Greely, Nick Stroud and Snake Spears, Bat Hartley men. The three toughest of the bunch.

"Hi, Falcon," said Midge. "You got jobs for your old pards." It was a statement, not a question.

Raven began, "I don't think . . ."

The three men looked at her and the flares that lit in their eyes started Kern's temper to boiling.

"I'll talk to them," he cut across her words curtly. Then he motioned to the three men and led the way to a wagon out in the gloom.

The Lucky M punchers were too tired to pay any attention and Raven just continued to stare moodily into the fire. Cinco Muldoon, lying on his blankets by the remuda, saw and listened.

"What the devil is this?" Kern demanded harshly.

"Bat just wants to see that nothin' slips up in this little plan," Snake said. "He's waitin' for you in Dragon, but he kind of wanted us to see that you saw him."

"Bat can go to hell," said Kern. "Tell him I've changed my mind."

"That's what he figured you might do," said Stroud. "Figured that the girl was liable to turn your head and make you forget that Tom McBride crossed you."

"She's not responsible for what her father did," said Kern. Then a sudden knowledge hit him. "Mitchell . . . So he made the bunch at last?"

The three outlaws did not answer, just stared back at him. But that was answer enough. Mitchell had figured out Kern's play and had seen that Kern was changing his mind. He had gone on to join Hartley.

"You three aren't staying," Kern told them harshly. "This herd is going straight through."

"Now," said Midge, "you don't make sense. You wouldn't want anything to happen to that girl, would you?"

Kern's fists clenched and all his toughness was on the surface. But the three men were not moved. They knew he did not dare make a break for fear of getting Raven hurt. He

was caught in his own trap. The joke he had started out to play had turned on him. He knew these men and knew that their threats were not idle ones.

"All right," he said, "I'll have a talk with Bat."

"I'd keep my voice down when I did," suggested Midge. "Bat ain't the one to take kindly to a man changing his mind. You ain't one of his favorites no more. We'll start work in the morning."

The three turned and went to their mounts. Pulling their bedrolls from behind the cantles, they stretched out beside the fire and laid down.

Kern called to Cinco. The young Mexican took the horses and his eyes probed deeply into Kern's. "I can help . . ." he murmured.

Kern shook his head. "I'll do something," he said grimly.

Back at the fire, he said to Raven, "We can use the extra hands."

She did not answer, nor even turn her head. She just kept staring into the flames as if she understood all that was going on about her and was utterly powerless to prevent its happening and even beyond caring now.

Kern went to his blankets thoroughly disgusted with himself. Anger rode him hard and he lay awake a long time. There had to be a way out. Mitchell . . . Hartley . . . even himself—a man should never trust a rustler. . . .

IV

It was late in the forenoon when Kern Falcon circled the herd on the

broad plains surrounding Dragoon. The town, dedicated to the salty trail drivers' desires, was a cluster of buildings huddled beside the Cimarron River and across that river lay the dark patches of the Blackjacks. When camp was made, Kern found Raven at the cook's wagon.

Old Marty Toles was saying, "Tain't no place for a lady, Raven."

"I'm not going in," she assured him.

"We'll let 'em water and feed the rest of the day here," Kern said. "I'll be back before dark."

Raven's eyes were searching him and he refused to meet them squarely. If he had only looked at her, he would have found her asking him in a silent way not to go into town, asking him to stay on this straight trail he had followed since leaving the Pecos country. He turned his horse and trotted away. There were starry tears in Raven's eyes.

As he rode onto the main street, Kern found the town gripped in the drugged quiet of midday. It was sleeping off its rowdiness of the preceding night. A few swampers lazily swept litter from the saloons and the shades of the rooming houses were drawn tight against the day's light. Four horses stood hip-sprung and heads down before the Red Dog and Kern tied up at the rack. He went in.

The smell of tobacco and whiskey was heavy in the place and a lone bartender idly polished glasses behind the bar. At the table in the far

corner of the gloomy room sat Bat Hartley with Bib Mitchell, two punchers and Manuelito Perez. There was a bottle on the table and it was obvious that all but Perez had indulged freely.

"You haven't changed in size, fella," Bat said.

Hartley was small in a country where big men were the rule. Standing but five feet ten, he was dwarfed by a man like Bib Mitchell. But his shoulders were broad and there was latent power in him. Kern had seen that demonstrated several times. Bat's face was freckled and an unruly shock of red hair escaped from under the band of his sombrero. His upper front teeth protruded and, with his thin lower lip, gave his face a cruel cast.

"No change in size," said Kern flatly.

Bat shot a glance at the sullen Mitchell. "Your friend here tells me that you've gone soft on the McBride girl. You figured on having me help you cross her to get back at her old man for crossing you. But you've gone soft."

"Call it that," said Kern. "But she isn't responsible for her father's actions. Besides, there's circumstances that made McBride do what he did. You knew my intentions when I quit the gang, and they haven't changed. I want no more of this. We'll just leave the deal set, Bat."

Hartley bared those protruding teeth in a grin. "Mitchell, you were right. Have another drink."

Mitchell poured a generous shot from the bottle and tossed it off, wiping the back of his hand across his lips. His bloodshot eyes were boring into Kern's and all the man's hatred was fixed by the surge of the liquor. The dark skin of Perez's face was blanched with fright while the two Hartley outlaws watched with deceptive unconcern. A cool wind blew across the back of Kern's neck.

"So you don't want to deal?" asked Bat softly.

"No deal," countered Kern. "I thought it would be a good joke, but not now."

Bat let the silence run and during that period the tension became an electric thing. The bartender was motionless behind the bar, carefully watching the play.

"The joke," said Bat, "is on you. I was going to cut you in, but now you don't get a thing. Mitchell, here, has laid the ground work good. He was the one who bumped Tom off and got the money that McBride intended paying for the Mexican cattle. We've got everything worked out, Falcon—worked out without putting you in the picture."

Kern's eyes narrowed and all the slack in his body was drawn tight as a fiddle string. "Bat," he said slowly, "things must be pretty bad when you have to tie up with a tinhorn and a drygulcher. But nothing's going to happen to that herd. Not that you'd enjoy. If you think there is, you're going to get hurt right there in that

chair." His hand hung loose near his gun.

The men were drawn tight now and Perez came out of his chair and flattened against the wall.

Bat flashed that buck-toothed grin again and said, "I know how fast you are, Falcon. Better see if you have anything to be fast with. One of the boys in your camp should have lifted the shells from your gun sometime last night. I told him to."

With a light oath, Kern pulled his gun and examined the cylinder. It was empty! And as he looked up at the group, he stared into their drawn guns. They weren't taking any chances.

The men behind those guns were laughing now. Bib Mitchell said, "You don't look so tough with your fangs pulled."

Snake Spears came ramming through the batwinged doors and pulled up short. "Boss, that damn girl has started the herd to rollin'," he gasped. "They're across the river and headin' out on the run!"

Bat's grin deepened. "It looks," he said, "like she doesn't trust you any more than I do, Falcon. Smart kid—except for one thing. Her move makes it easier for us. He's your man, Bib."

Manuelito Perez had slithered down the wall and now he made a wild lunge and went out through the batwings. No one paid any attention to him. Bib Mitchell's gun was raising and he was cursing wildly. "Just like I got her old man . . ."

Kern's muscles tensed to take the

impact of the slug. Savagely, Bat Hartley batted that weapon aside and the lead chunked into the saloon wall. "None of that," he swore heavily. "No gut-shootin' an unheeled man." He twisted the gun from Bib's hand.

Kern canted his head at Bat. "You got a little pride left," he said.

Bib was moving around the table now, his nostrils flared and his eyes dancing from the liquor racing his blood. His face was flushed and his lips drawn back against his teeth. "There ain't no girl to protect you now," he growled and rushed at Falcon.

Kern met that charge as he had done once before, batting the sledge-like right swing aside and stepping in to punch solidly at Bib's stomach. He cut the man's wind off with a mighty "Ooph!" but Bib had caught him by the other arm.

Bib whirled Kern around and got his forearm beneath his chin and his knee in the small of Kern's back. With this leverage, he pulled hard. The action was so violent that they both went down, hitting the floor heavily. The fall broke the hold, but when Kern rolled away he was limp with pain. His back had been strained to the breaking point. Bib was up first and his boot caught Kern solidly in the ribs.

Kern gasped and scrambled out of the way of a second kick and got to his feet. His back was to the wall and he shoved out a hand, palm up as Bib rushed. He let the big man run into that palm and felt his

shoulder take up the jar against the saloon wall.

For a split second Bib seemed impaled on that palm, then he spun away and staggered sideways. Kern leaped forward and smashed a solid right into the man's face. That seemed to lift Bib from his inertia.

Cursing deep within his throat, he clubbed at Kern with both fists, and his blows left numb places where they landed. Kern slugged savagely back but it was like hitting a mad-dened bull.

Then Kern had his forearm against Bib's neck and was rushing him back against the wall. They hit with a stunning impact and Kern grabbed Bib's hair. With the man slashing at him savagely, he pounded Bib's head against the wall, suffering his blows, but pounding that head against the boards.

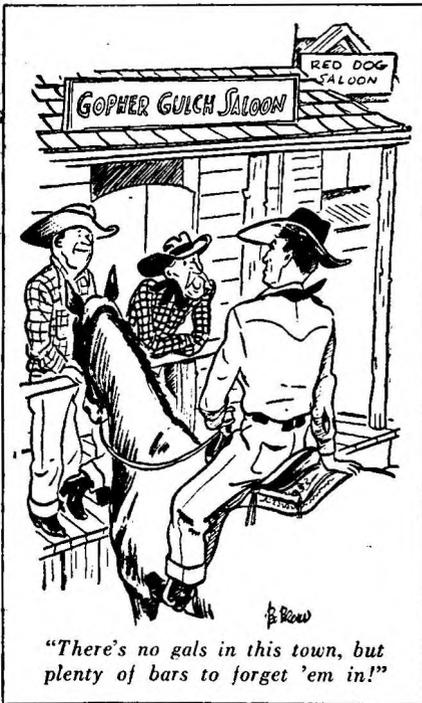
Bib's whiskey-reddened eyes glazed over and his swings grew feeble. Suddenly Kern stepped back and Bib Mitchell slumped to the floor, his head rolling limply to one side. Remembering Mitchell's confession of bushwhacking Tom McBride, Kern started after him again, his rage driving him mad in this instant.

Through the roaring in his ears, he heard Bat Hartley say, "He hasn't changed in size. Mitchell ain't man enough or he's too drunk." Then he laid his gun barrel smartly across Kern's head. Falcon went down with his kick unfinished.

"Grab Mitchell," Bat said. "He ain't much good but we need him. Let's get after those cattle."

When Kern Falcon returned to consciousness strange odors assailed his nostrils. With a groan, he opened his eyes and found himself gazing up into the round brown face of a Mexican woman. Her thick lips parted in a friendly smile and she called over her fat shoulder, "Manuelito, he ees awake." The strange odors were those of beans and tortillas and chili.

Manuelito came into the semi-darkness of the room and thrust a bottle of tequila under Kern's nose. "Drink," he ordered. "It ees very good for the head, *señor*."



"There's no gals in this town, but plenty of bars to forget 'em in!"

Kern came up on one elbow and would have sunk back if the woman had not put out an arm to support him. His head reeled for a moment, then the dizziness went away. He took a long pull on the bottle. The heat of the liquor hit hard and helped steady him.

"I could use a few beans, too," he said.

The woman got up and left the room.

Kern remained upright now and looked quizzically at Manuelito.

"When I got out of the saloon, *señor*, I run for help," the Mexican explained. "But the herd, she is crossing the river. Cinco, I find heem and he ees very angry. He tells me the *señorita* thinks you are selling her out but that he knows different. She would not help. Cinco tells me to come back and save you. I find you een the alley behind the saloon, *señor*."

"I haven't a friend on either side now," Kern said.

"You are in wan fine feex," agreed Perez. "The *señorita*, she don't want you. *Señor* Bat would keel you on sight. And he gets the herd monies without working for it."

"Money? How?"

"While they are making me wait for you, *señor*, I hear the plan. When you come—boff—you are out of the picture. *Señor* Mitchell, he is to go to the girl and tell her he did you een; that he found you trying to sell out to Bat Hartley. That he also ees the big hero and has done for Hartley, too. He ees now *segundo* again and

in her favor. *Señor* Hartley, he does not show his face. He rides with his men to Abilene and finds a buyer. He meets with Mitchell on the plain and they sell. *Señorita* Raven winds up in Abilene with nothing but the trip." Manuelito shrugged fatalistically. "An' *Señor* Mitchell, he gets the *señorita* because she has no one else to turn to."

Kern swore softly. "Mitchell's figured to take over ever since he bushwhacked Old Tom."

"*Seguro*. Sure, *señor*. He ees a *muy malq hombre*."

Catalina brought Kern a steaming plate of beans and tortillas. As he ate, he mused, "And I thought the Mexican cattle were rustled and she was no better than the rest on wet stock deals. She figured the Mexican from whom Tom bought the critters had done the drygulching and wanted double pay. She didn't have it and had to move out fast."

"That ees right, *señor*. Cinco tells me this: The *señorita* knew you were coming and that the Rangers had laid a trap for you in Marfa. That ees why she kidnap you from the train. Cinco swears it is so."

Kern stared into space. So that was it. Threatening him with prison unless he helped her and she was helping him all the time . . .

Suddenly Kern's eyes snapped back into focus. "Get some horses, Perez," he ordered. "We're heading for Abilene."

The Mexican grinned and left the room.

Kern bolted the remainder of the

food and swung to his feet. He swayed a little, but steadied down. He pressed a gold coin into Catalina's fat palm and accepted her profuse thanks.

"*Vaya con Dios*. Go with God," she said.

"I'm going after the devil himself," growled Kern.

Perez had the horses saddled and ready in front of the little shack when Kern came out. Kern pulled some cartridges from Manuelito's belt and loaded his gun. With an effort, he swung up into the saddle. At his signal, Perez sided him and they skirted Dragoon, splashed across the Cimarron ford and pushed into the Blackjack forests.

Riding wide of the trail, Kern pushed his mount hard. His temper grew razor-edged and Manuelito Perez cast uneasy sidelong glances at him.

The forests fell behind and they crossed the Arkansas River. When the dun and dust-scattered plains surrounding Abilene broke under their horses' hoofs, Kern reined down and stared at the town with smoldering eyes. Then he twisted around in the saddle and looked back at the dust boiling high on the horizon's edge.

"That'll be the Lucky M herd," Kern said. "The way I've got it figured—knowing how Hartley works—he's in town talking to a buyer now. He'll ride out with him and meet Mitchell who'll come ahead to make the deal. When the cattle get here the buyer will have the bill of

sale but Raven won't have any money. Hartley will be gone and Mitchell will make his play for Raven."

For a long moment he was silent and Manuelito watched him closely. Kern's chin was thrust out and there were glass-hard splinters of light in his eyes. Fishing in his pocket, he drew out some coins. He pressed them into the Mexican's hand.

"Manuelito," he said heavily, "from here on in it's a one-way trip. Your work is done."

The Mexican protested. "There will be three or four of them, *señor*. Cinco will cut out my heart for running away."

"You'll get hurt if you stay with me," said Kern flatly. "I'm talkin' to the boys in the only language they'll understand." He tapped his gun butt. "You'll just have to dodge Cinco until he cools off."

The Mexican screwed up his face to protest further but Kern reached out and kicked his horse in the ribs. With Manuelito's hand lax on the reins, the animal lit out in a bucking run. Kern turned toward town.

Nearing the center of the great grazing grounds at the end of the thousand-mile trail, Kern made out the crawling blot that was a lone horseman. From the town came four riders. That would be Bat Hartley, his two men and the buyer. Kern slowed his gait so they would meet before recognizing him.

As he rode on, he saw the group meet and quit their horses. Kern's mouth grew dry and there was a small hollow in his stomach. His

eyes were mere slits and his shoulders rigid. This deliberate play he meant to force turned him cold as ice.

Kern was almost on top of the group before they were aware of his coming. Then they were turning, staring with unbelieving eyes. The lean buyer in their center looked at Kern as he swung slowly from his horse and his face blanched at what he saw. Quickly he moved to the far side of the men.

Bib Mitchell's big body was tense, his face set hard. Bat Hartley's lips were drawn back over his buck teeth in a cruel grin. The two punchers were still-held, alert.

"You'd think," said Bat, "that you'd have learned your lesson in Dragoon."

Kern dropped his reins and stepped away from his horse. "Some men can't be taught a damn thing," he answered.

And they stood looking at Kern, knowing what was coming, for his purpose was a bright flare in his eyes. They knew he didn't have a chance and they knew he knew it. But there was no turning aside in this man. His gun swift was legend and the man he directed himself against was going to get hurt. They remained still, saddled with this terrible moment of indecision.

"Funny," Bat said, "what a woman will drive a man to do."

"Funny," echoed Kern hollowly. "But this one's for Tom McBride. Let's get at it."

Even as he was drawing his gun, Kern thought he heard the pound of

flying hoofs. Mitchell was matching his move, but fear was squeezing his eyes because he was far behind. Kern's first shot caught the Lucky M bushwhacker in the chest and spun him around.

Bat Hartley's gun was out and he dove in behind Mitchell, hitting him hard with his shoulder, sending him staggering toward Kern. Bib's reflex action on the trigger touched off a shell and the lead smashed into Kern's leg. He went down to one knee.

Then Hartley's gun was slamming shots at Kern. He triggered back, bucking against the lead tearing at his shoulder and side. Through the smoke, he saw the lean buyer buffalo one of Hartley's men, but the other was taking aim. Then that man went down suddenly without firing.

Bib Mitchell was still on his feet, but his gun was in the dust. He groped with outstretched arms like a drunken bear, then collapsed. With his next shot Kern caught Hartley square and the outlaw leader crumpled.

Kern was on both knees now, his head hanging. His body was on fire and there was a numbness creeping over him. . . .

When Kern Falcon opened his eyes he looked up into a bowed canvas top. There was the odor of cooking in the air. A cool hand caressed his forehead and he turned to look into Raven McBride's eyes. She was smiling down at him.

"That was a fool play to try alone.

Falcon," she said. "But you'll pull through."

There was still plenty of fever in him and his mouth was parched and dry. Raven answered the question in his eyes.

"You're in Toles' cook wagon and he doesn't like it much. We're ten days past Abilene on the way to Wyoming. Perez came and got us. If it hadn't been for the buyer suspecting a crooked deal and buffaloing one Hartley man while Cinco Muldoon was downing the other, you wouldn't be here. Manuelito told me all about Mitchell gulching my father, and his intentions. Falcon, whether you like it or not, you've been kidnapped again. There's nothing for you in Texas but jail. Dad willed half of this herd to you to compensate somewhat for the wrong he had to do to get home before mother died. I withheld that information from you to see if you had actually given up the owlhoot and taken the straight trail. Now, as a partner, you have a choice. You can sell or else . . ."

"Or else?" Kern echoed softly.

"Build a new life with me or go back to the Texas jail."

Kern looked at her for a long moment and she never seemed so radiantly lovely.

"I'd rather," he managed at long last, "pound new fence posts than prison rocks."

Smiling through the tears welling in her eyes, Raven McBride bent down and kissed him. . . .

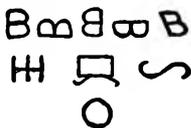
THE END

RANGE SAVVY

By Gene King



The versatility of the cow pony is an old story in the West. Many an old-time cowboy has on occasion used his favorite paint even for such chores as plowing up a few short rows beside the ranchhouse. But it's far different from hitching up a farm horse to a plow. Hitched in traces and with a blind bridle on, a spirited cow horse will rear and buck and generally go crazy. On the other hand, put a saddle on him, ride him and have another man guiding the plow handles, with the plow dragging at the end of a lariat rope, the other end of which is made fast around the saddlehorn, and things go smoothly. That way, to the pony, it's just like dragging bogged-down steers out of a bog hole in early spring.



Letters, particularly a rancher's own initials, have always been a favored source of cattle brands. However, not all initials are equally suitable for the numerous variations that can be formed. Aside from upright B's, tumbling B's and lazy B's, you can also reverse a B. But you can't reverse an A, or a T either, for that matter. They are the same either way around. Perhaps the least adaptable initial of all is the letter O. It is the same standing up, lying down, upside down or virtually any way you place it.



Skis are mighty popular with winter sports enthusiasts throughout the country. But as far as a real north-country backwoodsman is concerned, they are strictly fofooraw. Snowshoes are his winter travel gear, and they are as essential to him as mittens on his hands. Snowshoes may be slow and, to those not used to them, cumbersome. But they will get a man across snow-covered country day after day better than skis, particularly if he is toting in a load of grub on his back, or carrying a rifle and a bunch of traps. Moreover when he has to, a man on snowshoes can break a trail for his dog team. Snowshoes make the only track the dogs can follow.

By
Jim
Kjelgaard



THE RETURN

What forced John Gordon back to that wilderness cabin?

JOHN GORDON lingered in his bunk after Thomas and Mallory got up. Through half-opened eyes he watched them start a fire and prepare their meager breakfast. They ate slowly, savoring each bite, and when they were finished they put their exact rations for noon in their pockets.

Gordon lay as a sleeping man does. He heard the door open and shut, and cautiously opened his eyes. Thomas and Mallory had started on another of their hopeless quests for game—food.

Slipping quickly out of bed, Gordon went to the door, and opened

it to see Thomas' and Mallory's snowshoe tracks stretching into the spruce forest. Gordon closed the door, and his hand shook as he prepared his own breakfast. He controlled himself. The two men would hunt all day, and that was well. If they even suspected what Gordon was about, they would come back and kill him.

Gordon went ahead with the plan he had conceived last night. Mallory, Thomas and he had been in this cabin, five days, ever since they had left their wrecked plane. Mallory and Thomas were certain help would come and that they must do

what they could for themselves while they waited for it. There simply was not enough food to permit three men to make the long trip to the Salt River and Jorgensen's trading post.

But John Gordon was sure no help was coming. If three men stayed here, all three would starve. One, taking all the food, could reach the Salt, and Jorgensen's.

Shouldering the food he had packed, Gordon stepped outside. The intense cold struck him like a great, electric shock. He bent his head into his coat collar and struck southward, snowshoeing fast partly because of the cold and partly because he desperately wanted to put a long distance between himself and his two partners. He traveled until evening. Then he made his night fire.

He sat with his back against a tree, while the leaping fire cast its ruddy glow into the spruces and lent a bright orange shade to their green branches. The sudden crackle of a twig startled him and he looked fearfully around as though he expected to see Thomas and Mallory step out of the trees. Of course it was not—it could not be—they. Gordon laughed out loud, and instantly he was quiet. Imagined echoes of his own laugh came back to rebuke him, and mentally Gordon strove with them.

It was easy to lay down a set of rules and ideals, but not easy to abide by them when one's own life was at stake. Did it make sense to die, to stay in the cabin and be a sacrifice, just because Thomas and Mallory

thought it the thing to do? They were going to die anyhow, and at best the pitiful store of food could prolong their lives only a few weeks. He was not their murderer. The pangs of hunger they would know because he had run away with the food, they would have suffered anyway when that food was gone.

Gordon opened the pack. He took out a loaf of bread, a little parcel of bacon and the tiny store of tea. With his knife he sliced three long strips from the bacon. Setting his teakettle over the fire, he filled it with snow and watched the snow melt to nothingness. He added more snow, and when the kettle was three-quarters full of bubbling water, he took the small skillet he had packed and put that over the fire. Gravely he laid the three slices of bacon in it. Then, before him, rose the images of Thomas and Mallory.

It had been agreed that they, knowing better how to hunt, should hunt every day while Gordon did the camp chores and kept a supply of wood. Every night they had returned from their hunt, weary and hungry. There had been no game or even a sign of any. Yet, each night after Thomas and Mallory had eaten their small meal, they had spiritedly discussed the next day's hunt and the success they must certainly have.

Slowly Gordon took the skillet from the fire, picked the three slices of bacon out with his fingers, and dipped the grease up with his bread. He thought he was ravenous. Yet, though the hot tea was warming, the

bacon was strangely insipid and Gordon was surprised to see the cold grease white and hard on the bread. He ate it slowly, trying to enjoy each bite but finding it almost tasteless.

Gordon leaned with his back against a tree and tried to sleep, but visions of Thomas and Mallory would not let him slumber.

They must have returned to the cabin some hours ago, and found neither fire nor food awaiting. They . . . Gordon tried to shrug the picture away, and could not. But he must. It did not make sense for three men to die when one could live. Gordon dozed a little, and rose in the gray light of the next morning to go on.

Then he knew that he must turn back.

It was not a sudden decision, or a sentimental one. Gordon knew that, should the need arise, he could shoot both Mallory and Thomas and never suffer a qualm. He should have done that, or knifed them in their beds, or otherwise made certain that they were dead. To leave them dead would have been easy, or at least much easier than to leave them, and himself, with the certain knowledge that they were doomed. That had been his mistake. Dead people were just so much inert flesh. Live ones . . .

Gordon did not hesitate when he finally turned and swung back up the trail down which he had come. And, now that he had started back, some heavy and oppressive thing which he had carried seemed suddenly lifted from him. Thomas and Mallory

would despise him for his desertion and might even kill him. They could never hold him in contempt.

Gordon traveled very fast, and it was midafternoon when he finally came to the cabin. He approached it slowly but openly, and saw the tendril of blue smoke that curled from the chimney. Mallory and Thomas, then, were at home. Gordon opened the door, saw both men seated at the table, and at the same moment they saw him. There was a second's strained silence. Then Gordon said in the way he thought it should be said:

"The stranger's return."

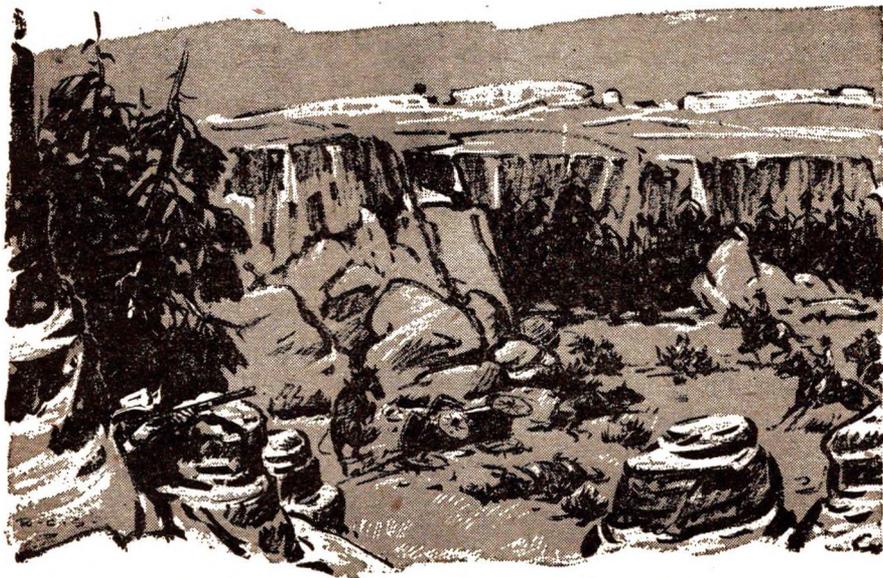
Thomas and Mallory looked awkwardly at each other, as though each was waiting for the other to speak. Mallory's face was heavy with shame when he finally faced Gordon.

"We . . . we don't blame you, John, for feeling the way you do. And"—he shrugged—"I really don't know why we did it. It was just after Tommy and I got the buck, and we sort of got to talking, and . . . Well, we thought it would see two of us through to Jorgensen's. But we just couldn't go on. I'm glad you smelled our smoke and came back. We located a whole yard of deer on the way back, and can get enough meat to stay here all winter if we have to. We . . . we felt pretty cheap when we blew in here three hours ago and you weren't here. But . . .

"We *did* come back!"

THE END

FORBIDDEN RANGE



I

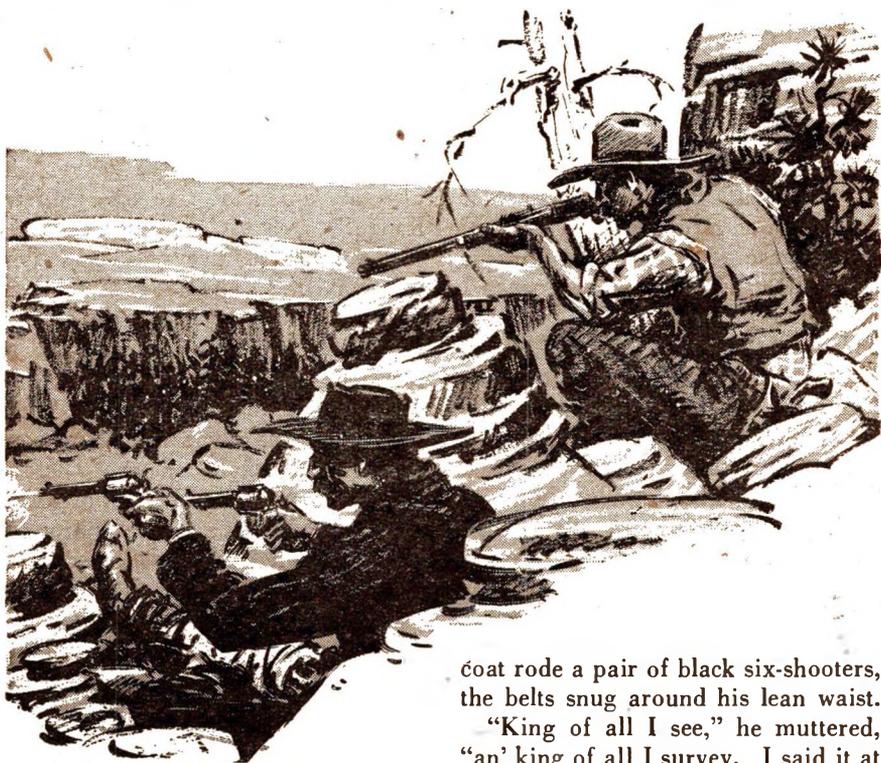
DESPITE an occasional stir of soft wind from the south, it was quiet on the east rim. The sun was two hours high in the air behind him, its light casting shadows through the pines and out on the ragged spur of moss-covered rock a thousand feet above

the canyon floor. But quieter than anything else for a long, long time now was Old Brand Stallion, tall, gaunt and grim there in the saddle of his tall black horse.

Dead-black clothing garbed him from the wide, flat-brimmed hat to the spurred heels of his boots. His hair was black, coarse and as straight

Threatened by invasion, split by mutiny, that renegade empire was doomed unless Brand Stallion's guns backed his claim that he was king of all he surveyed

By Tom Roan



as a bull's tail, thin lips a hard crack against his teeth. Under his left leg rode a rifle, under the right a blunt-nosed carbine. As something new along the Montana-Wyoming line, the sweat fenders of his huge old black Mexican saddle were filled with loops for cartridges for the rifle and the carbine. Under his long-tailed

coat rode a pair of black six-shooters, the belts snug around his lean waist.

"King of all I see," he muttered, "an' king of all I survey. I said it at the start. I'm still sayin' it. An'," he took a deep breath, "I'm damned if any man or men, wimmin or young uns, can do this to me—or even try to without some dyin' goin' on 'round here."

The man on another tall black horse four yards behind him was a long time in even thinking of answer-

ing him. Eldon Stallion was like his father in so many ways, men usually had to stop and stare to tell one from the other from a mile away. Eldon was tall, saddle-hardened to a certain gauntness, garbed like the older man and carrying the same weapons. But he was younger, just past his middle twenties, his eyes bluer but no sharper than those pale, flat-looking disks under Old Brand Stallion's shaggy white brows, the decided contrast to the coal-black hair.

"No, blast it, no." The older Stallion was grumbling to himself again, gaze still fixed on a scene down the canyon. "I said it when I come here thirty years ago. I'll still be king of these hills, these valleys an' canyons of the Outlaw Country when I die.

"*Eldon!*" It was as if he had just remembered that his son was back there behind him. "Why the devil don't you open yore mouth an' say somethin'! Can't you see what I see?"

"You generally do the talking." The younger man had not been startled by the sudden harsh rise in his father's voice. "It's always Brand Stallion, *Brand Stallion* alone! Devil take any man who might even try to get in a word until you've had your say—and especially if he might have guts enough to disagree with you!"

"An' you don't agree." The statement was matter-of-fact. The older man did not turn his head or move a muscle, hard old eyes set in their stare down the canyon. "Even after seein' what you see a-comin' down

yonder on the canyon floor! I've raised a brainless fool. Gutless at times, too, I think!"

"Blood of the stallion!" The first hint of a smile crossed the face of Eldon Stallion, but it was quickly gone. "You've said that for years!"

"Some day, right soon, maybe"—a scowl crossed the older face—"I ain't gonna be short when it comes to takin' a quirt an' wearin' it to a frazzle 'cross yore back. Look down the canyon! Look an' see what I'm a-seein' a-pourin' in on Outlaw Range!"

"I've looked, I've seen, and I'm still looking." The ghost of another smile came to the younger man's face. For the second time now he lifted a powerful pair of old German binoculars and put them to his eyes. "But I still argue, as others argue, that you can't own the whole country. There's probably ten thousand miles of hills, canyons and open rangelands around you that you have never used and never will. Sometimes I think I'd like to see this country filled with decent people around us instead of the rustlers and cold-blooded killers with which you have so damnably surrounded yourself from the beginning."

"Yo're a fool, as I said." Again Old Brand Stallion did not turn his head, only the faintest hint of a shrug coming from him. "Wanted men work cheap. They're afraid to let you down. But yo're like Margaret, yore mother, an' Eldeen, yore sister. You didn't get it from the good ol' Stallion side. No, by Satan! Ain't

nothin' but good, hard guts in a real Stallion. Same with the Gun-songs on my mother's side. Dammit, you picked up a yaller streak somewheres, Eldon. One day I'll beat it outa yuh, or blow yore brains from yore head! *Look down yonder!*"

It was as though Eldon Stallion did not hear. The glasses were at his eyes. There was really no need for them in this high, clear air, but he could not help bringing them back again and again on the leading rider down there a couple of hundred yards ahead of four giant old covered wagons that had come out from behind a bend half an hour ago.

Seven riders were just ahead of the wagons, big-hatted, booted and chapped men, butts of rifles glistening in the sunlight on their saddles, six-shooters and cartridge belts glinting. A woman drove the leading wagon, a slight figure in blue. A long-legged youth trailed with the second, old men bringing up the others.

Behind the wagons was what counted the most. It was an ever-growing herd of cattle, good-looking stock pouring slowly around that bend and stringing up the east bank of the little creek down there where long lines of cottonwoods grew. Behind the cattle would trail the horse herd, and possibly more of those enormous old wagons, for this was no small outfit venturing into the Outlaw Country for a summer of grazing. It was an outfit coming in to stay, to fight if it had to fight.

Eldon Stallion swept the glasses back to the leading rider. It was a tall girl on a tall black horse with an amazingly white mane and tail sparkling like silver in the sunlight. A big white hat was on the back of her head, her hair as yellow as new gold, dark-brown buckskins and high-heeled boots marking the rest of her.

"So, by Satan, so!" Old Brand Stallion had turned his head at last, eyes on the glasses. "Weak-eyed, too, I guess! Them glasses are on the gal down there, you can bet! Eldon, don't make me kill you 'fore this day's done. They're gonna start catchin' it down there, right soon now." He was slowly backing his horse from the spur, where a false step would mean a sudden fall to the rocks far below. "Set back an' watch it!"

There was little use in having mentioned it. A mile up the canyon above the overhanging spur was a heavy stand of timber. Out of the timber horsemen were suddenly pouring, big-hatted, chapped and booted, the sunlight harsh streaks on rifle barrels, six-shooters bristling down there as the gang swept forward, more than twenty of them. Old Brand Stallion chuckled and pulled at his long nose.

"Days ago I knowed this was a-comin'. I sent 'em word. They didn't lissen, just come on. Maybe ol' Trigger Sam Hatfield thinks that his purty yaller-haired gal's gonna be some help, but she won't."

"Trigger Sam Hatfield!" Eldon Stallion's eyes had widened. "That's a

Texas outfit! I saw him in Buffalo Bend two years ago." He nodded to southward, toward the railroad town forty miles away. "He came in with a trail herd!"

"An' the gal with 'im then," the old man smirked. "Maybe you saw 'er. Maybe you didn't, though there was some whisper of talk what come back to me 'bout you shootin' a gun out o' the hand of somebody tryin' to monkey with a gal when you was down there. I used to do fool things like that, m'self. Fact is, I had to kill a man over Margaret— Say, where'n thunder do you think you're goin'? Come back here, blast it!"

Knowing that blood was going to be spilled this morning unless something was done in a hurry, Eldon Stallion had suddenly steeled and wheeled his horse to the left. Ignoring the yells and cursing behind him, he kept going on down the rim. Instantly the hoofs of his father's startled and snorting black were behind him, sounding like the rattle of the devil coming with all bells ringing on the shale underfoot.

A glance at those riders spurring down the canyon had been enough. They were some of the toughest men to be found hiding out anywhere on Outlaw Range. Every man among them had a price on his head; some of them many prices. Their pictures and descriptions hung in the offices of jails all over the West, their crimes ranged from robbery, rustling, general hell-lifting to murder.

Personally, Old Brand Stallion had

never stolen cattle or horses in all his hectic life, and yet year after year his herds had grown, fall and spring roundups sometimes so huge they were startling, making him richer and richer. Only a fool would not have known the reason why cows and horses multiplied like that. These outlaws and many of the others hiding out back in this tall, deep country were constantly rustling at every opportunity. None boasted about it to Brand Stallion, but he had to know—and did know! When one of these wanted men decided it was safe enough to move on, he left with his pockets lined with gold, often with a new saddle and one of the half-thoroughbred horses for which Outlaw Range had grown famous for rearing.

Heading that mob in the canyon—mounted on a wall-eyed, high-headed half-outlaw sorrel—was Big Dude Gay, the wide ribboned sleeve bands on his arms fluttering in the wind with all the colors of a Christmas tree against the rest of his shiny black shirt. Summer or winter, he wore long-haired Angora chaps as white as snow. On his curly red head was a pearl-gray hat that had cost him seventy dollars, at his hips silver-mounted six-shooters rocking on elaborate Mexican belts, a two-gunner dangerous to both men and women, especially to the latter, his apple-butter face, glib tongue and ready smile too often hiding the true killer.

Dude Gay usually ruled every man in a gang when he rode at the head

of one. Old Brand Stallion was the one man on Outlaw Range who could make him come down off his high horse with a snap of the fingers.

Still in the lead and determined to keep it, the younger Stallion came to a break in the rim where a dangerous ledge led down in the face of the cliffs. He took it recklessly, Brand Stallion still yelling curses and threats behind. Usually a wild one himself when standing tall and straight in the saddle of a near-flying horse, the old man must have been galled to the marrow when he had to slow his pace, cursing the cloud of dust boiling up behind the horse ahead, broken bits of shale flinging out into space and rattling down the cliffs. By the time Brand Stallion reached the floor of the canyon his son was far ahead of him and riding straight for that pretty girl on the tall black horse with the silver mane and tail.

It must have been startling to all the Trigger Sam Hatfield crowd. The seven men behind the girl had hastily come up with their long rifles, swinging them across their laps, their faces tense, lips tightened—a Texas crew ready for a fight or a frolic! The girl tightened rein, looked for a moment as though she would wheel back, and suddenly had a change of thought. Swinging her horse to her right, she came galloping forward, straight toward the younger Stallion, a wide smile coming to her face. Then she was crying out to him:

“Mr. Eldon Stallion!” She pulled up quickly, looking back over her shoulder, voice louder. “Dad, come

here! I want you to meet someone who did me a service in Buffalo Bend—”

“Not now, Miss Hatfield!” Eldon had pulled up, dust now swirling around both of them. “There isn’t time! There’s danger here! We’ve got to stop this thing before somebody gets killed!”

“Watch the cattle, everybody!” A six-foot, ruddy-faced man on a tall white horse was yelling behind the girl as he came bounding forward. “Don’t leave your horse, Grace!”

There was little need to tell any girl of the range that. The cattle were beginning to spread up the east side of the creek, the grass here rich and in many places coming up to the knees. In a few minutes more everything would be quiet, but with cattle stirred into a sudden trot gunfire might start a stampede.

And it looked like gunfire coming. Dude Gay and the gang with him were swinging out, rifles reeling up to the crook of every man’s arm. In a line they came to a halt, every eye on Old Brand Stallion, every man waiting for him to pass Dude Gay the signal to begin. In a few minutes scores of heads of the cattle might start dropping from a merciless fire aimed at stopping their progress.

But something had come over Brand Stallion. His big right hand had lifted, a hold-it sign to Gay and his men. Face looking longer, gaunter and like old parchment now, he had slowed the pace of his horse. His keen old eyes were no longer on

his son, the girl and the men beyond her. Brand Stallion was staring across the creek, looking at a line of horses that seemed to have come out of the rocks and lower trees over there. Dismounted, standing behind each horse, was a Texan, a rifle cradled across the saddle—lined-up hell waiting for the fireworks to start and ready to meet it with a withering blast from more than twenty guns over there.

"Hum-mm-mm!" Brand Stallion was pulling up a dozen feet away now, eyes on the big, handsome man on the white horse. "Looks like somebody's come full prepared for war. Where'n blazes do you think yo're goin' with these cows an' them wagons?"

"The name's Hatfield." The man on the white horse jabbed his chest with his thumb and smiled. "Sam Hatfield, from the Brazos. That's my daughter. Her mother's driving the lead wagon. From what I've heard, I take it that you're Brand Stallion. Right?"

"An' never denied the name!" Stallion's lean lips warped into a leer. "Nor denied that this is my range. You an' yore gun crowd here an' across the crick ain't scarin' me. That little bunch"—he jerked his head toward the waiting Dude Gay—"is just a few of my men. How long is it gonna take you to turn this outfit an' get it out o' the canyon? I ain't givin' you too long."

"Mr. Stallion, get me straight." Trigger Sam Hatfield had ridden on, pulling up within a yard and leaning

forward in his saddle. "We're not here to be bluffed out or gunned out by you or anything that looks like, smells like or tastes like you. You're a two-gun bat with a great reputation for cold-blooded murder and high-handed rustling. You, I believe, call yourself king of the Outlaw Country. I'm not a king from anywhere, but if I have to fight you I've come for that. If you don't like what I have to say, now's the time to reach for your guns and we'll shoot it out here and now. If I go down it'll settle it. My outfit will turn and get out, taking my body with it. Those are my orders. And now"—he was smiling all the time, only his eyes were a steely blue—"if you've got any real guts, let's see the color of them. For my part I think you're an old fraud and haven't got guts enough to do your own fighting or rustling!"

Eldon Stallion had heard it all, had seen it all. Even yet he could not believe it. No man had ever dared to talk to Brand Stallion like that in the past. Men all over this country were afraid of him. With his wife and daughter it was the same, always afraid to open their mouths in fear of suddenly arousing his ever-ready ire. Eldon himself was the only one who had dared to quarrel with Brand Stallion now and then.

"We didn't come for war, if we can avoid it." Trigger Sam Hatfield was still letting the old man have it, not bullying but talking straight from the shoulder. "On the other hand, we polish no man's boots to keep from

it. I hate 'blood, Stallion, until it has to come. Then, by Satan, I like to see men die! My reputation in Texas is good. I keep no cheap wanted scum around me to do my fighting and stealing. I—"

"Hold it, Hatfield!" Brand Stallion lifted his right hand. "You talk damn big—for just one man. But you as good as talk to a fella with a gun in his belly." He nodded grimly toward the Texas line-up on the other side of the creek, cattle here pooling around them in a growing cloud. "We'll settle this later on. No man has ever beat me. No man ever will. Damn it, I'm *Brand Stallion!*"

"An' you—you dirty whelp!" He was suddenly spurring on past Sam Hatfield and heading straight to his son, pulling up right in front of him. "What you come bouncin' down here for is more'n I yet know, but I do know how you feel." His voice was grinding and shaking with anger now. "I can see purty yaller hair an' purty blue eyes, an' skin so soft an' smooth it might be satin. You want this country poisoned. You want people, like yore mammy an' yore fool sister. All right, *Eldon Stallion!*" He was turning his horse. "Let me tell you somethin'. For a long time I've been tired of yore lip an' yore fool ideas. Now the time's come to rid myself of them. Yo're through. Damn you, never darken my door ag'in or I'll kill you like a rattlesnake!"

"An' you, all mouth an' all guns"—he was glowering at Hatfield—"me an' you are just gettin' acquainted.

You'll hear my rattle, you'll feel my fangs. No man asks Brand Stallion for a fight without gettin' it. But let me tell you somethin' 'fore I go." He glanced back at his son. "I'm the kind to give even a rattlesnake some warnin'. Get rid of that thing I've just told off. There ain't a drop of loyalty in all his guts! He ain't got a thing on his head, his body or his feet that I didn't have to furnish the money for 'im to buy. I oughta leave 'im standin' here barefooted an' naked on the ground."

II

Brand Stallion was gone then, weaving his horse through the cattle, heading for Dude Gay and the gang. In a minute all were turning, riding back up the canyon, the old man in the lead, shoulders slightly slumped, eyes staring at the ground, not a one in the group daring to speak to him yet, knowing that he might suddenly call the lightning down on their heads.

"And that was Brand Stallion!" Trigger Sam Hatfield swung back to Eldon Stallion and his daughter, suddenly thrusting out his hand. "Thank you, young man, for what you did for my daughter two years ago in Buffalo Bend when a drunken fool tried to tie into her! But that's in the past!" He glanced at the departing crowd going up the canyon. "I heard then in Buffalo Bend about Eldon Stallion. And now"—he scowled—"I've met the great Brand and heard what he had to say to you. I'm sorry, young fellow. I've heard of such

men, but it has been my good fortune never to have met one face to face. Maybe you'll tell us why you came galloping down here as you did."

"To stop the flow of blood, nothing more!" Eldon Stallion was still white-faced and trembling from head to heel with humiliation. "Sometimes I think my father's crazy. . . . But I must tell you the rest of it." He glanced across the creek. "You seem to have come prepared. But if that's all your crowd, you haven't half enough to fight Brand Stallion. There's room here for you, room for a lot more decent men and . . . and"—he glanced at the girl—"women in this country. My mother and my sister would be overjoyed to see them come. But there's my father, and the gangs behind him. It's like he told you. You can't win, you can't talk it out, you can't reason it out, and there'll be too many against you to think of shooting it out. But I know you're a man who'll not back down.

"Go on up the canyon if you must. Four miles up, possibly a little more, there's a narrow break across the

creek in the west wall. Inside that break is an enormous basin sheltered by high cliffs, well-watered, the good bunch grass stirrup-high. We've never run a single cow or horse in it. Never needed it, never will! Go there if you must. Pitch your camp somewhere near the middle of it, far enough away to be out of range of gunfire from the rims. Guard the entrance, watch everything. I'll wish you luck. So will my mother and sister. And now"—he lifted his hat to the girl—"I'll say goodbye!"

"But where are you going!" cried the girl. "You heard what your father said! It was probably just an outburst of temper . . ."

"No, ma'am!" Eldon cut in firmly. "It's been a long, long time building up to this. Brand Stallion is a strong man. He was never known to change his mind, right or wrong. Again, I wish you luck."

"Listen, young man!" Sam Hatfield was trying to stop him. "I heard all Stallion said, even about what was on your back, head and feet! If there's anything you need, gold or silver—or friendship that'll never tarnish, all you have to do—"

"Don't, dad!" The girl reached out a quick hand, cutting him off, and for some reason her big eyes were full of moisture. "He . . . he's had too much to stand as it is. Let him go! Something tells me we . . . we'll see him again!"

But Stallion was gone and heard none of what she was saying. Weaving his horse through the cattle, he seemed to be heading southward, a



man not exactly knowing or caring where he was going.

Up the canyon Old Brand Stallion was riding grimly on, the rest respectfully keeping forty yards and more behind him. Even the self-sure Dude Gay dared not venture up beside him. No man made himself conspicuous when Old Storm Cloud—a name more than half of them called him behind his back—was in a black mood and ready to burst into a thunder-crashing hurricane, flinging right and wrong in front of him.

The slump that had come to his proud, ever-square shoulders was still there. The weight of the world seemed upon him, eyes yet staring at the ground ahead of him. He seemed dull and listless, as if made speechless by some tremendous pain, and yet his old head was a simmering kettle. It came up once, the eyes bitter as he looked at the sky, shoulders squaring, voice suddenly whispering low and fierce.

“If thy right eye offendeth thee, pluck it out!” he quoted. “An’ Eldon’s long been offendin’ me. Maybe, by Satan, I’ll have to take a buckboard whip to his mammy an’ sister to shut ’em up when they hear of it when I get home, but I’m Brand Stallion, an’ I’ll hold my own or die!”

He had always been like this, never changing, never relenting, asking no quarter, never giving it even to the dying. Hate filled him more now than ever. He had always hated the thought of any other outfit trying to settle in this wild mountain stronghold

around him. Men had had the gall to try it. In every instance he had whipped them out, always profiting from the herds of cattle and horses they had left behind when forced to flee. No man, no gang of men, had been able to stand long in the teeth of the wrath and killer fire of this self-anointed gun lord of the Outlaw Country.

Eldon Stallion had argued with him before, stepping out and away from the kills when there was blood to let, but he had never been as brazen as this. Something was wrong with the boy! Something had always been wrong with him, right from the cradle up. Sending him to school had probably ruined him. Letting him be named after the easy-going Eldeens on his mammy’s side! Naming him Eldon, and his daughter Eldeen! Margaret’s work! Margaret Eldeen, purtiest gal in Utah when he married her! Any man was a fool when he married a woman!

Kettle still simmering in that old head, he was even meaner when he finally swung eastward, mounting to the rim through a steep break in the canyon wall where wagons, horses and cattle were sometimes brought down or driven up. The mob behind still kept its distance, and the country now grew higher and higher until they were climbing to the towering rim of a great, head-shaped dome. Here in the center of it was the “castle of the lord” as some called it.

Pack mules had broken their backs, others had pulled gut and sinew apart carrying and snaking great logs up

here from the vast dark forest of fir, pine and oak on the lower slopes. In the center of it men had worked their brains out, digging and blasting a well two hundred and sixty feet down to strike a gushing stream of icy water as clear as crystal, brought to the surface and lifted into an eighty-foot tank now by a windmill that pumped night and day.

The "castle" was ponderous, having many rooms, three-fourths of which were never used, porches all around it, walks of flagstone going in all directions. Leaded windows looked out everywhere, the tops of a dozen chimneys showing above the various levels and pitches of the roofs. Inside, it was splendor personified, Oriental rugs that had cost small fortunes, pipe organ, piano, Swiss music boxes, paintings on the walls, a library crammed with beautiful volumes, not a one of which Brand Stallion had taken the time even to pretend to read.

Here was everything the heart could desire. Everything but friends to enjoy the blessings of his riches and the lavishness of his spending. But that was something that rarely occurred to Brand Stallion. He had no real desire for company. Cattle buyers came in the fall and spring. Army horse buyers came twice or three times a year. Strictly business, all of it. Four flat-faced Indian squaws and a Chinese cook did all the work, men on horseback jumped at the snap of Stallion's fingers or the *clang* of a bell calling them from the

great sea of bunkhouses, sheds, barns and corrals seven hundred yards down the east slope on a broad flat that was like the brim of a monstrous hat. No fool, young or old, needed anything else but this. Damn it, this *was* everything!

Still ahead of the gang when he came to the rim, Stallion sawed back on his reins, staring to his left as a drumming of hoofs came to him. He glowered, curled his lips and swore. The others stopped behind him. It was Eldeen, tall, dark-haired, wearing a beaded buckskin skirt and a shimmering blue shirtwaist, and mounted on a sleek pinto lathered with sweat.

"Well?" His voice was a growl when the girl bounded up, the pinto rearing to a halt—a mean devil that would probably some day kill her. Counting the gold and silver on it, the saddle under her was worth a thousand dollars, the bridle two hundred. "You been to a fire or just gettin' back from one, Eldeen?"

"Dad, something has happened!" The girl glanced down the slope, trying to keep her voice as low as possible. "Maybe you'd better let the others go on to the corrals and come on alone with me! Where . . . where's Eldon?"

"In his skin, I reckon!" he snapped at her. "What'n thunder's makin' yore eyes so big an' blue they look nigh ready to come poppin' out o' yore head?"

"Come on alone with me!" She swung in to his left, putting a quick hand on his arm. "I started out to find you and Eldon. But . . . but

please don't fly into a rage when . . . when you hear!"

"Hear what?" he said impatiently. "Oh, well, all right!" The sheer anxiety in her face must have changed him. Eldeen was no fool, not a girl to get excited over nothing. He looked back over his shoulder and barked a command. "You fellas go on to the bunkhouses! I'll call you by the bell when I want you. Stick 'round close!"

It was enough. Stallion saw Dude Gay swing to the left, the others following him. In grim silence he rode on with the girl, wondering what had come over her but determined not to ask any questions nor show too much curiosity. Curiosity sometimes made a man look weak. When they were far enough away she was talking again.

"Two deputy United States marshals were here more than an hour ago, dad!" She paused, waiting for him to say something, but he was too iron-lipped for that. "They brought a warning!"

"They've brought warnin's before! Same thing, I suppose!"

"Your kingdom's falling, dad!" Those words jarred him inwardly but not outwardly. "The government's opening up half the country around you as free rangeland!"

"They've tried it before an' it didn't work!"

"This time it will, dad!" It looked as if Eldeen was about to burst into tears. "They said they'd send soldiers if they had to, to keep the law. Oh, dad!" She leaned to him, a sob

coming from her. "I'm . . . I'm trying to say that you're just about through as the king of all you see, all you survey! You can't fight the entire United States!"

"Don't aim to!" He laughed at her, still the iron-hard ruler of the mountain stronghold. "When cows come they'll come in a bunch at a time. In a bunch at a time I'll have them taken!"

"You . . . you have an awfully sad awakening coming this morning, dad! I . . . I feel so sorry for you!"

"Sorry, hell!" He roared that at her, lifting his right fist, a Spanish quirt now dangling from the dark wrist like a curling and writhing blacksnake. "I'm no damn weak-lin'! I need sympathy from none!"

III

Silent now, Eldeen led the way on to the log hitchrack in front of the west porch, and swung out of her saddle. He saw Margaret then in the doorway, dark-haired, her eyes hazel and shot with green, pretty as a picture yet. She looked tired, strained, moving back to let them pass as the girl led the way on into the house. Eldeen swung to the left, Brand Stallion following her up a stairway, then another and a third to a round tower on top of all the roofs. Here was a powerful telescope mounted on a tripod. The girl rushed to it, sighted through it, and stepped back with a nod.

Brand Stallion swore, and stepped forward to take a look. In a moment

he was a man with every muscle tensed to steel. The telescope was pointing to the northeast. Coming down a great canyon in the far distance was a giant herd of cattle trailed by seven enormous covered wagons lumbering along in the morning sunlight.

"Now," whispered the girl, "look straight east, then to the southeast. They're coming from all directions, dad! I've counted six, and there may be yet more. They're surrounding us!"

"Well, by Satan!" A whisper of laughter came from him, as mirthless as a rattlesnake's buzzing. "Looks like the Outlaw Country's gettin' damned interestin' an' mighty, mighty popular all of a sudden, don't it!"

"Yes, dad!" Again Eldeen Stallion's voice was a tense whisper, her face still pale, eyes big. "Perhaps now you can understand what I meant when I said that the gun lord of the Outlaw Country is just about through as a king of all he surveys."

"I'm still Brand Stallion." His voice rumbled, but there was a faint sign of a nervous tremble in his thunder as he kept swinging the powerful telescope from one window to another in the tower.

"I'm the king of the Outlaw Country." His voice thunder-rumbled as he continued to swing the telescope and stare through it, seeing a thousand times more today than he had ever thought he would see. "I'm the law an' the king, an' only death will rob me of my throne!"

"And death is so easy, dad, and sometimes so foolish!" Eldeen put an unsteady hand on his shoulder. "We've seen so much of it here. I detest the thoughts of it, the men who make it so simple! Any fool can die and . . . and go to hell!"

"Sure!" He chuckled now, straightening for the moment. "Just as fools have died around here an' gone to hell in the past! It won't be no different, Eldeen. Just a little more fightin', a little more blood."

"Where is Eldon, dad?" Her tone was gentle. "Why isn't he here?"

"Eldon Stallion won't be here no more!" He turned, glowering, Old Storm Cloud ready to burst and scatter lightning all over. "Eldon Stallion— Well, by Satan, Eldon Stallion's dead!"

"Dead!" Her half-scream filled the tower. "Dad, no!"

"Dammit, yes!" He was roaring now. "To you, to me, an' to yore fool mother! If he ever darkens this door ag'in I'll kill 'im, my own son, as quick as I'd kill a rattlesnake! An' you, now!" His left hand shot up, catching her by the arm in a fierce grip. "Don't you ever mention his name to me ag'in!"

"What are you saying, Brand?" Margaret Stallion's voice came to them from the head of the stairway. "What has happened to Eldon? I'm not afraid of you. In my heart I've never been. My seeming cowardliness for so many years has only been my lost respect for you. Tell me what I ask, and don't try to roar me down. If you do I can pack up, take

Eldeen with me in a buckboard, and go away forever, from all this blood I've seen so long."

"Margaret, what are you sayin'?" Brand wheeled and strode toward her, a strange expression in his eyes and face that might have been sudden fear coming to this man of iron at last. "You'll go where?"

"What happened to Eldon, Brand?" Never had he seen her so quiet, never so calm and collected, standing there at the head of the steps, her forearms on the railing, her loose hands looking tired and frail. "I have listened to terrible things before. Tell me."

"I sent 'im away, that's all." He caught her small face between his big palms, but for some reason he was gentle now. "It wasn't no mistake. It's been a long time acomin'. There's a cow outfit in Music Wind Canyon. 'Cause of a purty gal, Eldon left me an' went to 'em. He went to stop me from drivin' 'em out. I couldn't stand it. To keep from killin' 'im, I told 'im to stay away from here. That he must do, Margaret, 'cause my own son ain't no better'n anybody else when he sets his mind to cross me, an' I'll kill 'im the same as any other man who turns his hand agin' Brand Stallion. That's me, Margaret, if you ain't forgot. After all, I was never a fatherly man, an' only wanted you."

"You are a devil, Brand." She still faced him, looking up at him now in a cold, mounting resentfulness.

"As I am, so I be!" He almost

picked her up, moving her to one side. Pushing past her, he went on down, booted feet heavy on the stairs, the spurred heels tinkling. "But," he flicked back his shoulders when he was halfway down, "I'm still Brand Stallion, never licked in my life, never will be. Soon now I'll kill another man."

He was suddenly thinking of Trigger Sam Hatfield. By talking to him as he had talked, by bullying him in front of his own son, that tall Texan had as good as signed his death warrant—even if Brand Stallion never killed another man in his life!

But he was shaken now, not outwardly. It was all on the inside, not to be let seen on the outer surface. Strong men never cowered, never let anybody know that ever a smattering of fear came to them. And all this would pass. Everything passed in time. All he needed now was a chance to get out and think in the clear air, away from everybody, letting no other thoughts but his own have full sway.

At the hitchrack he swung back in the saddle. For a few moments he sat there, looking down the slope at the corrals, studying the crowd there. They knew! They had seen those cattle in the distance, coming from the northeast, the east and the southeast. None, of course, had seen what was coming from the other directions west of the great hump here. He wondered how they were taking it, what they were thinking.

All told, he could rake in seventy to eighty fighting men hiding out in these wild hills, deep canyons, basins and narrow gorges. Some might be flushed out like scared birds when they saw all the cattle and fighting men pouring in. A man could not trust all of them, no more than half of them if that much. But he would wait. When nightfall came he would send riders in all directions, a fighting man calling in his wolves for the slaughter.

Swinging away, Brand was gone until late in the afternoon, returning when the sun was low on the broken mountain ranges in the west. He had seen more and more at closer hand. At the hitchrack he tossed his reins around the saddlehorn, gave the black a slap that sent him on down toward the corrals, and walked into the house, as hungry as a bear.

"Fix me a bowl of that Chinese mustard green soup you make so well, Sing Lee!" he ordered briskly when he walked on into the long kitchen and dining room. "Where's the folks?"

"Glo lay." Sing Lee faced him nervously. "In bluckblood. Take tlunks, sluit casees, blundles."

"What'n hell you tryin' to say!"

"They glo lay." The old Chinaman shrugged and opened his hands helplessly. "Blucktooth drive. Maybeso glo Blufflo Blend."

Damn! Brand glared around the room, then tramped back through the rest of the house. A quick look inside Margaret's and Eldeen's rooms con-

vinced him, the empty closets and dresser drawers staring, making a cold, sick lump in the pit of his stomach.

"Deserted, in an hour like this!" It was like a low groan coming out of him, startling him. Wheeling, he strode back to the kitchen, a yell coming out of him. "Fix that soup! Then drag it down to the corral and tell— No, I'll take care of it with the bell." He turned again, walked back into the huge living room, and gave a silken-tasseled cord a jerk, the short, almost fierce *clang!* of a bell sounding over the roofs of the house and floating down the slopes.

IV

The one *clang* of the bell always called long and lean old Doc Cobey, thirty years ago one of the best doctors in the Southwest. Cobey had been here before Eldon and Eldeen were born, helping Margaret through both the ordeals. Still a master in the art of handling wounded men, cutting bullets out of them, setting broken bones, often doing a major operation in the dead of night by the light of lanterns, he was the one man who had the run of everything, including a long-log sod roof of his own down there on the flat south of the corrals. Stallion glowered when he came in and seated himself at the dining table for a cup of coffee.

"An' what'n thunder," rumbled Stallion, "wouldja know 'bout this business of Margaret an' Eldeen high-tailin' it in a buckboard with that

half-fool, little Bucktooth Pete Grady, drivin' 'em?"

"I tried to talk them out of it, Brand." Cobey was never a man to flinch when it came to straight talk. "But it's been a long, long time in coming. Brand, you've been too damned self-centered, uncaring for anybody but yourself. Today, when you sent Eldon away it was the last straw. They've gone to find Eldon, to join him."

"That was my damn business!"

"Everything's your damn business, Brand." The old doctor smiled at him. "I just got through saying that! Don't snarl at me. I've never frightened very easily. Besides, I've been your friend these many years, ever since trouble befell me in the Southwest. My loyalty has never been questioned."

"But you still like my wife, my daughter—an' maybe Eldon—better'n you have ever liked me, Doc!"

"Everybody does, Brand," the doctor smiled. "You let people get only so close to you, and then you slap them away. Margaret told me to tell you not to follow her. But there's something. I must tell you. Dude Gay and Beauty Smith followed that buckboard away from here. With them trailed Buck King, Cross Bender, Ace Hightower, Bloody Bart McKee, Tiger Luke Tracy and Bud Frio. All told, eight of the toughest men up here. When I had a chance to look around—well, Brand, it looked as if they'd gone for good. They took about everything they owned that was worth taking."

"So!" Brand Stallion let the word come out like a purr. "An' how long they been gone? Time to get far?"

"They left within two hours after you rode away." Again that cold, mirthless smile came back to the doctor's face. "I'm speaking of Margaret, Bucktooth and Eldeen. Dude and his bunch pulled out about forty minutes behind them. They'd seen all those cattle and men pouring in. Others down there. Brand, think the jig is up. Don't depend on too many friends if the going gets tough. I'll be here until I die. After all these years they'll never want me back in Texas. I've only killed one man in my life. I went to school to learn how to save life and—"

Brand Stallion suddenly cut him short by springing to his feet and banging back to the living room. Seconds later he was jerking repeatedly on the tasseled cord, the harsh pealing of the bell ringing down the slope, now calling all men in hearing distance. When he stepped back into the dining room he was as white-faced as a ghost.

"Dude Gay's allus tried to shine up to Eldeen!" he growled. "I ain't liked the way Beauty Smith's been lookin' at Margaret of late. She was kind o' afraid of that purty clothes hoss, him with all his fancy clothes, his fancy guns an' wild red hair! I'm a-followin' that buckboard, Doc! Not," he added hastily, the expression in his face giving his words the lie, "that I'm carin' a straw 'bout Margaret an' Eldeen comin' back. I just ain't lettin' Dude Gay an' Beauty

Smith slip a damn thing over on me. You stick here an' sort o' watch out for things with the men I leave behind. I won't be long, knowin' all them shortcuts like I know 'em!"

"Somebody else can stay here, Brand." Doc Cobey came to his feet, tall, straight and grim now. "I'm riding with you. And just to let you in on a little secret, I've already sent four good men to trail Dude and Beauty. I know how Dude feels about Eldeen. I know how Beauty has been looking at Margaret, and there's not a damned thing those two won't do, now that they think they've got to quit this country, anyway."

Sing Lee came to the table at that moment with a steaming bowl of soup. Never a man to deny himself anything when he wanted it, Stallion sat there wolfing the soup down while Cobey stepped outside to talk to the gang that had come hurrying up, giving hasty orders that sent them scurrying back to the corrals. Fifteen minutes later Doc's long old sorrel—his medicine and surgical bags on the saddle—and a fresh black horse for Stallion were brought up. Stallion scowled when he stepped outside and looked at the gang.

"Me an' Doc'll go!" he growled. "I ain't needin' all this bunch just to stop a couple of fellas. Stick here an' watch over things. An' don't get scared"—his voice lifted to a mean pitch—"at a few campfires you may see burnin' round you in the distance when it gets good an' dark! Campfires have blazed here in the distance

before—an' gone out in due time. We won't be too long."

But the sun was already gone behind the hills, only a blob of its light here and there on the distant peaks. By the time they were slipping into the lower reaches twilight was on them, shadows pooling in all directions, some blue-black along the foot of canyon walls and the narrow gorges. With real darkness around them, they heard hoofs coming when they were only a few miles away.

"Somebody comin' back!"

"Sounds like three or four horses, Brand!" Cobey had pulled rein just to his left, head cocked to one side. "Might be the men I sent. I hope not! There they are!"

A rider had just come around a bend. Behind him trailed three more horses, heavy objects across their saddles. In a few moments they were staring at the tall, thick-chested Tobe Keller, one of the men the doctor had sent out. Keller was slumped forward, both hands on his saddlehorn, the horses behind him in single file. Blood covered his face and chest, and only his grip on the saddlehorn was keeping him on the horse.

"Ambush . . . a few miles on!" he muttered. "No warnin'. Just . . . a let loose . . . of guns! Left me for dead. Other fellas . . . are! I picked up the dead. Was tryin' to, anyhow, when Eldon come."

"Eldon!" Brand Stallion let the word fall out of his mouth. "What in hell was he doin'—"

"Catch 'im, Brand!" The doctor

shot his horse forward. "Looks like he's a goner now!"

"Don't pass out on us, Tobe!" Stallion was cursing when he struck the ground, breaking Keller's fall as he let him down. "Blast it, I want to know what Eldon was doin' there! I—"

"It's no use, Brand!" Doc Cobey had leaped down for a quick look. "Keller's through! Must have been dying when he got back in that saddle!"

"Just like a damn man, ain't it!" Stallion straightened, glaring on down the trail. "My luck's runnin' bad today, maybe. Still, though, I've seen worse things than this. But"—he shrugged—"we'll just tie 'im back across that saddle, an' let the horse take 'im on home with the rest of 'em to sort o' tell the others what they might expect.

"Anyhow, they must've been ridin' like a gang of plain damn fools!" He kicked at a stone, a big, round-faced moon beginning to swing up over the hills behind him. "Had to be in a fool bunch to get shot up like this! Not a smart one among 'em! Come on. We can't waste time. Grab hold of 'im. Jehoshaphat, ain't he heavy! Allus did puzzle me why a man seems so damn much heavier dead than alive.

"'Nother thing, too." He was bent over, getting a good grip on the dead man. "Don't it seem plumb queer how these fellas just get started tellin' yuh somethin', then get a dazed, dry-pill-swallowin' look in their eyes an' keel over dead 'fore they finish?"

Together they roped the body across the saddle, and gave the horse a slap, sending him on with the others following with their dead. Turning, about to swing back in the saddle, Stallion was suddenly stiffening, head cocking to one side as he listened to the faint sounds of distant gunfire coming to them like a whispering echo out of the west.

"Music Wind Canyon, Doc!" He clicked his teeth. "Sounds like hell on a let loose, don't it? Let's get goin'!"

He swung up and spurred his horse on down the trail, the doctor following, the dead going home behind them, the living going on to fight.

V

Cobey let the distance widen between him and Stallion as they rode. Had Tobe Keller and the others done this, some of them would have yet been alive and not shot to pieces like bunched quail.

Stallion seemed to have forgotten everything else but the noise he had heard, and they were soon swinging up and up to higher ground. On a

What's In A Brand Answers (page 87)

1. Broomtail; 2. W in D, Lass: Windlass; 3. Get on the Ball; 4. I B long 2 U: I Belong to You; 5. Bat L Ax: Battle-ax; 6. Soup and Fish; 7. Bell without a clapper: Dumbbell; 8. 2 in D, pendent: Too Independent; 9. Backfire.

rim there he pulled up, listening again. There were no sounds now, and even had firing been going on at the moment he might not have heard it. There were no walls up here to carry noise like sounding boards, and Stallion plunged on, pausing only once more before he came to the high rim of Music Wind Canyon, a few miles below the bend where Trigger Sam Hatfield and his crowd had appeared.

Silence again held them, Cobey easing his horse up to the left as they sat there listening, the moon brighter and brighter behind them. A sound finally came, apparently from far up the canyon. It took a minute to tell for certain that it was gunfire breaking out again, and once more they were moving, hammering along the rim.

"It's beyond Bullsnake Bend!" Stallion pointed to the left where the canyon started twisting away to the west. "We'll short-cut here!"

Going straight on for a time, the rim twisted itself back to them, the canyon deep and wide here, moonlight flooding it. As they pulled up they saw a dark shape just coming from around the last bend, and knew it even in the shadows as a buckboard drawn by two big, dark horses. As it cleared the bend, a rifle blazed a yard-long ribbon of flame behind it, the flash so quick they could not tell which way it had gone until another had come, other shots sounding down the canyon behind it.

"Somebody," grunted Stallion, "is tryin' to protect that buckboard.

Reckon that can be Margaret an' Eldeen down there, Doc?"

"No one else, Brand!" The old doctor was grim-faced. "Who it is behind— Well, damn it, there's only one guess! It has to be Eldon! This means that Dude Gay short-cutted. Eldon somehow got there. Now he's trying to hold them off. Look! There's a gang coming round the bend. Too much for one man down there, Brand!"

"An' we can't get down to 'em from here." Brand Stallion's voice had grown tightly sober. "Not for three miles yet. But it's Margaret an' Eldeen. Dammit!" He whipped back his shoulders. "Maybe this'll show 'em they can't run out on me like a couple of rabbits!"

"Margaret's driving!" Cobey was bending forward in his saddle, the buckboard getting closer to the eastward wall. "I wonder what happened to Bucktooth Pete Grady!"

"Probably dived off the seat an' high-tailed it at the first sign of trouble!" Stallion's voice was mean again. "Half-witted fool! To start out with him would show that both them wimmin was crazy!"

"Eldon's horse stumbled, Brand!" Cobey was still watching intently, another burst of gunfire filling the canyon down there. "Maybe he's hit! Let's go on to where we can get down and try coming back to meet them!"

"We'll stick here, Doc." Like a weathervane swinging with the play of the wind, Stallion's tone had be-

come tightly sober again. "If we only had some way of signaling 'em to swing close to this side we could be a lot of help up here. That's Dude behind 'em, all right."

"And all eight together yet!" The old doctor nodded. "Those who waited to wipe out Tobe and his three must have gone on to catch up. I hope you'll one day remember that I told you several times that I didn't like to see you letting Dude Gay hang around!"

"Too late to talk now." Stallion scowled but kept his voice down. "Wonder why he didn't let 'em get closer to Buffalo Bend? Don't answer that un!" He jerked up his hand. "His picture's smeared all over down there, in the sheriff's office an' in ever' saloon an' dive."

"Besides," Cobey frowned, "that's open country, Brand. Dude would want the hills, the Outlaw Country proper. There's miles and miles of this country neither of us has ever seen, and he has some place where he thinks it'll be safe. Don't think there aren't others who'll side in with him, now that these big cattle drives have started. I've thrown hints your way lots of times, Brand." A glint had come into the doctor's eyes. "You're never a man to listen to anybody but Brand Stallion! Not a third, maybe not a fifth, of these outlaws ride for you 'because they like you. Most of them hate your guts, your overbearing manner. You have a mean tongue—"

"Looks like they're comin' closer!"

Stallion spoke as if he had not been listening to a thing Cobey was saying. "An' . . . an' nobody's shootin' at the buckboard back there. It's Eldon they wanta drop, if it is Eldon! Damn it, Doc"—he stiffened suddenly in his saddle—"they're bullet-herdin' that buckboard up the canyon! They ain't really tryin' to stop it—an' that means it's goin' where they want it to go!"

"Let's try going on and comin' back, Brand!"

"Shut up!" Stallion turned his head and glowered. "Ain't I told you once we was gonna stick here? I ain't never wrong, Doc! Hell an' damn, fightin's been my business almost since I was big enough to cradle a six-gun in my hand. If Eldon gets killed down there, it's his own fool lookout. We stick here where we can watch the show, sort o' movin' on with it until our chance comes."

In spite of his arrogance, he was usually right in such things. It soon looked as if he was right here. The buckboard came closer, then it was swinging away. Margaret was having sense enough down there to hold the horses to a steady pace, not pouring the whip into them, not going to run them so fast they would drop dead in the harness.

Eldon was showing some sense, also. For a moment Brand Stallion could admire his son. Eldon was keeping fairly close to the buckboard, as if he knew that no bullets would be fired into it, maybe realizing by now that this was a bullet-herding job

and firing just enough to keep the gang behind at a fairly safe distance.

Feeling better about it, Brand Stallion was soon leading the way on but keeping the buckboard in sight. With her horses down there slinging ropes of sweat lather, Margaret kept them coming, never making it too hard on them, once actually slowing them down to a walk. Maybe Margaret knew now that this was a bullet-herding job and was playing it out with all the help Eldon could give her.

When they were finally getting to the break in the rim where cattle could go up and down, even wagons, Brand Stallion was letting his tall horse out in a run. He struck the sea of pines. Just as he started out of them he was suddenly pulling up, seeing eleven riders ahead of him racing for the top of the break. One of that gang let out a yell:

"That's Brand Stallion! *Get 'im!*"

"Fall back in the clear!" yelled Cobey. "I told you you could look for a double-cross all the way around! *Duck it, Brand!*"

Even Cobey's voice was not enough to drown the sudden burst of gunfire that now greeted them, Stallion's horse going down as a bullet from a carbine struck him in the chest, ranging back deep inside him like a knife straight to the heart.

Doc Cobey's horse fell an instant later, caught squarely through the head by a bullet as he flung to the left. With a single grunt it went down, the doctor rolling like a bounding ball in the bushes and rocks.

Stallion was hit even as his horse was reeling to the left and going down. A stab of pain tore through his right leg at the knee, the sudden agony enough to make him cry out in a voice that might have come from a wounded cougar. In the air the next instant, coat tails spread, he was like a long, lean old bird of the sky flying down to a quick landing, but even as he was leaving the saddle, he had been fast enough to haul up his carbine. Now on his face, chest and nose, he landed among the rocks. In a wheel-over that was lightning itself, the wounded leg a broken, bone-grating thing, he let the carbine drop beside him and was coming up with those long black .45's from his belt, sudden streaks of fire roaring from his old hands.

Cobey had suffered less. His horse had come down on all fours, falling between two big rocks, knees doubled under him. The doctor had gone on as if blown from the muzzle of a gun, coming to a halt in a ball against a rock faced with a clump of brush. No real fighting man by any standard, he sawed up a six-shooter, knowing that it was a sell-out here, a place either to shoot it through to a finish or die.

Brand Stallion's six-shooters were still drumming, the Old Storm Cloud really letting the lightning fly. Two men in the break reeled in their saddles and fell. Two more plunged forward, pawing for their saddle-horns, their wheeling horses pitching

on down and out of sight with them in the break.

Cobey's six-shooter was slower, but he turned a man in the saddle, then swore when he heard a horse bawl. Then the fight-back from the break was cleared, men lunging their horses on down and out of sight, Stallion and Cobey letting up with their firing when there was suddenly nothing left to shoot at. Out of the seemingly dead silence here now, the roaring of the weapons having wiped out all lesser sounds, Cobey spoke, voice intensely sober.

"Are you all right, Brand?"

"No, dammit, I ain't!" Stallion's answer was an enraged roar. "Right leg's gone, bones of the knee busted all to hell! Might—have to cut the damn leg off 'fore yo're done. You all right, doc?"

"Outside of bruises . . . I think! Listen!" Cobey jerked up his hand. "Must be Eldon right below us, Brand. Sounds like they're all piling into it at one time. Stay where you are."

He crawled back to his horse, managed to get his rifle, and turned back to the rim. A fringe of brush hid his face as he looked down, a wide half moon of gunfire stabbing down there. The buckboard was out of sight now, and he knew that it was under the overhang here of the cliffs. Evidently Margaret Stallion had tried to turn up the break, intending to head straight homeward, but she had been cut off, seeing riders above her, and she had swung in down there behind a fencelike

wall of rocks, Eldon riding in to join her.

Not until he had slid himself out further in the protecting brush could Cobey see what had happened down there. He could see the wheels of the buckboard now. It had been turned over on its right side, a dead horse torn from his harness and lying there on its left side. Then he saw Eldon's horse. It had been brought down by a bullet and was lying in the brush three or four rods from the rocks down there. Sliding back, the doctor reached for his rifle. At that moment Brand Stallion came crawling up, a writhing old blacksnake on the ground. Painfully, he took a look down, and slid his carbine forward.

"Now we'll give Eldon some real help!" Never a man to show pain if he could help it, his voice was hard-gripped. "The boy's a chip off the old Stallion block now—even if he was goin' wrong on me!"

With a rifle and a carbine opening up on them, the outlaws below were soon forced to fall back, two of their number down there dropping in the rocks and brush ahead of the places where they had left their horses. Instantly accepting the firing from the rim, they were soon hammering the rocks here with lead, spurts of dust rising, wailing bullets splattering, glancing, turning upward in the air, some of them with shrill whistling sounds.

"Fall back a little!" warned Stallion, face splattered with bits and

needles of shattered rock. "We have a fair place to keep shiftin' an' fightin'—if it wasn't for this damn leg! Maybe you better take one of yore doctor knives an' just finish cuttin' it off."

"This is no place for a surgical operation, Brand, but I'll have a look and see what I can do." Cobey turned toward him, taking out a knife and preparing to cut Stallion's trouser leg away. "This fight's just beginning. If we get out of here alive it's far more than I'd bet on right now. Don't be surprised to see more and more come into this—and they won't be on your side. They know you're through, no longer king of all you survey. The temerity of even trying to grab off Margaret and Eldeen has a hell of a lot more behind it than a mere kidnaping. Another king had been picked for Outlaw Range, Brand. Yes, just that. He'll be one who'll dance to the tune of the rest of the wild outlaw bunch."

Stallion cursed him, but he was grim and thoughtfully silent three hours later, lying there with rude splints from cut and trimmed pine limbs on his leg to keep it straight, the flow of blood stopped.

The fighting had staggered back and forth, bursts of firing coming, then long periods of silence. They were stuck here, unable to move back, or go down, cocked guns waiting for them in the break. Others had come up, sneaking into a half-circle behind the rim. Down below, Margaret, Eldeen and Eldon were all still there and unable to move out of the rocks,

the gang in front of them waiting, marking time.

"Waiting for the moon to get over on the other side of the canyon," whispered Cobey. "Then they'll pick off Eldon. They're not going to harm the women if they can help it. Both can write checks on the money you've got in the banks all around. They can sign over cattle, land and horses. Dude Gay's smarter than he ever looked. Wait and see!"

Gunfire roared at them from the pines and rocks to eastward an hour later. Creeping figures there had moved up as if an inch at a time. The first blast sent bullets all around them, Stallion grunting as a dull, sickening pain drove through his stomach.

But it was no wipe-out yet. Old Brand Stallion was fighting as he had never fought before, jammed back, in the rocks, six-shooters rising and falling, Doc Cobey drumming away to his right and constantly shifting his position, a man who believed in saving life turned into a relentless killer trying to make every bullet count.

It was going against them and could not have lasted another twenty minutes when a second noise came into the firing, appearing to shake the rim. Lying on his back, blood streaking from the corners of his tight-lipped mouth, Brand Stallion recognized the sudden beat as that of hammering hoofs, a wild yelling lifting out of it, added gunfire a raging

storm. Then a voice came, just as wild as the rest of it:

"Hold your fire on us, dad! It's Eldon with a crowd to help you!"

Now it was murder, ruthless slaughter. Men who had been creeping up in the rocks were turning, trying to flee, horsemen racing in with blazing weapons to cut them down, even when some of the outlaws threw up their hands and tried to surrender.

"Texans, Brand!" Cobey had to yell to make him hear above the noise of the mad din. "They're below us, too. Sweeping down the canyon to wipe out the mob there in front of Margaret and Eldeen. Eldon managed somehow to get away and go for that help. Naturally, he had to go to that Texas crowd—"

"An' that damn Trigger Sam Hatfield!" Stallion bit out the words through bloody lips and teeth. "There was the yaller-haired gal I told you about. Purty. Mighta made me do fool things when I was young as Eldon. But . . . but he'll never be like me! He ain't hard enough. He . . . couldn't . . . be made . . . hard!"

"Better for everybody, Brand." Cobey mopped his lips with his

old neckerchief. "Eldon will be the makings of this country. Where you fought to be whole hog, he'll give the lesser fry a chance, and' still be a finer, better king by kindness, by fairness. than a wolf gobbling everything with pistol balls. Are you listening, Brand? Looks like all the firing's coming to a quick end. Maybe then I can do something for you to . . . to . . ."

But Brand Stallion was not listening. He did not hear the cheering break out below, Margaret and Eldeen crying out to men, an answering burst of jubilation lifting here on the rim. Even when Eldon came up, he did not see him, did not hear him.

Brand Stallion was lying there as he had always said he would lie when the end caught up with him. Hot six-shooters were in his limp old hands, a carbine across his lap, empty cartridge shells flung all around him, eyes hard and wide-open as they looked up at the moon above the trees without seeing it.

"'King of all I see, king of all I survey!'" Cobey stood above him a short time later, hat in his hand. "Like that he lived, Eldon. Like that he believed he was dying. Still the king of the Outlaw Country!"

THE END

SIGNS AN' SYMPTOMS

*When a cowpuncher rides with his head carried low,
He's hidin' some feelin's he'd rather not show;
But when there ain't nothin' he wants to keep hid,
It's always r'ared back like a coffeepot lid!*

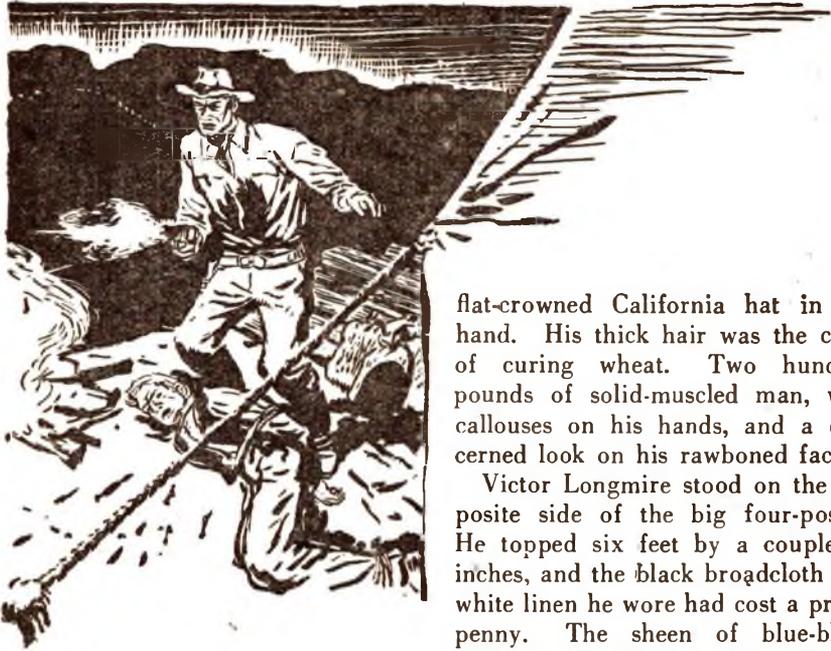
S. OMAR BARKER



"I bequeath you trouble," were almost the last words spoken by tough old Hugh Longmire, and they were words that set brother against brother in a merciless

CROSSFIRE

By M. Howard Lane



I

THE Central Pacific brought one of Hugh Longmire's sons to Valentine. The U.P. brought the other, and there the similarity ended.

They met, for the first time in five years, at the bedside of their father, and Hugh Longmire stared at them out of green eyes that oncoming death had faded to a neutral gray. He looked them over impartially—a pair of sons to make a father proud—but all that came out of the old man was a derisive sniff from his long nose.

"Ye're neither as tough as I've been!" he said.

Dennison Longmire, six feet tall, dressed in conservative gray, with a

flat-crowned California hat in his hand. His thick hair was the color of curing wheat. Two hundred pounds of solid-muscled man, with callouses on his hands, and a concerned look on his rawboned face.

Victor Longmire stood on the opposite side of the big four-poster. He topped six feet by a couple of inches, and the black broadcloth and white linen he wore had cost a pretty penny. The sheen of blue-black whiskers beneath his skin was the color of his hair and eyes.

Old Hugh kept studying them, and the stroke that had laid him on his back had twisted his mouth into a permanent sneer. "I'm dying," he said flatly, "and I've got only one regret. I wish I could have lived long enough to see you two roosters fight it out for the Longrope."

"You'll outlive us both, dad," Dennison said with a catch in his throat. "We'll get you back on your feet."

"Look," Vic Longmire cut in, "I got the sawbones' telegram in Chicago, telling me to get out here quick. So I come along. But I've got a heap of business that's waiting for me. Let's get this meeting over so I can catch a train out of here."

Hugh Longmire chuckled, and he seemed to be enjoying himself. "Den," he said, "you were always the soft one, like your mother, saying the right thing at the right time. Vic takes after me. He says what he means, and I'm going to say the same to both of you right now."

Den drew a deep breath and waited.

"You had better save your strength," the Valentine doctor said from the foot of the bed. "I've warned you, Mr. Longmire . . ."

"Shut up, sawbones!" said the old man rudely. "I ain't going to live out the hour so I might as well have my fun while I can." He put his dimming eyes on Den.

"Son," he said out of crooked lips, "I hear you've done well since I run you out of here."

"You didn't run me out," Den corrected. "I left when mom died. Nobody runs me out of any place where I want to stay."

"A chip off the old block even if ye have got yaller hair." Old Hugh chuckled. "So ye went to California and grubbed out enough gold to buy a ranch and some farmland."

"I've made a living," Den said meagerly.

"A man can always make a better one," said his father. "There ain't a finer ranch in Nebraska than the Longrope. I've seen to that." His old eyes swung to Vic and seemed to soften a little. "You pulled out about the same time, son," he said reminiscently. "Valentine wasn't big enough for you. You'd made love

to all the gals here and whipped all the boys, so you went to Chicago. Hear tell you've done right well buying and selling cattle. Maybe you've shaded a few deals, but, shucks, that's what I'd expect of my kin. A man takes what he wants in this world, but when he gets ready to die he's got to leave it to somebody. That's why I called you boys home for a last visit. Felt like dyin' a week ago. The sawbones, here, said my pump was going, but I fooled you, eh, doc? Nobody's going to spoil my last party, and I've had a-plenty of 'em!"

Vic Longmire lifted a long Havana from his vest pocket and thumbed a match alight.

"I must forbid—" the rabbitlike doctor began.

"Shut up!" Vic and his father said together, and they matched grins as old Hugh looked admiringly at his black-clad son.

Den, watching, felt like an outsider at the deathbed of his own father:

"So we'll get down to business," said old Hugh, and he seemed to relish the idea. "The Longrope is willed to the both of ye, on the provision that you stay here and run it for six months. I bequeath ye trouble," he went on, "and I prophesy that one of you will be meetin' me in hell inside of these' same six months. If you both live past that time my lawyer has his orders to bring in a surveyor who will divide the Longrope in half, a part to each of you. If one should

die between now and then, the whole spread goes to the other. Worth fighting for, boys? Dammit, I wish I could stay around and watch the fun!"

Old Hugh slipped back on his pillow.

"Please leave now," the little doctor was imploring. "This strain is too great for Mr. Longmire's heart."

"Shut up, sawbones!" said Vic Longmire. He had the kind of deep-timbred voice that most men obeyed, and for the first time he looked squarely at Den.

"Well, brother?" he drawled, and his smile was mocking around the cheroot in a corner of his mouth.

"I'll take Doctor Ware's advice," Den said shortly. "Dad might rally if we let him rest awhile."

"You were always soft like your mother . . ."

"Our mother," Den reminded, and his green eyes were growing hard.

"O.K., our mother." Vic Longmire shrugged. "I came first, but you were always the favorite with her. Me, I was dad's boy. You took on some of her softness, Den, but you can't be a complete la-de-da." From his waistcoat pocket a pair of dice had appeared like magic. "Not loaded, brother. How'd you like to roll me for the Longrope? Winner take all."

Dennison Longmire looked at his thirty-year-old brother. He was twenty-nine himself. "The winner," he said slowly, "will take all. But a pair of dice won't settle it. Put

the damned things back in your pocket!"

"I bequeath you trouble." Den pondered those words as he watched Vic stride toward the corral to pick up a fresh mount for the ride back to Valentine. He stood in the big living room of the ranchhouse and stared through one of the windows that looked out on the yard and the bunkhouse and barns beyond. Vic was at the corral now, and Den was remembering his brother's last words after he had suggested they stay here until the final hour was past.

"Keep the death watch yourself, my sentimental brother!" Vic had drawled, and clapped Den on the shoulder. "I'm riding to town."

"Take your hands off me," Den Longmire had said flatly, feeling as though a snake had brushed his shoulder.

Vic had recoiled slightly, and Den had got a good look at his brother's eyes. There was nothing in them but unmitigated hate.

"You're still soft," Vic had answered. "I'll prove it before long!"

So Vic Longmire had walked to the corrals, and before he was halfway there Den saw two men sidle through the doors of the bunkhouse. They were long and lean, and their movements reminded him of prairie wolves he'd seen slinking past the ranch henyard in winter time, seeking something easy to kill.

One of the men roped a fresh horse out of the remuda in the corral and slapped Vic's saddle on the animal.

All of his movements were awkward. The man looked as though he knew what he was doing, but lacked practice. The other one talked with Vic, their heads close together. Like friends, yet Vic hadn't visited the Longrope for at least a year. Den watched and wondered.

Vic rode from the yard, and afterwards Den saw other riders swinging in toward the corral at the end of their afternoon's work. One came on directly toward the house and Den recognized Bard Thomas, the slat-thin, gangly foreman who'd rodded the Longrope since he could remember. Pleasure stirred in him at the sight. Bard had taught him to sit a horse and handle a Colt.

Den went out to the porch to meet the Longrope's ramrod when he came stumping up the steps, spurs jingling. "Feller," he said, "you're a sight for sore eyes."

Bard Thomas took his hand, but there was no warmth in his grip. "I hear," he said tonelessly, "that you own a few farms in California."

"We call 'em ranches out there," Den told him with a laugh.

"We call 'em farms, here," Thomas said icily, "and the gents who run 'em sodbusters. How are you, sodbuster?"

II

Den looked at the Longrope's foreman and he felt a little sick inside, but none of his feelings showed on his face.

"You got a fish bone stuck in your craw, Bard?" he asked mildly.

Thomas thawed a little. His grin was shamefaced. "Guess the old man bein' sick and all has kind o' got me upset," he said lamely. "Glad to see you back, Den. Heard you were coming."

"Everybody," Den said, with a furrow in his brow, "seems to hear things around here. You boys all got carrier pigeons based in Chicago and California?"

The foreman grinned. "Nope," he chuckled, "but we got a tramp telegrapher at the depot, name of Horace Wolff, who's better than a newspaper when it comes to lettin' us know what comes over his wire. Vic's word and yours that you were comin' was all over town a half hour after he got it. If a gent wants to keep a secret around these parts he'd better not put it on the wire."

"I'll remember that," Den said as he led the way into the living room. "There used to be a bottle in one of these cabinets," he added. "Maybe we could have a nip if you don't mind drinkin' with a rancher who turned gold into wheat land, with cattle on the side. Cattle, that is, that are going to starve if the drought in the Sacramento don't break."

Bard accepted a generous glass. He lifted it. "To you, Den," he said, "and I'm sorry about callin' you a sodbuster. Guess it's because I just get so danged mad at what we got happenin' around here."

Den sipped his whiskey, then made a cigarette with quick fingers. "What

are you talking about?" he asked almost roughly.

Bard sipped the whiskey appreciatively. "Remember Messenger Valley?"

"Yes," Den nodded. "We used to catch a mess of trout for supper out of Cloud Creek now and then."

"You couldn't do it now," said Bard sourly, and his drink seemed to have lost its taste. "We always figured it was part of Longrope's range, but we were wrong. Your dad never bothered to file on it. But he wasn't expectin' no railroad through here either. Congress granted public lands to the U.P. One passel took in the Messenger. Your dad fought their claim, but it didn't do no good. Next the railroad brought in a pack of farmers. That's their policy to get this country built up. More people here, more business for them. I can see that, but it's hell on the rest of us. Only thing we can do is to make it so rough for them colonists that they decide to pull out, and I guess"—his smile was grim—"that we're the boys who can do it."

"Vic could . . ." Den spoke musingly, and he knew instantly that he had said the wrong thing for Bard's leathery old face seemed to freeze.

"Guess you both can," he said stiffly, "after the old man dies."

"*I bequeath you trouble.*" Den began to see the broad scope of those words now, and he shook his head. "Where did you pick up the pair of wolves that roped Vic a fresh horse?"

Bard Thomas snorted. "Those

hard-hat cowboys!" he exploded. "The old man took 'em on, city clothes and all, a couple of months back when they showed up with a note from Vic. Danged if they didn't come out here wearin' derbies! Told Hugh they'd been working in the stockyards, but things were slack so out they come. Why, a feller might almost figger Vic had a premonition of what was comin' and wanted a couple of his own men in on the ground floor."

Den nodded, and Thomas kept talking, the whiskey oiling his tongue. "Them two ain't the only hard-hat gents in Valentine, either," he added. "A feller named Shake Giffin blew in about a month ago, and inside of a week, so help me, he busts out as the owner of the Longbow. Some say he won it fair and square, some say he bought it. I dunno, myself, because I ain't had a drink there since. Hard-hat dudes don't belong in this country no more than sodbusters."

"But of the two," Den said with a faint smile, "you like sodbusters the best."

"I hate their guts!" declared Bard vehemently. "They're irrigatin' land with Longrope water, and butchering Longrope calves in the dark of the moon. They're your big trouble, Den. Mark my word on that!"

Den stood silent for a minute, and the whiskey was biting at his stomach. He shook his head slowly, and his mouth straightened like spring

steel. "Vic's my big trouble," he said somberly.

Feet came pounding down the stairs from the second floor, and Dr. Ware burst into the room. "Mr. Longmire," he said gravely, "your father is passing away. I . . . He might like you by his side."

"Yes," Den nodded. He moved up the stairs two at a time, and entered his father's darkened room. Softly he moved to the side of the big bed, and old Hugh's withered hand seemed to be groping for something. His eyes were closed, and with a rush of pity, Den took the chilling fingers.

"Dad . . ." he choked out the word.

The dying man's hand gripped with surprising strength. "Vic!" His voice was a raspy whisper. "Vic, I knew ye wouldn't leave your old dad. You were always the wild one, son, but I wish ye all the luck just the same . . ."

Den felt the hand relax, and he knew his father was dead, but the shock running through him was stronger than the knowledge of death. Old Hugh thought Vic had been the one to help him across the border. Vic, his favorite. Vic, the wild one. Vic, the winner of the Longrope, if a dying man had his last wish!

Grim-faced as the dead man upstairs, Den roped and saddled the livery stable horse he had ridden out, and he knew that the Longrope crewmen, with speculation in their eyes, were watching him from the

barns and bunkhouse windows. The king was dead, and they were wondering what was going to happen next.

As he swung into the saddle, Bard Thomas came stumping from the bunkhouse. "Den," he said a little awkwardly, "mebbe I know too much, mebbe I don't. But your dad once told me the terms on which he was turnin' the Longrope over to you and Vic. I didn't like 'em then, and I don't like 'em now. Mebbe you'll pardon an old man's warning, but don't put your back to any lighted windows, and don't walk down no dark alleys!"

The sun was sliding westward behind cloudlike mountains as Den made his six-mile ride along the stage road through the Sand Hills. Buffalo grass tufted hillocks perennially green and succulent, and off to the right Den could see the gap of Messenger Valley running back into the timbered Labyrinth Hills where Cloud Creek found its source in the misty heights.

League on league, and old Hugh had been able to ride this road to Valentine, and claim all this vast land for the Longrope. An empire to make a man proud. Den could better understand his father's intolerance now. Hugh Longmire's possessions had made him feel and act like a king, but even with all this vast acreage the ranch could not be severed in half and prosper. Den knew that and the thought came to him: "One of us has got to die."

Sleek cattle were seeking the shelter of coulees for the night, and Den contrasted them to the gaunt beef that found scant forage on the foothill ranches he owned along the flank of the Sierras. That land out there was begging for rain, while here green grass waited for starving stock.

Den felt his fist clench. The Long-rope would spell money and power to Vic, nothing more. To him, it could mean success or ruin, for cattle shipped here from Sierra Ranch would have a chance to survive, and he made up his mind they were going to get that chance.

Off to the left Den heard the lonesome whistle of the evening train heading into Valentine. He topped a rise and the town lay in its hollow before him. The railroad had brought it prosperity, and so had the sodbusters, Den guessed a little grimly. No wonder some of the hard-hat boys from Chicago had followed the rails to these high plains to see what kind of easy money they could pick up.

A passenger was leaving the train, Den noticed as he followed the road that curved into Main Street. Through the dusk, he saw the newcomer as a slim silhouette tugging something heavy from the station platform to the boardwalk that led uptown, and impulse more than curiosity made him veer closer to the lone visitor. The person passed a bright store, and he realized that it was a woman wearing a tailored traveling suit. The heavy suitcase she was carrying banged against her

legs and made her stumble as Den rode alongside.

He tipped his flat-crowned California hat. "Dunno just where everybody is this evening, ma'am," he said easily, stanning the empty walks, "but it's sure a powerful shame when a lady has to carry a bag that heavy."

The girl had stopped, and he saw that her eyes were wide and gray as they scanned his clothes, then settled on the spike heels of his Sunday boots.

"You—you're a cattleman," she charged, and her small chin lifted. "I guess I'll just handle my own luggage. Mister . . ."

"Dennison Longmire," Den said easily, and he was finding his first pleasure since reaching Valentine that afternoon. "I'll plead guilty as charged, ma'am, but that doesn't keep me from being a gentleman. And gentlemen don't let ladies carry bags danged near as big as themselves!"

The girl smiled in spite of herself. Her lips were red in the lamplight coming from the door of the store behind them, and her face held an elfin charm.

"I . . . I'm Lucy Weir," she introduced herself, "and I've got to get out to Messenger Valley right away. Do you know where I can hire a rig?"

Den guessed that he'd wear the sod-bust brand for sure after this, but he said gallantly: "Ma'am, you set down on that suitcase and wait for me. I'll be back with a buggy before you can say 'scat!'"

He went up the street at a gallop, noticing how Valentine had grown since the coming of the railroad. Once there had been only a few stores to care for the needs of neighboring ranches, but now Main was solidly lined with buildings. Most of them were still alight, and the most garish place on the street, with a pair of blazing pitch barrels in front of it, was the Longbow Saloon.

The place seemed filled to overflowing, and of the few people still on the boardwalks most of them looked as though they were heading toward Shake Giffin's saloon.

Den reined into Merrick's Livery, and an old attendant shuffled from the office, cackling through snagged teeth.

"What are you laughing about?" Den demanded.

"Why, I was just wondering if your eyesight is bad. Them pitch barrels in front of the Longbow mean free drinks, and you're the first gent who has passed it up since Vic Longmire come back to town."

"Vic Longmire?" Den spoke the name so slowly that it seemed as though he was spelling out the words.

"Shucks, yes. Vic's holding open house in the Longbow. Him and Shake Giffin. Seems as how they're old friends. You . . . And then the attendant's voice faded into a squeaky sigh as he recognized his customer. "Why, you . . . you're Den Longmire!"

Den stepped from his saddle, and his eyes were green as spring ice. "I want a buckboard with a pair of

fast broncs hitched to it," he said.

"Right away, sir!" the liveryman grabbed a lantern from a hook and scuttled into the dim reaches of the livery, and Den heard him muttering: "Den Longmire. Vic Longmire. There'll be the devil to pay around here. They never did cotton to each other."

Den stood in the doorway of the big barn, and watched the traffic stream in and out of the Longbow. Every drinking man in Valentine would be Vic's guest before the night was out, he thought grimly. There was no quicker way to put a town solidly on your side of the fence than to furnish free whiskey to all its drunks. Den felt more alone than he had standing beside his father and hearing old Hugh wish Vic all the luck.

The thought brought the shred of a mirthless grin to his lips as the liveryman led up the team and buckboard. From the looks of things Vic was setting out to make his own luck!

III

Den accepted the reins and stepped to the seat.

"Better stop and have a drink with your brother," the liveryman leered. "I'm a-goin' to soon as my relief shows up. T'ain't often that a man buys around here any more, what with penny-pinchin' sodbusters stickin' together, and railroaders doin' the same. Tonight's goin' to be like old times when your daddy used to come to town and cover a bar with

gold. By the way, how is ol' Hugh?"

Den looked down at the liveryman, and in the lantern light his raw-boned face had a coppery tinge. "Old Hugh is dead. So drink hearty tonight. You won't get another chance very soon!"

He caught the whip from its socket on the dashboard and lashed the team right and left as it curved into Main. The rush of night air past his face cooled the temper that he usually managed to keep under control.

From the Longbow a drunken voice hailed him, but Den kept driving. He saw the girl huddled in front of Elspeth's Millinery Store. She was all alone on the walk. Just about as alone as he felt himself.

He tossed the girl's bag into the back without a word, and then he lifted her high into the seat of the buckboard, hearing her gasp as the night breeze whipped her dress and showed a glimpse of snowy petticoats.

Den was grinning as he went back to his side of the wagon, and some of the tension built up in him started to ease. Lucy Weir had that effect on him, giving him a feeling of ease he had never experienced with any of the other women he had known.

"You were quick," she said. "I . . . I don't know how I'm going to thank you, Mr. Longmire. I've always heard that cattlemen didn't like sobbusters."

"A person can hear a heap of things if they listen long enough," Den said gruffly. He wheeled the

buckboard into the stage road, and let the team ease into a run. "Where do you want to go in this nester colony, ma'am?"

"My father's place," the girl responded. "Luther Weir is his name, if he's still alive."

Den felt the touch of the girl's shoulder against him and he shifted the reins to his right hand and put his left about her suddenly. She leaned against him for an instant, seeming to draw some comfort from the feel of his big body.

"Your dad?" Den prompted.

"He's dying," the girl whispered brokenly. "He . . . he wasn't strong when he came out here to help found our colony, but the doctors back in Chicago thought this country air might be good for him. I . . . I stayed behind, because I had a good job in one of the buyer's offices at the stockyard. I didn't know dad was so bad off until I got the wire from mother last week. I came on as quickly as I could."

Den felt his throat grow dry as he swung the buckboard into the cut-off road that led to Messenger Valley. "Maybe you've heard of a gent back there named Vic Longmire?"

"Nothing good!" Lucy Weir said frankly. "Is—is he your brother?"

"Yes," Den admitted, and he guessed he was going to be right out in the cold again.

Lucy Weir had nothing more to say until the lights of cabins in Messenger Valley loomed before them. She sat erectly on her side of the

seat, and her face in the moonlight that guided them was sharp-cut and cold as cameo.

Den glanced at her from time to time. "Lucy," he said at last, "we might as well be friends. We're neighbors, you know. The Longrope belongs to me and my brother now. You see, our dad died this afternoon. It's tough when they go, but none of us can live forever. You remember that if anything has happened to your father."

"I . . . I will," the girl turned and put out her hand impulsively. "You, you don't look or act like your brother."

It was about the highest compliment she could have paid him, Den thought bleakly.

He wheeled the team over a bridge these farmers had built across Cloud Creek, and he was amazed at the amount of work that had been done. The cabins were neat, and there was a prosperous air about them, but they wouldn't look like this if Cloud Creek should go dry and turn their irrigated acres back into weed-grown furrows. However, there wasn't much chance of that happening, he assured himself. He was just too fresh from the Sacramento and parched acres there. Land, there as here, was meant both for farming and ranching.

"Here's our place," the girl said suddenly, and she pointed to a white cabin set back on their left. "I visited here a year ago just after everybody got settled."

Den swung the buckboard into the

yard and he could see a knot of people inside the brightly lighted front room of the cabin. Premonition made him lay his hand on the girl's arm.

"Lucy, don't forget," he said soberly. "Remember, we've all got to die sometime."

"I won't forget," the girl promised as he helped her from the buckboard, and a buxom woman came from the cabin and put her arms about the girl. She was weeping, and Den guessed that was answer enough. Luther Weir had died on the same day as old Hugh Longmire. One had been a king and one a sodbuster. Den stood beside the wagon, and he wondered if it made much difference when they answered the roll call beyond the grave.

A man, big as Den, came from the house and lifted the girl's bag from the buckboard. His eyes focused on Den's spike heels, then lifted in an angry glare. "We don't need no help from cattlemen around here," he said brusquely. "We'll take care of our own dead!"

Lucy Weir overheard the remark and swung from her mother's embrace. "That's a fine thing to say," she accused hotly. "Mr. Longmire was the only man in Valentine willing to help me when I needed assistance."

The nester's face turned sullen. "So you're Longrope, eh?" he challenged. "Well, I'll tell you again, you're not welcome around here."

"Fair enough," Den said, and his voice was full of distaste. "Just

remember to bury the hide and guts the next time you slaughter a Longrope calf!"

He whipped up the team, cramping the buckboard around on two wheels, and off to one side he saw Lucy Weir raise an impulsive arm. Her clear cry rang after him.

"You're welcome to visit the Weirs any time you want, Mr. Longmire."

Den turned the team into the cut-off, and warmth mingled with coldness in him. Lucy Weir's loyalty was a warm memory in his heart, but the sodbuster's warning was a sure course to trouble. How the end would come Den couldn't foresee, but Vic and Valentine had to know his stand.

He was thinking that an hour later as he wheeled the buckboard to a halt in front of the Longbow. The pitch barrels were burning low, but the lights inside the saloon were still bright.

Den stepped from the buckboard and long muscles crawled along his back. His mood was as gray as the suit that covered his big body. Vic had put a pair of hard-hat cowboys on the Longrope payroll, and Shake Giffin was his friend. Den wondered if some of Vic's money might have set the man up in business here, and the contours of a pattern began to take shape in his mind. Vic had planned for this time a long while ago, and he hadn't figured that he might run head-on into a brother who might have more at stake than any Chicago broker..

Den shrugged his coat smooth about his shoulders, and pressed through the swing doors of the Longbow. Vic had an elbow hooked over this near corner of the bar to greet all comers. A smile automatically formed on his lips, then turned stiff as he recognized his brother. Other men at the long bar and tables scattered about a stamp-sized dance floor saw the big man from California enter, and Den could sense the feeling in the room going against him. That was Vic's reward for buying free drinks.

Another smaller man in checkered vest and string tie brushed past Vic Longmire. His face was long and narrow and his pink tongue touched his lips constantly, reminding Den of a Sierra diamondback ready to strike. This was Shake Giffin. He needed no introduction.

"Howdy, stranger," Giffin put out a gambler's white hand. "Welcome to the Longbow. Drinks are on the house tonight so you're in luck."

"Longbow or Longrope?" Den asked deliberately, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Vic push from the bar, a wicked smile building on his dark face. Vic carried a full whiskey glass in one hand, and he moved forward with all the cocked readiness of a boxer.

"It make any difference, brother?" he asked.

Two men of a size. Two men hating each other. The talk in the saloon was a gone thing, vanished before the impact of twin personalities. Men watched and men waited.

Den knew it. He could feel the tension building. "Longrope," he said in the same deliberate tones, "is all done buying drinks."

"Then you can have the last one!" Vic Longmire said, and he was close enough to toss the whiskey into Den's face.

The move had been unexpected and Den back-stepped, pawing at his seared eyeballs, but a fist followed the whiskey before he could clear them. He felt the shock of Vic's knuckles drive him backward off balance and he hit the sawdust covered floor with an impact that set the hanging lamps to dancing in their brackets.

A roar that was like the growling of animals lifted from Longbow-watchers. Den twisted, managing to see the kicking leg aimed at his side. He caught his brother's ankle and jerked, and then Vic was down across him, snarling curses.

"Your dad wished you luck!" Den gasped.

"I'll make my own," sneered Vic.

Den saw his opening and sledged at Vic's dark face. He felt his raw-boned knuckles slicing through soft flesh. Then Vic's hand caught at his hair, and Den felt his head smash against the floor. He broke the grip with a big thumb pressed deep in Vic's windpipe, and both men got on their feet again.

The stockyards had their brawlers, and so did Sierra mining camps. Both men had learned to fight the hard way, by getting whipped more than once. Now it was brother

against brother with hate refereeing the bout, and the Longbow crowd cheering the finest battle they'd seen in a decade.

Toe to toe, they slugged it out, and the following days would see many an argument as to who had ended winner, for Vic finally covered his bloody face and lurched toward the bar, and Den, with his head drooping on his chest, swung blindly toward the batwings and pushed out into the night.

The Imperial Hotel stood across the street, and Den weaved toward it, wanting nothing but a basin of cold water and a towel, and perhaps a bed where he could rest for awhile.

The old clerk at the desk took one startled look at Den Longmire's clothes and face and climbed from behind his desk. He grabbed a key with one hand, and piloted Den along a dim hall with the other.

"Got a nice room back here," he declared, "all fresh made up."

Den sagged into a chair, and he let the clerk go to work on his face with a wet towel. The water cooled his eyes and some of the fever in his brain. Cooled him enough to make him realize that the fight with Vic had gained him nothing, and had, perhaps, cost a lot.

The clerk helped him out of his coat and seemed surprised at the absence of a gunbelt about Den's waist. "Mr. Longmire," he said, "most fellers wear Colts around here. They come in handy sometimes."

Den nodded and stretched on the bed, wondering grayly if that was

how he and Vic would meet the next time—over gunsights.

IV

"I bequeath you trouble." The words were a mockery in Den's mind, and then sleep sledged him as his eyes closed for an instant.

Something woke him, and his sleep-fogged mind couldn't place the sound at first. Then he realized it was the creak of ungreased hinges on the warped door of his room. He opened stinging eyes and saw a shadow in the doorway. The man's right arm rose, and instinct made Den roll toward the edge of the bed as a revolver bellowed deeply in the silence of the sleeping hotel. He felt lead pluck at the pillow where his head had lain, then he was on the floor, plunging straight from his hands, and knees toward the man in the doorway.

"Damn fool . . ." he heard the ejaculation as the revolver roared a second time, then his arms wrapped about the shadow's knees, carrying him backward across the hall. His assailant twisted with the agility of a cat, breaking free, and Den fell against the opposite wall. He heard the sibilant sound of running feet along the uncarpeted hall, and the slam of the back screen door, then heads were poking from other rooms along the hall, shouting excited questions.

Den was on his feet by the time the clerk came pelting from the front. He stood there staring at something

his hand had brought up from the floor when the clerk halted alongside. The lamplight showed them a battered black derby.

"Well, I'll be damned, if you'll pardon me," said the old clerk, and Den gave him a crooked grin from puffed lips.

"You're pardoned," he answered softly. "It looks like Chicago is moving West, but they sure don't teach their hard-hat cowboys to shoot very straight!"

Had Vic or Shake Giffin been the one to send a man to make this attack, Den wondered as he went back into his room and put on his coat. The question was one he couldn't answer, but regardless it looked as though time was running short.

Den walked into the lobby. "You . . . you're going out again, Mr. Longmire?" The clerk seemed startled.

"Bullets wake a man up fast," Den said dryly. "Tell me, who's your sheriff these days?"

"Frank Marshall," answered the clerk.

Den nodded. "I know Frank," he said meagerly, and didn't add, as he walked outside, that he had never liked the man. A pompous, barrel-bellied, two-bit rancher with a spread out in the Labyrinth Hills on the headwaters of Cloud Creek, Marshall had never been willing to work hard enough to make his ranch pay. A better talker than worker, he had evidently been able to edge himself into the sheriff's job.

On the street, Den turned right past the corner of the hotel, and he guessed

some of his opinions were still showing on his face when he laid the black bowler on Marshall's desk.

The sheriff was yawning, and his breath reeked of cheap whiskey. "A feller don't get much sleep on this job," he complained, and then he seemed to see the derby for the first time and his heavy body jerked back in his chair.

"Den Longmire!" he ejaculated. "Ain't seen you in a dog's age. What's this you brung me? A souvenir from California?"

"A souvenir from Chicago," Den said flatly. "Find a gent who wears soft-soled shoes instead of boots and is minus his hard hat, and you'll have the deadwood on the hombre who tried to shoot me half an hour ago."

Frank Marshall tilted back in his chair, and folded his hands across his paunch. His eyes were bloodshot as they studied his visitor. "This young generation is goin' soft, I guess," he said ruminatively. "Ol' Hugh used to kill his own snakes. "If you ain't big enough to do the same, why don't you call on Vic—or that leetle sodbust gal I saw you drive out of town tonight?"

The first of it Den might have taken, but not the second part. Rawnerved, anyway, he moved with the explosive speed of a Sierra cougar, reaching across the desk and grabbing a fistful of the sheriff's shirt.

"Marshall"—he controlled himself as best he could—"I hope I'm around the next time you run for election."

The sheriff's face looked like paste,

but his brag still carried an evil undertone. "You won't be, Longmire. You won't be!"

Den swung and walked out of the jail office, and he found that his hands were shaking so much that he had to shove them into his pockets to help still some of his anger.

Plenty had happened in one afternoon and half a night, he reflected, and Vic could stack all the winning chips on his side of the table. Even to having the sheriff in his camp, for Frank Marshall was a cowman at heart. No Messenger Valley farmer would get a fair shake from that Cloud Creek lawman. And neither would Dennison Longmire!

The thought sent him tramping down Main toward the depot, to pick up his suitcase and holstered Colt packed with the rest of his clothes. The time, he guessed, had come to put on his gun.

The time had also come to protect his back, and that needed another pair of eyes. Den stepped inside the stale-smelling station and wrote a message on a counter form. He handed it to the gray-haired telegrapher hiding behind a green eyeshade, and the man raised his head.

"Mr. Longmire!" he exclaimed, and Den found himself smiling his recognition of Horace Wolff. When Bard Thomas had told him about the tramp telegrapher who was better than a newspaper he hadn't connected the name with an operator he had once met in Sacramento. Horace Wolff was one and the same.

"Recollect a drink you once bought me in the Grizzly Bear." Wolff extended a bony hand. "And, by golly, one good turn deserves another. What can I put on the wire for you, Mr. Longmire?"

"Send this to John Carmody, Sierra Junction," Den instructed.

Horace Wolff read the message rapidly, then lifted keen eyes. "Looks like you're callin' for a friend," he said.

"Carmody's my Sierra Ranch foreman," Den said, and he wasn't particularly anxious to add anything else that could be passed around Valentine.

"You got a brother named Vic?" the telegrapher asked.

"Yes."

Horace Wolff nodded as though all was clear to him now. He turned and spat into a convenient spittoon, then glanced back at Den. "Ye're the pair fighting it out for the Longrope, eh? Well, Mr. Longmire, as I was sayin', one good turn deserves another, so I'm goin' to tell you something. One man ain't going to do much good. Your brother's got two dozen from Chicago waitin' for him at Garvey, twelve miles east. And that ain't all . . ." The telegrapher paused expectantly.

Den pulled a flat wallet from an inside coat pocket and selected a five dollar bill. He felt colder than he ever had before in his life as he laid the money on the counter.

"That might buy you another drink," he suggested pointedly.

Horace Wolff grinned and nodded. "Any port in a storm, eh? Well, thankee, Mr. Longmire. As I was sayin', my runner carried that message and another one to the Longbow about an hour ago. Mentioned a flatcar on a siding loaded with cement and steel and timber. Dunno just what your brother figgers to do with it, but were I you, I think I'd find out."

The five dollars had been well spent. Den tramped back uptown, and he was calculating swiftly. Carmody would get his wire in the morning and catch a train from Sierra Junction that afternoon. Two, three days at the most might see him here, but the way things were moving, a man couldn't wait that long.

Under his breath Den cursed Vic Longmire, but he had to admire his brother's sharpness, too. Vic had managed to put a pair of hard-hat cowboys on Longrope that could keep him advised of all developments there and in Messenger Valley. Shake Giffin had kept him in touch with doings in Valentine. And if Bard Thomas had known the terms of old Hugh's will ahead of time, the crew would have picked up the same information and Vic's men could have passed it along to him.

Den passed the Longbow, and he saw that the saloon was dark. It was midnight or later now, but the party that had been going on there wasn't the type to end until morning. Not unless Shake Giffin and a patched-up Vic Longmire had heeded the call of

those telegrams Horace Wolff had dispatched to them.

What was his brother aiming to do with cement and steel and timbers? And twenty men? Den knew of only one way to find an answer.

He wanted sleep above all else, but sleep would have to wait. He lengthened his stride and turned into Merrick's. "I want a fast horse," he said. "Send your bill to the Long-rope. I don't know when I'll be riding back."

"Your brother," grinned the attendant, "told me the same thing. Only he ordered two horses awhile ago. One for himself and one for Shake Giffin!"

Den hit a fast pace out of the sleeping town and he wondered how Lucy Weir was standing the shock of her father's death. Thought of the girl made him promise himself that he would see her again, when peace came to this range. And peace had to come. There was room here for cattlemen and farmers alike. The linking of a nation with steel rails spelled progress, and that was something men who had been used to free range would have to learn.

The road flowed beneath the hoofs of Den's galloping mount, sand hills rising white on either side of the old road that wound between them. Once the Pony Express had traveled this way, and once stages had rocketed along its length, but now the railroad had supplanted both. Garvey, ahead, was an ungainly water tower rearing alongside the tracks, a small station and a single street lined with a couple

of saloons and one general store. Den crested a pass between the hills and saw the station lights a few miles ahead. Then gun flame brighter than those lights smashed out from the rim of the Pass.

Den heard his rented horse scream, an almost human sound, and he was automatically dragging his feet from the stirrups as the animal stumbled. A sledge-hammer seemed to hit him in the chest, driving him backward in his saddle. The fall seemed endless . . .

V

Den woke in a soft bed, and he couldn't quite believe that he was seeing Lucy Weir's elfin face leaning close above him. He smiled shakily and the girl's answering smile was red-lipped and sweet, certainly no figment of his imagination.

"Lucy," he said weakly, "it looks like I've hit bottom!"

The girl's fingers against his lips silenced him. "Just rest," she admonished. "You've had quite a struggle, but I guess it's over now."

He went to sleep with questions puzzling him and woke the next morning with them still unanswered, but this time when he opened his eyes John Carmody's thin, bronzed face was beside the bed.

"Den," Carmody said cheerfully, "you're looking mighty fine!"

And Den Longmire answered his friend's grin. "You're a mighty poor liar. I'm feeling fine, but I'll bet I don't look that way with all the whiskers I can feel on my face, and

all the questions I've got in my head. Start talking, amigo."

John Carmody nodded, and he filled in a two-weeks blank in Den Longmire's life. "First off," he said, "you're in the Weir home in Messenger Valley. Seems as how some of these sodbusters work for the railroad to pick up extra money, and a couple of 'em coming from Garvey to attend Luther Weir's funeral found you all shot to hell on their way home. They brought you along with them and a little gal named Lucy Weir insisted she was going to take charge. She got the doc who cared for your dad, and between him and her nursing they've pulled you through. From what I hear you had a hole in your chest that looked more like a tunnel."

Den nodded, and he was remembering guns flaming from a cutbank wash. "Go on," he said tersely.

"I got your wire and came running," Carmody said. He hesitated a moment, then blurted: "I guess this ain't the time to bring it up, Den, but we'd had no rain when I left the ranch. The buzzards and coyotes are gettin' fat on your cattle. If we don't get some soon . . ."

Den raised himself on one elbow. "We'll load stock cars and bring our beef to the Longrope!"

"Seems like your range here is running short of water, too," Carmody said reluctantly.

"Cloud Creek?" Den forgot he had been wounded. He straightened in bed and felt a dagger pain go

through his chest, but he ignored it. "Cloud Creek's never run low since my dad hit this country. It can't . . ."

The sound of his voice brought Lucy into the room. "Den," she said softly, "it's true. The flow has dropped. Our crops are drying up."

Den looked at the girl and the softness of his tone didn't match the bleakness of his eyes. "Get me my pants," he said. "I've got to take a look."

But even sitting up in bed had been too much for him. Carmody lowered him against the pillows. "Tomorrow," he promised, "we'll see about the pants."

"Ride to the Longrope," Den said huskily. "See Bard Thomas. Find out what he knows about Vic and a shipment of cement and steel to Garvey. That's where I was headed."

Carmody waved a big hand. "I'll take care of it, Den."

Lucy Weir brought Den his supper that night and sat beside him while he ate a meal that would have satisfied a cornhusker.

"You'll be well in no time," she prophesied.

"All thanks to you," Den told her soberly, and he laid his hand over the girl's. "Tell me about your dad."

A shadow crossed the girl's face. "We . . . we made the mistake of planning his burial the same day as your father was laid to rest. There was almost a battle at the cemetery. Your brother and some of his friends tried to start trouble, but our people wouldn't fight. Now I . . . I guess

everybody in Valentine will be calling us cowards."

"I wish I'd been there," Den murmured.

"Isn't one bullet enough to satisfy you?" Lucy Weir asked dully, and then her voice dropped almost to a whisper: "Den, where's it going to end?"

He gave her an honest answer. "Lucy, I don't know."

Den walked that afternoon and found muscles long-tuned to hardship stronger than he had expected. He was dressed and resting when John Carmody rode in on a lathered mount.

"Den," Carmody bit out the words, "Bard Thomas doesn't know much more than us. He tells me that Vic and his hard-hat cowpokes rode away from the ranch two weeks ago, and ain't been seen since. In Garvey I found out that Vic's crew loaded wagons with the cement and timbers that flatcar brought. They headed toward the Labyrinth Hills."

Den scrubbed a jaw that he had managed to shave that afternoon. "Twenty-three men," he said slowly. "Twenty-three men and cement and steel and timber."

He got to his feet, and moved to a window that looked down on Cloud Creek. Fading sunlight spotlighted pools that were rapidly growing stagnant, and words that he hated to voice were forming on his lips.

"John," he said, "you get into Valentine. Bring back a pack horse loaded with dynamite and a spare

saddler for me. Somebody's trying to cut off this valley's water supply."

"If they make it, these farmers will have to pull out," Carmody exploded, "and that would be a damned shame. Den, this country needs these people. If we had more in California raising hay and alfalfa, you wouldn't be losing stock every day. If a man can buy hay, he can weather a drought. If he can't . . ." His shrug finished the sentence.

Carmody returned before dark and Den waited for him in front of the Weir cottage. Lucy stood straight beside him, and Den felt the girl's hand slide into his palm.

"Den," she said softly, "it's hard to admit, but I believe we've both been thinking the same thing. Your brother—"

"My brother is too damned big for his britches!" Den told the girl harshly. "He visited here last year and started laying his plans then. The only thing that could cut Cloud Creek is a dam up in the Labyrinth Hills, and Sheriff Frank Marshall owns the canyon it would have to cross. Carmody and I will know more about that before morning."

"Do you want extra men?" she asked directly. "Our people aren't cowards even if they wouldn't fight it out in a graveyard!"

"Two of us can get farther than a dozen," Den told her grimly. "You'll know what luck we've had, Lucy, when you see Cloud Creek bankfull again."

"And if I don't?" The girl was looking up at him, and he took her

into his arms. Her mouth was warm against his with a promise that only time could fulfill.

"Time for that later," said Carmody impatiently. "We've got a ride to make, amigo."

The Labyrinth Hills were well-named, a maze of pine-stippled ridges, and deep, winding gorges that caught their share of rain and snow and funneled it into Cloud Creek. Dusk caught them before they were well into the hills, but Den held a fast pace that made Carmody protest.

"That's dynamite our pack mule is carryin'," he reminded. "If she slips on this trail, we're going to Kingdom Come in a hurry."

"She won't slip," Den told him grimly. "I want a look at Marshall's ranch before it gets dark. This trail will take us to the ridge above his headquarters."

He was racing the last light of evening now and fighting the weakness in his own body. Pain rested deep in his chest, but he ignored it as he crested the ridge that had been his goal.

Below them the canyon was filled with deep shadows and the firefly glow of torches carried by workmen. Torches, and the rising bulk of timbers and steel and cement spanning Cloud Creek at its narrowest point. Workers labored there like ants, building a monument to one man's greed!

Carmody was already off his horse and unloading the pack mule. "Short fuses," he was muttering. "Cut short fuses. We'll blow that dam to hell-

and-gone before it gets any higher." Den looked at his partner. "But not those workmen," he said softly. "I'm going down and give them warning. You follow me with the powder."

"Don't be a fool," Carmody said brusquely. "They hired out to your brother. They knew what they were getting into."

"I doubt that," Den objected. "Knowing Vic, I can figure he told them this was a legitimate project. No. Innocent men aren't going to die if I can help it."

"You'll get picked up," warned Carmody.

"If I do," Dan answered, and his eyes were hard as diamonds. "I want those fuses cut all the shorter!"

The slope was precipitous, and Den used his heels to brace himself as he slipped closer to the project below. There was a shelf some fifty feet above the dam, and he could shout a warning from there.

Cautiously he eased down the last slant and a snake-like shadow loomed suddenly above him. He tried to dodge, knowing what it was, but the lariat dropped true over his head and shoulders, pinioning his arms as he reached for his Colt.

"Keep walkin', mister," a voice behind him ordered. "You ain't the first one I've eased over the drop-off. Your Longrope foreman got nose-ye and he's settin' in Vic's tent right now. You can join him!"

The lip of the rocky shelf was beneath Den's feet, and the rope was tight as a steel clamp about his shoulders. He tried again to reach his

Colt but a booted foot kicked him outward, and he felt himself falling. The rope brought him up with a jerk, and pain from his unhealed wound sent nausea rocketing through him.

Little more than half conscious, Den felt his feet strike solid rock above the level of the dam, and he saw a fire in front of a small tent set back beneath the overhang of the cliff. Vic's satisfied voice sounded from beside the fire.

"I've been waiting for you to show up, brother," he drawled. "One bullet wasn't enough to buy me the Longrope—and Messenger Valley. But two ought to turn the trick!"

Den sagged to his knees, and he felt the pressure of the rope binding him ease for the space of a second. He flipped the binding loop over his head and flung himself around as Vic Longmire's Colt blazed.

A man bound hand and foot at the mouth of the tent reared up and threw himself at Vic, crouched beside the fire. He missed his goal but the action was enough to divert Longmire's aim.

"Get him, Den," Bard Thomas yelled. "He ain't no chip off of ol' Hugh's block . . ."

Den's hand reached for the Colt he hadn't been able to grip with his arms pinioned, and he guessed that he had known since boyhood that it would always end this way for them—over gunights.

Vic Longmire fired a second time, and Den heard the bullet hit rock at his feet and scream off into space as

he got his own gun from leather. He fired once as he stumbled toward the fire and saw Vic straighten to his full height. He fired again, and Vic bent forward, his dark face shuddering with pain.

"I guess I'll be reporting in hell," Den thought he heard his brother say. "I'll tell dad that one of us had to win . . ."

A voice hailed down from the ledge above. "There's dynamite coming. Clear the dam!"

Bard Thomas was cursing the ties that held him, but Den swung back to where his own voice could be heard. "Save the powder, Carmody. We're not going to need it now."

"And why in tarnation ain't we?" exploded Thomas.

Den untied the Longrope foreman. "I'm beginning to see that this is the only good idea Vic ever had," he explained. "A dam here can control the flow of water and see that Cloud Creek provides enough for everybody—cattleman and farmer alike. One drought in California is plenty. We ain't going to have the Longrope run dry. I've got too many cattle that need this grass and drinkin' water to take any chances again!"

"Chances?" grunted Bard. "Mister, from what I hear you ain't started takin' 'em yet. I understand there's a nester girl that's got you all ready to visit the parson."

Den Longmire grinned, and he hadn't felt better in a long time. "I hope you're right, Bard," he said. "I hope you're right."

THE END



MINES AND MINING

By John A. Thompson

"I WOULD like to know how a prospector can tell when he has found ore. How does he know one mineral from another?"

Reader R. B., of Brownwood, Texas, recently put this query to us. It is a logical question for anyone to ask who is new to prospecting.

There is no mystery to the answer, R. B. Knowing how to identify valuable minerals is a prospector's business.

To start with, through the help of books or articles on the subject, or through actual field experience, all prospectors must learn a certain amount of mineralogy. That's the study that teaches one how to recognize the various minerals alone, or in rock formations. The prospector's main object in learning practical mineralogy is to develop his ability to spot industrially valuable minerals on sight or with the help of easily made field tests.

Minerals have definite identifying characteristics. Their color, for instance. Or their hardness. Another important property is the streak or color mark left when the mineral is scratched with a knife, or something harder than the mineral itself. The

color of the streak mark, always the same for the same mineral, often varies widely from the color of the unscratched portion.

Other identifying characteristics are such things as brittleness, or malleability. The kind of surface a freshly broken surface shows—rough, smooth, irregular and so forth—may be an identifying property. So may the luster of a mineral, whether it is dull or shiny, rocklike or metallic-looking. Crystal form may help identify a mineral. Specific gravity is important.

In practical field work specific gravity means whether or not a mineral is light, average, or noticeably heavy compared to an average rock of the same size. The specific gravity of a mineral is its weight compared to that of an equal volume of water.

Prospectors usually consider the specific gravity, or how a mineral "hefts" by checking it against a scale of different rocks or minerals that have an increasingly higher, specific gravity. For example, a lump of coal feels very light for a rock when held or hefted in the hand. Its specific gravity is about $1\frac{1}{2}$. Quartz with a specific gravity of about $2\frac{1}{2}$ is con-

sidered average "rock" weight.

Most of the principal metallic ores, on the other hand, feel, size for size, either heavy or very heavy compared to quartz. Magnetite, a commercial iron ore, has a specific gravity slightly over 5. Galena, a common lead ore, is even heavier. Its specific gravity is $7\frac{1}{2}$. Gold is extremely heavy, having a specific gravity of 19.

There is just as much variation in the hardness of minerals as there is in their heft. Pure talc is an extremely soft mineral. It can be easily scratched with a fingernail. It is rated as 1 in the hardness scale. Calcite can be scratched by a copper coin, and has a hardness of 3. Magnetite, harder still, is 6. It takes a good knife to scratch magnetite or other minerals with approximately the same hardness. A file is required to scratch quartz, rated as 7. The diamond, the hardest mineral known, is rated 10, and stands at the top of the hardness scale. *All minerals* fit in somewhere along the line between 1 and 10.

Prospectors don't often have a set of the different minerals in the scale along with them. But they generally do have, or should carry, a copper coin, good knife, and file for making rough determinative hardness tests. We assume they've got their fingernails along for the very soft minerals.

Now let's take a sample mineral

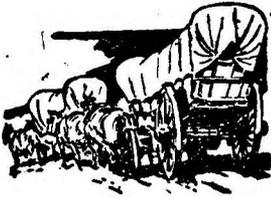
and see how the tests work out. Either because he has a field table of the ore minerals in his pocket, or because he has encountered it before, the prospector is aware of the fact that galena, one of the most important commercial ores of lead, has a bright, metallic appearance and a lead-gray color. It may be found in lumps or in square cubical crystals, breaks with right-angled corners, has a hardness under 3, and its specific gravity is $7\frac{1}{2}$ —noticeably heavy.

If the prospector doesn't recognize the specimen as galena at once, he tries a hardness test. Can't scratch it with a fingernail, but can with a copper coin. That fixes its hardness at more than 1, less than 3. He hefts it. The specimen is obviously much heavier than a similar-sized piece of quartz. Heavier than iron ore even. That puts it in the extremely heavy mineral class. But it is a cinch the stuff is not gold. Wrong color.

Adding up appearance, hardness, heft, color, and that right-angled fracture surface, there is virtually nothing else it could be but galena. Other minerals might have some of those same characteristics, but not that particular combination of them.

That's how it's done, R. B. With practice, field identification in the case of scores of the more common, valuable commercial metal ores becomes automatic.

If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter enclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, P.O. Box 489, Elizabeth, N. J., will bring a prompt, authoritative, personal reply.



WHERE TO GO

By John North

AUTO TRIPS in the West are one of the outdoor vacationist's favorite forms of fun. The only guides you need are the road maps obtainable at any filling station and a general idea of where you want to go.

L. P. of Omaha, Nebraska, has just such a trip in mind for this spring or summer. He's picked out the Colorado mountain country, as fine and scenic a mountain region as any in the West.

"Being used to driving in more or less flat country," he wrote, "can such a trip be made without danger? I am taking the family along, wife and two boys, 7 and 11. And they are the most precious things I've got. Any suggestions as to where to go?"

No need to fret about mountain driving, L. P., as long as your car is in good mechanical condition. Don't believe all you hear about high altitudes, either. Altitude won't hurt any healthy person. In fact, most people find it invigorating.

Touring the Colorado Rockies offers many a thrilling experience. The run out of Colorado Springs up to the top of Pikes Peak is an old favorite. The Pikes Peak Highway, Colorado's second highest auto road,

is usually open and snow free along about the end of May or early June. June, too, is the month that Colorado Springs holds its annual Pikes Peak or Bust celebration.

Incidentally, though Pikes Peak is not the highest mountain in Colorado (altitude at the summit 14,110 feet) it is easily one of the most famous. It stands out, lone and majestic, and a wonderful view of both mountain and plains country can be had from the top of the Peak.

About halfway up the Peak Highway there is a fine picnic campsite from which a wonderful, clear view of the summit of Pikes Peak can be obtained. Summit House is reached just 13 miles from the start of the highway.

Another and somewhat longer mountain scenery trip can be made further north to Longs Peak about 80 miles west and north of Denver via the old and still interesting mining camp of Central City. From Longs Peak, in approximately the center of Rocky Mountain National Park, fascinating drives over several hundred miles of good oiled highways can be made to Big Thompson, and North and South St. Vrain Canyons. Or to

Bear Lake and Glacier Basin.

Yet another trip that will provide a million mountain motoring thrills for any auto tripper is a swing through the San Juan range in the southwestern section of the State.

You can start from Colorado Springs at the eastern edge of the Rockies. Take State Highway 115 to Canon City (45 miles), then pick up U. S. 50 heading west through the San Juans. If you would like to take in a side trip over the highest suspension bridge in the world you can, outside of Canon City. It's about a ten-mile jaunt across the famous Royal Gorge of the Arkansas River.

Beyond Salida turn south again on State Highway 285 across Poncha Pass and into Saguache, a real, unspoiled old-fashioned cow town in the San Luis Valley. Next, you pick up U. S. 160 at Monte Vista and turn west again across the Continental Divide over Wolf Creek Pass, perhaps one of the most beautiful mountain passes in all Colorado. Further on is Durango, center of the San Juan Basin and principal shipping point for the farming section along the Animas River and the cattle country in the mountains and plateaus off to the west.

A side trip from Durango of 120 miles will give you a chance to take in the fascinating Indian cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde National Park.

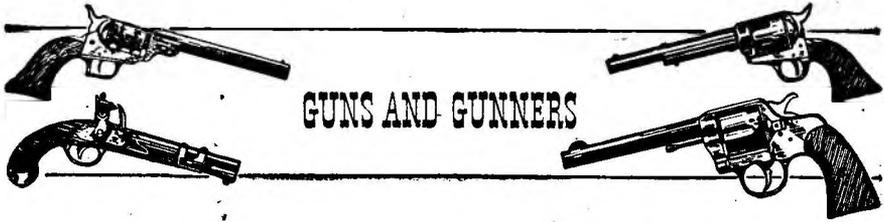
Out of Durango, continue north over U. S. Route 550 to Montrose, a distance of 112 miles, and about all you will want to make in one day. It is real mountain country driving past the mining towns of Silverton and Ouray, and the road traverses some of the wildest and most rugged high-range regions you can reach anywhere in the world by car. About 50 miles of it is unpaved gravel. Unless you watch yourself on the turns your wheels will be flipping pebbles over the edge of the highway at places where the drop straight down is 2,000 feet—or mighty close to it.

Just take it easy and you will make it safely as have countless other visitors every year—and the local folks do every day. As a matter of fact, accidents on the road are rare. You know you have to be careful at the start, and there is no chance at all for the sort of reckless driving that sometimes mars the pleasure of riding on our modern, high-speed more level country highways.

From Montrose it is a lead-pipe cinch to make the 211 mile run east on U. S. 50 over Monarch Pass to Salida, Canon City and back to Colorado Springs on State Highway 115.

From beginning to end, the San Juan swing is a grand trip. One you'll never forget. But, as far as that goes, so are any of the mountain motor trips you care to make in Colorado.

Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. Be sure to enclose a stamped envelope for your reply. Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, P. O. Box 489, Elizabeth, N. J.



By Captain Philip B. Sharpe

THE most popular rifle caliber in the world is the .22 rimfire. It is made wherever guns are made, and even in countries using the metric system it is called the 5.6mm. or .22 Kaliber. Boxes of ammunition generally carry both designations.

This department receives many requests for information regarding the lowly but popular .22's. A frequent query is: "What is the difference between guns marked 'For .22 Short, Long and Long Rifle' and those which are marked 'For .22 Long Rifle Only'?"

First, let's look at the ammunition. There are a few special .22 rimfires, now more or less obsolete, such as the .22 Extra Long, .22 Winchester Automatic, and the identical .22 W.R.F. and Remington Special. These fit only guns especially chambered for them. The standards are the three old favorites. The .22 Short was designed in 1856 by Smith & Wesson. It has a short case and a 29-grain bullet. Some years later, the .22 Long was developed, to obtain a little more power. It has a longer case, more powder, but the same bullet. Then, in 1887, desiring a cartridge with power which would give greater ac-

curacy, the Peters Cartridge Company and the J. Stevens Arms Company, working together, developed the .22 Long Rifle. This is the Long case with a 40-grain bullet and still more power.

If your barrel is chambered for the .22 Long Rifle, it will handle all three, but if it is marked ".22 Short," the Long and Long Rifle will not enter. Thus many of the lower-priced rifles in single shot or repeaters will be marked for all three. In the repeating gun, this merely means that the design of the magazine and the carrier or cartridge-feeding system will handle all three cartridges, even when mixed. If the gun is marked ".22 Long Rifle Only" the magazines will not properly feed shorts or longs.

The real question is "Will it harm my barrel to shoot .22 Shorts?" That question is complicated. Stand a .22 Short beside the .22 Long Rifle. Notice the difference in length. The short bullet jumps some distance through the front of the chamber before it gets into the rifling, spilling hot gas into that portion of the chamber. Soon the polished metal is burned rough, and when you again try to shoot the Long Rifle cartridge

the case expands into that roughness and sticks. In many cases the extractor will bite a piece from the rim, leaving the case stuck in the chamber. It will have to be pushed out from the muzzle end with a cleaning rod.

Eliminating technical details, in any given caliber, a heavy bullet requires a faster twist in the rifling to keep it spinning properly and in balance in flight. Thus it has been accepted that the greatest accuracy from the .22 Short is obtained with a twist of one turn in about 26 inches. The best for the .22 Long Rifle is one turn in 16 inches. The quick twist overspins the light bullet and accuracy is poor. If your barrel is marked "Short Only," it will have the proper twist.

Now the final common question: "How long before my barrel will wear out?" I have seen .22 barrels which have eaten 200,000 cartridges. Put another way, at current prices that means more than \$2,000 worth of ammunition. If you can afford to spend that much money for ammunition, you should not complain about laying out \$20 or so to buy yourself a new barrel.

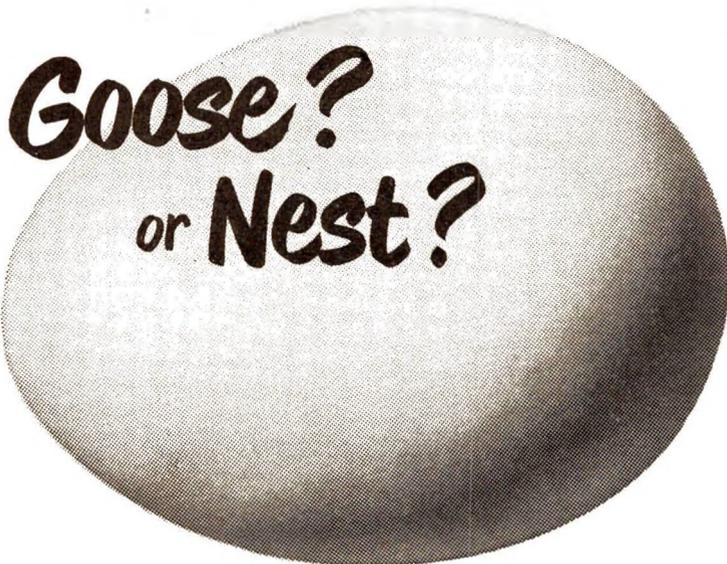
This department never answers the questions as to which brand is best. We have an organization known as the Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers Institute. They stand-

ardize everything, so one brand will shoot properly in rifles of Remington, Winchester, Marlin, Savage, Stevens, Mossberg and other rifles. But the .22 rifle is sensitive, regardless of make or cost. Some rifles have individual tastes as to loads for best performance. This is of no importance to anyone other than a match target shooter. And he has to find the right combination the hard way—the trial method. But all .22 ammunition will shoot better than the average shooter.

The .22 Long Rifle Cartridge is the world's most highly developed cartridge today. Some 5,000,000 are loaded daily. Every maker is constantly experimenting to attempt to improve the standard quality cartridges as well as the special match grades. Standard ammunition today is generally better than pre-war match ammunition.

Parents with growing boys who are asking for a rifle, should give them a break and see that they are started properly. The best help a beginner can get is found in a new book by Lt. Charles Edward Chapel—"The Boys' Book of Rifles." Published by Coward-McCann of New York, the 275 pages cover rifles, sights, shooting positions, target shooting, and hunting. It is all practical information and the book is well illustrated.

Address all letters concerning firearms to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Story, P.O. Box 489, Elizabeth, N. J. Be sure you print your name clearly and enclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.



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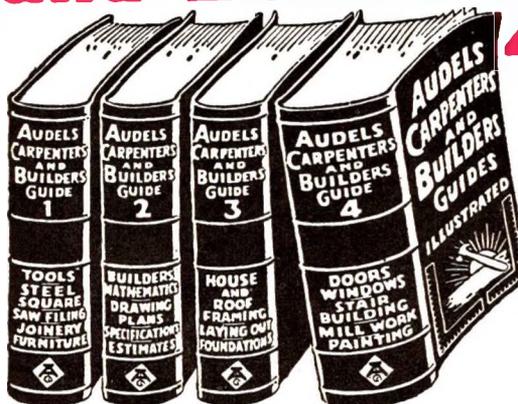
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