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REPPIN' FOR THE DEAD
A NOVEL BY WALT COBURN
ALL STORIES COMPLETE
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How to Avoid Saving Money

by DANNY KAYE

First, cut off all your pockets. By carrying your money in your hand you will—1. spend it, 2. lose it, 3. get it taken from you—*quicker!* Also avoid piggy banks and sugar bowls. The kiddies are victimized by such devices, often saving quite a bale of moolah. And shun budgets! Just buy anything you don't particularly hate.

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Danny Kaye

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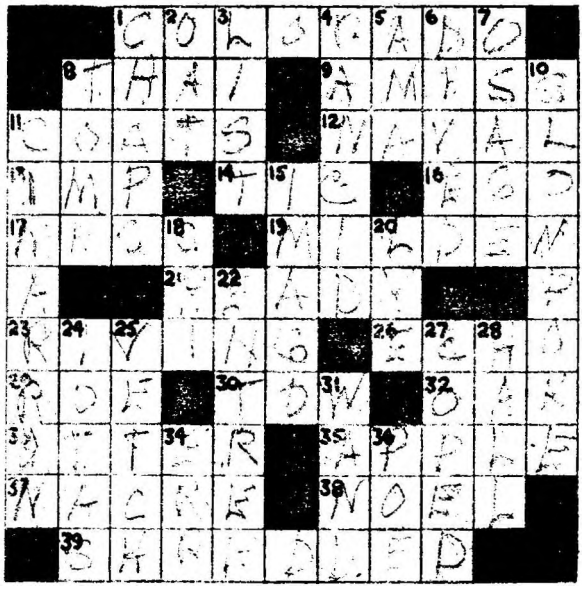


CROSSWORD PUZZLE

ACROSS

1. River of the Grand Canyon
8. Siamese
9. Wrong
11. Outer garments
12. Pertaining to sea power
13. Rascal
14. Twitching
16. The self
17. Soldiers' meal
19. Discoloration of cloth by damp and mold
21. Willing
23. Splitting
26. Imitate
29. Small deer
30. Haul by rope
32. Hardwood tree
33. Aquatic fur animal
35. Fruit
37. Mother-of-pearl
38. Christmas carol
39. Cut into thin pieces

DOWN

1. Sheepskin or leather pants protectors
2. Kind of grain
3. Group of written items
4. Spoiled, as butter
5. Wine vessel
6. Plunged into water
7. Siouan Indian
8. Book
10. One who moves like molasses
11. Famous Western river
15. Adult insect
18. Hindu title of respect
20. Strong alkaline cleanser
22. Freedom of access
24. Particles
25. Bitter herb
27. Contended with
28. Meeting room
31. Stick of wood
34. Miscalculate
36. American poet

(The solution to this puzzle may be found on page 131)

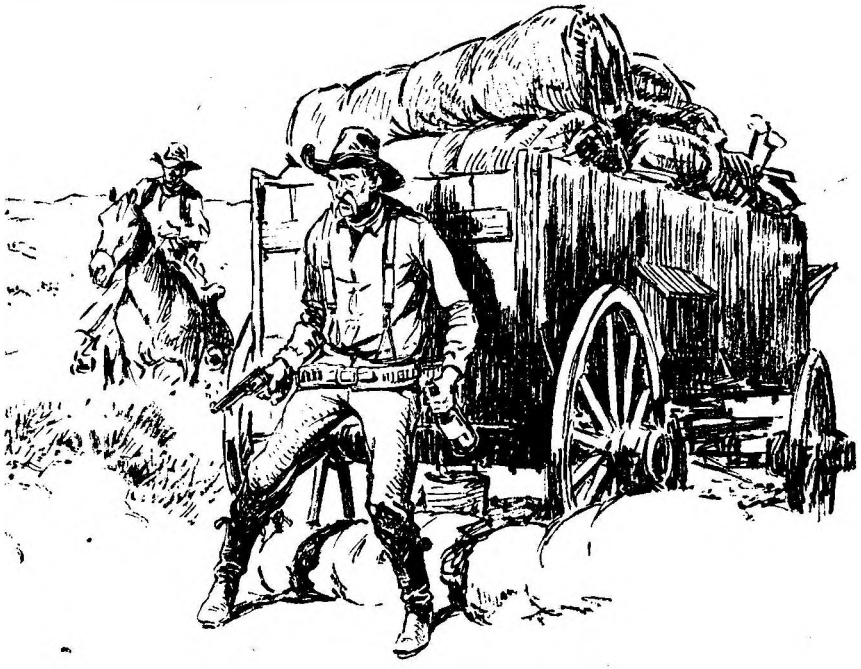
REPPIN' FOR THE DEAD

I

WHEN Ross Macklin placed in the calf roping and steer roping and won the saddle bronc riding the last day of the Prescott, Arizona, Frontier Days contest, it gave him a tail holt of the title of World's Champion Cowboy. He was feeling proud of himself and trying almighty hard not to show it while he unbuckled his chaps behind the bucking chutes. When somebody shoved a bottle at him, Ross grinned and shook his head. He didn't need a shot of liquor to warm him up inside. He

By Walt Coburn

"I look for Spud Murphy to come ridin' up one of these nights," drawled Ross Macklin—but could even phantom lead make that tough Anvil roundup crew believe in ghosts?



felt that glow of elation pounding the red blood through his veins and he was a little drunk with it—until the rusty-hinge voice of tough old Spud Murphy hit him from behind like a shot in the back. And it took all the prideful elation right out of Ross Macklin, Champion Cowboy.

"Pete Macklin," creaked that waspish voice, "always claimed his Bar M outfit lost the best all-around cowhand in Montana when his son Ross run off to foller the rodeos. But it was just another time when Pete was wrong. Never was a rodeo cowboy worth his grub around a real cow outfit."

It wasn't the meaning of the words, or their sting. It was the fact that ornery old Spud Murphy was alive to sound off in his creaky, cranky voice. Because Spud Murphy was dead. And Ross Macklin didn't believe in ghosts.

It had been in all the western news-

papers, and a long obituary had been written about old Spud Murphy and his Montana Anvil outfit, in the *Livestock Journal.* Spud had been one of the passengers who had been killed in a disastrous train wreck somewhere in California. His charred body, burned beyond recognition, had been identified by the watch and the little gold bull with its Anvil brand that Spud carried hung on a heavy gold chain.

That was six or eight months ago. Now Spud Murphy's creaky voice sounded behind Ross Macklin there behind the bucking chutes at Prescott, Arizona, like a dull rusty butcher knife shoved into Ross' muscular back.

Jerking the buckle of his chaps belt, Ross turned around stiffly. He was almost short statured, only five feet seven but husky through the shoulders that wedged down to lean flanks and saddle-muscled bowed legs. His hair was black and wiry as a terrier's. Black brows almost met above a short nose and they shadowed a pair of hard gray eyes. His mouth was wide and he was blunt-jawed. When he grinned he showed big white teeth. With that grin his eyes lost their hardness and glinted with a cowpuncher's humor.

Ross had a lot of good reasons to hate the guts of tough old Spud Murphy. But since boyhood he'd always kept hold of a sort of secret admiration and deep-seated respect for the tough ornery old cattle-man and when he'd read about old Spud being killed in that train wreck, he had felt a dull, aching pain inside his heart. It wasn't grief, exactly. But it had hurt, somehow.

Now tough little old Spud Murphy stood there. Alive. But he'd grown a spade beard that disguised the lean, leathery hatchet-faced line of his jaw, and a black patch covered a badly scarred eye socket. But the other eye was still as hard and bright blue as a Montana sapphire and it peered out from under a ragged shaggy gray brow.

Spud wore a shapeless old sweat-stained Stetson hat, a faded blue flannel shirt, worn Levi overalls and rusty boots, and he looked like some old broken-down cowhand who had just spent his last dollar on a bottle of rotgut booze and had used the last of the booze to drown his pride to where he'd beg the price of another bottle.

The Spud Murphy Ross Macklin had hated and respected and feared all his cowboy life had been prideful about his appearance, and when in town he was barbered and dressed in clothes made to order by the best tailor in Chicago. And, looking at Spud now, something inside young Ross Macklin went sick.

It must have showed in his gray eyes—along with whatever he'd felt in his heart when he read old Spud Murphy's obituary in the *Livestock Journal.* Because Spud's one blue eye misted a little, puckered at its leathery corner. And there was a huskiness in his creaky voice, when he pulled a beer bottle filled with colorless liquor from the flank pocket of his old Levis.

"It ain't ten-year-old bonded"—he

pulled the corncob stopper—"but it makes the drunk come." He shoved it at Ross.

Ross Macklin had turned down the offer of several bottles of good whiskey. But he took a long drag at Spud's moonshine corn likker and he blinked as it burned like liquid fire down his gullet and into his stomach.

Old Spud killed what was left and shoved the empty bottle back into his pocket, corked with the corncob.

"I got a keg planted in the brush," he explained. "I'm 'tendin' the windmill out yonder at a two-bit spread in Chino Valley. Seen your name toppin' the contestants list in the Fourth of July edition of the Prescott paper and declared a holiday when I'd got my chores done. They tell me you're the Champeen Cowboy. You're on top of the heap. Like as not, you got what's called Stetson fever—your head swole up to where the old size marked in the sweatband don't fit big enough. There'd be no average in your tossin' all this glory into the discard to go back to punchin' cows for a livin'. . . . No grandstand full of dudes to holler your name every time you swung a loop or stepped up in the saddle of a bronc; no herd of silly wimmin' trailin' you up and down the town street like a pack of houn's. And this rodeo travelin' an' hotel grub an' steam-heated rooms thinnin' your blood to where you'd hump up like a Texas dogie an' die the first Montana snow flurry that bit through them circus cowboy duds!

"I might've knowed I was wastin' my hired man's windmill tendin' chore time," Spud finished bitterly. "Well, so long, young feller. That brassy-lunged gent with the big megaphone is a-bellerin' out your name. Ross Macklin, World Champeen Cowboy. I fired you from a forty-a-month horse-wranglin' job because you wasn't man enough to hold it down. Whatever in hell gimme the notion you'd be worth that much now to the Anvil, I don't know. Must be this white mule rot-gut corn likker. . . ."

Old Spud Murphy's one hard bright blue eye blazed. He spat out his talk and turned and walked off. The tough old cowman walked with a limp now.

Ross blocked the old cowman's way. "Hold on, Spud." Anger tightened Ross' voice. It showed in his gray eyes. "You fired me once. You always claimed you'd never hire back a man you'd fired. Mebbyso old age or this white mule likker's softened you up. You sound like you're tryin' to hire me back."

"Whiskey talk." Old Spud's voice creaked.

"Forty a month," grinned Ross Macklin flatly, "and beans. You've hired a hand."

Old Spud Murphy's one hard bright blue eye bored a hole in Ross Macklin.

"By the hell!" The little old cowman's voice seemed to soften. "Well. by the hell . . ."

"Don't try to crawl out of it, Spud. I've called your bluff."

The rodeo arena director was calling Ross Macklin's name. Ross told old Spud to stay there, that he'd be back directly.

Little old Spud Murphy stood there, looking for all the world like some stove-up, down-and-out old grubline-riding range tramp. Watching through the dust cloud as World Champion Cowboy Ross Macklin rode out on his roping horse and lifted his hat to acknowledge the loud acclaim of the packed grandstand, Spud's one eye shone bright as a blue star. Old Spud had always cussed down the rodeo and its professional cowboys. He wouldn't hire the World Champion Cowboy for the Anvil beans he'd eat. He wasn't hiring Ross Macklin, the Champion Cowboy; he was hiring back young Ross Macklin, horse wrangler whom he had fired years ago when he found out the boy was riding the bronc stomper's rough string on the sly while the Anvil cowhands were following old Spud on morning circle.

Old Spud was waiting when Ross rode back to the chutes. The show was over and the grandstand was emptying. The cowboy contestants were riding back to town to jingle their spurs along Prescott's Whiskey Row.

Spud had an old saddle cinched on a stove-up old cow horse. The Anvil remuda had boasted three hundred head of the finest cow horses in Montana and Spud had always looked proud in the saddle. And even now, looking like some old tramp, forking an old secondhand saddle on a pensioned-off old cow horse, Spud Murphy retained something of that pride of a top cowman on a top cow horse, and Ross Macklin knew better than to offer the old man his extra roping horse and the new saddle he'd just won as a bronc-riding trophy.

Ross Macklin rode out to the Chino Valley ranch with old Spud Murphy. When they'd taken care of their horses, Spud filled his bottle from the five-gallon keg he had cached in the brush. They ate jerky and beans for supper and washed the grub down with strong black coffee. After the dishes were washed they sat and smoked in the starlight. And Ross let old Spud Murphy of the Anvil outfit tell it in his own way.

"Seems like some dead corpse got identified as Spud Murphy by my watch and gold bull watch charm with the Anvil brand, he explained. "Must've bin the tinhorn in my upper berth lifted it when he seen me slip out of the lower in my night shirt and pants, leavin' my watch and chain under my pillow.

"Anyhow, I'm bedded down on the rear platform when hell jarred loose an' I come alive out in the brush a hundred yards away from the wreck. The sleepin' car was afire. I was bunged up some. Laig busted, an eye knocked out, brain kind o' jarred loose. Couldn't remember my own name.

"Weeks later it come to me when I read in the paper where Spud Murphy, Montana cattleman, owner of the big Anvil outfit, had bin honored there at his home ranch. A copper plate had bin set into a big ol' granite

boulder there at the Anvil Ranch. Memorial services held, so on. . . . It was about the damndest, lyin'est, two-faced ceremony you ever heard tell of. Men that hated my guts makin' speeches. Any tears shed there was glycerine tears like actors shed on the stage. . . ."

Old Spud Murphy took a drink. His one eye blazed in the moonlight.

"I never married. I left my Anvil outfit to a nephew, Dennis Murphy. And a niece, Norah Murphy. Dennis and Norah is third-fourth cousins. And they ain't my real nephew an' niece. More like younger cousins. Shirt-tail kind. But they wear the Murphy name and they come from Texas where I was born an' raised an' where I lived till I come to Montana with one of the first trail herds. . . .

"I'd never seen Dennis an' Norah," Spud went on. "But I'd put 'em through school an' staked 'em when their folks died. Dennis had a little outfit in Texas. Norah banked her money an' taken a job teachin' school.

"I left Dennis Murphy an' Norah Murphy the Anvil outfit. I've had a lawyer draw up the will. It was left in trust to them. The Valley Bank at Red Coulee was the trustees and accordin' to the terms of that will I had drawed up, Dennis an' Norah had to make the Anvil outfit pay for five years before they got clear title to it. Allowin' for hard winters, a bad market, so on, and the average to run over five years. To prove that they was capable of handlin' the Anvil outfit as it should be run.

"You remember ol' Wash Lemmon, the Anvil wagon boss? Well, I put it in the will that Wash was to ramrod the outfit as ranch foreman an' wagon boss on every roundup till he admitted he was too old to make a cowhand. Then Wash could pension himself off on the old Macklin ranch that I'd got from your daddy Pete Macklin' on the mortgage the Valley Bank held when Pete got killed."

Old Spud Murphy took another drink. He was waiting for Ross to say something and Ross didn't disappoint the old cowman.

"I was in Europe with the Buffalo Bill show when I got word my father had been killed. Bushwhacked. I stopped at Red Coulee. They told me at the Valley Bank that nobody had been arrested for Pete Macklin's murder. That spur-jinglin' Dude Collier was wearin' a brand new sheriff badge. Dude told me that the Anvil had the Pete Macklin place and that if I showed the first sign like I meant to stir up trouble, he'd throw me in jail and toss the key in the river. I had a contract with the Bill Show I couldn't bust so I told Sheriff Dude Collier I'd be back, that I'd find out who killed Pete Macklin and I'd be my own law. . . . Go on, Spud."

"The Valley Bank at Red Coulee," said Spud Murphy, "has put in Dude Collier as receiver or whatever it's called by law. Dude turned in his law badge. He's ramroddin' the Anvil outfit, reppin' for the Valley Bank. Fred Collier, the president of the Valley Bank and its main stockholder is Dude's uncle. So Dude Collier is general manager, ramrod and wagon boss for the big Anvil outfit. Wash

Lemmon is the beef boss on the roundup. And I reckon that tough ol' ranihan is bein' kicked around a-plenty. With ol' Spud Murphy legally dead, that's what's happenin' to the Anvil outfit."

"Why don't you go back and claim it?"

Old Spud snorted. There was a hard bright twinkle in his one blue eye.

"You're the only human on earth that knows Spud Murphy is alive," his voice creaked dismally. "I'm sendin' you to the Anvil Ranch to rep fer me. I want to know what's goin' on up yonder. I got to find out what they're a-doin' to the big Anvil outfit that I built up from nothin'. Spud Murphy is dead. The buzzards is pickin' Spud Murphy's Anvil outfit clean. The wolves is goin' to fight an' kill over them bones. And if ever they figger it out what you're doin' there, you'll be the first one killed.

"There's only one man there at the Anvil Ranch you kin trust. That's the man the law accused of killin' your daddy Pete Macklin, but didn't have enough circumstantial evidence to convict. And he had the Anvil money behind him. That man is ol' Wash Lemmon. If you got to trust somebody, you throw in with Wash, regardless. But don't tell Wash Lemmon ner ary other human that you're reppin' for Spud Murphy and that ol' Spud Murphy is still alive. . . .

"It's a dangerous job, young Ross Macklin. And I ain't got even the forty a month to pay you. I can't promise you a damned thing. . . ."

Ross reached for the bottle. His grin was flat-lipped, but it left his eyes bleak.

"You've hired your man, Spud." He drank and handed back the bottle.

II

You can hate a man's guts and still have a lot of respect for him. Ross Macklin had hated Spud Murphy since he was sixteen years old. Since the day cranky, ornery old Spud had fired him for swiping broncs from the rough string. That day was as fresh now in the memory of Ross Macklin as it had been fourteen years ago.

Ross had wrangled horses for the Anvil every spring and fall on the calf and beef roundups, from the time he was twelve years old. And he'd made good. Hadn't lost a horse from the Anvil remuda. Besides that, there were half a dozen strings of horses belonging to the reps from other outfits and those rep strings were hard to hold the first week or so on the roundup when they kept quitting the remuda to pull out for their home range.

Young Ross had been proud of his job and his horse wrangler's record. And he'd done his camp chores, to boot, fetching water and chopping wood for the cook, helping the nighthawk set up the rope corral each time they moved camp, making himself useful.

A good horse wrangler has plenty

of time to sit in the shade of his horse while his remuda is scattered on good feed and water. But it was typical of young Ross Macklin that, instead of roundsiding, he would use his spare time fooling around with a bronc from the rough string.

Young Ross had a way with a green bronc. Horses weren't scared of him. They trusted the tone of his voice and the way he smelled. He had ridden every bronc in the Anvil rough string and nobody but old Wash Lemmon the wiser, and Wash never talked out of turn.

Then one day young Ross had gotten too bold and his pride had gotten the better of his common sense. He had fetched in his remuda one evening, forking a big hammer-headed blue roan bronc that the Anvil bronc stomper had condemned for a man-killing outlaw and refused to ride.

Dude Collier was riding the Anvil rough string that fall. And after the big Blue Lightning roan had fallen over backwards with him and pitched over in a limber-legged somersault a time or two, Dude had condemned the Blue Lightning. And twenty-year-old Dude Collier was rated as one of the best bronc stompers in Montana.

Dude was there at camp and so was Spud who had ridden out to the roundup from the home ranch. Wash Lemmon, the wagon boss, and just about every Anvil cowhand except the men on day herd were there at camp when young Ross Macklin fetched in his remuda. And the young horse wrangler was handling that big Blue Lightning outlaw as though he was some broke saddle horse, cutting didoes, riding the bronc like a cow horse.

Wash Lemmon had been tickled inside because he liked that kid of Pete Macklin's and he had no use at all for the tall, bragging, swaggering Dude Collier. So Wash was grinning inside when he saw young Ross sashaying around on the Blue Lightning outlaw, hazing his Anvil remuda into the rope corral.

Dude Collier had gone white-lipped with cold fury. That six-foot, tow-headed, pale-blue-eyed bronc twister saw a bald-faced kid wrangling horses on an outlawed spoiled bronc Dude was scared to go into the same corral with. It had been a gut shot that ripped through Dude's swaggering, boasting pride. He would gladly, eagerly, have killed young Ross Macklin then and there. He heard the grizzled Wash chuckle and his hatred included the Anvil wagon boss. Some of the cowpunchers were grinning derisively. Ridicule is a cruel thing. Dude Collier could be laughed out of the cow country by just such a damned fool trick as this.

Dude had had to think fast. And he had a quick brain, college-educated, cunning—like his Uncle Fred's banker's brain. And Dude was more than just a bronc rider. He was repping that year for the Valley Bank at Red Coulee because the bank had the Anvil outfit plastered with a heavy mortgage.

The hard winter had just about wiped out Spud Murphy's Anvil outfit and Spud had to mortgage the outfit to get enough money to restock his range. And unless tough, ornery

Spud tipped his hat to Fred Collier and called him "Mister," that cold-blooded banker might foreclose. So Fred Collier's bronc-riding nephew Dude was repping for his uncle's Valley Bank and kept a tally book in the pocket of his fancy shirt. And he had old Spud Murphy by the short hairs and wasn't backward about yanking.

"Tie the can on that smart-aleck Macklin kid's coyote tail, Spud." Dude's hawk-beaked, thin-lipped, lean-jawed face had a white, tense look. His voice was barely audible. "Or I'll claim your Anvil for Uncle Fred."

Only Wash Lemmon had overheard the threat. And Wash alone knew why Spud Murphy did something that day that was against his nature. A picayune, mean thing.

"Pull your saddle off that Blue Lightnin', button," Spud Murphy had said to the flushed, shiny-eyed young horse wrangler. "Wash will give you your time. I hired you to wrangle horses, not to mess around with broncs. You're fired."

Spud Murphy had done that to sixteen-year-old Ross Macklin. And Ross had hated the tough ornery little old cowman from that day.

Wash Lemmon had done his best to salve the raw wound it had made in the boy's heart, without betraying the truth. Wash had hired Ross in the first place, when the boy had shown up three years before and tackled the grizzled wagon boss for a job wrangling horses.

"Don't take it too hard, Ross," Wash had told the kid. "And you needn't pull your hull off that Blue Lightnin' bronc. He's yourn. And when the roundup's over I'll give you a string of Anvil colts to saddle-break. Ten dollars a head, and at your dad's place. You'll be your own boss. Take your own time about it. To the devil with this horse jinglin', anyhow—"

"To the devil with Spud Murphy!" Young Ross Macklin had choked back the sob in his voice. "To the devil with his Anvil outfit."

But Wash had made Ross keep the Blue Lightning bronc. A few years later Ross Macklin had won the calf roping at Calgary with the Blue Lightning and in later years when the blue roan gelding was getting too old and slowed down, Ross had pensioned him off. Old Blue Lightning should still be there at the Macklin ranch. . . .

Pete Macklin had told his son Ross he'd look after the Blue Lightning. Pete Macklin wasn't much of a father to brag about. He had been in and out of jail since Ross could remember.

The Macklin ranch was a renegade hideout and the drifting outlaws had paid Pete with stolen horses and cattle. Pete Macklin's place was on the Missouri River. He ran a saloon there and he made his own rotgut booze and sold it by the jug or bottle or across the pine-board bar by the drink. He was never caught selling whiskey to the Indians, but he would tell an Injun where to find a bottle in the brush and there would be a dollar left there where the bottle had been.

The ferryboat was seldom in working condition. So young Ross would swim a man's horse across, then row

the man across the river in the rowboat.

Pete Macklin never ate his own beef but there was always fresh meat hung up in the ice house. The brand was cut out of the hide and whittled to bits and the hide sunk deep in the river. From the time he was big enough to handle a skinning knife, Ross knew how to cut out a brand and whittle it away and get rid of earmarks.

Ross Macklin had commenced running away from home when he was old enough to climb on a horse's back. His father never took the trouble to go after him. Every cow outfit in that part of Montana had, at one time or another, hired Pete Macklin's kid. Ross would work for a month or two through a roundup, then draw his time and pull out. He might have enough money saved up for a new saddle or a pair of boots. Then when he got to town with it, Pete Macklin would likely be in jail and Ross would use the money to bail out his father. Though Pete never asked for his son's help.

Later when Ross Macklin began following the rodeos and making money, he would lay aside a part of it, just in case Pete needed it to get out of a jackpot.

Ross Macklin owed nothing in the way of allegiance to his father. He had no cause to respect the man who had sired him. Ross' mother had died when he was too young to remember her and Pete had done a haphazard job of raising his motherless son. But he had never lectured or scolded the boy, never laid a hand on him in way of punishment. He

taught Ross how to handle a horse and how to handle a rowboat in the swift, treacherous Missouri River; how to butcher a stolen beef or work a brand; how to handle his fists and shoot a gun; how to make moonshine whiskey and string a catfish trotline across the river. Ross had called his father "Pete" and they were sort of partners and understood each other without ever putting it into a lot of useless words.

Pete Macklin's death had caused no ripple of sorrow there in the Montana cow country. The law wasn't going to bother itself trying to track down and punish whoever had killed Pete Macklin. Pete's death had rid Montana of a worthless character.

The Macklin place on the Missouri River went to the Valley Bank and Spud Murphy had bought it and had signed it over, lock, stock and barrel, to old Wash Lemmon. It was rumored around the cow country that Wash Lemmon had killed Pete and old Spud Murphy had given Wash the Macklin place as a reward.

The Montana cow country did not mourn the passing of Pete Macklin. But that same cow country would give a man odds and bet him that one day Ross Macklin would show up to kill whoever had bushwhacked his father.

Old Spud Murphy knew it, though he would not put it into words. That tough little old cowman was sending

Pete Macklin's son back to Montana to avenge his father's death, and he was sending Ross Macklin back to Montana to save the Anvil outfit.

"You git back up there, young feller. How quick kin you git started?"

"What do you do," grinned Ross Macklin, "to quit this windmill job?"

"Uh?" grunted old Spud.

"I'm takin' you along, Spud."

"The devil yuh say!"

"Just as you are," Ross told him. "You look like somethin' just kicked out of a saloon. Muzzle that voice of yourn and even Wash Lemmon will have to look close to recognize you. There's places in the badlands back of the Macklin place where you kin hole up till you die of old age and nobody know you're livin' or dead till the buzzards find your carcass. Spud Murphy is dead. Nobody will be lookin' for his ghost to prowl."

"I ain't got a dollar to buy me a railroad ticket."

"You don't need a dollar. You'll travel with me and my two rope horses in a horse car."

III

Two weeks later Ross Macklin and Spud Murphy rode up about dark to the Macklin place on the Missouri River. It had a deserted, neglected look. The log cabin saloon was closed. Its windows were boarded up and the door was padlocked. There was a sign on the door that said: KEEP OUT.

The cabin where Pete and Ross Macklin had lived needed chinking and daubing. So did the log barn and cattle shed. But a hay crew had put up a big hay crop and the new haystacks were fenced by barbed wire. And there were saddle and work horses grazing in the horse pasture, Blue Lightning among them, fat and slick.

When Ross called his name the old roan cow horse nickered and came up to stand by the gate, head and tail up. Ross rubbed the old gelding's ears and muzzle and Blue Lightning nibbled at his face, while old Spud sat his horse, cussing softly.

They were Wash Lemmon's horses. Spud said he reckoned that Wash must be aiming to winter here, that he'd get around to daubing and chinking the log buildings later on in the fall before the first frost. And Spud showed Ross where his father was buried, at the base of a giant cottonwood on the high bank above the flood line. Pete's grave was alongside the grave of his wife and both were marked with headboards. A barbed wire fence ran around the graves and the tree trunk.

"Wash said he didn't reckon Pete Macklin wanted to be fenced in, alive or dead, but a tight wire fence would keep the varmints from diggin' . . ."

Like the boarded windows and padlocked door kept prowlers out of the old saloon. There wasn't so much as a pint bottle of liquor left inside. But the place had a lot of memories for Wash Lemmon. Wash had always been a drinking man. If it hadn't been for booze, he'd have his own iron and a cow outfit.

Wash used to slip away from the Anvil Ranch and down to Pete Macklin's and the two of them would get drunk and argue and quarrel until a

stranger would swear they were going to kill each other. As a boy, Ross had been scared until he got older and was used to their jangling and came to understand that the two men enjoyed those long whiskey arguments. When they wore each other out, they'd bed down and sleep off their jags. . . .

Only this last time Pete Macklin was dead when Wash Lemmon came out of it. Somebody had shot Pete in the back and dropped the six-shooter there on the saloon floor. And it was Wash Lemmon's six-shooter that Sheriff Dude Collier had found there.

"I bailed Wash out o' jail," said Spud. "Directly he was out, he come back here. Boarded the place up and padlocked the door. Everybody figgers Wash killed Pete but was too drunk to recollect how or why he done it."

"Wash never killed Pete." Ross Macklin made it a flat statement.

Before it got too dark, Ross prowled around while Spud was cooking supper. They had grub and a camp outfit, and they shared the same tarp-covered bed Ross used on the rodeo circuit.

When Ross came back to the campfire he helped Spud finish getting supper, then put out the campfire. He told Spud to sit back in the shadows out of the moonlight with his grub.

"This place ain't as deserted as somebody wants it to look, Spud," Ross spoke in a barely audible voice. "There's fresh horse sign around the corrals. . . . Boot tracks . . . One horse. One man. And he ain't too far away right now. So keep your back to the tree. And your gun handy. Somebody watched us ride up here. He's watchin' us now . . . yonder . . ."

Ross picked up a long-handled skillet. His voice was louder now and casual as he carried the skillet towards the river bank.

"This skillet needs scourin' . . ."

Ross had seen a cautious shadow move in behind the chokecherry brush near the river bank, heard the snap of a dry twig. He moved carelessly towards the brush on his way to the river's edge. And when he was close to the chokecherry thicket, he moved swiftly and without a hint of warning. He pitched the long-handled skillet with a swift overhand throw. It clattered against a gun barrel with a loud metallic clank that was followed by a sharp, startled outcry. It was choked off, blotted out, as Ross crashed through the brush with a swift leap that landed him on top of somebody crouched there.

Ross Macklin's one hundred and seventy pounds was compact muscle and bone. Quick, hard-hitting, without a lost motion, he had the perfect timing and coordination of brain and nerves and muscle that goes into the making of a trained athlete. Ross was straddling somebody. His knees pinned down a pair of flailing arms and a short-barreled saddle carbine went flying through the air. Ross cocked a bunched fist for a short pile driver knockout blow, then jerked his blow back, pulling the punch.

"Lemme—up, you—bully!"

The voice was shrill, a choked sob

in it. And Ross' left hand let go of a mass of thick hair. He scrambled to his feet and reached down to haul a girl to her feet. A girl in cowboy boots, Levi overalls and shirt. She grabbed her hat off the ground and put up a clawing, kicking wildcat fight for her saddle gun that Ross had picked up. Ross had her by the back of her shirt collar and the waistband of her Levis and was propelling her along towards where old Spud was on his feet, his saddle gun gripped in his gnarled hands.

"What you got there, Ross?" Spud creaked.

"Strike a match," grinned Ross, "and we'll look it over. It's part wildcat the way it's spittin' an' clawin'. Might have to sack it up and tie a rock to it and drop it in the river . . ."

"You—you—you—" The sobbing voice choked.

Spud struck a match. The flare of it showed a girl about five feet two and slim as a boy, with a tumbled mass of hair that Spud said was a chestnut sorrel. Freckles sprinkled a short nose and her chin was small and firm and her mouth a trifle wide. A pair of sage-green eyes, fringed by black lashes, were set deep under black brows.

"Cuter'n a speckled pup," chuckled old Spud. "Watch out she don't bite a chunk out o' you."

Ross shook her and let go. "Scare a man to death! Lucky I didn't take a shot at you. Only them boot tracks I saw was so danged small they couldn't belong to a growed man, I mighta shot you. I got a mind to bend you acrost a log and give you an old-fashioned whoppin'. Scarin' a man thataway! Supposin' I'd shot you . . . how do you reckon a man'd feel—killin' a girl?"

"Not half as bad as I'd feel, you black-muzzled baboon!"

Then she whirled on old Spud Murphy who was chuckling.

"What's so comical, you one-eyed old land-locked pirate? Speckled pup! Why, you whiskey-soaked old goat-whiskered ranihan!"

Ross got over his hot anger quickly. He stood there on wide-spread legs, with a wide grin on his black-whiskered face. And the girl cussed them both out without using a swear word and without repeating herself, until she ran out of breath. And by the time she had talked herself breathless, her quick-tempered wildcat fury had spent itself and she eyed them for a long moment. Slowly the anger died in her green eyes and the color came into her cheeks and she grinned faintly, like a boy.

Then the grin flattened and her green eyes studied them. Ross was wishing he'd shaved off the week's wiry black stubble and put on some clean clothes. But the girl wasn't paying any attention to his disreputable appearance. Not in the way Ross was thinking about.

"Strangers, aren't you?" Her voice was calm and level-toned now.

"You might call us strangers," said old Spud's creaky voice.

"Tough-looking," she went on. "I'd hire a couple of tough hombres. How'd you like to make a dollar?"

Old Spud Murphy wiped the beginning of a grin from his white-bearded mouth. His one hard, bright-blue eye twinkled.

"Name your game, young un."

"I'm not so darned young. And I can take my own part. But I'm not fool enough to buck odds I can't lick. You can name your fighting wages."

"Who do you want killed?" creaked old Spud Murphy.

"Crippled." She corrected him. "Horsewhipped. Double a wet rope and whip 'em."

She eyed Ross narrowly. "You're short but you move fast. The two of you could double up on that big fancy Dude. I'll keep that shirt-tail cousin Dennis off your back. That larceny-hearted whiskey-brave four-flusher! That pair of petty larceny picayune two-bit double-crossers! With their lady killer sashayin' around.

"I tried playin' 'em one against the other but it turned my stomach. I hoped they'd get jealous enough to lock horns. And they would, if I could stomach either of 'em. But when that fancy Dude started pawin' me I dragged a rawhide quirt across his pretty face till he got out o' the notion. And when Cousin Dennis commenced his mealy-mouthed whiskey love speeches I gave him his mixed pedigree.

"A pedigree I made up myself and hung on him because he must have come from sorry folks who stole a proud Irish name from the Dennis Murphy they bushwhacked in the fence cutter war in Texas. Uncle Spud Murphy must have been a sucker to let that fake Irish thing called Dennis Murphy fool him with the letters he wrote claiming kinship, when they'd murdered the real Dennis Murphy in their barb-wire cattle war in Texas. If Uncle Spud is turnin' cartwheels in his grave, it's his own stubborn mule-headed fault for lettin' himself get goldbricked by fancy letters. And don't think this Dennis Murphy is anybody's darned fool. He used Spud Murphy's money to grab himself an education and, drunk or sober, he's sharp as a knife blade. But who am I to be malignin' the dead, and God rest the soul of Uncle Spud whose money fed and clothed me since I was a speckled-faced kid with pigtails.

"But I'll pay no respect to that monument that fish-blooded white-collared Fred Valley-Bank Collier unveiled with his hypocritical speech makin'. I'll shed no crocodile tears there. But I'll say a bit of a prayer for Uncle Spud in my own way, and I'll fight like a wildcat to keep those thievin' buzzards from pickin' his dead bones. . . .

"Well, that's that and I've talked too much to a pair of strangers. But I'm Norah Murphy and Uncle Spud Murphy left me a part of his Anvil outfit and I'm takin' the rest of that Anvil spread away from Dude Collier and a thing who calls himself Dennis Murphy. I came here to meet the only friend I've got. But he hasn't showed up. And if they've killed old Wash Lemmon, then it's no holds barred from here on. I'll use that

gun you took away from me with your slick trick, mister, and I won't shoot to miss. . . .

"Well, there it is, misters. Name your fightin' wages. And I'll be right alongside you when you tackle 'em. How about it?"

She stood there facing them, small and freckled and red-headed and looking full of fight.

Old Spud Murphy was checking the bet to Ross Macklin. And Ross caught the signal in the old cowman's eye when it winked at him.

"It'll be a pleasure, ma'am," grinned Ross, "and an honor. You've hired your men. It's a deal."

"I'll pay you. . . ."

"When the job's done," said Ross Macklin, "me'n my pardner will collect what we figger it's worth. When did you eat last?"

"Yesterday morning. At the home ranch. The Anvil roundup is working the badlands. It's a month early for the beef work. And it looked to Wash like Dude Collier was up to something. Dude's the Anvil wagon boss. He had to take Wash Lemmon along when I insisted on it like Wash told me to. And Dennis is trailing Dude like a coon dog. They've got a mixed herd gathered and they'll shove it across the Missouri River here at the Macklin place. They should be here tomorrow or the next day.

"Wash sent me word to meet him here yesterday but he hasn't showed up. And I'm worried. There's something going on and whatever it is, it's bad. And it's dangerous. If they've drygulched old Wash Lemmon, I'm declaring open war on them!"

Spud was starting another supper fire, whistling tunelessly through his teeth as he fanned the blaze with his battered old hat.

"What do I call you two?" asked the girl.

"Just call my pardner 'Ornery.'" Ross grinned when he saw old Spud's bent back stiffen. "Ornery. It fits him like an old boot."

"And you?"

"Me? You kin call me Ross."

"Ross . . . Ornery." Norah Murphy said the names over. "Ross. Ornery." She nodded and grinned. "I'm Norah. Norah Murphy."

"I'll pull out at daybreak," said Ross, "for the Anvil roundup. You and Ornery kin move into the badlands. Out from underfoot."

IV

The Anvil roundup was camped on feed and water at the head of the badlands. Ross Macklin timed his arrival for sundown. He rode around the big beef herd they were holding. His week's growth of wiry black whiskers served as a good disguise.

He recognized the Anvil cowhands who were grazing the cattle onto the bed ground, but they showed no sign of recognition as they eyed him with the cold suspicion they gave a stranger. Two of them were old Anvil cowpunchers. The other two on cocktail guard were half-renegades Ross remembered having seen when they stopped for a jug at Pete Macklin's saloon. But it had been years since they had seen Ross Macklin. They'd remember him as the undersized bronc-riding kid who had worked for

every outfit in that part of Montana. And if they'd seen Ross contesting at Miles City or Calgary they'd see little in the shabby, unshaved stranger to identify him as Ross Macklin, cowboy rodeo contestant, or Ross Macklin, roper and bronc rider with the great Buffalo Bill Wild West Show.

There was no sign of the grizzled Wash Lemmon out at the beef herd where he should be bossing the job of handling the Anvil beef cattle. Ross Macklin returned the cold-eyed scrutiny of the cowhands and rode on towards where the mess wagon and bed wagon were camped on the bank of Anvil Creek.

The remuda was inside the rope corral. The horse wrangler stood there holding the rope gate in his hand. Some of the cowpunchers had already caught their night horses and were saddling. Others were on their way into the corral with their saddle ropes coiled in their hands. But they had all halted and they were standing there in their tracks and watching an ugly little ruckus that was starting.

Nobody paid any attention to Ross as he rode up and reined his horse to a halt. And Ross was watching, narrow-eyed, what he saw taking place.

Grizzled old Wash Lemmon stood backed up against the rear end of the bed wagon, an almost empty bottle of whiskey gripped in his left hand. His right hand was on the old long-barreled bone-handled six-shooter on his flank. He was weaving drunk.

Tall, rawboned, leathery, his drooping mustache and shaggy hair snow-white, Wash hadn't changed much.

And from under the slanted brim of his old Stetson hat his eyes were bloodshot and hard and bright as slivers of polished steel. He had the look of a gaunt, old wolf at bay.

Facing old Wash Lemmon, a six-shooter in his hand, was a tall, slim, black-haired, black-mustached young cowpuncher. His skin had a swarthy look and it was oily with sweat. His lean-hawked, hook-nosed face was set in a snarl that bared white teeth. His bloodshot eyes were as yellow as the eyes of a cougar. He was cursing Wash Lemmon in a harsh vocie.

Off to one side Dude Collier sat his horse, one leg hooked across his saddlehorn. A faint grin showed on his lean tanned face. His hair and trimmed mustache were the bleached color of new rope. His hand was on his gun. His pale blue eyes watched both Wash Lemmon and the cowpuncher who was crowding and prodding the old cowman into making a gunplay.

"You damned old whiskey thief!" The cowpuncher snarled at old Wash Lemmon. "A man can't leave a bottle tied up in his bed but what you smell it out, and you bin stinkin' drunk since night before last. The Anvil pays you a hell of a lot more'n you was ever worth to handle a beef herd. And you ride off into a coulee with my last two quarts of good

bonded likker to git skunk drunk—"

"Not too drunk, Dennis." Old Wash Lemmon's voice was toneless. "Not too deep in the coulee to watch what you was doin', you sneakin', lowdown, yellow son. You'd steal from an orphaned girl. . . ."

So that was Dennis Murphy. And he was thumbing back the hammer of his six-shooter.

Ross Macklin was riding one of the fastest rope horses that had ever helped a cowboy win his champion's Stetson crown. And that fast quarter horse went into motion now at the touch of a spur. Dirt kicked out from the shod hoofs. The hundred feet of open ground was covered in nothing flat.

Dude Collier heard the pound of the shod hoofs and turned his head in time to see the horse and its black-bearded rider shoot past.

Dennis Murphy heard and felt the horse charging down on him. He whirled, crouched, his cocked gun in his hand. But he was too late to do himself any good.

Ross kicked both feet out of the stirrups. He went off sideways in a headlong dive as though he were bulldogging a steer. With a terrific thudding crash he landed on top of Dennis Murphy's head and shoulders. The cocked gun exploded with a terrific bang. Ross used Murphy to cushion his fall, straddling the black-haired man from Texas. Dennis lay there on the ground partly stunned, badly shaken, his wind knocked out.

Ross picked up the smoking six-shooter from where it had kicked loose from Murphy's hand. He got to his feet, the gun in his hand, eying Dude Collier. The gun hand was pointed at the Dude's lean belly.

"I hired out last evenin' "—Ross grinned flatly at the Anvil wagon boss —"to Miss Norah Murphy. She sent me out to work with the Anvil wagon."

"The devil you say!" Collier swung his long leg down from the saddlehorn and kicked his foot into the stirrup.

Old Wash Lemmon tilted the bottle, gulped down what was left in it and threw the empty bottle at Dennis Murphy's head. It was a lucky throw. The bottle crashed and broke against the coarse black-haired skull.

"There's your damn bottle you was cryin' about," said the grizzled ramrod. He was blinking his bloodshot eyes, squinting at Ross.

Dude Collier rode towards where Ross stood on short widespread bowed legs. The Anvil ramrod's lean face had whitened a little. Recognition came slowly, uncertainly.

"It's me, Dude," Ross said flatly. "Ross Macklin. Remember me? I used to take the buck out of your Anvil rough string when I was a bald-faced button. Remember, Dude?"

"I remember"—Dude Collier pulled up a few feet away—"the last time you stopped at Red Coulee. I told you to quit the country and not to come back. Your memory ain't too good, Ross. You should've paid better attention."

"You fillin' your hand with that gun, Dude?" Ross watched the Anvil wagon boss' gun hand. "Or are you backin' down?"

"I'm not fillin' my hand." Dude

Collier's right hand came away from his pearl-handled six-shooter. "But I'm not backin' down, either. I don't do my shootin' around camp."

The one shot fired had spooked the remuda. The milling horses had knocked down the rope corral at the far side and spilled out and were scattering into the twilight. The Anvil wagon boss took out his temper on his horse wrangler.

"Pull the slack up in your jaw and git the lead out o' your britches. Your remuda's spillin' to hell an' gone."

Then he turned back to Ross Macklin and forced a thin-lipped grin.

"So the little lady hired you? Well, a man's got to learn to humor his future wife in those little things. You'll ride the rough string. You'll find 'em harder to set than those circus-trained bucking horses you've bin grandstanding with to the tune of a brass band. Spud Murphy will turn over in his grave. He never hired back an Anvil hand he'd fired."

"Spud's wore that grave out the past six months," grinned Ross Macklin, "turnin' over in it. Wouldn't surprise me if he'd done kicked his way plumb out. I look for Spud Murphy to come ridin' up out o' the moonlight one of these bad nights. But mebbyso you don't believe in ghosts, Dude."

"No."

"I'm reppin' for the dead." Ross Macklin said it quietly.

Dude's pale eyes narrowed. "Wash will show you your rough string. Ketch yourself one for a night horse when that horse wrangler fetches back his remuda. Put Ross Macklin on guard in Dennis Murphy's place, Wash."

Dude Collier reined his horse and rode away from camp at a long lope, headed for the herd. Dennis Murphy was still on the ground, out cold.

Old Wash Lemmon wiped the horny palm of his big gnarled hand on the seat of his faded old Levis and shoved it at Ross Macklin.

"Long time no see you, son. Couldn't make you out fer that black brush you growed."

The grip of old Wash Lemmon's hand felt good.

V

Ross Macklin told the grizzled Wash Lemmon to show him the toughest bronc in the Anvil rough string. He said it loud enough for some of Dude Collier's renegade cowhands to hear it. And by the time Ross got the bronc roped and saddled and the hackamore on, the whole outfit was there watching. And even the Texan impostor who called himself Dennis Murphy had washed off and found a bottle to "sober up on" and was looking on. That black-whiskered cowhand who had bulldogged Dennis Murphy and made the Anvil wagon boss quit the flats was Ross Macklin, the new World's Champion Cowboy.

Wash had sent a man out to the herd to fetch Dude Collier back to watch Ross ride or get thrown. But Dude wasn't out at the herd. The cowpunchers bedding the herd on what was called cocktail guard, said they had seen the Anvil wagon boss

headed for the home ranch as though he was in a big hurry.

"Dude's Uncle Fred Collier," Wash told Ross, "is at the home ranch."

Wash Lemmon wasn't near as drunk as he'd looked when Ross had first sighted the old cowhand. Either Wash had sobered up almighty sudden or else he hadn't been as drunk as he let on to be when he took that cussing out from the yellow-eyed Dennis Murphy.

"Fred Collier's after the Anvil," said Wash, "and he's camped most of the time at the home ranch. He kin turn his Valley Bank over to his white-collared cashier and teller. They can't rob him because he checks the books once-twice a week. But a cow outfit's different. There's too many ways to rob a man that ain't settin' there on it. Dude don't dast make a move till he asks Uncle Fred which way to jump. This herd's ready to trim. Dude's gone to fetch his uncle, and Fred Collier will be waitin' at the Macklin place when the herd gits there tomorrow. The wagons will pull out before daybreak to camp at the Macklin crossin' on the Missouri. I got orders to have my herd there before noon. Your showin' up sent Dude Collier off in a sweat." The old cowpuncher grinned crookedly.

Wash and Ross stood in the middle of the rope corral where the remuda milled around them. The Anvil ramrod pointed out a big bald-faced stocking-legged bay and said that Baldy was the worst bronc in the rough string.

"He pitches limber-legged. Sunfisher. And he twists like a damned corkscrew. You'll swear he's goin' to tip over when he hits the ground. But he don't. Loosen up and he'll throw yuh. Ride him into the ground and he might somersault when he finds out he can't loosen you up. He's never bin rode yet."

Ross Macklin rode the Anvil Baldy. And barring Blue Lightning, this bald-faced bay was the trickiest bronc Ross had ever forked. It was the neatest job of bronc riding these men had ever watched and even the renegades Dude had hired to help him steal the Anvil outfit, gave Ross his dues. Some of them remembered him as Pete Macklin's kid and were eager to remind Ross that Pete had been their friend.

"Looks like you got yourself a roundup crew, son," Wash said.

Ross Macklin told Wash that was what he had in mind when he rode the bronc. It took something like that to hire these renegades away from Dude. The old Anvil cowpunchers were loyal to Wash.

When they looked around for Dennis Murphy they found him gone. He had pulled out. Followed Dude to the Anvil Ranch. He had been too scared to stay here without Dude's protection.

It was still daylight enough when Ross saddled a horse from Wash's

string and rode out to the herd with the grizzled beef boss, for Wash to point out the worked brands on a lot of the steers. It was the Anvil brand worked into a big Star. The base of each Star point closed, so the brand was a Box-in-a-Star. The Box-in-a-Star was registered in Fred Collier's name.

Wash said there were plenty of cows wearing the Box-in-a-Star iron, branded calves following the cows. It was a bold steal. And Fred Collier was getting away with it. This beef herd was headed for Wyoming when it crossed the Missouri River at the Macklin place. Fred Collier had a Wyoming range under lease. Big enough, with good feed and water, to hold the steers a few weeks till they put on tallow and were in shape to be shipped. Fred Collier's Box-in-a-Star was registered in Wyoming. It was plenty legal on the face of it. But it was robbing the Anvil.

"Spud never got plumb out o' debt to the Valley Bank," Wash told Ross Macklin. "That's why he had to let Fred Collier dictate his last will and testament. This year's beef would've cleared Spud."

They rode around the herd together. Wash said there would be about three thousand head of three and four-year-old beef steers in the herd even when they trimmed it. It had taken all summer to gather the cattle and get the brands altered.

"But them three thousand head of cattle kin be scattered between now an' daybreak, son, spilled into the badlands and turned loose. Take a full crew anyhow a couple-three weeks to gather 'em. It would delay things bad. Some of them worked brands will show up by then for what they are and even if Fred Collier paid 'em big money, no stock inspector would dast take a chance on passin' 'em. Me'n you kin git the job done, son."

It wasn't as easy as it sounded. It took savvy and a lot of hard work. And even then Ross Macklin did not know how old Wash Lemmon managed it, though he saw it done. The Anvil herd never bedded down. It drifted. Drifted and scattered. At a walk. And in the white light shed by a lopsided moon, Ross Macklin saw three thousand head of big native Montana steers walk off the bed ground, spread and scatter in all directions in the broken badlands.

Wash gave orders to the old Anvil cowhands. He told them to unsaddle and turn loose the night horses that belonged to Dude's renegades.

"Set 'em afoot there at camp," said Wash. "Then git back out here and help me'n Pete Macklin's boy Ross scatter this herd from hell to breakfast."

Wash took Ross along with him when he rode out to where the nighthawk was holding the Anvil remuda.

"Bunch your remuda," Wash told the nighthawk who had worked for the Anvil since long ago when young Ross had wrangled horses for the outfit. "Drift 'em till daybreak. You'd orter make the old Horse Thief Box by sunrise. Drop your remuda in that big box canyon, then come on to the Macklin place on the river. If I'm there, I'll give you a jug. But if it's Dude Collier and his Uncle Fred

that's opened the padlock on Pete Macklin's saloon, you better keep goin' because ol' Wash Lemmon has throwed in with ol' Spud Murphy yonder side of the Big Divide."

Old Wash Lemmon had 'er made, he told Ross Macklin. This was his last and final chance to call for a showdown with Dude Collier and his Uncle Fred Collier and this Texan who called himself Dennis Murphy, if that yellow-bellied thing had the guts to show up there.

"I got nothin' to lose, son."

Wash Lemmon aimed to kill Dude Collier and Uncle Fred. He said so, like he'd predict a rain.

"I got your job cut out for you, Ross. You take care of Spud Murphy's young niece. You said you'd hired out to her. Was that a pipe dream? I told her to meet me at the Macklin place yesterday. But I couldn't make it. I had to watch 'em work some brands. Dude jobbed me, or figgered he had me jobbed when he told Dennis Murphy to put a couple of quarts in his bedroll where I'd locate the likker an' git drunk. I pretended to grab the bait. It was good likker; I got the most of it left. I let on like I got drunk. Rode off from my day herd and into the brush with them two quarts. When they figgered I was dead drunk they commenced their brandin'. I slipped over to the brandin' corrals an' watched from a distance. I worked on one quart. I'll bust the bonded seal on the second bottle here in my chaps pocket, when we git the job done.

"Anyhow I didn't show up at the Macklin place like I promised little Norah." Wash went on. "I hope she didn't git weary waitin' an' pull out. She'll be there, so I calculate. And while I'm scatterin' the last of these cattle like a sheepherder's brains, you ride on down there and git her away from there before Dude Collier an' his Uncle Fred show up at the Macklin place."

"I met Norah Murphy, Wash," Ross explained. "Hired out to her, like I told Dude Collier. I've got her hid out not too far from the Macklin place. Where she'll be safe and out from underfoot when the shootin' starts. She's in good hands. Nobody's goin' to git near enough to hurt her while ol' Ornery's there."

"Who's Ornery?"

"Pardner of mine. A goat-whiskered, one-eyed ol' warthog. Orneriest human on earth."

"That's what you called Spud Murphy the day he fired you."

"Yeah. Ornery. This ol' one-eyed ranihan is just as tough an' ornery as Spud Murphy ever was. You'll be proud to meet him, Wash. He'll be there when the ruckus busts loose. But he'll put Norah on ice till the heat cools off an' the dust settles. You kin gamble on it."

But that was a gamble Wash and Ross would have lost. Because at that very hour of the night, somewhere around midnight, old Spud Murphy was looking into the round black muzzle of the yellow-eyed Dennis Murphy's saddle gun.

VI

Spud and Norah had lingered too long there at the Macklin place in

hopes that Wash Lemmon would come. And when a lone rider showed up after dark they were fooled into thinking it was Wash. Then they found themselves staring into the muzzle of a saddle carbine, and it was Dennis Murphy who stood there in the black shadows.

"Who is this one-eyed buzzard, Norah?" Murphy's voice was rasping, ugly from whiskey. "Who sold him chips in the game?"

"You're drunk." Norah tried to step in front of the gun. "Put up your gun. This is a man I hired . . ."

"Like you hired Ross Macklin."

Dennis let Norah get closer. Then he clubbed her across the head with the gun barrel and pulled the trigger. The .30-30 bullet was aimed at Old Spud. The white-haired old cowman reeled as though he was drunk and his one eye walled back and his knees gave way and he went down, blood staining his bushy white mane.

"You've killed that old man!" Norah scrambled to her feet. She was dizzy and half blind from the blow across her head. But she went at Dennis with wildcat fury, her fingernails ripping his face. Dennis dropped the gun and fought the girl like he would fight a man, raining drunken, savage, merciless blows on her face until the blood spurted and he had beaten her down. Then he kicked her until she lay stunned. He still cursed her while he tied her hands and feet and tied a gag in her mouth and dragged her off into the log cabin. Leaving her there, he went back to throw the old man's carcass into the river.

But the bullet had only ripped old

Spud's white-maned scalp and creased his tough skull and he was getting up on his hands and knees when Dennis got back to him. Dennis had sobered a little. Enough to get some of the murder out of his system. He decided against killing the old white-whiskered stranger with the black patch over a scarred eye socket. Instead of finishing Spud, he hogtied and gagged him, then dumped him in the cabin with the girl.

"I'm expectin' Dude Collier and his damned Uncle Fred," Dennis told Norah, "to show up here before daybreak." He bared his teeth in a grin, and murder glinted in his yellow eyes. He shut the door on Norah and old Spud.

The yellow-eyed Texan knew how to set an ambush and wait. He had an Injun's patience for playing a game like that. And he had a bottle to nibble on to keep the chill of fear from crawling through his guts.

But it was a longer wait than Dennis had anticipated and with fear gnawing at his insides with rat teeth, he had to drink too much to keep up his courage. And when two riders loomed up in the dark hour before dawn, he was afraid to let them get too close. He lined his carbine sights on the taller rider and pulled the trigger.

The .30-30 saddle gun sounded loud as a cannon in the dark quiet.

Ross Macklin heard old Wash grunt as though he'd been kicked in the belly, heard the old cowhand cuss. Then Ross crowded his horse against Wash's horse and jumped both horses in behind the brush as the bushwhacker's carbine sent a rapid hail of bullets whining around them.

Ross Macklin lifted old Wash from his saddle. The bullet had smashed the old cowpuncher's right shoulder. Ross risked a sneak attack. He laid old Wash on the ground and, cutting away the shirt and undershirt, dressed and bandaged the bullet wound as best he could in the dark. Then he uncorked the bottle he took from the old cowpuncher's chaps pocket and told Wash to use it. Then Ross slipped through the brush on foot.

Stalking the bushwhacker was slow, cautious, dangerous work. And if Dennis Murphy hadn't been half drunk he would have waited there and let Ross blunder into his bushwhacker trap. But the Texan's nerves were jangled and though he gulped down whiskey as though it was water, it wouldn't thaw the chill in his cowardly guts. He lost his nerve and started back through the brush to where he had left his saddled horse. But he made too much noise.

Ross heard the brush crack, then he saw the shadowy shape of the crouched bushwhacker.

"Drop your gun and step out in the open!" barked Ross.

Dennis' gun spat flame. The bullet clipped the brush near Ross Macklin's head. Ross fired twice and both shots hit their mark. The yellow-eyed Texan impostor who called himself Dennis Murphy was dead when he pitched headlong to the ground.

Ross circled cautiously, closer and closer until he got near enough to be sure the bushwhacker wasn't playing possum. When he had made certain the man was dead he went back to where he had left Wash Lemmon.

Ross loaded Wash on his horse and got him to the cabin. He shoved open the door and carried the old ramrod inside. Wash was cussing and hanging onto his bottle.

"Take it easy, Wash," Ross told him, "till I scout around. Mebbyso Murphy was alone. But mebby he wasn't. Quit givin' up head. Work on that soothin' syrup till I git back."

Ross was gone several minutes when old Wash Lemmon heard the ghost of old Spud Murphy cussing in the dark cabin. Spud had come awake to find himself hogtied, with his silk neckerchief tied across his mouth. When he finally got the gag chewed into a sodden silk string, he cussed in his creaking voice. Wash Lemmon thought he was hearing Spud Murphy's ghost cussing and he was about to throw away his bottle when he heard scuffling, kicking sounds in the dark cabin. A ghost wouldn't wear spurs and kick, Wash figured, and at last he found his voice.

"If that's you, Spud, and you ain't dead—dammit, say so before I commence shootin'." Wash gripped his six-shooter in his left hand.

"That you, Wash?"

"Who the hell else would it be?"

"Then untie a man. And strike a match. I ain't alone in here . . .

It took a while to get old Spud and Norah untied. Norah cussed through

bruised lips without actually using a swear word.

"Now ain't that niece of mine," chuckled old Spud, "somethin' fer a man to be proud to claim, Wash?"

Then it dawned on Norah and she let out a little gasp. "Uncle Spud! And I called you a goat-whiskered, one-eyed, landlocked pirate! Oh!"

Old Spud was chuckling. Norah struck a match and Wash blew out the light. Quickly, with a grunted cuss.

"Ross Macklin is out yonder on the prowl. He just killed that thing that called himself Dennis Murphy. Dude and his Uncle Fred is due to show up here— Hellamighty, they're here!"

Out in the night sounded the sharp, echoing crack of a saddle gun. Then Ross Macklin's voice cut through the gun echoes.

"Reach for the moon, Dude! That goes double for your Uncle Fred!"

Dude Collier and his Uncle Fred Collier had ridden up boldly. The shot that sent a warning bullet whining over their heads had pulled them up short. They sat their horses in the moonlit clearing, Dude straight-backed, a saddle gun in the crook of his arm. Dude Collier had his faults, but cowardice was not one of his weaknesses.

Fred Collier had not always been a white-collared banker. He had punched cows until he found out he could make an easier living winning the hard-earned wages of other cowpunchers with a deck of marked cards and a pair of loaded dice. He'd earned enough at this saddle-blanket gambling to buy a saloon and gambling house. And when that place, called the Bucket of Blood, had earned him a good stake, he sold it at a handsome profit and opened up the Valley Bank at Red Coulee. Fred Collier still gambled. But it was high stakes gambling. Now he dealt in loans and mortgages and the Valley Bank was his gambling house.

Fred Collier wasn't wearing his banker's starched white linen and tailored clothes tonight. He wore boots and old pants and an old hunting coat, the pockets loaded with cartridges. His lean, wolfish, thin-lipped poker face was tanned. His pale eyes slitted under the brim on his old Stetson hat. There was a saddle gun in his hand. Fred Collier was more dangerous than Dude.

"You're travelin' high, wide and handsome on your World Champion Cowboy rep," called out Dude Collier. "Why don't you ride out in the open like a man? Or are you a damned bushwhacker killer?"

"I'll ride out," Ross Macklin's voice was flat-toned. "I'll ride out a-shootin'. If you two Colliers give me the real answer to a question."

"Name it!" snapped Fred Collier.

"Who killed Pete Macklin?"

"Dude killed Pete Macklin." Fred Collier snarled. "Pete Macklin found out about the Box-in-a-Star outfit I owned in Wyoming. Some of the renegades I had working for me talked too much when they got drunk on Pete's rotgut booze. They showed Pete how they worked the Anvil brand into my Box-in-a-Star an' Pete told Wash Lemmon one night. Dude was sheriff then. He did the killing. Now if that answers your question,

ride out and pick it up where Pete Macklin dropped it . . . Kill him, Dude!"

Ross Macklin had jumped his horse out into the clearing. Dude fired too quickly and the bullet cut Ross' hat crown. Then Ross Macklin's saddle gun was spitting fire as he stood high in his stirrups and Dude was swapping him shot for shot. Ross felt the thudding, burning rip of the bullet that struck his thigh. A second bullet creased his ribs and perked his aim to one side. Then Ross Macklin lined his gun sights and pulled the trigger and the .30-30 bullet hit Dude in the face and his handsome head lobbed over sideways.

Fred Collier would have made the odds two against Ross Macklin but the banker had seen a ghost. Old Spud Murphy had shaved off his spade beard and save for the black patch over his eye he was the same old hatchet-faced Spud. He'd shaved and changed to decent clean clothes because he was prideful about Norah taking him for an old range tramp. So Fred Collier saw the ghost of old Spud Murphy come out of the cabin, a saddle gun in his hands. And that was old Spud's creaky voice that shouted a challenge at the banker.

"I come back from the grave to gut-shoot you, Fred. You white-livered, thievin' tin-horn!"

Spud Murphy commenced shooting. And Fred Collier was returning the gunfire as best he could with his insides drilled with .30-30 slugs. Because tough old ornery Spud Murphy was shooting to kill. He stood there on bowed legs, his hat brim slanted across his white head, and he was shooting as fast as he could lever his saddle gun. Fred Collier never stood a fighting chance for his taw.

Fred Collier and his nephew were both shot from their saddles and onto the ground at about the same time. And they lay there, bullet-riddled and dead on the ground.

Ross Macklin reined his horse and rode back to the cabin. There was a faint grin on his face.

"I got some wages a-comin' to me, Spud. Your forty a month—and them fightin' wages Norah promised. If she'll patch up a couple of bullet nicks I picked up just now, I'll call it a deal."

Norah came out of the cabin. The color had drained from her face so that her freckles showed. Freckles and the bruises Dennis Murphy's fists had left.

"Ross . . ." Her voice was low-toned. "Ornery . . ."

She helped Ross from his saddle and she and Spud took him into the cabin. Spud fetched Ross' tarp-covered roundup bed and spread it wide. They laid Ross and old Wash on the tarp and then Norah rolled up her sleeves and started ordering her Uncle Spud around.

"Hot water, Uncle Spud. Dig into your warsack for anything clean enough for bandages. Go easy on that likker, Wash. I'll need it to burn the poison out of your bullet holes . . . If this hurts, Ross, don't be ashamed to holler. Or cuss. Cuss your heads off, both of you. If you come up with anything I've never heard, I'll buy both you boys a drink. . . . Rattle your hocks, Uncle Spud."

Wash said there was a jug of Pete Macklin's whiskey under a loose board in the floor beneath the bunk. Norah was welcome to this damned bonded stuff.

Norah got the jug. She watered some in a tin cup and tasted it cautiously, then drank with them when her Uncle Spud passed the jug to Ross and Wash.

"I didn't know a schoolmarm could cuss without swearin'," creaked old Spud. "Didn't know a schoolmarm could drink likker."

"If you think the money you spent on my education was wasted," Norah grinned like a boy, "I'll pay you back. Every dollar of it. You wanted me to be a schoolmarm, but I lied a little without putting it in so many words in the letters I wrote you, Uncle Spud. I said I was studying hard for my diploma. And I was. But it was a nurse's diploma. And I was working in a hospital down in Texas. Schoolmarms are all right—I've got nothing against 'em. But until I get a flock of kids of my own to teach the A.B.C's, I'll stick to this kind of work. Look at the characters I meet! Cattlemen hiding behind whiskers and a black patch; World Champion Cowboys wearing black beards and hiring out to the first girl that comes along. . . . You don't look much like your pictures, Champ."

"What pictures?" grunted Ross.

Norah was probing in his thigh. She picked out a chunk of blood-dripping bullet and, dropping it on the tarp beside him, trickled raw whiskey into the bullet hole. Ross squinted his eyes shut and gritted his teeth. His eyes blinked open when Norah kissed him on the mouth. And then she was very busy fixing a dressing across the wound. But her face was flushed and her dark green eyes were shining.

"Norah means them framed pictures in Pete Macklin's saloon," explained Wash. "The back bar's covered with 'em. And all them trophies you won and sent to Pete. That's why I boarded the windows and padlocked the door. So's nobody would pack them pictures and trophies off. I give Norah the key to the padlock. She's kept 'em dusted off."

Old Spud Murphy said he'd like a look at them. He'd changed his mind about rodeo cowboys being useless. . . .

Old Spud Murphy saw to it that the Box-in-a-Star brand was registered in Ross Macklin's name, both in Montana and Wyoming. And when the beef roundup was over and the Anvil and Box-in-a-Star beef steers were shipped, Ross Macklin and Norah Murphy were married at the Anvil.

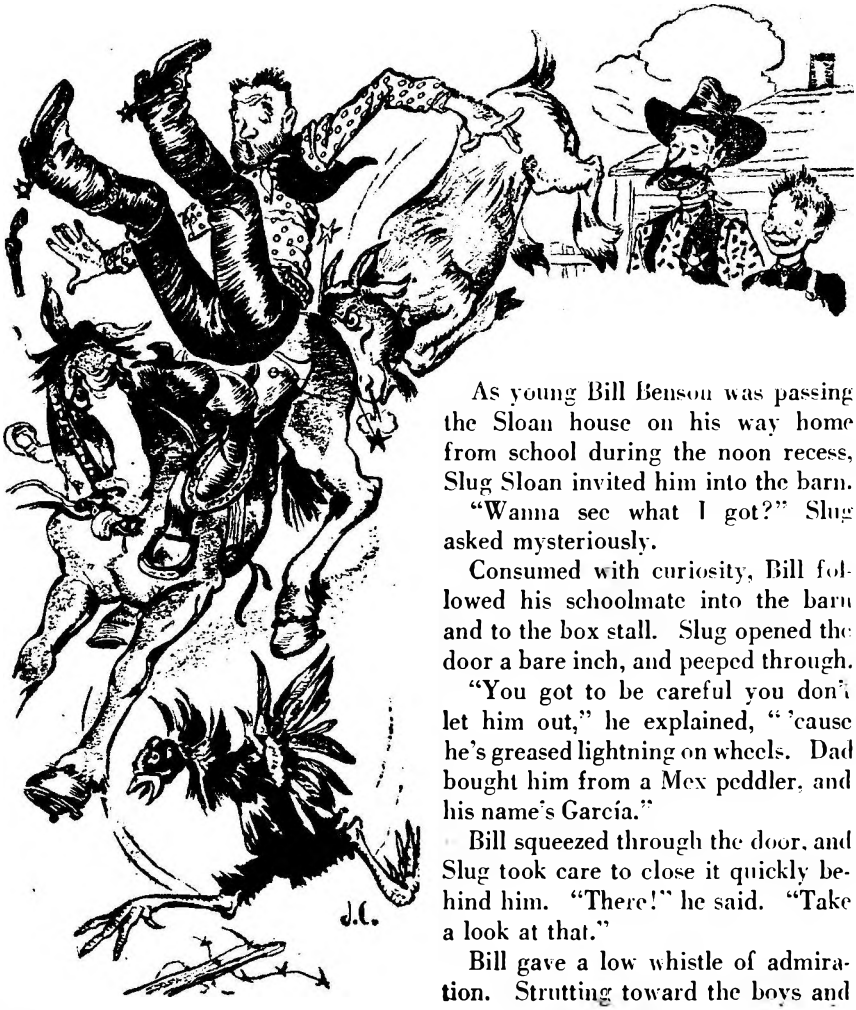
Spud Murphy gave the bride away and Wash Lemmon was best man at the wedding. After the bride and groom left on their honeymoon, Spud and Wash took a jug of Pete Macklin's corn likker and sat down on the ground with their backs against the granite boulder that held the copper plate bearing the name of Spud Murphy and his Anvil brand. And they passed the jug back and forth until the last drop was emptied. Then they smashed the jug on old Spud Murphy's monument and headed for a hearty sunrise breakfast.

THE END

What they said about Garcia was mostly unprintable, yet nobody could deny that he was

GAME TO THE LAST

By Joseph F. Hook



As young Bill Benson was passing the Sloan house on his way home from school during the noon recess, Slug Sloan invited him into the barn.

"Wanna see what I got?" Slug asked mysteriously.

Consumed with curiosity, Bill followed his schoolmate into the barn and to the box stall. Slug opened the door a bare inch, and peeped through.

"You got to be careful you don't let him out," he explained, " 'cause he's greased lightning on wheels. Dad bought him from a Mex peddler, and his name's Garcia."

Bill squeezed through the door, and Slug took care to close it quickly behind him. "There!" he said. "Take a look at that."

Bill gave a low whistle of admiration. Strutting toward the boys and

clucking in a friendly manner, came a red, long-necked, long-legged game cock, with spurs an inch and a half long and sharp as needles. The head and comb were small, the eyes bright, intelligent, and reflecting the half light like diamonds. In fact, García appeared all legs and neck and not much of anything in between.

"Pick him up," Slug urged. "He's a real pet."

Bill stooped and picked up the game cock. And García kept right on clucking and crooning softly like some old setting hen. Bill scratched his comb, stroked his long neck and felt gingerly of his sharp spurs.

Slug was observing Bill closely and shrewdly. "You like him?" he asked.

"Like him?" young Bill repeated ecstatically. "Gosh!"

"What'll you gimme for him?" inquired Slug.

During all young Bill's fourteen years, he could recall nothing that he had desired more than the possession of that game rooster. What he was going to do with it was a question that did not bother him for the moment. He just wanted it.

But despite his eagerness to possess the graceful, friendly bird, he took time out to do a bit of heavy thinking. Would his mother allow him to keep it? He eliminated his dad, for the time being, because Paul Benson, the sheriff of Maricopa County, Arizona, was busily engaged in scouring the Vulture Mountains in quest of one Butch Webber, a notorious outlaw with a big reward on his head, whose specialty was holding up banks, including the one at Tumbleweed. Butch Webber's elusiveness was not the only tantalizing trait in his character. He was given to dramatizing his crimes, bragging about them, long and loud, and suddenly appearing at a spot and at a time when least expected, much to the confusion and disgust of those who sought his arrest.

So young Bill decided to take a chance on his mother and tackle the sheriff later.

"I'll give you my knife for him," Bill offered.

Slug opened and examined the proffered knife critically, and turned up his nose. "Naw," he refused. "'Tain't much of a knife. What else you got?"

Bill felt through his pockets and came up with fifty cents. That sum represented his weekly allowance for feeding the chickens and cleaning out their pen, toting in wood and kindling, cleaning out the barn and taking care of whatever happened to be in the corral at the moment. In Tumbleweed almost everybody kept pigs, chickens, a cow, a saddle pony or two, and, of course, had a barn and corral.

But the corral back of the Benson house was something else again. Bill's dad, being the sheriff, used it for his saddle horse, Desert Wind, and also as the town's pound, so that, at various times, it was respectively occupied by burros, stray cows and cayuses, or whatever happened along in the line of livestock, all of which had to be cared for until such time as an owner showed up and paid for the feed.

"All right," Slug finally agreed, pocketing the knife and the money, "García's all yours. But look, Bill. You gotta hang on to him like grim death, 'cause if he ever gets loose,

there just ain't no ketching him, the way he can pick 'em up and lay 'em down."

"I'll make a pen for him," Bill said, and departed happily for home.

He was passing Mrs. Hemingson's chicken pen when her old dominick let out a loud crow. García heard it too. He gave a sudden tug, tearing loose from under Bill's arm, and hit the dust running. With head low to the ground like a hunting dog, he made a beeline for the pen. He took the six-foot wire in his stride and landed right in front of the old rooster. All in the same movement, García hopped into the air, struck with both spurs, and that was that, save for the terrific cackling set up by the alarmed hens.

"García, you come here!" Bill called in consternation. But García just stood over the prostrate rooster, flapping his wings and crowing to beat the band.

Bill ran around to the gate, plunged through, and made a grab for the game cock. But García just wasn't there at the moment. In fact, he was already over the fence and streaking it like lightning across the street in pursuit of new worlds, and roosters, to conquer. In other words, García was in his element, on the loose, and going places.

Mrs. Hemingson suddenly appeared in the doorway, took in at a glance what had happened, and also spotted the bewildered Bill in her chicken yard amid the cackling hens. Grabbing her broom, she started toward him.

Bill took one frightened look at her and went over the fence in García's wake, followed by a number of uncomplimentary remarks from the irate lady. Nor did he glance back to see if she was trailing him, because García was just then rounding the corner of the hardware store and Bill had to keep him in sight.

García's loud, challenging crowing seemed to have set off the entire feathered population of Tumbleweed. Or so young Bill thought as he sped around the corner of the hardware store and plowed into the alley. Roosters on both sides were crowing their heads off, simply inviting sudden and immediate disaster. And Bill was thinking about something else, too, at that precise moment. About why, for instance, Slug had told him to hang on tightly to the game cock, and why his friend had been so eager to sell the bird in the first place.

In the meantime García had disposed of two more dominicks and was streaking down the alley in search of another. From side to side he darted, leaping into this chicken pen and that, leaving death and destruction in his wake, not to mention the panting, perspiring Bill, who kept plunging through wire fences or flopping over them, tearing his clothes on nails, and receiving more verbal abuse from angry housewives than anyone had ever taken before in all Tumbleweed's history.

But catching up with, or catching hold of, García was, so Bill discovered, about as simple as overtaking a flash of lightning and corraling it in a bottle. If only those fat-headed roosters would stop their crowing and not keep asking for it, he thought.

At last he got a break, and García got a change of antagonists. Down at the end of the alley, Mr. Winters kept a small herd of angora goats and a billy the kids had nicknamed Whiskers. The billy goat wasn't a bad sort if you didn't tease him, although he did smell horribly. At the moment Whiskers appeared from behind a garbage can, in which he had been rummaging, directly in the path of the bloodthirsty García, who had just knocked off his sixth victim.

Whiskers, a sad-looking old goat, lowered his head and looked daggers at the onrushing García. The game cock, however, was not to be dismayed by mere looks, a long beard and a lowered head with two horns surmounting it. Here was something else that moved, that blocked his path, that dared defy him. And that was enough for García.

As the game cock sailed into the air, up came Whiskers' head to meet the assault. The goat immediately received two resounding slaps alongside the jaw from García's wings, and had his beard combed by two very sharp spurs for the first time in his life. Before he could recover from that surprise, García lit on his back, raking him from stem to stern and making the hair fly.

Then García hopped down and appeared a bit surprised himself because this big white lummox was still on his feet and filled with fight. In fact Whiskers was even then backing up in order to gather sufficient momentum with which to butt García into the middle of the next county.

That was a lucky break for young Bill, who made a flying tackle and grabbed the unsuspecting García around the legs. Tucking the game cock under an arm and being careful this time to hang onto his legs, Bill lit out for home on the dead run, leaving bedlam and pandemonium far to the rear.

Bill slowed down before reaching the house, and shifted García to the arm farthest from it, so that, in case his mother was looking through the window, she wouldn't suspect anything — just then. That would give him time to cache García in the barn till after school.

But, it so happened, Mrs. Benson was busily sweeping the back stoop. She failed to catch sight of García right away, but she did get an eyeful of her dust-covered and ragged son.

"Where on earth have *you* been?" she demanded. "Just look at your clothes!" That was when García gave the game away by crooning softly. Mrs. Benson favored him with a sharp look. "And where," she wanted to know, "did you get that . . . that thing, William?"

Bill told her, adding that his pet's name was García.

"I don't give a hoot what his name is," Mrs. Benson retorted. "What I want to know is, what did you give for him?"

"A knife," replied Bill.

"You don't mean to tell me, William Halliday Benson, that you gave Slug the new knife your father bought you for last Christmas?"

"Nope," Bill assured her. "It was an old one. Well, not so old. It has two good blades, and Slug can grind

down the busted one and use it for a screw driver."

"*And*," Mrs. Benson insisted meaningly, "what else, William?"

"Four bits, mom."

Mrs. Benson cast her eyes upward toward Arizona's blue heaven. "A knife and four bits," she wailed, "for less than two bits' worth of fowl!" She then took a new tack. "And those clothes! William, you've been fighting at school!"

"No, mom. García got away from me," Bill explained. "He's hard to catch."

"And *I* know a certain boy who is going to be hard to catch when his father returns from chasing Butch Webber." Mrs. Benson asserted positively. Then she pointed a finger at García, demanding: "What are you going to do with that thing?"

"Keep him for a pet, mom."

"William Benson, you turn right around this instant and take that rooster back where you got it," Mrs. Benson ordered. "And the next time you—" She paused abruptly, shot a glance beyond Bill and then let out a warning scream. "Watch out, William!"

But the warning came too late. Bill received a sledge-hammer blow on the side of his body. Up shot both arms and over he went on his ear in the deep dust. At the moment of falling, he caught a glimpse of Whiskers and got a good whiff of him too. It required only a split second for Bill to figure out that the goat had trailed him and García back to the house and had aimed a flying bunt at the bird under his arm.

Mrs. Benson jabbed the stubby broom in the goat's face, and Whiskers did not hang around waiting for another jab. Bill scrambled up and looked around for García. The game cock was speeding toward the corral, where the sheriff had impounded a stray steer just prior to taking off in pursuit of Butch Webber. In the confusion of events, García hadn't noticed Whiskers, but had, undoubtedly, conceived the idea that the sudden and violent butting had been the work of the stray steer.

So before Bill could get anywhere near him, García had hopped to the top bar of the corral and was slapping his wings and crowing his defiance. The steer, being just as curious as the rest of his kind, came toward García.

Suddenly a feathered bomb exploded in his face, two stout wings belabored him vigorously, and a sharp spur punctured his tender nose. Letting out a terrified bawl, the steer whirled, and crashed through that corral fence as if the poles had been threads. He took out across lots at express speed, tail erect, bawling at every jump.

Since this happened to be a Monday morning, horrified housewives, attracted by the bedlam, reached their back doors in time to see the steer heading for parts unknown with long lines of wash dangling from his horns and dragging through the dust.

García flew back to the top bar of that portion of the corral fence that remained intact, and began sending forth his challenging call to the whole startled world of Tumbleweed. That

was when Bill grabbed him and beat it into the barn.

By the time he had put the bird in Desert Wind's box stall and had carefully latched the door, Mrs. Hemingson was leading a contingent of very irate ladies into the Bensons' backyard. A babble of complaints and demands arose, with everybody talking at once, and with Mrs. Benson, on the receiving end, almost in tears.

"That bird killed my rooster!" "And mine!" "Oh, just look at my washing!" "And my garden!" "You'll pay for this!"

Mrs. Hemingson, having the loudest voice, climaxed the verbal tirade when she shouted: "I'll sue you, Mrs. Benson! And, as president of the Tumbleweed Women's Club, I'll see that your husband is not re-elected sheriff this fall! He's just a no-account lawman, who has let Butch Webber get away after stealing our money from the bank. And, furthermore, that brat of yours is following closely in his worthless father's footsteps, by fooling away his time with a miserable game cock that is wrecking the peace and property of this town."

Some of the other ladies were chairmen of this or that club, and all joined her in promising to fix the sheriff good and proper at the coming elections. Mrs. Benson did some rapid promising herself — that she would make good their losses and see that nothing like that ever occurred again. Then she herded young Bill inside and read him the riot act while he ate his lunch with little or no relish.

Nor did he receive any consolation from Slug, when he returned to school and related the events of that fateful noon hour.

"Sure, I knew what García was, sucker," Slug grinned. "First thing he did, after dad bought him from that Mex peddler, was to whale the daylights out o' our big rooster. That García'll fight a buzz saw. You're stuck with him, Bill."

Next morning Bill did his chores after breakfast, took care of García in the box stall, then lit out for school before his mother got another chance to tell him to return the game cock to Slug Sloan.

Bill kept glancing out of the schoolhouse window about every five minutes, hoping to catch sight of his dad returning to Tumbleweed. He felt sure that if they could just have a little talk before the sheriff arrived home, his father would talk his mother into allowing Bill to retain his pet.

But when the noon recess bell rang, there was no sign of anything moving through the shimmering heat waves on the distant horizon. So Bill trudged homeward disconsolately, being careful to avoid all the back alleys where, yesterday, García had wrought such havoc. A gentle breeze wafted an appetizing aroma to his nostrils, and, it seemed to him, that there must be a chicken in every pot in Tumbleweed. Or almost.

Bill was still some distance from home when he took a last, lingering glance at the horizon. Suddenly he gave a glad cry. A cloud of dust was approaching, and soon he could make out the forms of half a dozen riders.

With a joyous whoop, Bill started running toward the outskirts to meet a very tired sheriff and his posse. But Butch Webber, whose ugly face was familiar to most of Arizona's citizens from the reward posters, was not among them.

"Hi, pop!" Bill greeted his father breathlessly. "Where's that outlaw?"

The sheriff dismounted stiffly and let his son lead the spent Desert Wind. Smiling wanly through the alkali dust mask, he replied: "Well, Bill, we didn't see hide nor hair of him."

Then Bill got in his best licks, telling his father about the acquisition of García, but soft-peddling the results. "He did knock off a rooster or two, pop," he admitted, "and mom's plenty sore. Wants me to take him back. You'll lemme keep him, won't you, pop?"

"We'll see," said the sheriff. "Just now, about all I'm interested in is something to eat and drink."

When the sheriff saw the wrecked corral, he gave a low whistle of surprise. "Looks like a tornado struck the place while I was gone. How about it, son?"

"Oh, the corral," Bill said, trying hard to sound nonchalant. "That stray steer went through it. Just a minute, pop. I got to shove something under a box in the barn, before I put Desert Wind in his stall."

Mrs. Benson came out just as Bill disappeared and gave her husband a hug and a kiss. She also gave him a detailed account of all that had happened to the neighbors and the corral, and just what those neighbors had threatened to do in the fall.

"So," she finished, "if you're defeated, you've got Bill and that—that García to thank for it. I insist that you make Bill take—"

"H'm," the sheriff observed. Then he smiled again. "Now, now, Mary. Let's not be too hard on the kid. He didn't realize what he was letting himself in for with that pet of his. And as for this sheriffing job . . . well, there're other and safer ways of making a living. . . . Here, Bill, take good care of Desert Wind." And after he had eaten, he said: "You'd better be getting back to school, son."

"But . . . but what about García, Pop?" Bill insisted. "Do I get to keep him?"

"On one condition, Bill."

Mrs. Benson threw up her hands. "There you go!" she sighed. "But don't forget there's an election this fall."

"Bill," the sheriff said, "you'll have to make good the damage García has done, which means no allowance money for some time. However, this evening you and me will build a pen for García. In the meantime, I'll put him in the old chicken yard and tack an extry foot or two of wire on top to keep him from further trouble."

They had the new pen almost completed by the time the sun started dipping swiftly on the horizon. Then, from around the corner of the barn, a rider silently appeared. Bill glanced up, and blanched.

"Pop, look!" he gasped.

The sheriff, down on his knees driving wire staples with a claw hammer, glanced up into the wickedly

grinning face of none other than Butch Webber, outlaw-at-large. There was nothing the sheriff could do about it, for the double reason that he wasn't wearing his gun and that Butch's was pointing at his midriff.

"Well, here I am," the outlaw announced. "Just thought I'd drop by to tell you you've been chasin' your tail. Yeah, I'm here, but not for long. Just long enough to make the election of a new sheriff an immediate necessity, as they say."

Suddenly scantlings snapped and wire twanged behind the mounted outlaw, but he was too wily to turn his head for a moment and look. The sheriff, too, was watching the outlaw like a hawk for just such a fool move.

Young Bill glanced in the direction of the racket in time to see Whiskers barging full tilt through the old chicken pen, in vengeful pursuit of that bothersome red rooster. García executed a neat side step, and Whiskers went flying past.

García then completely ignored the goat, for he had spotted Webber's horse. In a flash he was through the gap in the wire that Whiskers had made, streaking across the yard, wings flailing, long legs going like pistons, with the goat in hot pursuit.

Up into the air García sailed, and down he came, driving a spur deep into the horse's hock. A split instant later, all four of Whiskers' hoofs left the ground, and the entire hundred and fifty pounds of bone, muscle and case-hardened skull missed García by a hair and brought up short against the horse's rear.

The surprised animal nearly went over on its nose, regained its balance, and went straight up with a twisting motion. Butch Webber went straight up, too. His hat flew one way, his gun another. While his horse took out madly across lots, Butch turned a half flip flop in the air and then came down head first, making any use of the claw hammer by the sheriff totally unnecessary.

Then, just as the sun dipped from view behind the horizon, the neighbors, led by Mrs. Hemingson, arrived. When they recognized the sheriff's captive, they promptly forgot their recent grievances.

As one, they turned to look for García. For him, as for all his feathered kinfolk in Tumbleweed, the day was done with the setting of the sun. Nature required that he seek a place to roost. And he was seeking it now, moving slowly, languidly, toward the old chicken pen, lacking that graceful, floating strut of but a few minutes previously.

Mrs. Hemingson, who by now had heard the story of García's last-minute assault, walked over to the droopy bird and picked him up. Gently she handed him over to the astonished Bill.

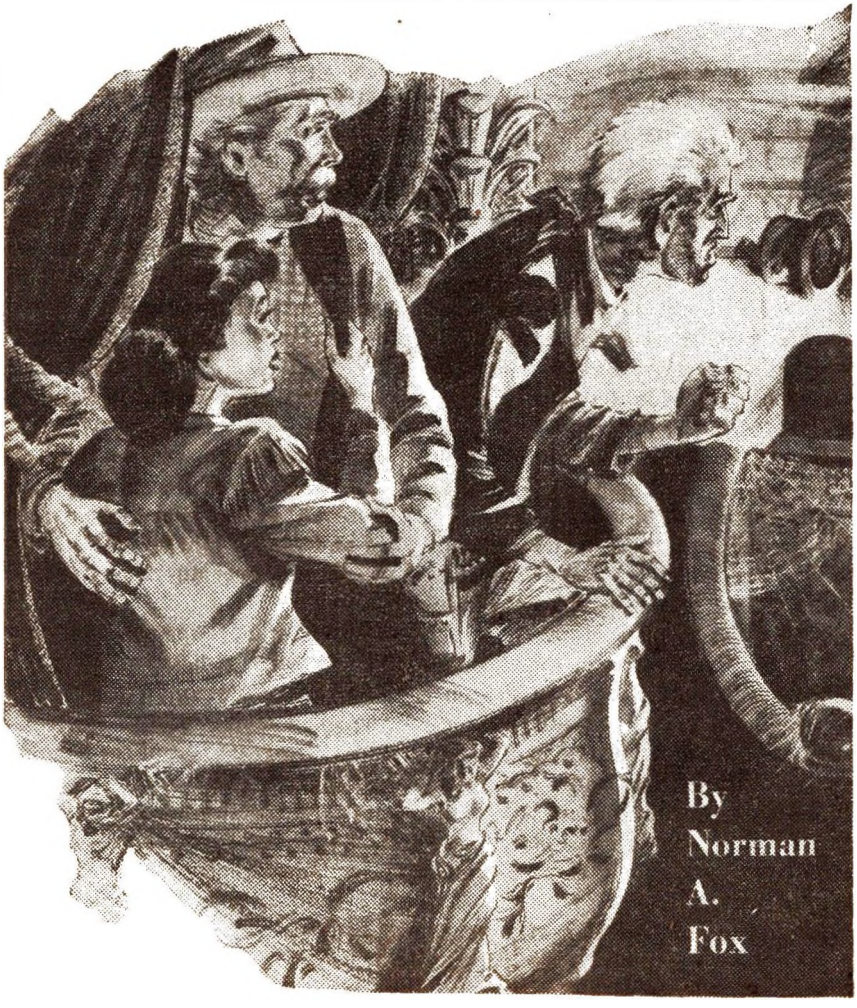
"Young man," she said, "you take good care of him because he's worth his weight in diamonds." Then she turned and addressed the assembled ladies. "As president of the Tumbleweed Women's Club, I make the motion that we use García as our mascot this fall, when we campaign for the re-election of Sheriff Paul Benson."

"Second the motion!" chorused the happy female leaders of Tumbleweed.

THE END

After putting on the strangest performance of his career, would ***Dane Richmond*** *once more be forced to watch*

COLTS RING DOWN THE CURTAIN



By Norman A. Fox

I

HALFWAY up Lone Eagle the Hardrock City stagecoach squealed to a stop at a swing station, and here Dane Richmond alighted to stretch his legs. Thus, insignificantly, did the trouble have its beginning.

Mountain miles and the ceaseless tongue of a fellow passenger, a whiskey drummer who'd finally talked himself to sleep, had contributed to Richmond's boredom: he wanted nothing here but to feel solid footing under him and to ease his back while the six horses were being changed. When he strode into the squat, stone building with its brush roof, he hoped to find it empty. There'd be people enough at tonight's performance, and the talkative drummer had stifled Richmond's natural gregariousness and turned it sour. He almost groaned when he found the girl await-

ing him in the waiting room of the station.

And awaiting him she was. He saw her eyes flick over his tall length, taking inventory of his tailored broadcloth, white waistcoat and the high silk hat he wore tilted at a rakish angle. A plague on that hat! It had been the idea of his advance agent who'd thought that a show of opulence was necessary to fat bookings and good box office in this wilderness mining country. Richmond saw recognition light the girl's eyes as she studied his lean, clean-shaven face, and he supposed that in a moment she'd be asking for his autograph. There was a familiar pattern to all this, and he almost reached for the case in which he carried a handy supply of cards with his signature scrawled upon them.

Yet she looked too intelligent to be the type who would fawn upon him because of his calling. She had frank blue eyes and a determined chin and a lithe grace that was emphasized by the divided riding skirt and buckskin jacket she wore. What showed of her hair under a wide sombrero suggested a reddish tinge. No simpering schoolgirl, this one. Yet her breath caught a little as she said:

"You're Dane Richmond? The man who's going to sing and dance at the Gem Theater in Hardrock City? I'd heard you'd likely be on this stagecoach."

Richmond sighed. At least he'd be retiring while he was still in his twenties; there was the consolation of remembering that this tour would end in California and that certain fertile acres would be his and he would never have to stir himself nor see another soul, unless it were of his choosing. A man had a right to privacy. Yet his smile wasn't purely professional as he answered: "Yes, I'm Richmond. I didn't expect to be met a dozen miles this side of the boom camp."

"You'll have only a few minutes here," the girl said. "I'll state my business quickly. What is your price to come to Boulder Gulch and put on a one-night performance?"

"Boulder Gulch?" he ejaculated and stared at her with a new interest, wondering what possessed her.

"Perhaps you remember the place. You played there when you toured Montana three years ago."

"I remember it," he said. "A drummer who's out in the coach did a lot of talking about that camp. He says it's a ghost town now. He tells me that three years ago the strike petered out and richer diggings were found around the shoulder of this mountain, and that is how Hardrock City came into being. According to him, there's nothing at Boulder Gulch but deserted, rotting buildings."

"You wouldn't be playing to much of an audience," admitted the girl. "But the old opera house is still standing. Rufus McMoon left it as it was and built a bigger theater in Hardrock City when the new camp sprang up. McMoon's the kingpin of Hardrock; he owns the stamp mill, and some of the richer claims. and two of the saloons."

"I know," Richmond said. "My advance agent wrote that he'd booked me at Hardrock through Rufus McMoon. So the old Boulder Gulch the-

ater is still standing! I remember it well; I put on a good show there, but Colts rang down the curtain that night. Your Montana men are mighty impulsive. There was a shoot-out in the audience, and a dead man to be toted away afterwards. I'm not likely to forget the opera house in Boulder Gulch!"

The girl's eyes had clouded as he spoke; now they lighted again. "Then you'll consider putting on a repeat performance there?"

"I'm booked straight through to the coast," Richmond told her regretfully. "My advance agent takes care of that. The only way I could play Boulder Gulch would be to skip Hardrock City. Rufus McMoon, as I remember him, is the kind of man who makes a bad enemy. And I can't promise that I'll play Boulder Gulch on another tour, either. I'm retiring after this season. But tell me: how were you going to find enough people in Boulder Gulch to offer me expenses?"

"No one is there," the girl answered. "You'd be playing to an audience of three."

Dave Richmond came then to the only conclusion he could possibly reach. The girl was mad — utterly mad. Yet looking at her gave the lie to this belief; there was intelligence in those eyes, and that same determination he had first noticed. Perhaps a touch of mountain fever was doing this to her. In any case it was utterly fantastic, this suggestion that he change his plans so that he might give a performance in a forgotten town that had been consigned to the ghosts and the pack-rats. He smiled

kindly, deciding it was best to humor her.

"Believe me, I'd like to oblige," he said. "But it just can't possibly be arranged."

"Even if I could make you believe that it's practically a matter of life and death?"

Outside, Richmond could hear the creaking of harness, the jangle of chains, as the stock tender finished fastening six fresh horses to the coach for the uphill run to Hardrock City. There was a harsh, reassuring reality to those sounds; it was the proof that this shadowy interior and this girl with her mad insistence were no part of a senseless dream. Keeping his voice kindly, Richmond said: "I'm sure it's not as serious as you think."

She'd folded her arms, and one of her hands had disappeared under the buckskin jacket. Now her hand came into view again, and in it was a Colt .45 that looked ponderous in her grip. She took a hasty, backward step, the gun leveling until it was in line with his fancy white waistcoat.

"Very well, Mr. Richmond," she said grimly. "I'd hoped I could approach you on a business basis. You think I'm crazy, of course. Just the same, you're going with me to Boulder Gulch — by force if necessary. You'll walk out of this station, and I shall watch you from the doorway.

You'll tell the stagecoach driver that you're not going on to Hardrock—no more than that. I'll depend on your ingenuity to evade the questions he'll likely ask. I've horses waiting to carry us to the ghost town. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly," replied Richmond—and went into action.

Beneath his left armpit was a .45 in a special holster. He'd played this mountain country too many times to go unarmed; there were always ruffians who hoped to enrich themselves by relieving a trouper of his share of the box office; and the loquacious drummer had had a great deal to say about The Stranglers, a road agent organization which had terrorized this section for several years. Richmond had trained himself in the use of his gun, but he didn't try for it now. Instead, he shrugged and turned toward the door, thus shortening the distance between himself and the girl. Then he chopped outward with his right hand, striking hard at her wrist.

She'd let the gun waver for a moment, thereby showing herself as not too adept at the sort of thing she was attempting to do. The gun roared, the bullet gouging the dirt floor, and, at the same time, the weapon fell from the girl's hand. Instantly Richmond kicked the gun aside and seized the girl's wrists; she struggled frantically for a moment, and then, realizing the futility of pitting her strength against his, she stopped fighting. The shot had fetched the stock tender and the stagecoach driver. Framed in the doorway, the two grizzled oldsters were profanely demanding to know what in tarnation was going on.

"An accident," Richmond said, releasing the girl. "I was . . . er . . . trying to show this young lady one of the fine points of her gun when it was discharged." He picked up the weapon and extended it to the girl. "Good-by," he said. "The coach must be ready to leave. Perhaps we'll meet again."

Gratitude had turned the girl's eyes misty, yet he was not sure but what, with the gun restored to her hand, she might level it at him again, dominating the driver and the stock tender at the same time. Putting his back to her, he strode from the station and climbed into the coach. The drummer, aroused by the shot, was pawing sleep from his eyes and mumbling questions, but Richmond paid him no heed. The actor's glance was on the swing station's open doorway; he saw the girl standing there, and she was still standing when the driver mounted to his high perch, the whip cracked, and the coach rolled away.

"I'll swear I heard a shot," the drummer muttered.

Richmond's interest was still elsewhere. The coach had clattered around a turn, its leather thoroughbraces squealing, and as the Concord headed up a road that was to hairpin its way to the shelf on the mountain's side where Hardrock City sat, Richmond spied a man in the brush beside the road — a mounted man who held the reins of two other horses.

Richmond nodded to himself. This man had come with the girl, he guessed. One of those empty saddles was for her, the other was supposed to have been for Dane Richmond—

transportation to a ghost town for a performance before three people.

The man who waited, glimpsed so briefly, appeared to be big-boned and florid-faced, and gray enough to be the girl's father. He'd lifted his hand, apparently acknowledging the stage driver's salute, and Richmond determined to ask the driver about him when the coach reached Hardrock City.

He was to be denied that chance. There was a reception awaiting him when the stage rolled into the boom camp which had mushroomed on the side of Lone Eagle peak. There was Rufus McMoon with his fat hand extended, and his fat lips pursed in a speech of welcome which ended with an invitation to a special banquet to be given that night after the performance, a banquet to fete the performer who'd endeared himself to the frontier. There were crowding miners to acclaim the celebrity and usher him with clamoring enthusiasm to his hotel. And there was the performance given that evening in the Gem, with its clangorous brass band and its stomping, raucous audience.

All this was routine for Dane Richmond. But tonight he looked across the smoking footlights into that vast, dark, noisy void that was the audience, looked and performed mechanically, his mind elsewhere. For strong in his consciousness was the memory of the girl in the swing station, and he was wondering the while if they would ever meet again.

II

The banquet was given in one of Hardrock City's bigger buildings, a log hall that was obviously a community center where all sorts of meetings were held. Chairs and benches had been cleared away to make room for crude pine tables, and, though there was a primitive touch to the surroundings, the food was lavish and the wines had been imported into the mountain country at considerable cost.

That was Rufus McMoon's way. McMoon was staging this affair at his own expense; the rank and file of the boom camp's muckers were his guests, and they would go forth tonight remembering the greatness of Rufus McMoon. The man had been a power in Boulder Gulch three years ago. He was a greater power here in Hardrock City. Rufus McMoon had learned that more flies could be caught with sugar than with vinegar.

Yet Dane Richmond, seated at McMoon's right hand as the guest of honor, sensed that the man's hospitality was a pose. Richmond had known too many troupers not to recognize acting when he saw it. McMoon was a natural politician, yet the real power of the man lay in a ruthless aggressiveness that gave the lie to his oily show of good fellowship tonight. Rufus McMoon was wooing the populace with studied intent. This same man, Richmond judged, would grind these muckers beneath his heel another night. That, too, was McMoon's way.

Thus Richmond had sat and toyed with an extravagance of food, watching and waiting for McMoon to show his hand; yet Richmond's interest was only casual, and his curiosity would not extend beyond the evening. At

midnight a stagecoach would roll him on to the next camp; the season's end would mark an end of trouping. He would never see Hardrock City again, nor Rufus McMoon. The ambitions of this transitory host of his were of no real concern. Speculation was an idle thing with which to while away time.

When McMoon rose to speak, Richmond got his cue. McMoon climbed ponderously erect; he weighed all of two hundred and seventy pounds, and expensive broadcloth failed to hide the grossness of him. A cigar was tilted in his perspiring balloon of a face, and he extinguished the weed by dropping it into his wine glass, grinning expansively.

"Having a good time, boys?" he demanded.

An enthusiastic roar rose from the assembled muckers.

"That's fine," McMoon said. "Talk has it that the camp may be electing a sheriff one of these days. Seems that our Vigilance Committee ain't turned in the kind of results we've all been expecting. Some folks has suggested that I'd be as good a man as any for the sheriff's job. I'll know who my friends really are when election day comes."

"Stranger in these parts, ain't you, podner?"

"You gonna put out a feed like this when you're campaignin', Rufe?" a drunken miner called.

Richmond smiled. This was all so transparent that he wondered why he hadn't guessed before that McMoon's objective was something of this sort. Then he felt the heaviness of one of McMoon's jeweled hands upon his shoulder.

"But we ain't here to talk about me, boys," McMoon went on. "We've got a guest of honor, and there's no need of me introducing him, seeing as most of you was packing my theater tonight when he did his dancing and singing. It's quite a feather in Hardrock City's hat, having Dane Richmond here. Let Dodge City and Tombstone brag about Eddie Foy; we're getting first class talent, too. And when I'm sheriff, I won't be too busy to book the best entertainment for you boys. I've been swapping letters with none other than Frank Butler. Maybe next season we'll have his act here, and you'll see little Annie Oakley doing her shooting on the stage of the Gem. How will you like that?"

A thunder of raucous applause rose to the rafters, and McMoon had to wait until it diminished.

"Mr. Richmond ain't no stranger to these mountains," he went on. "He appeared in my opera house up at Boulder Gulch three years ago, and

some of you was likely there that night. Mr. Richmond put on a show for Boulder Gulch, and the camp put on a show for *him*. Dane had a kind of shooting dance on his program in them days, and while he moved those feet of his around, he let go with some blank cartridges to spice up the dance. With all that hullabaloo, I guess he didn't even know there was a shooting out in the audience until we'd rung the curtain down on him. That was the night that Jubal Kendall stopped a slug in my opera house. Hardrock City can point with pride to the fact that no such incident occurred tonight. We've come a long ways from the lawlessness of Boulder Gulch, and—"

"What about The Stranglers?" a strident, drunken voice interjected. "They're still operating. Stole the dust belongin' to one of them Poverty Flat muckers the other night and hung him from the ridge pole of his own cabin!"

McMoon frowned. "I know confounded well that we still got that terror in our midst," he said. "I don't need to be reminded of it. And I ain't apologizin' for it, either. If Doc Blodgett was here, he could maybe speak for the Vigilance Committee, seeing as he's the head of it. But maybe Doc wouldn't have very much to say. The Stranglers have kept those Vigilantes running around in circles. If I was sheriff, things would be different. You can remember that, come special election time."

He paused, donned his benign grin again and said: "But you boys ain't here to listen to me jaw. You can do that any day of the week. It's Dane Richmond you want to hear. Dane, can we have a few words from you?"

Richmond came to his feet and waited for the storm of applause to die. He began speaking then, voicing his appreciation for the hospitality of Hardrock City and the ovation that had been rendered him at the theater, and the speech came easily. He had made a similar speech in a score of camps, yet he put warmth and sincerity into it, for he was remembering that these were the men who'd been his audience, these were the kind who'd made his success possible. Because of them he could now dream of green California acres and do-nothing years in the sunlight.

Remembering this, Richmond felt ashamed of his mood of the afternoon when he'd hoped to find the swing station empty. He tried putting his feeling of gratitude into words, and in the midst of his speech, he became aware that Rufus McMoon was preparing to leave the building.

A wide-shouldered wedge of a man, sinewy of body and stupid of face, had come silently into the hall and, approaching McMoon, had whispered into his ear. Richmond knew this man. His name was Sledge, and he had been McMoon's constant shadow as far back as the Boulder Gulch days. McMoon, listening, frowned; this much Richmond saw from the corner of his eye; and then McMoon hauled himself out of his chair and left the hall with Sledge. Richmond, his speech finished, seated himself again and waited for the stomping and clapping to end.

A waiter bent to Richmond's ear

and said: "Mr. McMoon apologizes, sir. Important business has taken him away for a few minutes. More wine, sir?"

Richmond shook his head. He had eaten sparingly and drunk even more sparingly; there was that midnight stage to remember.

Twenty minutes later the chair next to Richmond was still empty, and he fished out his watch, snapped open its case, and was astonished at the lateness of the hour. The banquet was degenerating into a drunken orgy. Muckers who'd found wine too tame for their taste had fetched their private whiskey bottles, and these were being passed from hand to hand. Richmond wordlessly eased out of his chair and left the building, his departure unnoticed.

For a moment he stood on the planking that served as a sidewalk in Hardrock City. The camp was roaring with its blatant night life. Out in the rutted street an ore wagon rumbled by; booted muckers made a constant stream of movement, and, higher on the slope to which the camp clung, a stamp mill thundered. Richmond lost himself in the restless current of the street, wondering where he would find McMoon. There was a matter of money to be settled before the stagecoach departed. Richmond's advance agent had collected a guaranteed fee which was demanded before the performance, but a percentage of the box office receipts was to garnish this fee, and that bonus couldn't be passed over until the count was taken. McMoon would have the money.

But where was McMoon? The theater building showed no light in any of its windows, but both of McMoon's saloons were ablaze. The man also had an office in which he dealt in mining properties, but Richmond, passing the office, which faced upon the street, found it empty. He chose the bigger of McMoon's saloons for the start of his search, and, shouldering through the batwings, worked his way among the crowding miners who lined the bar and banked deep around the gaming tables.

A stairs climbed to a balcony running the width of the room at its far end, and Richmond, asking no one's permission, ascended the stairs and looked for a doorway with lamplight showing under it. The one he found was marked: PRIVATE OFFICE—KEEP OUT. Richmond was lifting his knuckles to knock when he heard McMoon speaking beyond the door.

"You gotta be sure. Sledge!" McMoon was saying with an intentness that held Richmond immobile. "You gotta be mighty sure. A half an hour now we've tried to make her talk, and she won't. Not unless we put fire to her feet. And I ain't risking that until I have to. Harming a girl can be mighty dangerous business. Those same muckers who are swilling my wine tonight would hang me from the handiest tree if this got out."

"Boss, I know Sam Shannon when I see him." That was Sledge speaking. "She was right there in the theater tonight, and Shannon was sitting next to her. I tried to keep close to 'em when the crowd poured out, but she must've went one direction and Shannon another. I couldn't get word to you. Not right away. I had to keep her in sight and wait for a

chance to grab her. That didn't come easy. Getting her up the back stairs and in here wasn't easy, either. She scratches like a wildcat."

A moment of heavy silence fell, and then McMoon spoke again. "Your stubbornness ain't getting you no place, my dear. You've been seen around these parts more than once in the last three years, and I can guess what's keeping you here. You can lead us straight to Sam Shannon, and you're gonna do it. Make up your mind about that!"

A girl's voice said: "You can plague me with questions from now until doomsday, and I'll not tell you anything. Sam Shannon would be killed the moment you found him. Don't try to pretend differently."

Richmond started violently. He knew that voice—knew it all too well, for he'd heard it today in the swing station halfway to Hardrock City. The same determination was in it now, and it was the same girl, no doubt of it. There was much here that Richmond didn't understand, but he could understand the savagery that rose in McMoon's voice now. At the banquet he had sensed the velvet that veneered McMoon's nature. Now the velvet had been stripped away, and the steel beneath was evident.

"We'll move her out of here, Sledge," McMoon said. "Take her to one of the cabins. Far enough from camp so nobody can hear her holler. She ain't giving us any choice."

Richmond stepped into the room then, stepped inside with the gun that had hung under his armpit now rigid in his hand. He didn't take time to

remember that this was no affair of his and that another hour should mark his departure from Hardrock City forever. Nor was it theatrical gallantry that prompted him to buy into this game. Dancing and singing didn't make a man less a man, and there were some things beyond stomaching. The gun sweeping the room, he said:

"Hoist 'em, you two. Hoist 'em fast!"

There was a desk in this room, a squat, iron safe, and a chair. The girl was tied to the chair. It was the same girl all right, wearing the same divided riding skirt and buckskin jacket. Sledge hovered near her, in his hands a broad bandanna which had likely been used to gag her and which Sledge had kept ready lest she make an outcry that might reach beyond this room. Sledge turned now, ludicrous in his astonishment, and McMoon showed as much amazement. But McMoon recovered himself first.

"This is no affair of yours, Richmond," he said brusquely.

"Get her untied, Sledge," Richmond ordered, and McMoon's shadow, reading the trouper's eyes, fell to obeying.

"You're making a mistake," McMoon grated. "A mistake that can cost you your hide, Richmond!"

The girl, her hands freed, was tugging at the knots binding her

ankles, tugging with more zeal than Sledge was showing. She came out of the chair, her eyes thanking Richmond.

"Get out of here." Richmond told her. "Fast. No, don't wait for me. Get going. I'll give you five minutes to be clear of this building. Then I'll be getting out myself."

He was afraid she'd give him an argument, and he was grateful when she didn't. She was lurching unsteadily; the ropes had cut off her circulation, but she made it to the doorway and was gone. Richmond backed toward the door while McMoon cursed savagely.

"You've still got time to change your mind and let us take out after her," McMoon raged. "You don't understand, Richmond. That girl is Sabra Kendall, the daughter of a man who was proved to be one of the kingpins of The Stranglers. Through her, we might have been able to bust up that bunch!"

"By torturing her?" Richmond questioned sharply. "You've got mighty queer ways of doing the law's work, McMoon!"

That was when the door opened. It happened so quickly that Richmond's one thought was that the girl was returning to urge him to come along. Then he saw the triumph leap into McMoon's little eyes and knew differently.

Spinning, Richmond saw the white apron of a bartender, saw this and the whiskey bottle and glasses the man was fetching to the office. But he saw too late. The bartender, grasping the situation, had raised the bottle and it crashed against Richmond's skull. He wasn't sure whether he fired as he went down, for unconsciousness came crowding to claim him.

III

Richmond came back to reality to find himself stretched upon hard planking, and when he attempted to get to his feet, he discovered that his hands and feet were bound. He was in a room shrouded in both darkness and silence: somewhere beyond it the clamor of Hardrock City beat like a distant pulse. His head ached dully, but, with the rush of memory, his concern was not for himself.

The girl! He hadn't been able to give her that five minutes he'd promised, and he wondered if she'd succeeded in getting out of the saloon before McMoon and Sledge had taken her trail. Or was she once again a prisoner? Had they taken her to some remote cabin to torture the whereabouts of Sam Shannon from her stubborn lips?

There was no telling, and Richmond began fighting the ropes, but they defied him; the effort only made his head ache worse and brought the perspiration out on him. He'd been moved from the saloon, he was certain; all sound that reached him came from beyond this building, and suddenly he understood. He was in one of the dressing rooms of the theater, and the Gem was deserted at this hour. He wasn't gagged, but any attempt to make his voice carry to the street was likely to be futile. Still, he tried it, shouting again and again until his voice grew hoarse.

Then a door creaked open, a greater blob of darkness etched itself against the darkness of the opening, and a man came into the room. Sledge? But this one knelt beside Richmond and began fumbling with the knots.

"I'm glad you cried out," the man said. "I've been stumbling all over this labyrinth in an attempt to locate you. A moment now and I'll have you on your feet."

The voice bespoke education and an air of culture that was unexpected in this wilderness, and Richmond, detecting a faint and elusive odor about the man, realized suddenly that it was medicine he smelled.

"What brings you into this game?" he asked his rescuer curiously.

"I'm a friend of Sabra Kendall's," the man said. "She came directly to me once you'd freed her from McMoon. She was concerned lest you come to harm while making your own escape. That's why she sent me to help you. I reached the rear stairway of the saloon just in time to see you being carried from it. I followed when you were fetched here, but I didn't dare enter the theater until McMoon and his man came out. Since then I've been prowling the place in search of you. There. Try standing now."

Richmond came erect and felt the man's hand at his elbow. They went groping along together, a stairs let them down to a lower level, and Richmond, glancing overhead at the spiderwork of pulleys and painted flies, realized they were backstage.

"Do you see that window yonder?" his companion asked. "I had to break it to make an entrance. You'll find it's not much of a drop to the ground."

Richmond went through the opening first, then waited in the shadows banking beside the theater until his companion joined him. The man grunted and said: "You can thank Sabra Kendall for your life tonight. I imagine McMoon intended to hang you a little later. The work would be laid to The Stranglers, and your empty pockets would suggest the reason for your ill fortune. But McMoon had to let that little act wait for the time being. He was probably too interested in trying to overtake Sabra to bother with you at once."

Richmond was feeling through his pockets. His gun was gone, of course, but his wallet was still intact, and his watch and card case were on him.

"Then it's the girl who's really in danger?" he asked.

"I wouldn't worry," the other said. "Sabra has been dodging them for three years, and, though they captured her once tonight, I think they'll find her hard to locate a second time. You'll be seeing her shortly."

"Look," said Richmond, "I'm grateful to you. But if she's safe, I'm calling it quits. I'd say things had been evened up. I got into trouble on account of her, but she sent you to get me out of it. Now I've got a stagecoach to catch."

"You were unconscious longer than you imagine," his rescuer told

him. "Your coach is gone, Mr. Richmond."

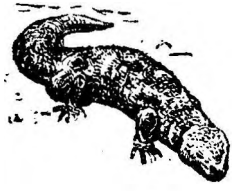
"Then I'll hire a private conveyance. I've a performance to make on the other side of the mountain tomorrow night."

They were walking along as they talked, Richmond's companion leading the way through the deepest shadows, and now they'd come to a space between two buildings near the camp's outskirts, a space wide enough to let the moonlight into it. Here two saddle horses stood ground-anchored by trailing reins, and here Richmond had his first real look at his rescuer.

He knew the big-boned, florid-faced, gray-haired man at once. This was the man who'd waited with the saddlers while Sabra Kendall had talked to Dave Richmond at the swing station and endeavored to get him to agree to a one-night stand in a ghost town. And this man now had a gun in his hand, the barrel pressing against Richmond's ribs.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But you'll have to come with me. I've no time for gentler persuasion, and your attitude has already indicated how useless it would be. Climb into one of those saddles."

It left Richmond with no choice but to obey, and even before his rescuer-turned-captor had surreptitiously guided them beyond the camp and to a mountain trail, Richmond guessed that they were bound for Boulder Gulch. Having decided that, he stealthily got his card case into his hands and dropped one of his cards beside the trail. Hardrock City had a Vigilance Committee, and there was a chance that he might be missed and a search made.



As Richmond saw it, his being saved from McMoon might very well be the classic leap from the frying pan to the fire. This captor of his had hinted that McMoon was one of The Stranglers, or at least that McMoon might use Strangler methods. But McMoon in turn had claimed that Sabra Kendall was the daughter of a kingpin of that road agent organization. The more Richmond thought about the situation, the more his head ached.

"We're going to Boulder Gulch, I'd guess," he finally said. "Do you mind telling me why?"

"You'll learn in due time," his captor told him.

There was that business of the one-night stand in the ghost town which Sabra Kendall had mentioned. Kendall? Jubal Kendall was the name of the man who'd stopped a slug in the Boulder Gulch opera house the night of Richmond's other performance. A new piece for the puzzle. But why should that make Sabra Kendall anxious for a repeat performance in the ghost town? Richmond had thought her mad at the swing station, but this captor of his was obviously possessed with the same madness. And then there was a fellow named Sam Shannon

mixed into the affair. There were a hundred questions Richmond might have asked, but that blunt refusal to explain had made a wall through which there was no penetrating. Richmond sighed and resigned himself to circumstance.

But not quite. He still kept dropping those cards from time to time, making sure that his captor's eyes were elsewhere when he did and hoping breathlessly that neither of the horses would shy from the white, fluttering pasteboards. The trail was a tunnel through crowding pine; it looped constantly upward and was slippery with needles. An hour passed, and another, and the moon swung low in the west, poised above barrier peaks. Then they came into Boulder Gulch.

The camp was as Richmond remembered it, two rows of log and frame structures following the sinuous winding of a gulch; but gone was the bustling activity of three years ago, for that had been transplanted to Hardrock City, around the shoulder of Lone Eagle.

Glassless windows stared down at the two horsemen as they rode the street, the hoof beats loud and clamorous in the eerie silence. Rotting sluice boxes were scattered here and there, coffins for hopes turned dead and left unburied. It brought a stiffness to Richmond's spine, riding here. It was a camp to which a curse had come, leaving it empty and disembodied and mocking. And then Richmond saw Sabra Kendall.

She was standing in a patch of dying moonlight before the squat, ugly bulk of the opera house, and with her was a wizened man. Back in the deeper shadows, horses nickered softly.

Richmond's captor, swinging stiffly from his saddle, motioned for the trouper to do likewise.

"So you fetched him!" Sabra exclaimed.

"By the only feasible method," said the man. "Mr. Richmond, you've met Miss Kendall, after a fashion. And this is Sam Shannon with her."

It was Shannon who was already holding Richmond's interest. The man was little and leathery, with a wild disorder of silvery hair that made a halo above his head. His face held a childlike serenity, but there was a clouded bafflement in his faded eyes. Richmond acknowledged the introduction with a nod and turned to his captor.

"And you?"

"Dr. Ephraim Blodgett."

"Doc Blodgett! I know your name. You're head of the Vigilance Committee!"

"That's true," said Blodgett. "You find it hard to understand that I did business with you at gun point. That phase has ended. There is an old saying that you can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink. You have been fetched as far as the trough, Mr. Richmond."

"Meaning that you want me to put on my act in this opera house? To an audience of three, Miss Kendall said. *You three!*"

"Correct," Blodgett agreed. "And now the time has come for explana-

tions. There is in this vicinity an organization called The Stranglers. We've tried hard to run them to earth, but we've failed. Three years ago we managed to get one of our Vigilantes, a Jubal Kendall, into their organization. He reported his findings to his partner, another prospector, Sam Shannon, here, from time to time. But Jubal Kendall couldn't get proof against the man whom we've long suspected of being the head of The Stranglers, and that was the man we wanted. Then there came a night when you performed in this very building before which we are standing."

"And Jubal Kendall was killed that night," Richmond cut in. "Shot, out in the audience, while I was doing my gun dance."

Blodget nodded. "Kendall came into the opera house during the performance, came in search of Sam Shannon, for Kendall had apparently gotten information so valuable that it couldn't be kept until later. But The Stranglers were hard on Kendall's heels. They shot and killed him, and they shot at Sam Shannon, too, just in case Shannon was the recipient of the information Kendall had gleaned that night. They didn't kill Shannon. They only wounded him, but, from our point of view, it was a mortal wound. Sam Shannon has no memory of anything that happened prior to that night."

Richmond glanced again at the childlike face, the baffled eyes. Blodgett turned to Sabra.

"Do you still have faith in this plan of ours?" he asked soberly. "I know that it was my idea in the first place, but now I'm not so sure."

"When I risked fetching Sam from hiding and brought him to the Gem Theater tonight," Sabra said, "I watched him closely during the act. He was straining to remember, but the surroundings were different, and the act had been changed. Still, at times I was certain that something was stirring inside him."

"Now do you see why we want you to put on your act for us, Mr. Richmond?" asked Blodgett. "Now do you understand why we want that night of three years ago repeated? Of course the conditions still won't be the same. We've fetched you here by force, but force will no longer serve us. It's up to you."

"I can understand why this is important to you, doctor," Richmond said. "As head of the Vigilantes, you want to squash The Stranglers. But how about you, Miss Kendall? You're hoping to see your father avenged?"

"I want his name cleared. After his death, stolen dust was found in his cabin, and other proof that he belonged to The Stranglers. He did belong, of course, as a spy for the Vigilantes. But the truth has to be kept secret until The Stranglers are exposed. Do you understand?"

"Why didn't you tell me all this at the swing station?"

She smiled. "You thought me crazy then. Would you have thought me less crazy if I'd told such a tale?

But since then you've seen me in McMoon's power, and you've seen how far he was willing to go to lay hands on Sam Shannon. Doesn't that give some proof that there's truth to my story?"

"We're awaiting your decision, Mr. Richmond," Doc Blodgett said. "You may do this section a great and lasting good if our experiment is successful."

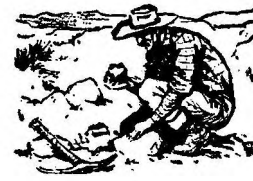
A great and lasting good . . . A few hours before, Dane Richmond had stood at a banquet table and thanked an audience for the success they had made possible for him. A hundred Hardrock Cities had insured his retirement to restful California acres. Now, in a sense, he was being asked to repay. He shrugged and smiled.

"Ring up the curtain," he said. "The show goes on."

IV

The door of the opera house yielded creakingly to their touch, and Sabra, who'd fetched a lantern along, got it aglow and lifted it high, making eerie shadows dance. The loose wooden chairs which were used for seats and cleared away afterwards for dancing had been removed to Hardrock City, but a few crippled ones remained and would be reasonably serviceable. And though the curtain hung dark and dusty, the footlights were still intact. "I brought a can of coal oil for the lights," Sabra said. "Help me, and we'll get them ready to use."

Richmond obeyed. Doc Blodgett, very professional now, dipped his



head toward Sam Shannon who was staring about listlessly.

"I've had a good deal of experience with mental ailments," Blodgett said. "Especially those induced by shock. Yet medical skill is ever fallible. Once, a year ago, we brought Shannon here and conducted certain experiments. They helped, but they didn't effect a cure."

"I changed my act this last season, but I use the same costumes," Richmond remarked. "It might be better if I were wearing them."

"I fetched your suitcase along," Sandra told him.

"You fetched my suitcase!"

"I took it from the stage depot," she said quite frankly. "Tonight, after you'd freed me from McMoon. Doc knew that you were a prisoner in the Gem, and I was to go on up here with Sam while he fetched you. We'd been keeping Sam in a cabin outside Hardrock City."

Richmond whistled softly. "You think of everything."

"This means a very great deal to us," she told him simply.

In a few minutes Richmond had changed into the costume he had worn that other night, three years ago, and the moment had arrived to ring up the curtain. Meeting Sabra backstage, Richmond said: "It will be a little awkward, working

without musical accompaniment, but I'll do my best."

Blodgett moved out of the shadows. "The conditions won't be the same in many respects, of course. But we can only hope, at best. The cure may be wrought tonight, induced by a familiar word, a familiar phrase. The cure may never be made. Good luck, boy, and whatever the outcome, you have my gratitude."

"You two better get out there with Shannon," Richmond said.

He rang up the curtain himself; the ancient rope groaned to his tugging, and the curtain rose spasmodically and sent dust and cobwebs showering. He came out upon the stage, glanced across the smoking footlights and began his opening song, a melody of Stephen Foster's, haunting and magical as the Southland itself. His voice was rich and mellow and trained to carry above the blatancy of brass bands, and it sent the echoes chasing from the corners of the vast auditorium and filled the shadowy recesses with music.

In the box there, below him, Richmond could dimly perceive the three faces as his audience sat bunched together, and when the song ended, their applause made feeble fury, for only two of them clapped at first. Then Sam Shannon joined in, his effort uncertain and wavering.

Richmond bobbed from the stage, made a quick change and returned to go into a soft shoe dance that made him a darting, soundless dervish. He was putting all his professional skill into this, but the wonder of it, the weirdness, cast its heavy shadow. He had played here before, played to a large and raucous audience; the years had made their march, and he was playing here again. But the town had fled, leaving only its empty shell, and he played to ghosts and ancient memories—to the forlorn hope of a doctor who wished to remedy a great ill and to a girl who wanted honor restored to the name she bore.

Yes, it was a performance to be remembered, a performance queerer than any he'd ever known. There was the same vast space, but only three seats in that box next the stage were filled. In the other boxes, now empty, the pretty girls of many a traveling chorus had beguiled the booted patrons to drink with them and thus had enriched Rufus McMoon far beyond the take of the box office. This was the setting that had known gaiety and tragedy, and now a man was bobbing across a stage and going through old and familiar motions, and that man was himself.

He finished his dance and did the pathetic poem, "Kalamazoo in Michigan," which Eddie Foy had fetched to Dodge City's Lady Gay, and Richmond wondered what that veteran trouper would think if he could witness such a performance as this. He left the stage again, made a slight change in costume for his next act, and, from the wings, called Doc Blodgett's name softly.

"How's he behaving?" he asked Blodgett.

A great hope had put a fever in Blodgett's eyes. "He's interested now. Intensely interested. I think it may work yet."

"The next act is my gun dance," Richmond said. "I performed it with regular six-shooters, loaded with blanks. I'll have to have guns."

Unhesitantly Blodgett handed him the very one that a few hours before had been pressed against Richmond's ribs. The medico was gone briefly and returned with a second gun. "Shannon doesn't carry one," he said. "But I've got Sabra's. The bullets are real."

Richmond nodded. "I can't harm this stage," he said dryly. "You'd better get back in the box and watch Shannon."

"Yes," Blodgett agreed. "This was the act that ended your last performance in Boulder Gulch."

The dance was one of Richmond's own improvisation, designed to impress frontier audiences who could understand guns, no matter how slight their knowledge might be of the dancer's art. The dance was only incidental. It was punctuated by shooting and had been a favorite part of Richmond's repertoire until this season when he'd discarded it for a newer novelty act. He came out upon the stage, a whirlwind of movement, planting a bullet through the planking underfoot to announce himself. A roll of drums, a clang of brass, should have accompanied this, but there were only shadows in the orchestra pit tonight.

Going through his gyrations, Richmond built up to the point where he used a gun again, and, putting a bullet between his own nimble feet, he was thankful for all the practice that enabled him to give this performance with live bullets as easily as he'd done it with blanks. And thus he built his act to its own climax, built it with the realization that the hopes of those out yonder must be reaching their climax too. For if being transported into the past was to release the locked memory of Sam Shannon, then the moment was near when Shannon should be recalling the finish to that other performance in this now-dead camp.

Suddenly Shannon was on his feet crying hoarsely, and Richmond came to a stop and saw Sabra and Doc Blodgett at the man's elbows. Shannon was shouting. "Jubal—Jubal Kendall!" and staring about wildly.

Blodgett, his voice betraying the tension that gripped him, was saying: "Think hard, Sam! You remember now, don't you? The guns? Jubal Kendall dying?"

Shannon shook his head dazedly, his eyes glaring to left and right. "Jubal got it," he said. "He told me so. Right here. He got the account book The Stranglers kept—a ledger showing how the dust they stole was divided among them, share for share, with a double share to Rufus McMoon, the leader. It's got their names in it—all of them. Jubal got it."

"He told you that?" Blodgett insisted hoarsely. "He came into

the opera house and told you that?"

"He knew they were after him, and he wanted me to know. He said he'd hid the account book under the floor of this box—in McMoon's own theater! Now I remember! Because here, of all places, Jubal thought, McMoon would never suspect. Then Sledge killed Jubal. Shot him down right here beside me while the guns were going off on the stage!"

Blodgett raised his strained face and shouted: "It's worked, Richmond! It's worked! No wonder Rufus McMoon has wanted Sam dead these three years. No wonder he's never given up trying to reach him. He couldn't feel safe as long as Sam was alive; there was always the chance that Jubal Kendall had told Sam where that ledger was hidden, and there was always the chance that Sam would some day remember."

"I see," Richmond said. "And I can see why McMoon wanted to be sheriff of the diggings. It would mean that he'd know when every dust-laden stage left the camp. It would mean that he'd be in a fine position to tip his Stranglers off to every move."

"That's right," cut in the harsh voice of Rufus McMoon.

He was standing just within the doorway, far to the back of the theater, and with him was Sledge, bulking big beside him. There were only these two, but the thought in Dane Richmond was that this made the odds double, for Sam Shannon wore no gun, and neither did Sabra Kendall nor Doc Blodgett, for they had given their guns to him to use in this act.

"I owe you a heap of thanks, Richmond," McMoon said as he and Sledge came swiftly toward the stage. "You put on an act that turned a trick for me. Three years now I've sweated, wondering what had become of that account book, and where and when it would show up. Now I know. But mostly I owe you for leading me here. You see, when we cut for sign on the girl, we didn't find any. But we did find those cards you strewed behind you. Yes, I owe you a heap. But seeing as you know what these others know, it's mighty hard coin I'm gonna pay you with."

A gun came into McMoon's hand, and Sabra's scream rang out eerily in this abandoned theater. "Run!" she cried. "Run for the wings!"

But Richmond wasn't running. History had repeated itself. Once again thundering Colts were ringing down the curtain on his Boulder Gulch performance, but this time he was having a hand in the real shooting. There was no time to reflect that the game was none of his choosing and that he'd been forced into it by circumstance and the intent stubbornness of Sabra Kendall. There was only this to remember: he had been given a chance to do a great good for people who had made his success possible, that and the fact that he had unwittingly blazed the trail that had fetched McMoon here. One of his guns spoke, and Sledge dropped the weapon he'd been trying to level.

With a choking cough, he bent at the middle and measured his length on the dusty, rotting floor.

McMoon was shooting now, shooting with slow and calculated intent, and Richmond damned those smoking footlights which were making him so visible as a target. But a man trained to move quickly through the gyrations of a dance could move quickly with bullets peppering about him, and one who'd used guns in an act could use those same guns to more serious purpose.

He saw Sam Shannon peering wildly at him, he saw Doc Blodgett and Sabra trying to restrain an old man; and he saw Rufus McMoon climb over the footlights, then pause as though he were impaled upon an invisible spear. The man got his legs twisted and went down in a heap across the sprawled form of Sledge; the last echoes died, and only the heavy, acrid odor of powder smoke, clinging to the air, was a reminder of what had happened here.

Then Sabra was clambering onto the stage. "You're hurt!" she cried.

Richmond found the blood on his cheek but he had no memory of the bullet raking him. Doc Blodgett was clambering up here, too, and after a professional glance at Richmond's cheek, he said: "It's nothing. There may be a slight scar, but grease paint will cover it."

"That account book?" questioned Richmond.

"Jubal Kendall's idea to hide it here was smart," said Blodgett, waving the yellowed sheets of the book before him. "And Sam remembered, at last. With this in our hands, the Vigilantes will be dealing out justice before another sundown. And the miners will back us. Hardrock City will be seeing the last of The Stranglers."

"It's a show I'll have to miss," Richmond declared. "I've got another performance to make. In another camp."

Sabra Kendall was steadying him; he could feel the warmth and strength of her arm.

"You'll be coming back this way again?" she asked.

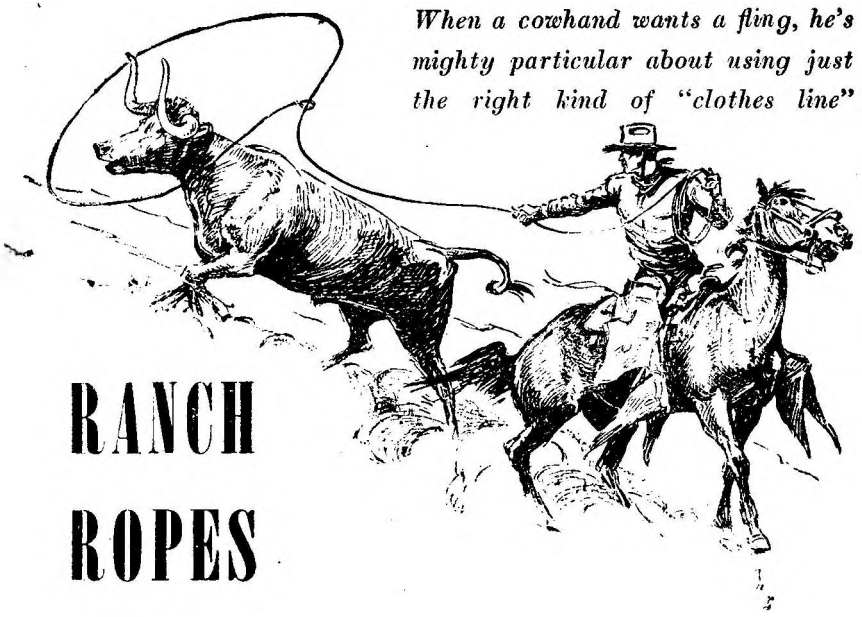
He should have reminded her that this tour was his last, that after that there was to be retirement on certain California acres, but he didn't. Sam Shannon was not the only one who'd been changed by tonight's performance.

It was Dane Richmond's thought that heretofore he had been a shadow capering upon a stage, alone and aloof, but tonight he'd played a man's part in a man's game, and it had made a difference. How could a man truly retire once he'd gotten grease paint in his blood? He was thinking that the Gem Theater in Hardrock City owed him money and now that McMoon was dead, the place would likely be up for sale. He was thinking that it would be mighty nice to be an impresario.

But mostly he was thinking that when he came back to stay, Sabra would be waiting for him. And that was the best thought of all. . . .

THE END

When a cowhand wants a fling, he's mighty particular about using just the right kind of "clothes line"



RANCH ROPES

By Nat W. McKelvey

EVERY tophand knows that, next to horse and saddle, a good rope is the cowhand's most important tool. Waggishly, he may call it a "clothes line," "fling line," or "whale line," but he pampers his catch rope with the same tender care accorded his bronc. It is the whirling, whistling rope that gives the roundup puncher his dash; the spinning, almost magic rope that makes the rodeo trick artist a commanding figure.

For corraling livestock, the rope and loop are as old as the Tartars of Mongolia. And the early Persians used it at a time when the American Southwest was an undiscovered, howling wilderness. Centuries before Mexican muleteers, trekking the Santa Fe trail, introduced the lariat to cowmen pioneers, aboriginal natives of Australia were flinging crude lines of liana, creeper, or woodbine.

Even today, the natives Down Under catch ducks with a lasso just as Mexican ropers use it to snare coyotes and wild turkeys. Far to the north, Laplanders employ a lariat to capture reindeer, while in Europe, Poles, Croats, Hungarians and Germans find it an indispensable addition to their cavalry equipment.

In the hands of an expert, the lasso can be a powerful weapon, either of offense or defense. Offensively, the Indians used it to capture and strangle their enemies. Defensively, they tried to stop the onslaught of the white man's Iron

Horse by snaring smokestacks with the thin, horsehair noose.

For *his* rope, the modern waddy finds so many vital chores that he must obtain the best. In catching horses or throwing cattle, he dare not chance a personal injury caused by an excited animal breaking a cheap rope.

At other times, the puncher may use his rope to pull cattle from quicksand, tow his wagons across swollen rivers, or guide himself from bunkhouse to corral during snowstorms. Tied to the bunkhouse door at one end and to a corral bar at the other, the rope makes a perfect hand rail. On the range, by wrapping several ropes around poles driven in the ground, the cowhand quickly creates a reasonably secure temporary corral.

In addition, the wise saddle hand employs his rope to drag wood to camp, tie his bed up, secure packs, and to stake out horses for the night. And many a cowboy can swear to the potency of his rope as a cow whip or for killing snakes.

Experience has shown the American cowpuncher that the best all-around rope is a three-strand number made from Philippine "hemp," a type of wild banana plant. This material gives the hand a rope of uniform, clear color, free from whiskers, or, as he calls them, "jaggers." A good rope, he knows, feels firm to the touch. The strands are firmly twisted, and such a rope generally has a "hard-laid" appearance.

Though the stronger, cheaper, more flexible hemp lariat has nearly replaced all others, a few "ropes" of different materials are still available. Humorously dubbed "McGays" by whimsical waddies, maguey ropes, four twisted strands of century plant fiber, make excellent trick loops but break too easily for roundup work. The same is true of the woven horsehair rope of the Mexicans. Sometimes made of black and white horsehair, interwoven to give the name of "salt-and-pepper" ropes, this Mexican product is interesting primarily as handicraft.

Slangily known as a "skin string" or "catgut," the rawhide rope of

four strands finds some favor among professional ropers at rodeos where its added weight helps make possible a longer catch. But, costing approximately $50, five times as much as a good hemp rope, the rawhide lariat is a tricky investment, at best. The breaking of only one strand wrecks the rope completely.

To produce the witchery of trick roping, operators turn to still another kind of rope, braided cotton. Smooth and pliable, requiring no strength, No. 12 cotton Spot Cord responds most readily to such spectacular tricks as the spinning loop and the rising and falling loop.

Between 35 and 45 feet long, the cowboy's throw rope consists of three parts: the loop, the honda, and the hand or "home" end. Because California and Texas hands frequently dally or tie-hard when roping, they require the longer rope.

The honda, or eye, through which the end of the rope passes to form the catch loop, may be of several kinds. Tied in the rope, it is called the "honda loop." But tied hondas, being clumsy and offering resistance to the air in throwing, are less popular than those of metal, horn or rawhide.

Some ropers declare that the best honda is an eye splice with the top half wired to prevent wear. Others prefer to finish this splice with a rawhide piece laced around the eye while the leather is wet. When drying, the leather shrinks, becoming extremely hard and resistant to frictional wear caused by the body of the rope running through the honda.

For added heft and smooth roping action, the metal honda is incomparable. Of variable weight, if made of brass, steel or aluminum, the metal honda is egg-shaped, grooved. One end of the lariat is wrapped around the groove of this eye, the loose terminal being either spliced into the body of the rope or wired and bradded to it.

For making heel catches on steers or calves, the rope with a metal honda has proven its excellence. After the catch is made, the heavy eye can be easily shaken free when the roper desires to retrieve his line. Chief disadvantage of the rope with metal honda is the danger of eye injuries to cattle.

A kind of compromise, the 3-H or Hogue's honda, tends to minimize the dangers of the full metal honda while keeping its virtues. Made of grooved brass, half the size of the full honda, the 3-H is clamped to the top and sides of the upper half of the honda eye.

Once an honda has been fixed in a rope, the loop is made easily by passing the other end of the rope through this eye. Now the throw rope is nearly complete. But to keep the rope from unraveling and slipping through the roper's hand, the home end must be knotted. For this purpose, some cowboys use a simple overhand knot. But the more prideful will finish the rope with a wall-and-crown or a double Matthew-Walker knot. Some waddies will even comb out an ornamental tas-

sel before tying the tricky M-W.

When a puncher buys a new rope, he first stretches it between trees, hanging weights on it for a couple of days to make it pliable and kinkless. Next, he waterproofs it by rubbing in a vaseline or tallow preparation containing an equal part of melted paraffin.

A tophand never allows his rope to acquire a coating of grime, and he will never hang his rope in a damp place. He knows that moisture will destroy its snap, making it limp and lifeless.

But no matter how well it is treated, no rope is any better than the man who employs it. So punchers spend years learning to throw the lariat. First, they practice the toss. Used for catching corraled animals, this throw is made on foot. The operator shakes out a noose, holds it away from his body at his side, and tosses it up and over the neck of the desired animal.

More difficult is the whirling throw made from the back of a running horse. Galloping along after a steer, the puncher shakes out a noose with his right hand. His left hand, meanwhile, holds both his reins and the home end of the lariat. When within range, the puncher whirls the noose over his head, throwing it for the head or horns of his speeding target. When the noose leaves his hand, he gives it a quick wrist twist to keep it open.

In the realm of roping, cowhands disagree on at least two things: whether to dally or tie-hard; whether to call their rope a lasso or a lariat.

The dally-man is a puncher who takes a few turns—dallies—of his rope around the saddlehorn after he has made his catch. He argues that, if the going gets rough, he can easily rid himself of trouble by unwinding the dally. The tie-hard man, often a Texan, sneers at this, regarding it as timidity. He is so sure of himself, his horse and his catch that he ties the home end of his catch rope permanently to the saddlehorn. Be hanged to trouble and let 'er rip!

To distinguish a lasso from a lariat, it is necessary to examine the historic background of the words. Coming from the Spanish *la reata*, meaning the "tie back," *lariat* usually signifies a leather rope. But Southwestern punchers loosely use the term to mean any catch rope.

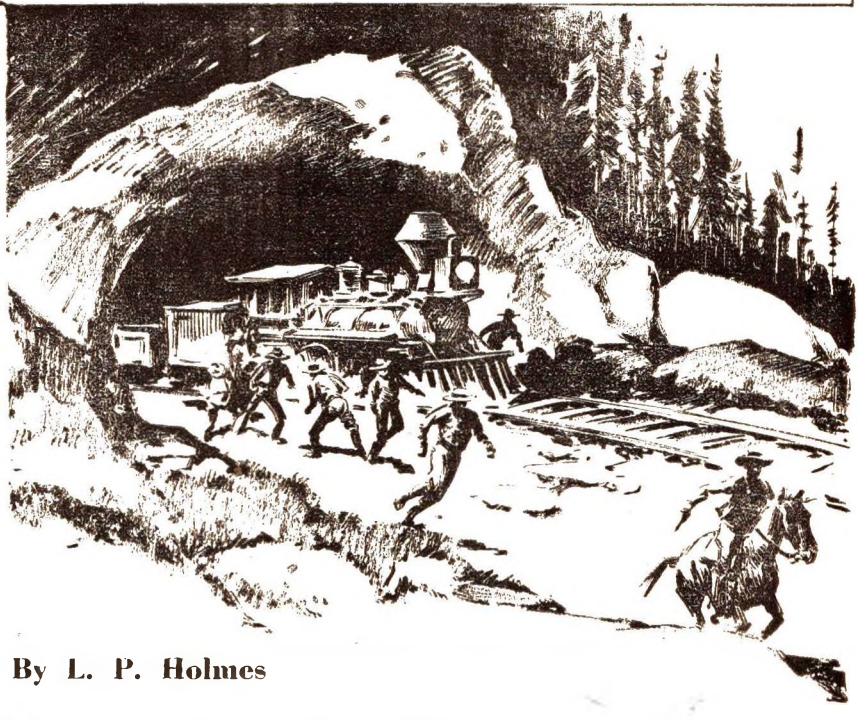
Lasso, from the Spanish *lazo*, Latin *laqueus* and Portuguese *laco*—all meaning a noose—describes a rawride rope only. Californians, though, use the term to mean any catch rope just as they do riata or lass rope.

To confuse the issue further, punchers of the Montana range and the Northwest generally never use lariat, riata, or lasso. Pointedly, they just say "rope."

But on one thing all cowhands agree. A swing at the end of a good stout lariat is the finest reward for cow thieves. Though modern society has outlawed the rope for this use, the tophand still wants the best "fling line" he can find. He wants a rope for work, he wants it for fun, wherever he is.

THE END

Trouble Rides The Rails



By L. P. Holmes

Only by smashing a ruthless freighting combine could Vike Lawrence carry through the perilous job of breaking trail for the narrow gauge

I

BLUE DUSK was seeping in out of the high Nevada desert as the little Simcoe narrow-gauge engine, drawing a dozen flatcars loaded with ties, eased to a clanking, hissing stop on the railroad siding at Crown Point.

Vike Lawrence, who had ridden the tender platform in from Hart City on the main, standard-gauge transcontinental line, waved a rueful hand to the engine crew.

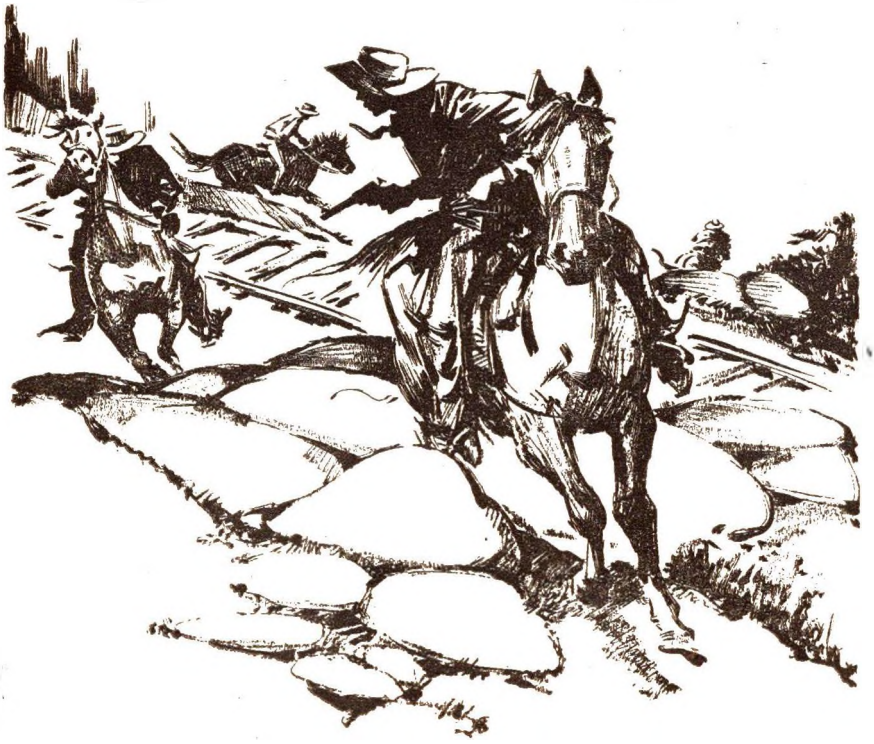
"Thanks for the lift, boys. I envy you. Your troubles are over for the

day. Something tells me that mine are just beginning."

Slab Turner, the engineer, split a grin across his soot-blackened face. "Your hunch is a case bet, mister. When Danny Briscoe sends out a hurry-up call for any man, it means he needs help. And anything that Danny Briscoe needs help in doing is bound to be plenty rough! Good luck!"

Vike cut out past the square, ugly station house, struck the open end of Crown Point's main and only street, and headed up town. A year previous, Crown Point had been merely a way station and a spread of corrals on the long freight-wagon haul between Hart City and Junction. Now it was a town, new, raw, rough and tough.

The Antelope Valley-Sevier River Railroad Company had done that, gouging out its right-of-way through the sage and juniper, stringing ties and spiking down narrow-gauge steel. For the lead and silver mines at Junction were not a boom-town fantasy. They were real and rich, and the lode ran deep. Already the first smelter put up was proving completely inadequate to handle the ore output, so now Western Consolidated was building another, with four times



the capacity of the original plant. Junction was a mining camp with a future.

Back in Hart City, watching developments with a shrewd, blue Scandinavian eye, Chris Jensen, owner and president of the Hart City Mercantile Bank, had called in other capital and sold the idea of the Antelope Valley-Sevier River narrow-gauge railroad, to tap the rich business Junction promised. And so the railroad had come and its coming had boomed Crown Point to its present boisterous status.

Like other construction towns that Vike Lawrence had known, Crown Point started early in the evening with its business of lusty living. Already the street was crowded. Railroad jerries rubbed elbows and swapped knotty fists with freight-wagon skinners. Both jerries and mule skinners were truculent, on the prod. They were natural enemies, for the coming of the one, meant the going of the other.

Where the steel rails reached, the wagon trade died out. It was triumph for one, defeat for the other. But it was progress and the way of a world which, while it might pause a moment to regret the passing of one colorful phase of life, used that same interval to draw a deep breath in anticipation of uproarious welcome of the newer era.

Also on the street were miners, coming or going between Hart City and the mines at Junction, who had stopped off to savor life in this raw, new town. There were swarthy, black-eyed Italian carbonari, men who burned charcoal back in the scrub-timbered hills, to supply the smelting furnaces at Junction. And there were Chinese, who labored mightily and well at the back-breaking grading jobs.

Dives and saloons were plentiful, with their gamblers and their come-on men. Speculators with plenty of jawbone sold rose-colored dreams of the future whenever and wherever they could find a listening innocent. And all around the shadowy edges drifted soft-footed Shoshone and Piute Indians, marveling and mystified at the white man and his ways.

The voice of the town was the murmuring growl of masculine voices, punctuated by an occasional drunken yell, or a flurry of cursing as another fight started. Somewhere in the distance a piano pounded out tin-can discord. The raw, sharp odors of wood smoke, of roughly cooked food, of wet steam and coal smoke from the Simcoe engine, hung heavy in the evening air.

Through it all Vike moved at a long, swinging stride, savoring the atmosphere of the town unconsciously as his thoughts played with all the possibilities behind the urgent call which Dan Briscoe, the railroad's construction superintendent, had sent him.

There were plenty of big men on the street, but none of them dwarfed Vike Lawrence. He had shoulders to match theirs and a long, wolf leanness which made him faster, surer in his movements than most. His weathered, square-jawed face mirrored a certain blunt stubbornness, the look of a man who had fought his way past

plenty of tough obstacles in his time and was willing to take on more of the same. His short, black pipe, clamped in one corner of his mouth, carried a certain challenging jut to it.

Yellow lamplight came flooding from the wide door of a general store. In that doorway stood a feminine figure, slender and erect in gingham. Her face was half turned as she spoke to the tall, rawboned young fellow at her elbow, a man in teamster's garb. The movement limned her profile cleanly against the light from within the store and the clear beauty of it was such that Vike Lawrence broke the long swing of his stride and half paused to look again.

It was at this moment that they came out of the thickening gloom. A good half dozen of them. The leader touched Vike on the arm, and Vike turned and said: "Well, what is it?"

"You Lawrence—Vike Lawrence?"

"That's right. Something you wanted?"

"Somethin' me and the boys are deliverin'."

Vike saw the first punch coming, for, though it was heavy and devastating, it was also ponderous and slow. So he was able to step easily inside it, roll his shoulder and counter with a short-armed smash that knocked the fellow flat.

It was a good punch, but the last of its type that Vike had a chance to deliver. For the others came on with a rush, swarming all over Vike, driving him back against the low porch of the store, muffling his arms by sheer weight of numbers, dragging him down and beating at him with clubbing fists from every side. Vike managed to evade some of those blows, but many landed, heavy and numbing.

One of them got Vike around the legs, locking them. The others bore him back. He fell on the store porch and they were all over him, savage and cursing.

Now that Vike was down, boots as well as fists thudded into him. One of those driving boots smashed into the side of Vike's neck and a stunning paralysis ran through him. Desperately he dragged his arms free and tried to wrap them about his head as protection against another kick. He was a little slow. That same boot drove into the side of his head.

Just before his senses left him, Vike thought he heard a feminine voice crying out in indignant anger. Maybe it was just fancy, for things were all muddled in his head, now. Then the muddle thinned out and became roaring blackness.

II

Strangling a little over the heavy jolt of raw whiskey that had been poured into him, Vike Lawrence regained consciousness faster than he had lost it. Fight was still in him and he reared up to a sitting position despite the protesting pressure of a pair of soft, slim hands and a quiet voice. Water dripped from his hair and lay wetly cool on his bruised face. He scrubbed the back of a hand across his eyes and looked around.

He was inside the store. On her

knees beside him was the girl who had been standing in the doorway of the place and whom Vike had been admiring just before the rough gang jumped him. She was saying: "Everything is all right, now. Jed drove them away from you. Rest a moment."

Vike didn't. Unconsciousness had not quenched the fires of combat burning in him. He got to his knees, stood up, feet spread and braced until his surroundings quit shifting and revolving around. He shook his battered head to drive the mists from it.

The girl had come to her feet also and now stood looking anxiously up at Vike. Then a brawny hand shoved the whiskey bottle at Vike and a gruff voice said: "Take another snort, friend. It'll tie you together."

Vike shook his head, looking at the speaker, the same tall, rawboned young fellow who had been with the girl in the store doorway.

"You're Jed?" asked Vike, his words a little slow and clumsy because they came through lips swollen and still numb from punishment.

"That's right. Jed Keswick. This is my sister, Dee. That gang that jumped you was some of Brad Lester's crowd. What would Brad Lester have against you? You don't look like a wagon man."

"I'm not," Vike told him. "I'm with the railroad. Lawrence is the name—Vike Lawrence. I'm glad to know you two—plenty glad. And I sure thank you both. That gang was certainly pouring it on me. How did you scatter them?"

Jed Keswick pulled open his faded denim jumper, showing a big Colt gun in a shoulder holster. "The only language certain people in these parts seem to understand," he said coldly. "You'd be smart to pack one yourself. So you're a railroad man, eh? I wonder now why I went to the trouble."

Vike's senses were all level and steady again by this time and the curt change in tone and manner of this Jed Keswick startled him.

"A crime to be a railroad man?" he asked.

Keswick shrugged. "It doesn't matter. They're thick as hornets and twice as mean. Come on, Dee. It's time we were moving out." He caught up a sack of groceries and went out the door into the night. The girl, her soft chin high, her eyes chill now with remote indifference, followed him.

Vike Lawrence stared at the empty doorway for a moment and then, half aloud, half to himself, muttered: "I'll be damned! Save your hide one minute, treat you like a horse thief the next. I wonder why?"

Behind him, a dryly nasal voice answered: "Because they run a little one-wagon freight outfit and because the railroad is driving them and their kind out of business. By plenty of tough struggle they were holding their own against Brad Lester, but they can't whip him and the railroad,

both. Mighty fine people, Jed and Dee Keswick."

Vike turned to look at the storekeeper, a thin, peppery little man with a big nose. "I think I was given good advice. You got any guns for sale?"

"A couple."

"Let's have a look at them."

When Vike left the store fifteen minutes later, the heavy, hard bulk of a Colt .45 snugged against his short ribs, tucked inside the waistband of his jeans.

He ached all over from the results of that short, but savage beating. But his head and thoughts were clear and the red-hot coals of initial anger had settled down to a cold, clear waiting flame that would burn on and on until quenched by the waters of some sort of retribution against those who had attacked him so suddenly and treacherously.

The street was, by this time, even more densely peopled than before and was growing rougher in its tempo by the minute, but Vike was not bothered any more and soon he turned into the Continental Hotel, a big, barnlike, two-story building, with a crowded bar running all along one wall of the big lobby.

Hardly had Vike entered when he heard his name called and he turned to face a stocky, crisp-moving man with grizzled hair and mustache. "Mr. Briscoe! I was just going to ask for your room number."

They shook hands and Dan Briscoe looked at Vike keenly. "You've had trouble?"

"Some. A bunch of toughs jumped me, down street. They were working me over pretty heavy when a wagon man named Keswick bought in with a .45 and shooed them off my neck. He said they were some of Brad Lester's crowd. They seemed to be expecting me, for they came up, asked if I was Vike Lawrence and when I said I was, they pitched right into me."

Briscoe's jaw jutted. "Afraid of that. There's a leak in our outfit somewhere that needs stopping up, damned bad. Well, we got lots of things to talk about. We'll go up to my room. Had supper yet? No? I'll order some sent up. Come on."

Briscoe had a big, corner, second-story room. There were two iron frame bunks in it and one of these was littered with blueprints, surveyor's figures, material reports and correspondence of one sort or another. A small table, equally littered, stood in the center of the room and this Briscoe cleared swiftly. In a corner stood a rough bureau with big white bowl and water pitcher.

Vike stripped to the waist, had a good wash, toweled his bruised face and body briskly and felt so much better that he greeted with relish the food that was brought in and put on the table. While he ate, Dan Briscoe alternately puffed on a black cheroot and talked. Mainly he talked. And Vike learned the reason for the urgent summons that had brought him down from the tie-cutting camps to this town of Crown Point.

Brad Lester was the biggest wagon man in that part of Nevada. His wagons numbered in the scores, his mules into the hundreds. Ninety

percent of all the hundreds of tons of freight that moved back and forth between Hart City and the mines at Junction, was carried in Lester's wagons. It was a virtual monopoly and a rich one.

Lesser wagon men who tried to get in on some of this fat business found themselves immediately engaged in a losing battle with Brad Lester. They and their skinners were beaten up, their wagons overturned, their mules stampeded into the brush.

These tactics were usually the initial warning. If the little wagon operator persisted in his purpose, why then his wagons might be burned, his mules picked off by riflemen hidden in the lonely sage and, as had happened in several cases, the skinner riding along at his jerkline job, bushwhacked off his wagon box by these same slinking riflemen.

By such high-handed and ruthless means had Brad Lester kept his freighting monoply. Then had come the narrow-gauge steel, reaching down across the miles. When that steel definitely connected Hart City and Junction, Brad Lester and his freighting bonanza would be definitely finished. So, of late, instead of fighting only the little wagon operators, Lester was devoting most of his strength to fighting the railroad. The longer he could hold back the railroad, the more and tougher obstacles he could put in its way, the greater the freighting profits he would roll up. So Brad Lester was overlooking no bets, high or low, crooked or ruthless.

Dan Briscoe sketched briefly for Vike Lawrence. "We've learned," said Briscoe, "that Lester was behind the trouble up in our tie cutting camps back in the Toyama Mountains. The same trouble you were sent up there to iron out. Well, you did a fine job there, Vike. Cross ties are now coming in faster than we can build grade to lay them on. That's fine. That's the way we want it and the way it should be. Now I've brought you down here to crack a tougher nut."

"The rewards of virtue," murmured Vike ruefully. "You clean up one dirty job and they hand you a meaner one. I should have muffed things, up in the Toyamas."

Briscoe smiled thinly. "I know your kind. You wouldn't be happy unless you were bucking a tough trail. Well, here it is. Brad Lester is raising hell, out at end of steel. He's spending a lot of money and he's got to some of the jerries in our steel-laying gangs. We've been trying to ferret out the double-crossers, but without any luck. They work slick as hell. A thousand things are going on, little things not amounting to much in themselves, but which in the aggregate add up to all kinds of delays. Here a fish plate is only half bolted, there a spike not driven home. Ties spaced too close or too far apart, steel laid far enough off gauge to derail a car of steel or ties. All that sort of thing, which means work that has to be gone over and done twice. Time and money wasted. I'm sending you out there to clean things up."

"How far does my authority reach?" Vike asked.

"Clear across the board," rapped

Briscoe grimly. "Even to me if you catch me in any dirty work. Chris Jensen, the big boss, has been out and he's fighting mad. You can shoot the works and be confident that he'll back your hand all the way, Vike."

Vike nodded thoughtfully. "How about the grade gangs? Has Lester got to them, too?"

"Not yet, thank the Lord! Those Chinese coolies are all right. They mind their own affairs, do their job and ask no favors. But I wouldn't be surprised to have Lester try something on them at any time. He's cunning as a fox, ruthless as a wolf. I could hear of Brad Lester being dead and not bat an eye."

"What about Al Meade?" asked Vike. "He's steel boss. I'll be moving in on his territory. He's pretty touchy and he won't like that."

"He'll have to like it, or else," was Briscoe's flat retort.

They talked for a while longer, then Vike stood up and reached for his hat. Briscoe wanted to know where he was going. Between their puffed, bruised lids, Vike's gray eyes took on a cool gleam.

"It all happened pretty fast," he drawled. "and the light wasn't any too good. But I saw enough to remember a few of their faces. I'm going out to look for them."

"You'd be smarter to stay right here and go to bed," argued Briscoe. "You can have that bunk. I'll clean that junk off it."

"I'll use the bunk later. Right now I'm feeling fine and frosty again. To get a job done, a trouble shooter has to establish a reputation. You

do that by trailing down anybody who takes a cut at you and kicking hell out of him. If you absorb a licking and don't hand a better one back, the rough ones figure they got you bluffed. If I can find any of them, I aim to hand out a little education."

"You'll end up getting rubbed out," Briscoe protested. "When the cards are all down, this fellow Brad Lester fights for keeps. A slug in the back, a skull crushed in with a club, a knife in the throat—he'll stop at nothing. This is for keeps, I tell you, Vike."

Vike patted the gun at his waist. "If he wants it that way, okay. Don't worry about me. I've been around."

III

Vike made a round of all the saloons, joints and dives. At each

he slipped unobtrusively inside the door, put his back to the wall and looked the place over. When he saw no face that clicked in his memory, he would slide out just as quietly and go on to the next place. The fact that his face clearly showed marks of recent combat did not attract undue attention. Plenty of men in Crown Point's rough, tough citizenry bore marks of combat, recent and past. It was that kind of town, that kind of crowd.

In the end Vike drew a blank and had about decided to go back to the hotel and that spare bunk in Dan Briscoe's room, when he heard, over at the north edge of town, where some of the smaller wagon camps were established, the lifting yell of hoarse anger-filled voices that advertised another spot of trouble. Not Vike's trouble, but trouble of some sort. And it was in him this night to look for it. So he headed that way at a fast walk, stumbling through the black gloom of a refuse-littered alley and out into the partial clear beyond.

Here, at the very edge of the reluctant sagebrush stood some rough corrals and the ponderous, looming bulk of several big Merivale freight wagons. A fire, just beginning to take hold, was burning in the bed of one of these wagons and beside it men were fighting.

Trouble, indeed, thought Vike Lawrence, but still none of his. The next second he changed his mind, for a voice lifted above all the rest, sharp with worry and anguish.

"Get away from them, Jed—get away from them! Let the wagon go!"

Despite its altered tone, it was the same voice that had been soft and gentle in Vike's ears when consciousness came back to him in the store. The voice belonged to that girl with the lovely profile, Dee Keswick.

Vike went into the ruckus at a run. The fight was revolving about a central figure and Vike knew who that figure would be. Jed Keswick, the girl's brother. So, Vike knew, the fringe of the group was his meat.

He didn't use his fists. Instead he snapped his heavy Colt free and began swinging the heavy barrel. Twice he swung, twice he connected solidly and both targets grunted and dropped. This broke the pressure on Jed Keswick and he spun into the clear. Vike jumped over beside him and rapped out: "Vike Lawrence again, Keswick—repaying his debt. Give 'em hell!"

It made a big and quick difference, two men shoulder to shoulder, instead of a lone one, surrounded and muffled by numbers. The attackers gave back and when Vike nailed another with that gun barrel, swung at full arm's reach, the rest broke and ran. One of them, when some twenty yards away, whirled, cursing savagely. Pale gun flame spurted, the report rolled heavily across the night and a slug whipped past, thudding into the side of the wagon.

Vike shot back, expecting little in results, for the spurt of gun flame had been there but a split second and the man behind it was just a crouched and shifting shadow in the night. Yet to Vike's shot there answered a sharp yelp of pain, then the receding pound of running boots. Abruptly, except for the three roughs

Vike had gun-whipped, he and Jed Keswick were alone.

"The wagon," panted Keswick. "That fire . . ."

They scaled the tall sides of the wagon, dropped into the bed, where flames curled and licked luridly and sent up the heavy stench of raw kerosene burning. Several old blankets, folded to act as cushions, were on the wagon box. Jed Keswick dragged them free and, with Vike, went after the fire, beating it back, smothering it with the blankets.

It was hot, fume-choked work, but they got it done and a slim figure came toiling through the dark with two heavy pails of water which was used to douse the final stubborn ember. Vike climbed down, eyes smarting, throat raw from the acrid bite of smoke and fumes.

"That water did it," he said to Dee Keswick. "The wagon is safe enough and not harmed greatly. This makes me even with you and your brother. I like to pay my debts."

Dee's voice was shaken. "It's no use! We can't fight Brad Lester. It isn't worth it. We'll have to move out, leave these parts."

A crowd, mostly other little wagon operators, drawn by the gun shots and other uproar, was gathering. One who knew Keswick asked: "What's it all about, Jed?"

"Brad Lester, of course," Jed answered bitterly. "I happened to take some of his roughs off the neck of this fellow Lawrence, earlier this evening. This is Lester's way of getting even—trying to burn my wagon."

A growl ran through the crowd. "Here's three of them still on the ground. What are you going to do with them?"

"They belong to Lawrence. He gun-whipped them. It's his say."

"We'll take them off your hands," said one of the crowd. "We'll hustle them out of town and give them the choice of a rope or of clearing these parts for good. And we'll convince them, plenty."

"Fair enough," said Vike. "Take 'em along."

The crowd hustled the dazed roughs to their feet and away into the night.

Vike Lawrence, remembering what the girl had said to him just a moment before, remarked: "Pretty tough setup for your sister, isn't it, Keswick? If you'd be interested, I can line you up a good, steady freighting job, hauling ties out of the Toyama Mountains down to Berger on the main transcontinental line. You wouldn't have anybody like Brad Lester to bother you, there."

"That would be working for the damn railroad," said Jed Keswick gruffly. "And I hate all railroads for the way they're cutting the throats of us wagon men. Besides, I never ran from anyone and I'm not starting now. One of these days I'll hunt Brad Lester down and fill him full of lead. And that will be an end to the crooked, greedy rat."

There was finality in Keswick's words, so Vike did not argue. He merely said: "Glad things worked out as well as they did, without too much damage done. Good luck!"

He was turning away when Dee

slipped over to him, dropping a feather-light hand on his arm. "We both thank you greatly, of course. Had Jed been hurt, or had we lost the wagon . . . Yes, we do thank you."

The starlight was just enough to make a witching oval of her face.

"Glad I was able to return the favor you folks did me, Miss Keswick," Vike said. "Work on your brother to consider that Toyama Mountain job. I know you'd both like it there."

IV

A work train, the cars dark with the figures of the steel-laying and grade gangs, rolled out to end of steel. Behind snorted the little Simcoe engine pulling cars heaped with ties. Vike Lawrence rode with Slab Turner and his fireman in the cab of the Simcoe.

As Slab eased the throttle open, he looked at Vike with that wide grin of his. "By the looks of you, friend, you found trouble early and quick."

Vike grinned in return, running a hand over his bruised face. "It jumped right out and bit me not five minutes after I arrived last evening. Seems like I was expected."

Slab nodded, sobering. "Lots of funny business going on."

Morning mists smoked in the draws, winnowed across the flats, then disappeared magically as the sun rolled up and laid its early light and warmth through the sage.

Steel was creeping over a low, gradual land rise, almost imperceptible to the eye, but its sure presence advertised by the staccato beat of the Simcoe's exhaust as Slab Turner put his tie train on to a siding, so that the work train, after discharging its load of humans, could back out the miles to Crown Point again.

Beyond a false crest to the land rise, the black mouth of a tunnel showed, a four-hundred-yard-long bore cutting through a knife ridge which laid a solid barrier across the right-of-way. A long, sweetly true curve of new-built grade, slicing through the sage, but still devoid of steel, ran up to and disappeared into the dark maw of the tunnel.

Groups of Chinese grade hands were already plodding out the curve to the tunnel, disappearing within it, for their work had reached well beyond. Wastage here, thought Vike. The steel gang should be pounding close on the heels of the grade workers all the time. They had plenty of steel, plenty of ties, of fish plates, bolts and spikes. Vike spoke this thought to Slab Turner.

Slab shrugged, shot a stream of tobacco juice into the sage. "Didn't I say there was funny business going on?"

For a time Vike stayed in the background, watching. The tempo of the steel gang was sullen, slothful, careless. And Vike thought that a gang of men like this was not unlike a barrel of apples. One or two rotten ones

could affect all the rest and set a spreading decay throughout.

He saw several things. He saw that Al Meade, the steel boss, a beefy, florid-faced man, was blind to this, either unconsciously or wilfully. And out of the shifting figures of the workers he spotted two, the sight of whom brought a cool, hard gleam into his eyes. One of these was working with the tie layers, the other gauging the rails as the steel went down. Here, he thought, was the answer to two of the complaints that Dan Briscoe had voiced, ties improperly laid and steel going down out of gauge.

Vike moved quietly up behind the tie layers, watched several of the roughly squared timbers go down. Then he said, his voice crisp: "No matter where you handle them, whether up in the Toyama camps, or down here, you can't seem to do a job with the ties, can you, Haggerty?"

Lark Haggerty came up and around, startled, snarling. He was a burly man, with little, shifty eyes, which veiled craftily as he recognized Vike.

"What's it to you?" he growled.

"Plenty! You were no good in the tie camps, and you're no good here. Seeing you and Gotch Murdock here explains a little ruckus last night. One of you must have seen me get off the tie train and you arranged that surprise party for me in front of the general store. You're through, Haggerty. You're fired!"

Haggerty leered at him. "Try telling that one to the boss—Al Meade."

The steel boss came hurrying up. He and Vike had met before. "Hello there, Lawrence. What are you doing here? What's the argument?"

"Trouble," answered Vike dryly. "Steel that isn't moving as it should. Ties laid wrong, steel going down out of gauge, spikes not fully set—a lot of things. I fired Haggerty here from the Toyama tie camps, I fired him and Murdock yonder. They're not the sort this railroad wants working on any of its jobs. So they're through here."

"Wait a minute—wait a minute!" Meade's florid face went more so with angry color. "I'm running this outfit. Haggerty and Murdock are my men and they suit me. You keep your nose out of this end of the game."

"You go tell that to Dan Briscoe," Vike rapped back crisply. "I say that Murdock and Haggerty are through. Get them out of here!"

A faint shadow of bluster, which told a story of its own, came into Meade's words and manner. "Briscoe hasn't said anything to me. And until he does . . ."

"He will," cut in Vike. "I suggest you head back to Crown Point and have it out with Briscoe. Then you'll see."

"By Satan, I'm doing just that," fumed Meade. "I'm going back on that tie train as soon as it finishes unloading, and find out just where I stand and what authority you got to come butting in."

"That's swell," Vike declared. "You'll find out, all right. And take Haggerty and Murdock with you.

Because, I tell you, they're all done here."

On all sides men had stopped work and were watching and listening. Some were surly, some grinning openly at the discomfiture of Al Meade. One of these was a brawny, level-eyed, square-jawed fellow. At him Vike shot an abrupt question.

"What's your name?"

"Pat Dunne. And are you telling me I'm fired, too?"

"Hardly. Ever handle men?"

The big Irishman sobered slightly. "Aye! I've handled them."

"Good! This gang needs a foreman. You're it, Pat. Every honest man jack of you knows this steel hasn't been going down fast enough, or going down right. And you don't like it. You're honest, decent workmen, anxious to do a good job that you can take pride in. I can tell all that just by watching you and marking your mood. You haven't liked the way things were going. Well, that's changed now. Look at all that finished grade ahead of you, ready for steel. And the grade gang getting further ahead of you all the time. Is that the way it should be? Well, Pat?"

Pat Dunne looked around. "Will you monkeys be listenin'? The truth, isn't it? Them Chinee boys in the grade gang are good—mighty good. But are we going to let it be said they're better than we are? Are we?"

A stir ran through the men. One of them yelled: "Show us the way, Pat."

Pat slapped his big, calloused hands together. "'Tis a bargain. You terriers start rootin'. And soon we'll be roarin' at the heathen heels of that grade gang."

The men jumped to their jobs with new spirit and purpose. Dunne turned to Vike, smiling grimly. "You've scratched their pride, friend. So now they'll make you eat your words."

"Which I'll be happy to do. Bring your progress report to Dan Briscoe's room tonight when you come off the job. And who knows, Pat—maybe you'll be steel boss tomorrow morning."

Slab Turner had backed his train out on to the main line and the ties were unloaded and stacked. Vike went over and called up to the engineer: "Tell Dan Briscoe I'll be staying out here all day, Slab. Tell him to pour the ties and steel through because we'll be laying track now as it should be laid."

Slab grinned. "You got a keen eye. You spot funny business and scotch it quick."

Al Meade, Gotch Murdock and Lark Haggerty had been standing aside in a sullen group, waiting for Slab to start back to Crown Point. Meade murmured something to the other two and now Murdock and Haggerty came toward Vike, their purpose plain in face and manner.

"Gotch and me always like to leave our mark behind when we move off a job, Lawrence," Haggerty growled. "So we're going to give you something to remember us by."

Slab Turner dropped down out of his cab, a heavy wrench gripped in one hand. "One to one is fair," he said. "But two to one I don't go for.

Somebody can get his skull caved in if he wants it that way."

This stopped Murdock and Haggerty in their tracks. Vike laughed. "They don't want it one to one, Slab. They tried it that way, back up in the tie camps and didn't have a bit of luck."

"Then," said Slab. "the two of you will be climbing onto one of those flats, because I'm leaving. And bring your friend Meade with you, else you'll all walk back to Crown Point. May the wind blow the crooked teeth out of the three of you!"

Slab went up into his cab. The Simcoe hissed and wheels began to turn. Murdock, Haggerty and Meade scrambled up on a flat. Slab Turner gave a taunting, derisive hoot of his whistle and the little train slid away.

V

Four days had gone by. In that time Dan Briscoe had fired Al Meade, replacing him with Pat Dunne as steel boss, and Pat and his men had made good their threat to force Vike Lawrence to eat his words. For steel had crept up to the tunnel, through it and now was reaching out into the long, open flats of Antelope Valley beyond, hard at the heels of the Chinese grade gang, with the mines at Junction only ten miles further distant.

Exultant over the swift, new progress, Dan Briscoe went in to Hart City to report to Chris Jensen. Vike Lawrence had the room he shared with Briscoe to himself for the night. Weary and ready to turn in, he opened the door to a knock and faced Jed Keswick. Vike had just been thinking that he'd seen nothing of the Keswicks since the first night he'd hit Crown Point.

Jed looked considerably the worse for wear and tear. He was dusty and ragged and he limped when he came into the room. His face was gaunt with banked anger and bitterness.

"I've come to ask for a job, Lawrence," he said curtly. "A job on the railroad, for only the railroad is big enough and strong enough to break Brad Lester. And I want to see him broken and brought down to nothing, just as I am now."

Vike pointed to a chair. "Sit down, Jed. What's this all about?"

"I went out after a load of charcoal at one of the carbonari camps. It doesn't pay as well as straight freight haul into the mines at Junction, because that way you haul supplies in to Junction and bring back a load of lead pigs from the smelter. When you work the carbonari camps, you take in charcoal and go back empty.

"Up to now," Jed continued, "Brad Lester has passed up the charcoal hauling for that reason and it's been the one thing that we little wagon operators could take up the slack at. Lester hasn't particularly bothered the little outfits working the charcoal haul. Today was different. Maybe he's got it in for me in particular. Anyhow, some of his roughs jumped me. Thank the Lord that

Dee wasn't along with me." He paused, rubbed a weary hand across his eyes as though he were wiping away some haunting picture.

"They caught me coming down the Gunsight Grade," he went on. "They rolled a boulder into my mules, wiping out three of them like you'd smash three flies with your fist. The rest went over the grade, taking the wagon with them. I jumped, just missing being caught under the wagon. When I added up the damage I found a load of charcoal gone to hell, my wagon smashed to kindling wood and seven out of my twelve mules killed or crippled so bad I had to kill them. It completely finished me as a wagon operator! There it is. I want that job on the railroad—any kind of a job. Just so it will keep Dee and me eating and with a roof over our heads and give me the satisfaction of knowing I'm part and parcel of the one organization that can smash Brad Lester. Well, how about it?"

Vike nodded. "There's a job waiting. Slab Turner's fireman has been moved up and Slab is looking for the right man to take his place. You'll get along fine with Slab. He's the pure quill. You can start in the morning. I'm mighty sorry about your freight outfit, but I'm glad to have you on our side, Jed."

Jed stood up. "Thanks. You're white, Lawrence. I'll do a job for you. Now I'll be getting back to Dee. She's pretty upset." He exploded in dark fury. "Damn Brad Lester! He's in town. I saw him on my way up here. He walks like he owned Crown Point, but always with several of his toughest bully boys not far away. At that, I've a notion to hunt him up and take the cost of my outfit out of his hide!"

"And have his bully boys work you over?" warned Vike. "That wouldn't make it any easier on your sister. You stick to your first idea. Go on home and give Dee the good news that you're on a new job."

After Jed Keswick left, a queer restlessness came over Vike. Presently he got his hat, caught up his gun where it lay on his bunk, shoving it down into the waistband of his jeans. Then he left the hotel and went along the moiling street to the Juniper, the biggest bar and gambling joint in town. His guess was good. Brad Lester stood at the far end of the bar, shaking dice with one of the bartenders for drinks.

Vike knew Lester by sight only, a big man who laughed too easily, with an air that seemed almost benevolent until one got a good look at his hard, bright, rather small eyes and saw the deceit and cold, ruthless greed which they mirrored. Brad Lester fooled many people on first acquaintance with that jolly, quick laugh of his.

Vike worked an unobtrusive way through the crowded barroom, then moved swiftly in beside Lester.

"If he's winnning," Vike told a slightly disgruntled-looking bartender, "it's because he's cheating, as usual. He prefers doing things that way."

Lester turned, his laugh for once stilled. He looked Vike up and down. "Don't know you," he said. "Maybe some of my boys do."

"Don't try to call them up," cau-

tioned Vike curtly. "I don't like to be crowded. At this distance I couldn't miss and the first slug would be for you."

Brad Lester looked down at the butt of Vike's gun and let out a long, slow breath. "All right. What's the play?"

"The railroad is too big to deal in personalities. In the end it will smash you, Lester, and I'll be happy to have a hand in that. But in the meantime, if you pull any more dirty tricks that hit directly at me or any of my friends, you'll answer to me, man to man, and to the devil with your bully boys."

Lester rubbed a hand across his heavy lips. "And just who would be your friends?"

"A lot of folks. But men like Jed Keswick in particular. If I thought you had the money on you to make good for the loss you caused him, I'd take it off you right here and now."

"I don't know what you're talking about." A thread of bluster came into Lester's tone.

"You lie in your teeth, but you won't call me for the word," said Vike contemptuously. "Because there's a streak of dirty yellow all through you."

He waited for Lester to take up this challenge, but all the freighter did was drain a glass of whiskey, then stare straight ahead. Vike laughed scornfully, backed away and left the place.

Brad Lester continued to stare straight ahead, but as he motioned the bartender to refill his glass, his eyes were hard and mocking.

VI

Vike Lawrence and Jed Keswick were down at the yards early the next morning. After telling Brad Lester off the night before, Vike had hunted up Slab Turner and explained about Jed. Slab had suggested that Vike get Jed down early so he could get a little coaching on his new job.

"It will be a good day for him to break in on," said Slab. "A light day. I'm scheduled to take the work train out to end of steel and then dead-head back after a couple of cars of ties that are coming in from Hart City later in the day."

Vike had an early breakfast, then went by the little cabin on the north edge of town where Jed and Dee Keswick lived. Jed was just finishing breakfast when Dee opened the door to Vike's knock. She seized the opportunity to say:

"You're being very good to us, Vike Lawrence. It was a heavy jolt to lose our wagon and mules, but maybe it was worth it. Now at least I'll know that Jed isn't fighting Brad Lester on his own. He'll have all you men of the railroad with him if trouble starts."

"We're lucky and glad to get a man like Jed with us," Vike told her. "I know he'll like the work, once he gets the hang of it."

Dee was, thought Vike, a sight to warm a man's heart on a gray, chill morning like this, so neat and trim, her cheeks pinked up from working over the breakfast stove. He looked at her so steadily, with his thought so apparent in his eyes, that the girl flushed and her own glance fell.

Slab Turner was fussing about his beloved Simcoe engine, long-snouted oil can in one hand, a handful of wiping waste in the other. He shook hands with Jed, gave him a keen survey, then dropped an approving nod to Vike. Slab got right to work with his new man and by the time the steel and grade gangs came trooping down from town, to climb up on to the string of flats behind the Simcoe, Jed had absorbed the initial hang of things.

Vike rode the cab with Slab and Jed. He had come to like this trip, out across the high, lonely desert, with a new day coming down across the sage to meet them. The air was clean and cool and vitalizing, pungent with the scent of sage and juniper and a man was lifted up inside with the knowledge that he was part and parcel of construction achievement. Even the lowliest Chinese grade hand, hunkered down back there on the two rear flats, thought Vike, owned that same satisfaction. It was one of the good things in life, perhaps because it was earned with hard, physical toil.

The Simcoe rolled back the miles swiftly, headed into that long, sweet curve that led into the dark mouth of Ten Mile tunnel. Vike tipped his head slightly against the flow of smoke and cinders as the Simcoe plunged into the tunnel mouth. On either hand, rock walls and stout timber shoring slid by, sensed but not seen in the blackness. The sound of the train, of little moment in the wide spaces of the desert outside, here in this close confine was a shattering, grinding roar. And, queerly enough, Vike Lawrence liked that, too. For it spoke of power, man-made and man-controlled.

Vike heard Slab Turner's hard curse at the same moment the Simcoe lurched under the grab of brakes, swiftly set. Leaning out, Vike looked ahead into the rushing blackness. There was a glow out there, a muted, crimson thing, which grew with frightening speed into a solid sheet of flame that filled the entire tunnel ahead and spread along seasoned wooden shoring like flowing water.

It raced to meet the train, driving an acrid breath ahead of it with almost explosive force. And on it was an odor that shot Vike's memory back to the night when the attempt had been made to burn Jed Keswick's wagon. The stench of kerosene.

Impressions were fragmentary at a time like this. A flame-filled tunnel —train and men trapped—no chance to stop rolling tons and back clear of the tunnel and the ravening demon which filled it. The flame was coming too fast, draft-driven from the southern end, sucking in air there—a giant flue—an all-consuming furnace—and nearly a hundred helpless men on those open flatcars behind!

Their cries lifted already, shrill and terrifying even above the thunder of the Simcoe.

The Simcoe lurched ahead. The brakes were off. The engine strained

and vibrated under the drive of a throttle opened wide. And Vike Lawrence understood. Slab Turner, lank, gangling Slab, with his wide grin, his lean cheek always bulged over a mouthful of chewing tobacco, a plain man and an unpretentious one, had thought this thing out with lightning speed, had made his decision, and on it rested the lives of men and the material worth many thousands of dollars. Slab wasn't stopping. He wasn't making the mistake of trying to stop and back away. No time for that. Either course would be fatal. So Slab was going through, wide open!

It was like leaping headlong into the maw of a furnace. Instinctively Vike dropped his head, folded his arms across his face. Then they were into it. Flame licked at them, hungry, crimson claws that reached clear across the cab, from side to side. Vike held his breath, for to breathe one gulp of that raw flame was to die of seared, scorched lungs.

The heat was suddenly ghastly. Vike could feel it strike clear through his clothes and his flesh seemed to dry and shrivel. Nothing of flesh and blood could live long here . . . seconds only . . . no more than seconds. . . .

He was still alive and when his tortured lungs finally forced him to gulp for air, it was clean air, sweet air that he tasted. Slab Turner's hoarse, fury-filled yell, triumphant too, brought Vike's head up, his arms from his face, his stunned eyes looking ahead past the engineer's humped shoulders.

Out there was an open portal, framed daylight, rushing toward them. The southern end of the tunnel! They were through the flames: they were into clear air. Slab Turner, his mind and hand true as the staunch heart of the Simcoe, had brought them through.

But what were those three figures, limned against the light of that beckoning portal? Running figures, frantically racing along the track, trying to get clear of the tunnel before the roaring, racing Simcoe could come up with them.

Slab Turner yelled again, an avenging note in the sound. The racing train covered fifty yards while the figures covered five. It caught them, an agonized stride or two from the end of the tunnel and safety. The Simcoe with its thundering cars was an avenging juggernaut, the substance of the doomed trio nothing at all against its roaring might. There wasn't even a jar as it rolled over them.

VII

He cornered Brad Lester in a rocky gulch, far back in the lonely sage. Lester's horse had given out just before Vike's mount had gone down. They were both afoot and half the length of the gulch lay between them. Brad Lester had a gun, while Vike had no other weapon than his two hands, for he never carried his gun when on the job. Just his two hands, hungry for Brad Lester's throat, and a black, driving ferocity that sent him lurching and scrambling straight at the burly freighter . . .

Vike Lawrence had seen two things when Slab Turner, free at last of the

flame-filled tunnel, brought the train to a halt. He had seen three saddled horses, tethered to a clump of sagebrush beside the open track, horses rearing and plunging in fright. And he had seen still a fourth horse, carrying a bulky rider, fleeing up a ridge side, into the sage. So Vike had leaped from the cab of the Simcoe, swung into the saddle of one of those frightened horses, and set out after that fleeing rider.

Time meant nothing, distance less. Only the cold, driving ferocity of purpose that was in him mattered, white-hot as the flame men had ridden through and lived.

Brad Lester had ridden madly, but Vike had been even more reckless, and Lester's horse had given out first. So here they were, the two of them, in this lonely gulch. And Brad Lester had a gun and was shooting.

Vike could see the gun leap in recoil as Lester cut down on him again and again. Lead whined past Vike's head, gouged the earth at his feet, and was as nothing. For what was mere lead, after that flaming inferno back at Ten Mile tunnel?

Straight on plunged Vike, with Lester, heavy lips peeled back, eyes wide and staring with trapped terror and desperation, only a few short steps away, pulling down for a final shot.

The slug hit, and Vike knew it only because of a distant, faraway blow that shook and staggered him. He gathered himself and plunged on. Brad Lester dropped his gun and tried to drive his way through the matted tangle of sage. It caught him and threw him back. Then Vike had him, had him by the throat. . . .

When Jed Keswick, up on another of those tethered horses, found them a long half hour later, his first thought was that both of them were dead. And Jed's deep gasp of relief was almost a sob when he found a faint, faint pulse, still beating in Vike Lawrence.

There had been a lot of gray shadows, with people moving through them, disembodied ghosts at the fringe of a man's consciousness. Now the shadows were gone and the people were real. Particularly one whose voice was ever gentle and soft, whose hands were ever light and comforting. Dee Keswick.

She was with Vike all the time and it must have been because of that he lived. Later, there were others. Jed Keswick, Slab Turner, Dan Briscoe and Pat Dunn. Even, one day, there was Chris Jensen, the big boss himself. But the one who counted above all else was Dee Keswick, trim, soft-moving—gentle as sunlight.

Came a day when Jed Keswick told him the whole story. They had been able to identify those three fleeing figures that the roaring Simcoe caught at the southern tunnel entrance and wiped out. Al Meade, Lark Haggerty and Gotch Murdock.

"We were plenty lucky," said Jed. "We lost only one man, a poor terrified Chinese grade hand who jumped instead of riding it through. The rest thought fast enough to flatten out on their faces, wrap their arms about their heads and leave it all up to Slab Turner. So they came through,

scorched and singed and blistered, but safely through. We got Meade, Haggerty, Murdock—and Lester. You made plenty sure of Brad Lester, Vike. I had to pry your fingers loose from his throat.

"We've cleaned the tunnel up, put in new shoring," Jed went on. "And the end of steel is less than two miles from Junction, now. Me and Slab and the rest of the boys are figuring on riding you out in state behind the old Simcoe for the celebration that's due when the last rail goes down."

Dee Keswick came in, heard this last. "I'll see about that, Jed Keswick. No one moves Vike unless I say so. Now, run along. Vike has to sleep."

She was fussing over Vike as Jed went out, grinning.

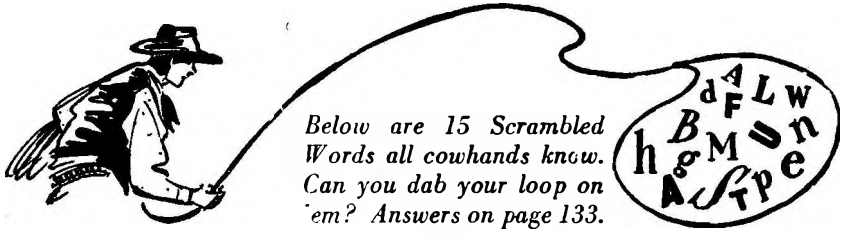
"They had it planned smart," murmured Vike. "Only Slab Turner's nerve and quick thinking changed the picture. If Slab had tried to stop and back up, like they figured he would, the train and all of us would have burned to a crisp. Lester and the other three would have ridden away and there would have been no evidence, no answer as to who and how. But Slab didn't make the mistake they figured he would. He didn't stop. He busted right on through and he caught those three who started the fire before they could get clear of the tunnel. Lark Haggerty and Gotch Murdock—I can understand them being ready to do any kind of dirty work for Brad Lester. But Al Meade! I never figured he'd turn that low, or that he was tied in with Lester, too. But he was. Money, I guess . . . Brad Lester's money . . ."

Soft fingers lay against his lips. "That's all over," Dee told him gently. "There's no profit in thinking of it. Think of other things, better things, if you must think."

"All right, I will," whispered Vike. "Of you."

Dee's gentle smile seemed to fill the whole room with radiance. "Very well. Of me, if you wish it so, Vike."

THE END



Below are 15 Scrambled Words all cowhands know. Can you dab your loop on 'em? Answers on page 133.

1. gumaye
2. thewa
3. snire
4. kefcolt
5. shoreraih
6. vedo
7. tibarb
8. morstnows
9. dokowcreep
10. defil
11. bearcube
12. sterne
13. sumtark
14. thyces
15. shucktob

BUCKAROO BRAGGIN'

By S. Omar Barker

Cowboys may do some braggin'
When they're gathered 'round the wagon.
  For the puncher, don't forget, is human, too:
But of the things he's proud of,
The ones he brags out loud of—
  You mostly find they'll number mighty few.

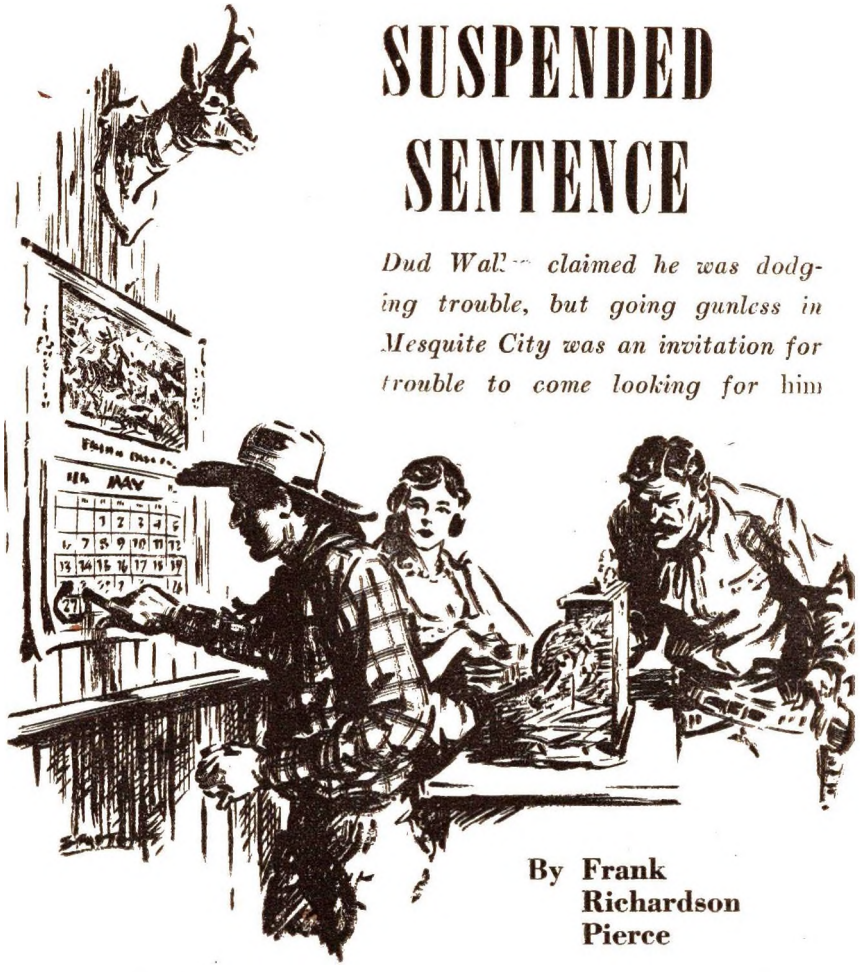
He may boast just a little
Of his skill with pot an' kittle.
  For most all cowpokes savvy how to cook.
He might brag some on his ramblin',
Or claim that in his gamblin'
  He's the kind of guy no tinhorn ever took.

In case he's feelin' cheerful
He may talk a modest earful
  About the many gals he's left behind:
An' maybe, with some giggin',
He may boast about his riggin',
  An' the first-class saddles that his pants have shined.

His pride in his rough callin'
Don't require much caterwaulin'—
  He's the most un-braggin' cuss you'll come across.
But you sure as heck can figger
That no brag is ever bigger
  Than a cowboy's when he's braggin' on his hoss!

SUSPENDED SENTENCE

Dud Wall claimed he was dodging trouble, but going gunless in Mesquite City was an invitation for trouble to come looking for him



By Frank Richardson Pierce

HE rode into Mesquite City around noon—dinner time, we called it—and left his horse at the hitch rail in front of the general store. He loosened the saddle cinch and put a feed bag over the horse's head, then watched it a moment. The horse tossed his head into the air when the flies bothered him too much, and some of the oats spilled onto the ground. It was a hot day, and there wasn't a bird in sight, but a couple came from somewhere and began eating the oats. The stranger watched them with idle interest.

I knew that I had seen his face somewhere. It might have been a newspaper picture, or one of those you see on "Wanted" notices. He wasn't armed, but, although his pants

looked as though they were faded by the sun, the upper part, where a gun belt would fit, still showed the original color. But he didn't look like a gunman. You might take him for a young rancher with a wife and a kid, or a fellow starting a small business in some tough Western town.

Well, Mesquite City was about as tough as they come. Kim Watson ran things his own way. If you wanted to operate a saloon or a little card game, you had to cut Kim in on the deal. He didn't like men who spent only part of their pay in his places. He wanted to see a man wake up dead broke. Then Kim would do his grandstand act—buy the fellow a meal, loan him five bucks and send him on his way with a slap on the back.

This stranger, without guns, didn't belong in Mesquite City where everybody wore them. And I figured he didn't intend staying because he made no attempt to unsaddle his horse or hire a room at the Windsor House, which took care of most of the miners and punchers passing through. Kim Watson owned a piece of the Windsor House, too.

I walked over and said, "Howdy," and he said, "Howdy." He seemed friendly but he didn't mention his name. Jerking his head toward Hank Morton's store, he asked: "Is that the best place in town?" I said it was, and he went in.

He came out with a hunk of cheese, a can of tomatoes and a few crackers. He took out his knife to open the can, apparently intending to start a meal when Mary Banning crossed the street. Mary was dark-haired, with Irish blue eyes, full red lips and the kind of white teeth that made you like to see her smile. She waited table in the Gem Cafe.

The gunless gunman's expression quickened with interest, and something in his eyes that might be called indecision vanished. He put the crackers, cheese and tomato can into a saddlebag, shook the dust from his shirt, then took off his hat and inspected it with a critical eye. Blowing the dust from it, he set it on his head at a confident angle and crossed the street to the Gem.

I got hungry about that time, too. It was partly because I had eaten a light breakfast, but mostly because I wanted to get a line on the stranger. The longer I looked at him, the surer I was that I'd seen him somewhere.

Mary Banning had a friendly way of getting acquainted with new customers.

The stranger smiled right back at her when she introduced herself and said she hoped he'd enjoy his stay. He shook hands and said: "I'm Dud Waller!"

I almost fell off my stool. Dud Waller was a man you didn't take liberties with. Fast on the draw, he had cleaned up several towns where the Kim Watson breed operated. He wasn't a crusader who tried to change frontier habits, he didn't like marked decks, crooked dice, roulette wheels that were fixed and drinks that knocked a man out. When he came across a setup like that, he usually sent word to the top man in town to clean up his games. If that

didn't work he waited until he caught an operator red-handed, then went to work.

Vaguely I remembered a case in the Southwest. Dud Waller had been forced to shoot a tinhorn in self-deense, but the man's sidekicks had the law sewed up. As a result, Waller was tried, found guilty and sentenced to a year in jail.

Mary Banning was interested. "*The* Dud Waller?" she asked in a low voice.

"I'm the only Dud Waller I ever heard of," he answered.

"I guess, then, you must be the only Dud Waller *anyone* ever heard of," said Mary. "What'll it be?"

Waller looked at the bill of fare. "What about a T-bone steak? Are they off of a scrawny range critter, or grain-fed beef?"

"They cover a platter," she answered, "and are laced with fat."

"Fried spuds," Waller continued. "Plenty of side orders of vegetables, and some apple pie if you've got it. I like whipped cream on my pie, Miss Banning, but I'll take my coffee —like my liquor—straight."

"We'll try to make it so good that you'll stay here," Mary said seriously.

"I'm afraid you won't make it that good," he told her. "I'm heading for Mineral Mountain. They claim it's a nice quiet place, where a man can't get into trouble."

"So I've heard," she answered. She gave the order and came back, picking up the conversation where she had left off. "And you're dodging trouble?"

He looked her right in the eye. "Yep!" He grinned. "Sounds funny, doesn't it, coming from Dud Waller? But I've never looked for trouble."

"What *have* you been looking for all these years?" Mary asked, with a mischievous twinkle in her blue eyes.

"Twenty-five isn't so many years," Dud argued. "Besides, I didn't leave home until I was fifteen. Then I worked in a school for bed, board and book learning, as the feller says."

"You haven't answered my question," Mary reminded him. "You've been drifting from place to place. What have you been looking for if it wasn't trouble?"

"I'll tell you, if you don't breathe a word to a soul," he said. "Just between us, I've been looking for a little spread that can be developed into a big one with hard work and a fair amount of luck. And . . . the right girl."

I could see that Mary liked Waller, because she laughed and said: "I'm betting that you'll get both."

There's always a five-center around to keep the number-one man posted on what is happening in a town like Mesquite City. For his dirty work, he gets food, drink, a place to sleep, a few dollars and smiles from the boss.

Deuce Cronk was one of the five-centers who fawned on Kim Watson. A thin-faced, shifty-eyed, ratty sort of man, he slid from the stool as soon as he heard Dud Waller's name. I could imagine Kim Watson's disbelief, then Cronk's whining arguments. I guessed that Watson would

figure Waller was an impostor, then take action. And sure enough Watson came in, alone, as Waller was finishing his steak.

Kim sized him up, noted the absence of guns, then made his usual grandstand play. "Mary, is this man bothering you?" he demanded. "Some of the boys claim he spilled some smart talk when he ordered his meal."

"Why no, Mr. Watson," Mary assured him. "Mr. Waller has acted about the same as all customers act. He asked what I recommended and gave his order."

"I don't believe you're the Waller who's been giving decent people a lot of trouble in the Southwest," Watson said to Dud. "We don't want your breed in this town. Finish your meal and get going."

"Let's see your badge?" It was a question, and Waller looked puzzled. "You must have one. You talk like a town marshal ordering a bum out of town."

Watson grabbed Waller's arm and yanked him off the stool. I saw Waller's fists clinch, and his eyes narrow. Then he shrugged and said: "If that's the way you want it, I guess that's the way it is."

Mary looked disappointed and I felt let down myself. Was the man yellow? Maybe he wasn't even a distant relation of Dud Waller.

"It does seem, though, a man would have the right to finish a meal . . ." he said meekly. But his eyes weren't meek. He seemed to be fighting something inside.

Watson evidently missed it. "You shot off your face, mister," he said.

"Leave him alone, Mr. Watson," Mary said sharply. "We can't have our customers bothered."

"Spunky little devil, aren't you, Mary?" Watson answered. He had made his usual play for the girl and hadn't gotten to first base. From the day she went to work at the Gem, the town had figured Watson would take her under his wing. None of his men had the nerve to make cracks about his lack of progress, but Watson knew what they were thinking and it hurt his pride.

"All right, Mary," he said with assumed reasonableness. "I'll let you keep your customer."

I saw the color surge over Dud Waller's cheeks. They were bronzed cheeks and weathered, but the color showed through just the same. He drew a long breath and crossed the room. There was a big calendar on the wall and near the cash till at the end of the counter stood a bottle of ink. Dud pulled out the cork, dipped his finger into the ink, then made a black ring around the number 27. He went into the washroom, came back drying his hands on his neckerchief and said: "I'm ready for my pie now."

Watson's gaze shifted back and forth from the calendar to Waller's face. He was puzzled. And for once, it seemed to me, he was on the defensive. "What's happening on the twenty-seventh?" he asked brusquely.

"On the twenty-seventh," Waller replied, "something nice is going to happen to me. I'm going to be very happy. I may even buy the boys a few drinks."

Mary's eyes were dancing. Watson shrugged his shoulders and looked Waller up and down. "You're leaving town pronto," he said.

"Maybe so," Waller answered, "but I'll be around the twenty-seventh." He looked at the calendar several seconds, then returned and crossed out the 14. "That's today's date," he explained, "so I might as well cross it off. If I'm not around tomorrow or the next day, I'll cross off the fifteenth and sixteenth when I show up again."

"You're crazy," Watson said. It was the tone of a strong man who is baffled by something and doesn't know what to do about it.

When Watson left, Waller talked to Mary in a low tone, then came over to me. "Mr. Dunlop," he said, "Miss Banning tells me you deal in stock, ranches and mines."

"I guess you'd call me a range real estate dealer," I answered. "First, though, *if* you buy anything around here, what about Watson? It's a big country, but he's a man who needs lots of room. It wouldn't surprise me if he let it be known there isn't room for the two of you in these parts."

"It wouldn't surprise me if I agreed with him, Mr. Dunbar," Dud answered. "Can you show me a small spread with elbow room on four sides?" He smiled, adding: "Funny, an hour ago I hadn't any reason for stopping here longer than it'd take my horse and me to eat. Now I've got a couple of reasons."

He put up his horse in the livery stable, and I hitched up the buckboard and picked him up at the Windsor House where he had got himself a room.

"How much are you ready to spend?" I asked.

"What'll a seven-thousand-dollar down payment get me?" he countered practically.

"Somehow," I answered, "I see you fitting into Slash M."

I could tell by the way Dud examined Slash M that he knew his business. The owner loaned us a couple of saddle horses and we rode over the range. A glance was all Waller needed at the beef cattle to know their worth. He checked on the barbed-wire fence, digging into the ground and cutting into fence posts to determine the rot. He wasn't buying anything that had to be replaced in a year or so.

It was the same with the barns and ranchhouse. He crawled underneath and checked on the foundation timbers. Later he rode along the creek bank, and while he talked about the trout I knew he was figuring on the high and low water marks. He wasn't buying himself a dry ranch if he could help it.

"A man could put a dirt dam across here," he remarked, "build a ditch along the bank and irrigate that stuff down there." He pointed to a dry flat needing only water to make it produce alfalfa.

He did a lot of figuring that night, and the next morning told Buck Mat-

thews, the owner, that his price was ten thousand dollars too high. Matthews came down seven thousand dollars.

But when Waller went out to the barns, Buck took me aside and said, "One of my punchers came in from town last night, Dunbar. He claimed Waller had a run-in with Watson. Waller ain't packin' a gun, and even when a man packs iron, he don't always stay in these parts if Watson don't want him to. I want this sale to stick. I don't want the ranch dumped back into my lap because Watson kills Waller or runs him out of the country."

"I understand that," I told him.

"But what's the answer? What's Waller going to do about that killer who's run this part of the country to suit hisself for five years or more?"

"I don't know the answer," I admitted. "But Waller knows it."

"Mebbe he just thinks he knows it." Matthews grumbled. "I like the cuss, but I'd like him better if he wasn't afraid to wear a brace of six-guns."

"He used to wear 'em," I argued. "You can see the marks of his gun-belt on his pants."

"One way you don't have to settle things with guns in this country is not to wear 'em," Matthews complained. "It's the mark of a yellow man. Sure, I know Waller, if he really is Waller, is rated one of the best. But I've known things to happen to some of the best. They go on for a long time, beatin' the other man to the draw, and preservin' their own lily-white hides. Then some bright day they pick up a lead slug. After that they're gun-shy, you might say."

"My money is on Waller," I said. "Not because I want to make a sale, but because I feel that way about the hombre. He's the best prospect we've had yet for your spread."

"Oh, I'll make the deal," Matthews told me, "but I'd feel better if the cuss wore guns. Say—I just thought of something."

"What?" I asked.

"Shootin' match," he answered. "They claim an old fire horse pullin' a milk wagon can't resist a fire. We'll see what Waller does."

Matthews raided the tin-can pile under the cookhouse window and we started our match. I tossed cans up, and he shot at 'em. Then we reversed the setup. I missed a lot because I couldn't help it. Matthews missed on purpose. It was enough to drive an expert shot crazy. It should have made him want to get in there and show us how it should be done. All Waller did was jam his hands into his pockets—hard. But he had the most baffling expression in his eyes I ever saw.

Matthews tied a can to a string which he suspended from a tree limb. He started the can, which was about belly high from the ground, swinging back and forth. Walking away, he turned, drawing at the same time, and blazed away at the can. He missed. I tried it and missed. Then Matthews whirled and fanned the trigger. He got the can the third shot.

"You'd be deader'n a door nail, if that can was a man," Waller snorted.

"Show us how to do it, then, if

you're so good," the rancher told him.

But Waller had had enough. He made a bee line for the barn, cussing a blue streak.

"He can't stand it to be around guns," Matthews declared. "Pride made him hang around awhile, but his nerves weren't up to it. I'd give a good deal to know what made that cuss gun-shy."

It was midnight when I let Waller off at the hotel. The Gem was open, but Mary was off duty and he didn't stop even for a cup of coffee.

Cronk saw me the next morning and knew that Waller must be back. He loafed around, leaning against store fronts until his man showed up. Then he was suddenly full of business. I could guess what he'd say to Watson: "Waller waited until Mary was on duty, then he went to the Gem for his breakfast. Dunbar followed him in."

Sure enough, Watson showed up just as Mary was bringing in our orders. "Hello, Dunbar," he said. He didn't like me any better than I liked him. But there wasn't much he could do about it. A broken-down rancher, turned real-estate dealer in his late sixties, can't be expected to throw lead from a six-gun's muzzle. "Hello, Waller! Thought I told you to stay out of Mesquite City."

"Yeah. But I had to mark off a couple of dates on the calendar." Dud went over and crossed off the 15 and 16.

The old, baffled expression came into Watson's eyes. "When you going to start wearing guns like a man?" he asked.

"I was told, on pretty high authority, that guns are dangerous," Waller answered. He instinctively tapped his hips, and I noticed his hands stopped exactly where they would have if he had been drawing his guns. A man has to practice reaching for gun butts plenty of times to do it exactly right. Waller did it expertly. I noticed that Watson didn't miss that angle, either. Mary sort of caught on, too. She flashed a look at Watson, warning him not to start trouble.

Waller caught the look and again he got red in the face because a girl was defending him. Watson walked out and Waller finished his meal in silence. Several times he looked up, as if he wanted to say something. Finally Mary asked in a low voice: "What's on your mind, Dud?"

"I was going to ask you to let me take you to the dance Saturday night," he said.

"Why don't you?"

"A man should be able to defend himself and . . . his girl," he answered.

"Why don't you ask me, Dud?" Mary insisted.

"Mary, can I take you to the dance Saturday night?"

"Yes, Dud," she answered. "It's going to be a box social." Her eyes twinkled. "My boxes usually have a blue ribbon tied around them."

"Who gets the money from the boxes?" Dud asked.

"We use it to buy clothes and things for families who are having a run of bad luck," she answered.

"Who usually buys your box?"

"Watson—and the cheap skate gets it for a song because no one will bid against him," Mary said indignantly.

"Blue ribbon, eh? Hm . . . that gives me an idea," Dud said. He leaned over and whispered something to Mary and she laughed.

The dance was on the twentieth. Dud Waller took title to the ranch, subject to a mortgage, on the nineteenth. He had been in and out of town, and his trail and Watson's hadn't crossed. But everyone in Mesquite City knew a showdown was coming. Waller's attitude puzzled everyone. Instead of men asking each other how he was going to handle Watson, they were asking Watson what he was going to do about Waller. I could see Watson change, and some of his confidence seemed to drain. Whenever Waller came into sight, Watson's eyes centered on his middle, as if hoping to see holster and guns.

Waller picked up Mary at her home early Saturday evening. He was wearing his store clothes and was all duded up. There was no doubt of it, he was a handsome cuss. Mary had her box wrapped up in plain paper, and I noticed the other girls brought theirs the same way.

Watson was at the dance, of course. He had had a couple of drinks, but was perfectly sober, and he danced a couple of times with Mary before the auction. There was a tenseness when Old Man Hallock put down his fiddle around midnight and took the outer wrapping off the first box lunch. It was wrapped in white paper, held in place with a criss-cross of blue ribbon.

"How much am I bid?" he asked.

"Five dollars," Waller said.

"Ten!" bellowed Watson. I thought of the boxes he had bought in the past for a dollar, when others had gone for three or four.

"Twenty," yelled Waller.

"Thirty," answered Watson.

"Fifty," Waller said without hesitation. You could hear a pin drop. "Let's get it over with. I raise my own bid to seventy-five dollars."

"A hundred!" Watson offered.

Old Man Hallock looked at Waller. "Let him have it," Dud said.

There was triumph in Watson's eyes. He could have paid a thousand dollars and it wouldn't really have hurt his poke, but I knew that every cent over a dollar had hurt him. As I watched him, his face turned purple, and his hands clenched until you could hear the cardboard crumpling. Old Man Hallock had torn off the outer wrapping of the second box. It was of different shape, but it was also tied with blue ribbon.

Dud Waller bid five dollars, and nobody topped him. After that the bids ran around two or three dollars. The fellows weren't sure who had packed the box because all were tied with the same kind of ribbon.

When opening time came, Waller drew Tessie Smith, and Watson

found himself eating with Clara Moody who hated liquor and gambling and blushed easily. Poke McCoy, the feed man, had bought Mary's box.

When the boxes were emptied and put away, and Hallock was tuning up his fiddle, Watson stalked across the room.

"Waller, that was your work," he said angrily.

"It was for a good cause," Dud answered, by way of admission. "And everybody could afford the price they paid."

"You knew that wasn't Mary's box!" shouted Watson.

"No, I didn't. They were all alike," Dud said. "You could have left me on a limb when I upped it to seventy-five dollars."

Watson moved in swinging, and Dud retreated dodging the blows.

"Where's Steve Jessup?" he yelled.

Jessup is the town marshal. He pushed through the crowd that was gathering. "I'm here, Waller," he said a little contemptuously. "And I suppose it's up to me to take care of you, as long as you can't take care of yourself. Mostly my job's seeing that bums and drunks can't get out of line. Kim, behave yourself. There're ladies present."

Watson turned and left the dance. Dud Waller finished the evening without batting an eye. He had lost a lot of respect, but people were more and more puzzled. He didn't act like a man who was ashamed of his spunk. In fact, he seemed to be having as good a time as anyone.

He took Mary to the Gem for coffee on the way home. Watson was there, putting away ham and eggs.

Dud looked at the calendar, then at the clock. "It's three hours after midnight," he said, then crossed off the 21 and came back to his seat.

"Damn it! Watson exploded. "I've stood enough of this. Waller, I give you twenty-four hours to get out of town. I'll make you run or fight if I have to use a club."

Dud Waller went back to the calendar. "Give me until five o'clock, the afternoon of the twenty-seventh," he said. "I'll be busy at the ranch until then."

You could have heard a pin drop. Everyone was looking at Watson. "Five o'clock, the afternoon of the twenty-seventh," he said.

It was Saturday, the twenty-seventh. Dud Waller rode into town at four o'clock, and Cronk—and nearly everyone else—saw him. Cronk came into Watson's place where I was having a drink. I needed it, because the suspense since noon was more than I could take. Waller and Mary were in love, and I didn't want to see their future smashed by the likes of Watson.

"Kim," Cronk reported, "Waller's here. He put up his horse at the livery, carried a package to the Windsor House, then went over to Herb Nichols' barber shop for a shave and hair cut."

"Good!" Watson said savagely. "That'll save Herb cutting his hair and shaving him after he's dead. Is he wearing his guns?"

"No." Cronk shook his head.

At a quarter of five I needed another drink. I was half through when Dud Waller came in. He was all slicked up and smelled of bay rum.

"At five o'clock, Watson," he said. "I'm drawing a cross over that circle I made around the twenty-seventh. It's a special day and hour. *Then* I'm coming down here and buying the boys a drink. I thought you'd like to know—in case you wanted your barkeep to put a special shine on the back bar glasses."

I crossed the street to the Gem. It was deserted because most people were in buildings where there was less glass to shatter from wild bullets.

At five o'clock Dud came out of the Windsor House. He was wearing his guns! He walked at a normal pace, and his high heels made a steady *thud-thud-thud* on the wooden sidewalks. His eyes were slightly narrowed as he looked down the empty street. They darted quickly toward Mary as he came abreast of the Gem Cafe, and suddenly he turned and came in.

Mary looked frightened but she tried to smile when Dud pushed up her chin.

"I'm going down to Watson's for a drink," he said. "Then I'll be back up. I can eat a steak—and don't forget to have melting butter on the top. And what kind of pie you got?"

Mary couldn't answer.

"I'll eat any old pie," Dud said. Then he kissed her and left.

I risked a look out the window. Watson's batwing doors opened, fanned a moment, then closed. Watson was coming up the street.

Dud Waller's steady pace never changed. I saw Watson's face go gray under the strain, then suddenly he went for his gun and it cracked flatly.

Magically Waller's gun was in his right hand. His left hand rested lightly on the butt of his other weapon. His voice, clear and cool, was heard by everyone in the block.

"You had first chance, Watson, and you missed. You'll miss the second and third shot, too. Then it's my turn."

Watson fired again and I saw dust spurt from the street two hundred feet away. He raised the gun again, but it was shaking in his hand and suddenly he dropped it. He stood there, a sitting duck you might say, waiting for Waller to fire.

"You were right for once in your life, Watson," Dud said. "This country isn't big enough for both of us. You can catch the nine o'clock stage. Dunbar can sell your property for you and send the sale money on to you.

I suppose everyone expected that Waller would take Watson's remaining gun and pick up the one on the sidewalk, but I guess that would have been a sign of weakness. Dud wanted Watson to know he wasn't afraid of him under any conditions. He kept right on going. He turned into Watson's place and I got there in time to hear him say: "The drinks are on me. It's a special day, boys. A year ago a Federal judge sentenced

me to jail for one year. I'd wounded a cuss that had death coming. The sentence was suspended on condition that I keep out of trouble, whether it was my fault or not; also that I not, at any time, wear guns. I've had to take a lot, but the time was up at five o'clock this afternoon."

He had one drink himself and then he said: "Fill 'em up again, bartender, and send the bill to me. I'm good for it. I'll be around here quite awhile yet. Right now, I've got supper waiting for me at the Gem. Coming along with me, Dunbar?"

As we walked slowly up the street, Dud explained things to me. "I wasn't worried, but Mary was," he said. "I couldn't convince her this was a battle of psychology rather than guns. I didn't want to start life here with a killing on my hands—not even if it was someone like Watson. In a way I pulled a gun on him when I circled the twenty-seventh. And I pulled it again every time I crossed off a date. His nerve was just about gone when he faced me today."

"There was nothing the matter with yours," I told him, "letting him have first shot."

"Your hide isn't in much danger, when the other fellow's nerve is gone," Dud answered. "It was Mary who took the real beating. But I'll make it up to her."

He began by taking her into his arms and kissing her, with a dozen customers beaming their approval.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

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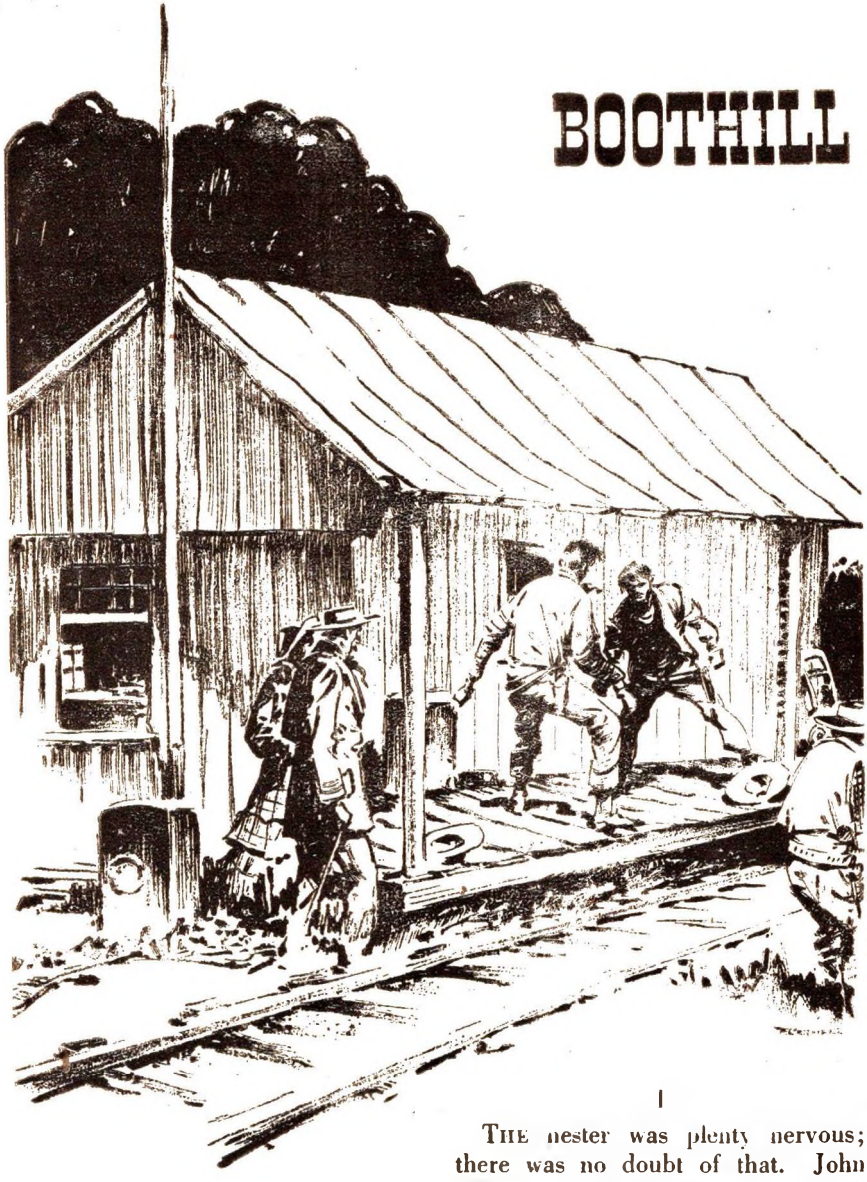
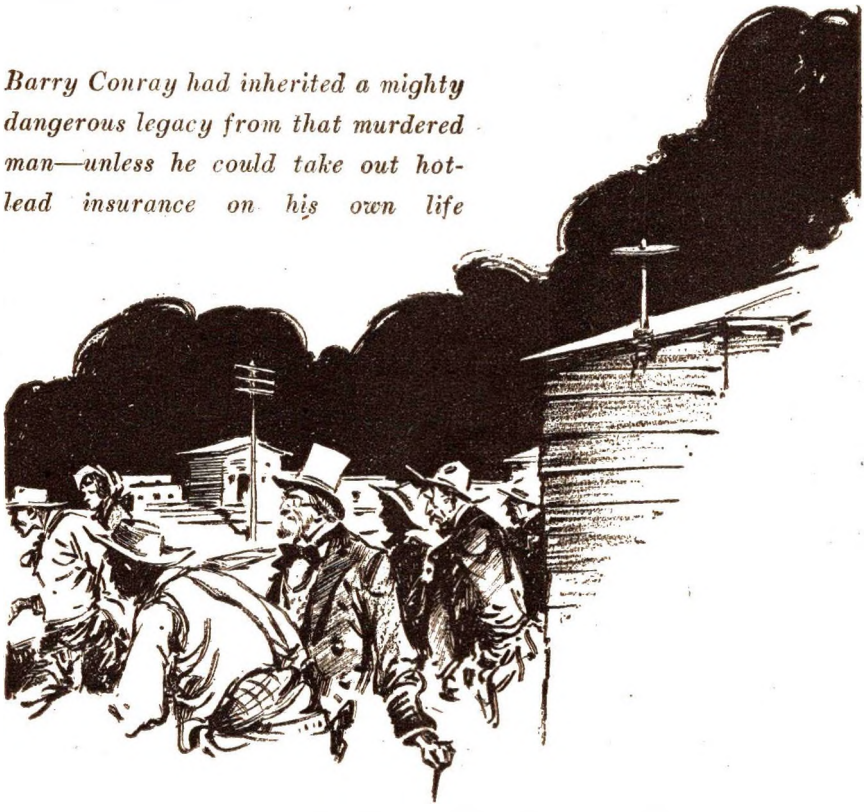


I

THE nester was plenty nervous; there was no doubt of that. John Williams, he'd said his name was. A little man getting along in years, who looked more like a college professor than he did a homesteader.

REWARD

Barry Conray had inherited a mighty dangerous legacy from that murdered man—unless he could take out hot-lead insurance on his own life



By James Shaffer

"The invitation still stands, boys," Williams said with forced heartiness. "If you'll ride to Delray with me, I'll set up the drinks. I've just proved up on my claim and, well, I feel like celebrating a little."

Barry Conray finished tightening his saddle cinch. He had a hunch a celebration wasn't the reason Williams wanted him and Max Ferner to ride to town with him. The nester didn't look like a man who ever touched a drop of liquor. Barry looked over at Ferner, wondering if his partner, too, had sensed the homesteader's strange nervousness.

"Gets rather lonesome, out here all by yourself," Williams went on. "Glad I saw your campfire last night and asked you to spend the night with me."

"And your cooking was plenty good, Mr. Williams," Barry said with that easy grin of his. He and Max had been camped about a mile down the little creek from Williams' cabin the night before. The homesteader had seen their fire and ridden down with an invitation to have supper and spend the night with him. And the nester's hearty welcome had warmed Barry's heart as much as the food had warmed his stomach.

And now the man's nervousness. Barry frowned, remembering small sounds he'd heard during the night. What harm could it do to ride to Delray with Williams?

"You still in a hurry to ride south?" Barry asked Ferner.

"Heck, yeah." Max grunted sourly. "We c'n git a drink of likker anywhere, and Delray's an hour's ride out of our way!"

Barry Conway's face flushed dull red. That was no way to turn down a polite invitation; to fling it back in the man's teeth like an insult. The last few days he'd been getting more and more fed up with his riding partner. He and Ferner had been working for the same outfit up north when they'd gotten the urge to drift, so they'd come south together.

Now Barry grinned to try to wipe out the embarrassment that showed on Williams' face. He shoved a boot in the stirrup and swung into the saddle. He was tall and straight, with all the lithenes of his twenty-two years. His easy-going nature showed in his bronzed face.

"Reckon we're in a hurry, Mr. Williams," he said apologetically. "Maybe we'll be riding this way again some time, and we can repay your kindness."

"C'mon, c'mon." Max Ferner grunted and spurred ahead. Barry waved a final good-by at Williams and rode after Max, taking with him a picture of a forlorn little man watching them leave in dejected silence.

The Williams homestead was right at the base of the rugged San Marlow hills, and it wasn't until Ferner's horse had slowed down on the steep, wooded slope, that Barry caught up with his partner.

"Something was bothering that gent," Barry said, as they pulled their horses to a stop and rolled a smoke. Ferner shrugged his narrow shoulders, his sharp features impassive, as he touched a match to his smoke. Barry twisted in the saddle, but already the thick pines hid the homestead from view.

"Probably in trouble," grunted Ferner. "Never saw a homesteader that wasn't. He probably figured that for the price of a couple meals, we'd do some fighting for him. Me, I want cold cash and plenty of it before I sell my gun."

"I don't sell mine—for any price," Barry said quietly. Then he shook his head. "Williams didn't look like a gent that would trick somebody else into doing his fighting. He just looked scared. And did you hear somebody snooping around outside last night? Thought I did."

"To the devil with 'im," Ferner said. "Let's be moving. We—"

The words broke off suddenly, and both men sat bolt upright. Gunfire! And there was no mistaking from whence it came; the little homestead at the base of the hills. Barry listened tensely, hoping to hear the sound of a shotgun. He knew that was the only weapon Williams possessed. But the shotgun's blare never sounded; only the harsh bellow of six-guns. Barry whirled his mount down trail and raked it with spurs.

"C'mon, maybe we can stop it!"

"Hey, you fool!" Ferner yelled, but Barry paid no heed, and after a moment he heard Max's horse come down the trail behind him.

Barry broke out of the pines at a dead run, and the sight his startled eyes took in sickened him. The neat little cabin was in flames, the fire hungrily lapping at the dried logs. There would be no chance of saving it. Then as Barry drew closer, he saw what he'd expected to see but somehow had been dreading.

A lone, still figure sprawled on the ground a few yards from the cabin.

A cloud of dust raised by hard-running horses was disappearing over a slight rise back of the cabin. Barry raked his mount with spurs and whipped past the little cabin and its still figure, but by the time he'd reached the top of the hill, the riders had reached grassy ground that raised no dust, and were already out of sight. Barry rode back to the burning cabin, as Max Ferner jogged in at an easy lope. Sliding out of the saddle, Barry turned Williams over.

Blood seeped from three or four bullet holes, but somehow the little nester had clung to life. His eyes opened slowly as Barry whipped his vest off and pillowed the man's head.

"Who shot you, Williams?" he asked.

"Goran ordered it . . . Punchy Slager . . . his foreman. My notebook . . . hip pocket . . ."

Barry's eyes were hard as he slid a hand under Williams and drew the dying man's tally book from his hip pocket. Williams groped weakly in his shirt pocket for a pencil.

"You write 'er out," Barry said grimly. "Write out who shot you and sign it and I'll take it in to the sheriff. I'll make sure they hang before I leave Delray."

But Williams shook his head. "More important things . . . my daughter . . . want her to have my homestead . . . and what I found on it. . . ."

Max Ferner had dismounted and was now bending over the man. "What did you find, Williams. And where?"

"Elsie . . . will know what I found. Tell her to look near the place where her horse threw her. . . ." The man fought weakly to get the pencil to the notebook, and Barry marveled at the will power that kept the nester alive with all that lead in him. Williams' eyes glazed for a moment, then he fought back the hovering black wings of death and stared straight at Barry. "Will you . . . promise to see . . . that my daughter . . . gets this place. . . ."

"Sure, sure I will, Mr. Williams," Barry reassured him quickly.

"Then write out . . . bill of sale for homestead . . . to yourself. Turn it over to Elsie when . . . there's no more danger of Goran taking it away from her."

Barry nodded and wrote swiftly on a page of the notebook: "For the sum of one dollar and other consideration, I sell to Barry Conray. . . ." He scribbled it hastily and held it over for Williams to sign. The man roused himself and scrawled his name across the page.

"Elsie will see you are . . . rewarded properly. Clear title to homestead in my shirt pocket. Goran didn't know I had . . . proved up on my homestead."

"What'd you find, Williams?" Max Ferner insisted. "What'd you find and where did you find it? Tell us and we'll show your daughter—"

Williams' head rolled weakly. "No need. Elsie will know. Just see that Goran doesn't get the homestead. . . ." He gasped, and the fingers clutching the notebook and pencil tightened as fresh pain ripped through him. Then he relaxed and lay quiet. Barry reached over and closed his eyes.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" Ferner breathed. "We got us a homestead —and one with something plenty valuable on it!"

"It'll be ours just long enough to turn over to Elsie Williams," Barry said sharply. "You ain't forgetting that, are you, Ferner?"

For a moment Max Ferner's face hardened and his black eyes narrowed quickly. Then he shrugged and laughed.

"Shucks, no." He laughed shakily. "We don't know where to look anyhow, because we don't know where the horse threw Elsie. What I meant," he went on lamely, "is that part about the reward for turning this over to Williams' daughter. Ought to be plenty of reward, huh? I mean, if whatever Williams found was valuable enough for somebody to murder a man for—why, there ought to be plenty in it for us!"

Barry tore the page out of the notebook that was still clutched in Williams' hand. He folded the bill of sale and tucked it away. In Williams' shirt pocket he found the certificate of title the government sends to homesteaders when they prove up on their claims. He put it with the bill of sale.

"I ain't after no reward," he told Ferner. "I feel that if we hadn't been in such a hurry to ride on this morning, Williams would still be alive."

"You ain't holding yourself responsible for his being killed, are you?" Ferner grunted.

"Maybe. Maybe not," replied Barry. "But turning over this homestead to Elsie Williams will just wipe out an obligation I feel like I owe Williams. Help me lift him onto my horse."

Ferner frowned. "Did you ever think how it's gonna look—a couple of strangers riding into town with this dead man?"

"We can't just let him lay here," Barry replied. "And he oughtn't to be buried till the sheriff and coroner see him."

"Let's roll him in that tarp and leave him in the barn," Ferner said quickly. "We c'n send the sheriff and

coroner out. They can look over the scene of the killing and do whatever they want with Williams."

Barry hesitated. He wanted to see the nester get a decent burial. On the other hand, Ferner was right about taking the body to town. And the sheriff and coroner would undoubtedly want to scout around the homestead. If they went straight to town the sheriff and coroner should be back out here in two or three hours. The barn would protect Williams' body from coyotes and other animals for that time. Barry nodded and then, rolling Williams into the canvas, carried his body into the barn.

"I'll be glad when we give this place to that gal and get our reward," Ferner said as they climbed once more into their saddles.

"Me, I'll be glad to see this gent Goran and Punchy Slager get the six feet of boothill that they deserve," Barry answered.

II

Delray didn't impress them. It looked the same as a dozen other small cow towns they'd passed through lately. A wide dusty street flanked on either side by false-fronted buildings; a few people along the streets, and hipshot horses tied along the hitchracks. A dusty sign farther down the street proclaimed the sheriff's office.

"I'll ride down and tell the sheriff about it," Barry told his partner. "Also I'll find out where Elsie Williams is."

"I'll wait for you in that saloon."

Ferner said and reined toward the hitchrack.

But there was no sheriff in the office. Only a sleepy-looking jailer who looked surly at having been awakened.

"When'll the sheriff be back?" Barry persisted.

"How should I know?" the jailer grunted sourly. "If you got anything pressing, take it up with Punchy Slager. He's the deputy when the sheriff's away."

Barry's eyes narrowed. Punchy Slager—the man Williams had named as the killer. A hot itch crawled up Barry's spine to the back of his neck as he digested that bit of information. Things were beginning to shape up, and he didn't like the shape they were taking. A sheriff away on a trip with no one knowing when he would return. A nester murdered, murmuring the name of the deputy sheriff as his killer.

"You want me to git Punchy for you?" demanded the jailer.

"Never mind, I'll wait and see the sheriff," Barry told him.

"Whyn't you see Punchy?" the man demanded suspiciously. "He's the deputy. He c'n handle things just as good as Sheriff Warren."

"I'll bet he can, at that," Barry said quietly and walked out. He stood for a moment on the sidewalk, debating his next move, then moved up the

street toward the hotel. He'd gone only a few feet when he heard the door of the sheriff's office slam shut. He shot a glance over his shoulder. The jailer was hurrying across the street, darting quick glances at Barry's back.

The hot itch on the back of Barry's neck increased, and his hand subconsciously loosened his holstered gun as he mounted the hotel steps. The clerk eyed him listlessly, taking his time about pushing the worn register over. Barry scrawled his own and Max's name on the line and the clerk turned lazily to the keys hanging back on the desk.

"Like a little information," Barry told him.

The clerk tossed the key over. "Shoot," he said. "I know everything there is to know about these parts."

"Then where'll I find a girl by the name of Elsie Williams?"

The listlessness dropped from the clerk instantly. For a moment there was a flash of wariness in his eyes, then his old manner returned, and he shrugged.

"Don't believe I know the lady," he said with elaborate casualness.

"Think again," Barry told him, an edge in his voice. "Her dad has a homestead down near the San Marlow hills." He paused a moment, then his hand dropped to the hickory handle of his six-gun. "Your memory need jogging?"

"Nope," the clerk replied promptly, "it don't. Miss Elsie Williams teaches school in Ravenswood. That's thirty miles west of here. The next station on the railroad. She's about twenty years old, and she's durned pretty. She ain't married and— Is that enough?"

"That's enough," Barry said and started moving toward the door.

"Are you a friend of John Williams, the nester?" the clerk called after him.

Barry turned and regarded the man for a moment. "I might be," he said tonelessly.

"In that case"—the clerk's voice was brisk—"I'll have to ask you to pay for your room in advance."

"But if I was a friend of Goran's," asked Barry quietly, "would the same rule hold?"

"One dollar fifty—in advance," the clerk insisted, and Barry paid it with a grim smile tugging at his lips. Out on the street again, he let his eyes rove up and down until they settled on two men across the street. One of the men was the jailer. His companion, short and heavy-set, rubbed a day's stubble of beard with a thick hand as he studied Barry insolently.

Barry shrugged and started up the street toward the railroad station. He'd gone about a hundred yards up the street when a fleeting glance over his shoulder showed the thick-set gent walking toward the hotel. Barry loosened his gun again, and the hot, itchy feeling was still with him.

"Miss Elsie Williams?" the station agent's pencil wavered as Barry gave him the name.

"That's right. Miss Elsie Williams, Ravenswood. And the message is: 'Come at once. Very urgent.' And sign my name. Barry Conray."

The agent still hesitated. Shoving

his green eyeshade up, he wiped perspiration from his forehead. He shot a quick glance through the dusty window and up the street.

"You got any reason to be sending that telegram?" he asked. "I mean, it sounds sort o' bad. It's liable to upset Miss Williams. I mean, if you got good reason—"

"I have," Barry said quietly. "Six good reasons. You can count 'em yourself." He lifted his gun free and let the muzzle of it come to rest a few inches from the agent's face. "I don't know why people in this town are reluctant to do anything when they hear the name of Williams," he grated. "But I don't like the idea. Start sending."

The agent looked at the gun and turned to his key. He clicked it a few times and waited. Then he tried again to raise the agent at the other end. Barry shoved his gun in leather, but he kept his hand on it, and he shot worried glances down the street. He wished he'd taken time to pick up Max. He was beginning to feel mighty lonesome in this town of Delray.

He loosed a sigh of relief when the key clattered back an answer, and the agent picked up the message. He waited until the chatter of the key was stilled, then asked the agent:

"What's the first train she can catch coming this way?"

"Not before nine o'clock tonight," the man answered. "She just missed the morning train. She'll leave Ravenswood at nine tonight and get in here about ten-thirty." He stopped and cocked his head sideways, listening, as boots thumped heavily on the wooden platform of the station.

Barry turned and stepped outside, and almost collided with the short, chunky man he'd seen talking to the jailer.

"You the hombre that's been asking a lot of questions about Elsie Williams?" the man blurted without preamble. His thumbs were hooked in his gunbelt and his head shoved forward like a bull ready to charge. And then without waiting for Barry to reply, he turned to the station agent who had come to the doorway.

"What'd this hombre want down here, Al?"

"That's none of your business, friend," Barry cut in smoothly before the agent could reply.

He heard the quick gasps from three or four men that had followed the chunky man to the station, and a couple of men moved quietly, but quickly behind him. Barry shot the small crowd a glance and got a little comfort out of the fact that they didn't seem to be the chunky man's friends. Only curious onlookers.

His eyes shifted instantly back to the man facing him. The chunky man's face was dull red with anger, and his big hands were tensing toward the six-gun on his hip.

"Lippy young squirt, ain't ya?" The man's eyes narrowed, watching Barry's every reaction. And Barry's reaction didn't suit him at all, from the way he looked.

Barry laughed. "Lippy as the devil," he agreed. "A friend once told me a neat trick. When you're getting ready to shoot a man in the guts, talk to him. Get him riled—get his attention off his draw. Ten to one, you'll find it'll slow him up."

"A neat trick, all right," the chunky man said, with a cold grin. "But I don't fall for it." He jerked his head at the station agent. "Alf, what did this fellow want with you?"

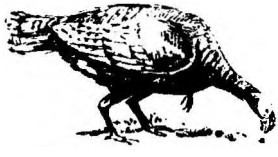
The station agent opened his mouth, but Barry cut in again, speaking to the man he faced. "Did anybody ever tell you that you look like a hawg getting ready to root?"

The man gurgled a curse. His hand dropped to his gun, half jerked it out of leather. And then he saw that he'd been tricked. Barry's gun was already clearing leather; was already lifting. With a hoarse cry, the man loosed his gun and stumbled backwards, his empty hands spread in front of him.

"Thought you knew about that trick," Barry laughed. He waited a moment, then slowly holstered his gun. The chunky man's eyes never left his gun hand, and the moment Barry released the gun butt, the man charged.

The unexpected rush caught Barry flat-footed. The man's shoulder hit him in the chest and the two of them went flying backwards and smashed into the side of the station. The dull shock of the blow drove the breath from Barry, and he felt the strength run out of his arms.

He saw his opponent draw away a few inches, then drive forward again. his thick arms flailing like pistons.



Gasping, Barry gathered the strength to fling himself sideways as the man charged. One fist caught Barry a glancing blow in the side as he fell away; then he heard the man's sharp yelp of pain as he struck the station wall. But the man was tough. He bounced back from the wall as if he'd been a rubber ball, whirled and drove viciously at Barry again.

The breath was back in Barry now, and strength was seeping back into his body. He side-stepped the man's rush, and flicked a light blow to his eye. The man snorted, shook his head and charged again.

It wasn't a noisy fight. They battled each other with grim, silent savagery, and there were no cheers or yells from the onlookers. Barry got his breath back. He side-stepped again and drove a punishing left into his opponent's stomach.

It stopped the charge, and Barry drove his right with a bone-jarring jolt into the man's face. The man began to give ground, and Barry moved in on him with relentless purpose.

There was no science to Barry's fighting now; no feinting, no more fancy footwork. The need for that was over. He drove forward steadily, swinging short deadly blows at the man, and throwing his whole weight behind each fist.

Slowly but surely, Barry beat the man back against the station, pinned him there with short jabbing blows when he tried to break away, and he continued to pump his fists into the man's body and face.

Then, suddenly, it was over. The chunky man's knees buckled and he

sagged forward, limp and helpless. Barry stepped back. The man went to his knees, and for a moment, his head lolled from side to side. After a moment, he lifted his battered face. His chopped-up lips moved painfully.

"No man does that to me in my town and lives," he muttered.

"Then maybe this isn't your town any more," Barry said between great breaths of air. He picked up his hat and started back up the street. The small crowd opened silently to let him through, then turned and stared at the beaten man on the platform.

III

The hotel clerk stared with mouth agape as Barry swung through the lobby and went up the stairs. Unlocking his door, Barry closed it carefully and washed the marks of the fight off his face in the washbowl. Then he flung himself on the bed to catch his breath, but almost immediately steps came hurrying up the hall. Barry had his gun trained on the door as Ferner came inside.

His riding partner was excited. He mopped his face with a dirty red bandana and flopped in the rickety chair by the window.

"I sure been finding out things since I left you!" he blurted.

"So've I," Barry grunted, swinging his feet over the edge of the bed. "What did you find out?"

"That we're a couple of suckers!" blared Ferner. "Know what that old fool Williams found on his place?" he went on disgustedly. "Nitrate!" He spat the word out. "Not gold, nor silver, nor copper—but a stinking fertilizer!"

Barry shrugged. "There's plenty of money in nitrate."

"Not for us, there ain't," Ferner declared hotly. "It'll take months before that gal can develop that nitrate deposit and pay us our reward."

"That reward sure sticks in your craw, don't it?" Barry said coldly. "Why don't you forget it? All we're doing is carrying out a dying man's wish. That's the least we can do for an hombre that was decent to us, ain't it? To see that his daughter gets what rightfully belongs to her."

"I see you ain't found out much about this town," Ferner said, half-jeeringly.

"I found out enough," grunted Barry. "And I still aim to do what I promised Williams I'd do."

"You just try it and you'll get the same thing Williams got," Ferner said darkly. "Come here." He pointed down to the street. "See that big man down there with the black hat? That's Hack Goran."

Barry nodded, unimpressed. "The gent that had Williams killed. We'll stick around town until he's hung for that killing."

Ferner laughed sarcastically. "You poor pilgrim!" he snorted. "The law can't touch Hack Goran. He *makes* the law in this town. Owns the Bar G spread and has a dozen gunslingers on his payroll. Why, everybody in town is talking about how crazy Williams is—or was—for trying to buck Goran. They're sayin' Williams as good as signed his death warrant when he turned down

Goran's offer for his homestead. Me, I'm riding out of town right now."

"Ain't you forgetting our promise to Williams?" Barry asked. "What'll we do with this title—and the bill of sale?"

"Shucks!" Ferner said disgustedly. "Mail it to the girl."

Barry shook his head stubbornly. "That wasn't our promise. We promised Williams we wouldn't turn it over to her till we were sure that Goran couldn't take it away from her. And that means getting this title registered at the county seat."

"You poor idjit!" snorted Ferner. "If we don't git out of town now, we never will. Goran's sent out to his spread for his gunnies. They'll be here in an hour or so. And lookee here!" He pointed out the window. "See that chunky gent talking to Goran? He's a killer—"

"Yeah, I know," Barry finished for him. "He's Punchy Slager, Goran's foreman."

"Well, you did find out a few things, eh?" said Ferner.

"Yeah," Barry answered quietly. "I found out, for instance, that I can beat the stuffing out of Punchy Slager with my fists."

"Great Godfrey!" Ferner gasped. "The fellow that beat him up—was that *you!*"

Ten minutes later, Ferner ground his cigarette out with his heel and started rolling another one.

"Barry," he argued, "we're wasting time talking. Let's be on our way. We can ease out of town fast before Goran's men get here. We can ride out by a side street before they know we're leaving."

Barry started to shake his head again, then changed his mind. "Max, maybe you got something after all. By gosh, I hadn't thought of that!"

"Hadn't thought of it!" Max yelled derisively. "What've I been talking about the last hour?"

"I mean this—what a sap I've been!—we got time to ride to Ravenswood and get there before Elsie Williams' train pulls out. Or if we don't make it in time, we can flag the train. We'll get the girl off the train, ride with her to the county seat and see that the property is put in her name. Then we can stick around with her till she sells that nitrate stuff to some fertilizer company. After that—"

"We git the reward old man Williams blabbed about and ride on again—let's go!" Ferner said enthusiastically.

Barry was glad their horses were in the livery. It made things a lot simpler. They debated a minute about leaving the hotel through the lobby, and then Barry remembered that Punchy Slager must have gotten some information from the hotel clerk.

"We'll go down the back fire escape," he decided, "and keep it as quiet as possible."

It wasn't possible to keep it very quiet. The back fire escape was rickety and wobbly, but they took it easy, and a couple of minutes later dropped lightly to the ground. They waited a minute for some reaction from the hotel, but there was none, so they walked rapidly toward the livery stable at the far end of town.

They had to cross a side street to get to the livery, and before crossing it they took a good look up the main street.

"No sign of Goran or Slager either," Barry breathed.

"I passed right close to Goran going to the hotel," said Ferner. "I think he's still wondering what it's all about, and just how much we know. If we pull out right now, we'll be gone before he makes up his mind to act."

"Let's go," Barry said, and they sauntered casually across the street, and into the door of the livery. "Think we made it?" he asked as they stepped into the cool duskiness of the stable.

"Nobody paid any attention to us," Ferner said in a relieved tone. The liveryman was walking up now. He looked a little surprised and curious to see them, but nodded wordlessly when they told him they wanted their horses.

Barry went into the stall and threw the saddle on his mount. Over his shoulder he spoke to the liveryman.

"Where'd be a good place to flag the train coming from Ravenswood?" he asked.

"Rock Springs, about twelve miles down the line," answered the man. "Train usually stops there to take on more firewood, anyhow."

"Anybody much around Rock Springs?" Barry persisted.

"Nothing but a pile of firewood," the liveryman answered shortly, still showing no concern about the questions.

Nor did he seem to think it strange that they led their horses toward the rear of the livery, to leave by the back door, instead of riding out the front.

"We done it," Ferner said fervently, as they stepped into the sunlight out the back door and prepared to mount. "And it's the only sensible thing we've done today—leaving town."

"Then you're not as sensible as you think," a cool, chill voice spoke behind them. They whirled, hands dropping to their guns; only to pull slowly away. Two gaping gun muzzles were trained on them.

Punchy Slager's battered face was a bloody mask of rage behind his cocked six-shooter. He had eyes only for Barry; and the young rider could see the killer working himself up to the pitch to pull the trigger. The hot, itchy feeling crawled along Barry's neck. At this range, Punchy couldn't miss—

"Hold it, you fool!" Goran spoke sharply to his foreman. For the first time, Barry took a good look at the man. Goran's face could have been carved out of granite for all the expression it had. Square and blocky, and set in the stern lines caused by ruthless ambition and not enough laughter. His eyes, black and unblinking, seemed to Barry to have the set, cold expression of a snake.

"What the devil!" Punchy growled. "Let's git it over with. I told this punk nobody could slug me in this town and get away with it."

"We'll do this my way," Goran said with quiet brittleness. "If you hadn't been in such a hurry this morning, and given these two time to get clean

away from Williams' place, we wouldn't have them on our hands now."

"Just give us the chance, and you won't have us on your hands long," Max Ferner said. "Turn us loose and we'll be a hunnert miles from here by sundown."

"You should have thought of that before you poked your nose into something that didn't concern you," Goran said sarcastically. "Now I don't reckon you'll be leaving Delray at all—ever."

"Then let's get it over with," Punchy Slager said quickly, and Barry, hanging onto every word, thought he sensed some nervousness in Punchy's quick plea. "Hang it, we can think up some story. I'm a deputy, remember."

"My way, I said!" Goran snapped.

Barry could hear Ferner's heavy, rasping breathing alongside of him. He felt hot and itchy all over, and the palms of his hands were moist and sweaty. But he forced a grin, and then a chuckle. And then he took a long shot in the dark.

"Yeah, your way, Goran," he said with a laugh. "Play it safe. Don't do anything rash—because this town is getting pretty fed up with your high-handed way of doing things!"

He was watching Goran intently, and for one fleeting instant, he saw the man's guard drop, and saw his expression change. A mere flash of worry and concern in Goran's eyes; then the man's iron will had smothered that moment of weakness. But it had been enough. Barry breathed easier. He felt as if he'd had a peep at Goran's hole card.

"Yeah," Barry went on. "This town won't stand for cold-blooded murder. That's a little too raw. You've worried how the town is going to take John Williams' killing. Delray might not like it a little bit. And you're not sure how much we know about it—and who we've told—"

But Goran's moment of weakness had passed. He had a grip on himself now and he wasn't being bluffed any more.

"You're right," he said coolly. "Delray might get riled up if we killed you outright, so we're going to let Delray kill you itself. For the murder of John Williams!"

Max Ferner choked as he sucked his breath in sharply. Punchy Slager grinned and the truculent look left his face for the first time.

"Neat trick if you can do it," Barry commented.

"Shut up, damn it, shut up!" Ferner almost sobbed.

"But John Williams' body hasn't even been discovered yet," Barry went on lightly. It was a lightness he didn't feel.

"I've arranged for that," Goran told him. "And the fact that you two were in town asking a lot of questions about Elsie Williams . . . I think," he added with a dry smile, "we can swing it."

He cocked his head to one side, listening. A buckboard was rattling

into Delray, and a man was shouting excitedly. Other men were taking up the yelling, and Barry could hear the wave of excitement running through the town.

Goran smiled. "That's it, you two. They're bringing in Williams' body. And, Punchy—you and I are bringing in his killers! Let's go."

Barry felt Punchy's gun prod him in the back. Ferner was cursing in his rage and fear, as the four of them walked around the livery and started up the street.

IV

There was a sizable crowd gathered in front of the sheriff's office. A buckboard wagon which was pulled up there was holding the strained attention of the crowd. Somebody saw the little cavalcade moving up the street, and the excited babbling died down to a dead silence as they approached.

"Is that John Williams' body?" Punchy Slager asked brusquely, as the crowd opened a lane for them.

Barry's heart leaped with sudden joy at that, and he could hear Goran curse with rage under his breath. A man in faded overalls and the flat-heeled boots of a homesteader spoke up coldly:

"Were you expecting Williams' body to be brought in, Slager?"

Slager grunted and started mumbling some reply, realizing too late that his eagerness had almost given him away. It was Goran, cool, arrogant and confident who smoothed the bad break.

"As a matter of fact, we were," he said calmly. "One of my men rode past Williams' place last night. These two men were spending the night with him. And this morning another rider saw smoke over toward Williams' homestead. I sent a man over to investigate, but it looks like some one got there before he did."

"You ain't proved nothing yet, Goran," the homesteader said grimly. "Just spouted a lot of words. Why would these hombres kill Williams?"

"They wanted what poor old John had found on his homestead—the stuff we all know he'd been looking for," Goran went on. "Nitrate. These two bums saw a chance to make some easy money."

The homesteader didn't give an inch. "I ain't convinced yet," he said.

"To blazes with whether you're convinced or not!" Punchy Slager broke in savagely. "I'm deputy while the sheriff's away, and I'm locking these two up for trial." He waved his gun at the crowd. "And I'd like to see somebody try to stop a law officer from doing his duty!"

"Just a minute, Punchy," Goran broke in easily. He turned to the nester. "Just what point are you in doubt about these men not killing Williams?"

The homesteader's eyes narrowed. He looked around at the crowd and read their backing of him. "Why would these two try and get aholt of Williams' daughter, if they'd killed the old man?"

"Yeah," Max Ferner broke in desperately. "That don't make sense, boys."

"It doesn't, until you know the

facts," Goran agreed. "And the facts are that they wanted to kill Elsie Williams, too—knowing she was Williams' natural heir. So they sent a wire to the girl to catch the next train to Delray. And they planned to take her off that train and do away with her. Because they asked the liveryman where was the best place to flag the train!"

There was a dead, ominous silence after that. The gathered men stared at Goran a moment, then at the two prisoners, and finally at the grim, tarpaulin-wrapped burden on the buckboard wagon. Barry could sense the change in the crowd. The homesteader who had so stubbornly stood up to Goran scratched his chin in deep thought, flicking suspicious glances at Barry and Max. In the space of four seconds the whole temper of the crowd had changed.

"Any more objections?" Punchy Slager asked sarcastically, throwing an arrogant glance around at the little crowd. "Some of you men take Williams over to the undertaker's. And you two—git in that jailhouse!"

Two men lifted John Williams' body from the buckboard wagon. As they did so, the tarpaulin fell open and exposed their grim burden.

"Old John died game," somebody murmured. "Look—a notebook in one hand and a pencil in the other. Seems like he was trying to write down who killed him!"

"What's that?" Goran asked sharply. He stepped over and stared at the body of the nester. Then he reached down and slowly disengaged the notebook from the dead man's hand.

"A leaf tore out," somebody said. "I shore would like to know what Williams wrote on that leaf."

Punchy Slager had stopped at the mention of the notebook. Now he stared stupidly as his boss lifted the little book, the muzzle of his gun sagging downward. Max Ferner nudged Barry, his eyes giving an urgent message. Slager's gun was in easy reach of Barry and it was held loosely in the man's fingers.

But Barry ignored Max's imploring look. His eyes were shifting quickly from Goran to Punchy Slager, and he read the indecision on their features. He read the unbelief on Slager's face as the realization came over the men that Williams had lived long enough to write something.

And Goran. He flicked a look of pure hatred at the deputy for his stupidity in leaving Williams alive. Then the look changed to one of crafty caution as he realized the danger caused by that missing sheet from the notebook.

Barry thought of telling about the missing sheet, of explaining to the crowd just what had happened the last few minutes that John Williams had lived. Then he put the thought aside. Goran's crafty words had turned the crowd against him and Max for the moment. It would be dangerous to bring out those papers Williams had given them, right at this moment.

"I reckon when we find that missing page," the homesteader said flatly, "we'll know just what did hap-

pen at Williams' place this morning. Reckon that'll prove who done it."

"Yeah," Goran said absently. His eyes were boring into Barry's. "Yeah, I reckon it will." His eyes flicked from Barry over to Max Ferner and back again to Barry.

Barry forced a grin, a lopsided, but confident grin. "That sheet might not be found for a year or two," Barry said grinningly, "but it could still hang a man—no matter when it was found," he added, looking straight at Goran, and still grinning widely.

Goran's glance shuttled from Barry to Max Ferner and then back again. "It sure could," he said slowly. "It'll sure hang the guilty man." He paused and glanced at Max Ferner. "Why, I'd give five hundred dollars just to find that sheet of paper," he added slowly.

"Enough of this palaver," Punchy grunted. "Inside, you two." He prodded them into the sheriff's office, and on back into separate cells. Barry heard the crowd slowly disperse outside, still talking of the tragedy and the missing notebook sheet.

"What in blazes are we gonna do now?" Max asked in a low voice through the little grill that separated the cells. "Say, let's give 'em those papers. They'll clear us!"

"They would've cleared us," Barry said mournfully. "If we'd brought 'em out right at first. But after Goran got through with that crowd, showing those papers now would hang us!"

"I don't see why?" Max grunted. "Remember I wrote out that bill of sale. Williams just signed it, and he was going fast when he done it. It was a pretty blotchy signature he put on that paper, like a man who's holding the pencil with somebody else guiding his hand! Nope, we better sit tight—"

He broke off as the front door opened and they could hear Goran talking to Punchy. From the tone of Goran's voice, he wasn't any too pleased with the deputy bungling the job and leaving Williams alive long enough to write something. Punchy muttered his excuses until Goran cut him short. Then the rancher came down the corridor.

"Strip to the skin—both of you!" he ordered curtly. "Hand your clothes out to me. I'll search 'em."

"We're sunk now," Max grunted.

"Sunk nothing!" Barry said flippantly. He laughed at Goran. "Kind o' worried, ain't you? You're gonna be more worried when you find we ain't got the paper."

"Huh?" Max ejaculated.

"Keep a tight lip, Max!" Barry called. "Don't let Goran know anything one way or the other." He turned back to the rancher. "Maybe we got the paper—and maybe we ain't," he jeered. "Maybe we had it and passed it on to the right person to keep for us; maybe we put it in the mail. We could've done a lot of things with it. And then"—he added

slyly—"maybe we never had it in the first place. Here's my pants, Goran —you won't find anything in 'em but patches."

Five minutes later Goran flung their clothes back in the cells. The rancher and Slager stood in the corridor, glaring at the two prisoners. Barry chuckled at Ferner's bewildered face, as he started pulling his clothes back on. Then he looked at Goran and laughed.

"Kind of a stalemate, ain't it, Goran? You're afraid to turn us loose—afraid we'll go get those papers. And you're afraid not to turn us loose, 'cause you're afraid that we won't go get them and that maybe somebody else already has them."

"A lot of men have tried to buck me," Goran said quietly. "A lot of men have thought they had me licked. They've all been wrong. Turn 'em loose, Punchy."

"Huh?" Punchy gasped, but Goran didn't reply. He'd turned and was now stalking toward the front door.

"You heard 'im, Punchy," Barry laughed. "Stick that rusty key in that lock and turn us loose. We got your boss up a stump. I wouldn't get too gay with that gun you're drawing. Remember you've already botched up things once today!"

Slager hesitated with his gun half drawn; then he let it slide back into leather. He shoved the key in the lock and turned it quickly.

"You're out of jail, but you're a mighty long ways from being out of town yet—don't forget that," he said.

Barry laughed as he and Max headed for the street. They paused long enough to pick up their guns, then stepped outside.

"How can you laugh at a time like this?" Max grunted.

Barry looked at him soberly. "It ain't that I feel like laughing," he said quietly, "but I noticed that it worries Goran and Slager plenty. They think that because I'm so happy I got the deadwood on 'em."

"If they only knew how wrong they was," Ferner snapped.

"Oh, I don't know . . ."

"Jest a minute, you two!"

They slowed down and turned around. The nester who had stood up to Goran, was facing them, flanked by two grim-faced men. All three carried shotguns.

"It's all right," Barry told him quickly. "Slager turned us loose. Lack of evidence."

The homesteader thought that over, but the suspicion Goran had planted in his mind about the two strangers was too deep-rooted.

"There's something going on here," he said grimly. "More than meets the eye. And I think it's between you and Goran. He had good reason to turn you loose, so I ain't trusting you." He waved a hand toward the street. "Williams had a lot of friends. Most of 'em are in town and they're gonna stay here till we find out who killed him." He waggled the shotgun meaningly. "It won't be healthy for you to try to leave town. See?"

The three homesteaders turned and walked off. Barry and Max

watched their backs in silence. Then Max broke out with bitter cursing.

"Now we're in it—right in the middle!" he swore. "And it's all your fault. If I hadn't listened to you, I'd been twenty miles from this town by now—and still going!"

"Shucks!" Barry retorted. "You was just as anxious to come to town and find that girl as I was. You had your eye on that reward Williams talked about. It was only after the going got tough that you wanted to back out!"

Ferner grunted, and Barry went on in a lighter tone.

"Why, we're sitting pretty now, Max. Look, the whole town is watching Goran now, so he can't make a crooked move at all. All we got to do is wait for that girl to get here — and she'll get here, all right. Goran'll be afraid to try to stop her. Then we just turn the papers over to her, tell what Williams told us before he died and . . ."

"Stop a couple of hot slugs in the back from Slager's and Goran's guns," Ferner finished bitterly.

"Oh, no. After all, the whole town'll be watching. Goran knows he's licked, that he can't make a crooked move now. Betcha what—Goran'll pull out of town before that girl gets here."

"No bet," Ferner snapped. "And suppose he does. We still don't get no reward. We've risked our necks for nothing, and we ain't out of the woods yet!" He paused and looked at Barry sharply. "Another thing—where the devil are those papers? Goran didn't find 'em when he searched you at the jail."

Barry laughed. "They're safe, don't worry. I'll have 'em back on me the next time you see me. Right now I'm going down and see that our horses are taken care of."

Ferner shrugged. "Think I'll go over and have a drink."

V

Barry walked down to the livery and found their horses still saddled. He told the liveryman he would unsaddle them himself, and led them to their stalls. Two nesters across the street kept watching him closely to see that he didn't try to make a run for it. But Barry merely led the horses back into the livery.

Once inside, he dug quickly into the bedroll tied behind his saddle and drew out the papers. He breathed a sigh of relief as they disappeared into his boot, and he silently thanked the itchy spot on the back of his neck that had warned him of danger when he and Max had tried to ride out of town. It had been that sixth sense that had suddenly inspired him to take the papers out of his pocket and hide them in the bedroll. He unsaddled both mounts and then went back to the hotel.

Delray was an armed camp. One by one, a bunch of tough-looking cowhands had drifted into town and were now idling along the sidewalks. Their tenseness, their hands hovering over their gun butts gave them away and stamped them as Goran's riders.

On the other hand, men in worn overalls and flat-heeled shoes were stalking the streets, too. Home-

steaders. Friends of John Williams. The sight of either group made Barry nervous, and he hurried straight to the hotel. He found a week-old newspaper and settled down in a chair to pass the time. . . .

It was near supper time when Max came back. He stepped quickly inside and shut the door with a slam.

"Everybody in town's packing a gun. Things are about ready to pop loose," he said, wiping his forehead with his shirt sleeve. His eyes had that bright look that Barry knew was caused by a dozen or so drinks. He stared at Max over the top of the newspaper. So far as he knew, Max had had only the price of a couple of drinks on him.

"Let 'er pop," Barry grunted, rattling the newspaper.

"Both sides'll be shooting at us," Ferner said shakily. He walked jerkily to the window and looked out. "Getting dark, but it gets dark late this time of year. That train'll be in before very long."

"That's when she'll start popping, if she's gonna pop," Barry said lightly.

Ferner wiped the sweat off his brow again. "You got the papers all safe and sound, ain't you?" His voice sounded queer and strained.

"Sure have. All safe and sound—"

Ferner's right arm jerked crazily. His gun cleared leather awkwardly, but yet with quite a bit of speed. It leveled on the newspaper that Barry was holding up to read.

"Then I'll take 'em!" Ferner blurted. There was an oily click as he rolled the hammer back.

Barry sat motionless for a moment, the newspaper still in his hands. Then he lowered it just enough to look over the edge.

"Goran?" he asked softly.

"Damn right Goran!" snarled Ferner. "I asked him if he was kidding about that five hundred and he said no. Said he'd pay it to me if I brought him both those papers. So I want 'em, Barry."

"That'll sort o' leave me holding the bag, won't it?" Barry asked quietly.

"You should've thought of that before," Ferner rasped. "I kept telling you we should've pulled out, but you wouldn't do it. So I saw a chance to make some dough. It's just your tough luck that you wasn't as smart."

"Maybe you ain't so smart, Max," Barry reminded. "Maybe Goran figures to double-cross you."

"Not a chance," declared Ferner. "He tore a five hundred dollar bill in half. I got one half; he's got the other."

"How you gonna git out of town?"

"Slager's gonna start a gun ruckus when they hear my shot. That'll draw the crowd to the other end of town long enough for me to git going."

"You aim to shoot me, then?"

"If I have to."

"Reckon you better start then—" Barry flung the paper aside with his

left hand. His right hand raised the gun that was in his lap, and his long legs lifted him out of the chair and shoved him sideways.

Ferner's mouth opened to yell. He triggered in a blind blaze of frenzy, but Barry's gun was already thundering. Ferner's slug splintered the chair; Barry's hit Max in the stomach. Ferner tried to get his gun up again, but the force of the slug knocked him backwards. The bed stopped him and he sat down on the edge of it. For a moment he looked as though he were getting ready to pull his boots off and get in bed.

"I knew that if you'd double-cross a dead man—like you wanted to do Williams—you'd double-cross a live one," Barry said softly. He waved his hand through the gun smoke to see Ferner better. Ferner opened his mouth, but no sound came out. He toppled forward to the floor.

At that moment there was a blasting roar of guns from the far end of town. The racket swelled in sound until it sounded like a pitched battle. Down in the street, men began to yell. Boots thumped on board sidewalks as Delray, already tense and primed, yielded to panic.

Barry blew out the lamp and slipped quietly from the room. The hallway was dark. Barry hurried down its length until he heard footsteps thumping up the stairs. Three men, it sounded like. He grabbed the first door he came to and pushed it. It opened and he stepped inside.

"Come from those two strangers' room," puffed a man whose voice identified him as the hotel clerk.

"Up to some devilment," another man said and Barry recognized the voice of the grim-faced homesteader. He waited tensely until he heard them enter his room, and then slipped out of the doorway and tiptoed on down the hallway.

The racket was continuing up the street, and men were running past the hotel. Barry started down the steps. He was halfway down when the front door banged open and Goran stepped inside.

Barry darted back up the steps and heard the two men come out of his room. He tried to reach the open door again, but the nester spotted him.

"Halt! Halt there—or I'll shoot!"

"I'm halted!" Barry said quickly. "Take it easy with that shotgun, feller!"

"What in blazes is going on up there?" Goran yelled from the landing.

"We're coming down," the nester yelled back and prodded Barry with the shotgun. Men were beginning to filter into the lobby in spite of the racket that was still going on up the street.

"This hombre killed his partner," the nester said quietly, prodding Barry with his shotgun. "You're gonna hang anyhow," he grunted. "So you might as well tell us the straight story of what happened to John Williams."

"To blazes with his story!" Goran bellowed loudly. "Let's hang him and get it over with! Get a rope, somebody—we've delayed too long already!"

The men in the lobby growled as-

sent. They'd been keyed up all day with their nerves on edge. Now here was somebody to take it out on. The growl became a roar of assent—and then it died down as one sound broke through it.

Barry was laughing. He hoped it was a laugh. He'd forced a grin on his face, and had forced his vocal chords to make a noise. But it was enough. It stopped the crowd for a moment. And—more important—it brought a flash of worry and uncertainty to the eyes of Goran. In that instant, Barry spoke.

"It didn't work the first time, and it won't work now, Goran."

"What won't work?" the homesteader behind Barry asked.

Barry looked straight at Goran, and inwardly he breathed a sigh of thanks that during the excitement, they'd forgotten to take his gun from him.

"Goran sent Ferner up to our room to get that torn sheet out of the notebook—and to shut me up for good. You're afraid that Williams named his killers on the note he wrote, Goran."

"You're a liar!" Goran snapped. "What kind of proof do you have of that?"

Barry laughed again and saw Goran's confidence begin to crumble. "Plenty proof, Goran. That five hundred you offered for that torn sheet of notebook paper. Ferner's got half of a five hundred dollar bill in his pocket and you've got the other half—"

Goran drew and fired. Barry felt something pluck at his shirt, and then he was shooting as fast as he could, only faintly aware that Goran was stumbling backward and slumping downward as the slugs hit him. Barry kept pumping lead till the gun clicked empty, and only then did he realize that he was still alive and unhit. . . .

Barry Conray leaned on the hotel desk and rubbed his freshly shaven cheeks. Goran had lived long enough to confess. Punchy Slager was in jail. And the title to the homestead and bill of sale were in the hotel safe, awaiting the arrival of the train and Elsie Williams.

"Tell me more about Elsie Williams," Barry urged the hotel clerk. "You say she's pretty, huh? Does she like cowhands? What color is her hair? Her eyes? How big is she? Can she cook?"

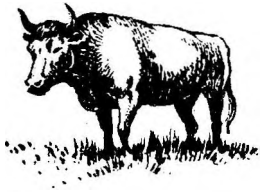
The clerk glanced wearily at the clock. "I can't answer all that before train time," he muttered. "All I can tell you is that she's always been a girl that likes to laugh a lot. When she gets over her paw's death, you and her ought to hit it off fine, the way you like to laugh—laugh even with a rope almost around your neck!"

Barry groaned. He'd forced so many laughs that day that he felt he never wanted to laugh again. But . . . maybe he and Elsie Williams both needed someone right now to teach the other how to laugh again.

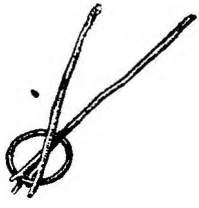
THE END

RANGE SAVVY

By Gene King



The cattalo, cross between a domestic cow and a buffalo, used to be just a livestock oddity. Now, because Canadian ranchers sought a new type of cattle capable of withstanding zero winter temperatures, Canada has scientifically crossed the buffalo with such popular breeds of cattle as Aberdeens, Angus, Shorthorns and Herefords. The resulting cattalos are virtually blizzard-proof, surviving in weather that would freeze ordinary cattle. But it has taken twenty-five years of selective breeding by the Dominion Experimental Farm, at Wainwright, Alberta, to develop a strain that is not sterile, is without the characteristic buffalo hump and yields steaks that are said to be just as good as the average steer's.



Back in the early days of the West nearly every cowboy carried an iron ring two or three inches in diameter attached to his saddle. This made a ready running iron for branding cattle on the range. To use it, the ring was simply heated in a fire; then held by tongs made by cutting two sticks from a mesquite bush below the fork to run the desired brand on the calf. Later when stamp irons came into general use, rings and running irons alike were generally frowned upon. Cowboys with imagination could too easily write their own brand on mavericks.

Mine timbering is an art the hardrock prospector has to learn. Not all mine openings or prospect tunnels require timbers to hold them up. Usually arching the tunnel roof is sufficient, except where fracture zones are encountered or the rock is loose and weak. Experienced prospectors become expert at tapping tunnel walls and roofs with a hammer or piece of wood to test the tightness of the rock formation. Loose rock that is likely to fall or cave in gives out a distinctly hollow sound.

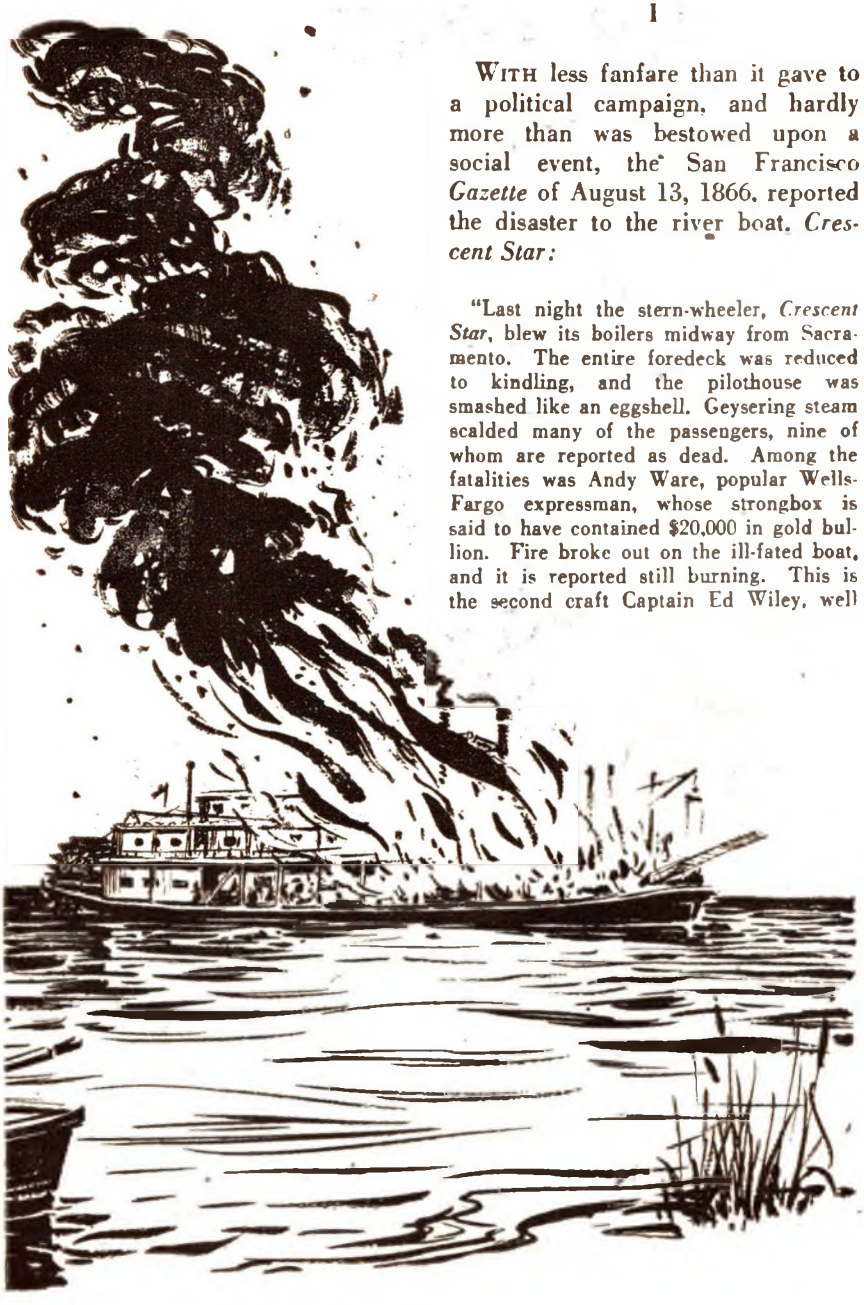
Mr. King will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

STEAMBOAT TO HELL

By Joseph Chadwick

If that trail of murder and arson led Jim Logan aboard the Sacramento Star, *the Barbary Coast was destined to witness another harrowing river disaster*

I



WITH less fanfare than it gave to a political campaign, and hardly more than was bestowed upon a social event, the San Francisco *Gazette* of August 13, 1866, reported the disaster to the river boat, *Crescent Star:*

"Last night the stern-wheeler, *Crescent Star*, blew its boilers midway from Sacramento. The entire foredeck was reduced to kindling, and the pilothouse was smashed like an eggshell. Geysering steam scalded many of the passengers, nine of whom are reported as dead. Among the fatalities was Andy Ware, popular Wells-Fargo expressman, whose strongbox is said to have contained $20,000 in gold bullion. Fire broke out on the ill-fated boat, and it is reported still burning. This is the second craft Captain Ed Wiley, well

known for his speed records, has lost in the past six months. It is to be hoped. . . ."

A line or two of censure aimed at the *Crescent Star's* skipper for having endangered the lives of his passengers in an attempt to cut a few minutes from the time it took to make the run. That was all. Men had died, others had been maimed. And no one was properly blamed or held responsible. What had happened to the *Star* was something to be forgotten. In the past dozen years, San Francisco Bay and the California rivers had seen a hundred such accidents. Some had been even greater catastrophes. Life was cheap, in the mad stampede for gold.

Fog blanketed the Bay and drifted in to eddy about Frisco's Pacific Street. It muted sounds and dimmed lights, and a river boat leaving its wharf was soon shrouded by the gray murk. Somewhere an odd tapping sounded, and Jim Logan paused before a darkened warehouse to listen. He'd heard the tapping before—in the cheap hotel where he'd taken a room on his arrival in Frisco from his back-country diggings.

The tapping came on, nearer, louder—not fast but with a measured beat. A big man, Jim Logan. An ex-Texas cowpuncher, he hated the fog that made him feel half blind. He hated the water, the swampish feel of the air, and the smells that cloyed the bayside. Most of all, he hated the idea of being followed.

He unbuttoned his coat and lay a hand on the holstered gun beneath, and the tapping sound pounded in his ears—louder than it actually was. It became a *thump—thump—thump.*

Forewarned by tales of men who had been set upon and robbed in this law-mocking town, Jim half drew his pistol. His nerves were tight, not so much with fear as with caution. The thumping came right up to him. A man loomed through the fog, walking on a peg leg.

"One moment, friend," Jim said, low-voiced.

The man halted, swaying like a drunk on his wooden leg. In the murky gloom, he was a somewhat obscure figure—small, skinny, with a pale patch for a face.

"What you want?" he demanded in a voice that rasped.

"I don't like being trailed, stranger."

"So you figure I was trailing you, Mister Logan."

"Every step of the way, from the hotel," Jim said. "How'd you know my name?"

"Asked about you at the Marvin House," answered the man. "Why? Because I heard you asking questions a sensible man doesn't ask hereabouts. You been trying to find out what happened to the *Crescent Star*, three months ago. That's like standing on a street corner and yelling for trouble to come find you. You better stop asking questions, Mister Logan—else you'll soon stop breathing."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's a warning, friend," the raspy voice said. "If it mattered to me,

you'd be a dead man by now. See this in my hand, Mister Logan?"

Jim looked down and saw a dull glint. There was a wicked-looking blade pointed at his belly. It could have been driven into him before he got his six-gun the rest of the way from its holster. Involuntarily he shuddered.

"You're warning me for my own good, eh?" he asked.

"That's right," said the man. "Your kid brother was one of the passengers who died on the *Crescent Star*. That's too bad. But you better forget it, just like I'm forgetting that I lost my leg aboard that hell boat."

His raspy tones died away. He turned and thumped off, the fog quickly hiding him.

A freight wagon lumbered by, and somewhere a shrill voice chattered Chinese. Jim Logan stood where the peg-legged man had left him, his hand still gripping gun butt. By nature, he was an easy-going and mild-mannered man. He was slow to anger but, when aroused, rage burned in him like a fever. He had let three whole months go by before his mind was made up to take steps to avenge the death of his kid brother.

At first, it had seemed that Dick's end had been unavoidable—caused by an out-and-out accident. Then a month ago, an old copy of the *Gazette* had reached Jim back in the diggings and he had read about the disaster, which before that had been news come to him only by word of mouth. A prospector had told him about the *Crescent Star*, and that Dick—only seventeen and on his way East to attend college—was one of the dead.

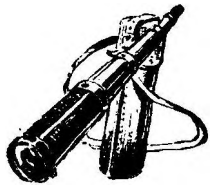
The *Gazette's* report had changed Jim's grief to anger, for he had read into the printed lines what had been left unsaid. A fool river-boat captain forcing his boilers for the last ounce of pressure, to gain a few extra minutes of time, and then the boiler iron giving away. . . . Jim had been able to think of nothing else after that. In his mind, he kept seeing the exploding deck, the scalding steam, the sudden fire—and the dead bodies. And a voice in his mind kept saying over and over: "Wiley, Wiley . . . he's to blame!"

After a month, Jim could stand it no longer. Now, come to Frisco to face Captain Ed Wiley, he had been warned by a fool with a wooden leg and a rasping voice to forget that his brother had died because this Captain Ed Wiley grabbed at speed like some men grab for gold!

"The devil with him," Jim muttered, and put the peg-legged man from his mind.

He continued on his way, toward the Pacific Street office building of the Star Steamboat Company. It was a grubby frame box-like building by a bay-front wharf. Behind a grimy window, yellow lamplight glowed. A sign over the doorway bore the firm's name and, in smaller lettering: CAPTAIN ED WILEY, OWNER. Jim pushed the door open.

The room into which he stepped was like any other business office, except that instead of a pale-faced male clerk perched on a stool at the



bookkeeper's high desk there was a woman. As Jim closed the door behind him, she stopped writing in her ledger to turn and look at him.

"Yes?" she said pleasantly. "Is there something I can do for you?"

Jim noticed only vaguely that she was blond and very attractive. He thought briefly that it was strange that a woman should be working in a waterfront office, and alone at night. But he answered as though facing a man.

"I'd like to see the owner of this company—Captain Ed Wiley."

"I'm sorry . . ."

"Where is he?"

"Please," the woman said, her voice husky with a choked-up sound. She got down from the stool, made her way around a rolltop desk, and faced him. "Please, let me explain," she said. "Captain Wiley is . . . he's passed on."

"Dead?"

"Three months ago," the woman said. "He died on the *Crescent Star*, one of our boats which blew up. If there is anything I can do . . ." She managed a faint smile. "I'm Ed Wiley's widow."

Jim Logan silently cursed himself for a fool. He had started off on a fool's errand, half-cocked, bent on avenging his brother's death—blindly thinking that he was the only person in the world who had lost a loved one. He had made a man already dead the object of his rage and hatred, and now he had made that man's widow recall her loss. He saw her wavering smile, the smile of a brave woman attempting to carry on her dead husband's business, and he muttered his apology.

"It's all right," Mrs. Wiley said. "You couldn't know, if you're a stranger here. Please let me help you with your business, if that is what brought you here. I'm trying hard to keep things going. But it isn't easy being Mrs. Martha Wiley after seven years of being the sheltered and pampered Mrs. Ed Wiley. My husband, you see, was a fine and kindly man. He was so full of life that he never believed he would leave me alone, like this. He taught me nothing about the business, and I have to make my way by trial and error. Did you wish to ship merchandise?"

"No," Jim said awkwardly. "It was nothing. Sorry to have bothered you. I'll go now."

Again Martha Wiley smiled her faint smile. "You don't like to do business with a woman, I suppose."

Jim had started to turn away, now he swung back. "That's not it," he assured her. "I lost my brother on the *Crescent Star*, and I came here to talk to Captain Wiley about that. not knowing he was dead."

"I see. You came to blame him," the woman said. "But you can't hold that against Ed Wiley. You see, he was dead before the *Star's*

boilers blew up. He had been . . . murdered."

II

Jim could see that beneath her calm, Martha Wiley was experiencing a woman's full measure of grief. He could tell that she was the type to sorrow in private, to weep alone. Certainly her grief was all the greater for her husband having died a violent death. The ugly knowledge of how Ed Wiley died must be making her hurt almost unendurable.

But suddenly Jim was considering the river-boat disaster from his own viewpoint. If Ed Wiley hadn't been to blame for the explosion, it might have been an unavoidable accident. Or it might have been caused by some over-zealous crew member out to establish a record of his own, on finding himself master of the boat.

"Who was the *Star's* skipper, after Ed Wiley's death?" asked Jim.

"The mate, Hiram Bates."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know," Martha Wiley replied. "He was uninjured in the explosion. Afterward, he disappeared. He came to see me, but I was ill with grief and so could not really speak to him. I haven't seen him since. If he had stayed, he would have been skipper of our new boat. My husband had just bought it, and he had promised to put Hiram in command of it. The *Sacramento Star* is on the river now—or rather, it's here at dock. George Ruman is its skipper. I gave him the job because he was engineer on the *Crescent Star*. And . . ." She paused, a catch in her throat. Sudden color tinged her cheeks. "And George was one of my husband's close friends."

And one of your friends, too, Jim thought. Aloud, he said: "Ruman should know if Hiram Bates was guilty of negligence when he took over as skipper of the *Crescent Star*. I'd like to talk to him."

"He'll be here shortly. He promised to see me home tonight."

"Do you know who murdered your husband?" Jim asked, realizing such a question would upset her, yet wanting to find something that would point to the man to blame for the disaster. "Or how he was killed?"

"I don't know who murdered Ed Wiley," Martha said slowly, "but he was killed with a knife. There was fog on the river that night, and my husband had stepped from the pilothouse so that he could see the channel better. Hiram Bates found him, stabbed to death."

Jim remembered how quickly the vicious-looking knife had come into the hand of the peg-legged man. "Do you know a man with a wooden leg—a man who may have been aboard the *Crescent Star?*" he asked.

Martha Wiley's answer was prompt. "That's Les Cooke. He was the *Crescent Star's* clerk, or purser. He was always a strange person, but since he lost a leg in the explosion he's been much worse. He won't work on the river now, but sometimes, when he's sober, he comes here and helps me with the book

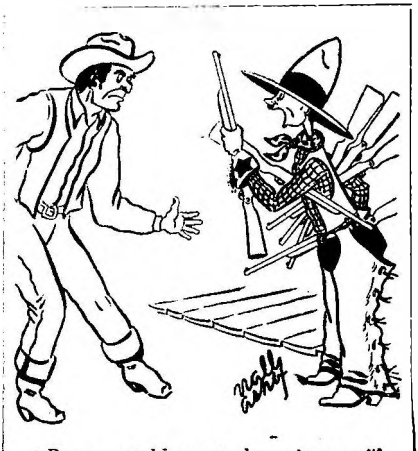
work." She gave Jim a curious look. "Why do you ask about him?"

"He warned me to forget about the *Crescent Star*."

Martha nodded. "He's said things like that to me, too. You see, there was a lot of ugly talk after the disaster. People gossip. The Wells Fargo express box was never found, and the boat was carrying a safe full of pay dirt which the miners up river had entrusted to my husband for delivery to Frisco. That safe was found looted."

Jim could see that Martha Wiley had been caught up by a desire to talk, perhaps because all this was penned in her mind, but now she seemed to want to break off the conversation. He put on his hat.

"Thank you for the information, Mrs. Wiley," he said. "I mean to find out what really happened to the boat, and who was to blame. If my brother's death was caused by the man who killed your husband, I'll find him . . ."



"But you told me to buy six-guns!"

Her eyes left him, for the door had swung open, and she said, a hint of pleasure in her voice: "Come in, George. This is Mister . . ." She looked searchingly at Jim. "I don't think you told me your name."

He told her and she said: "Mr. Logan—Captain George Ruman."

The skipper of the new *Sacramento Star*, Jim saw, was one of those darkly handsome men who look good in uniforms. George Ruman fitted his brass-buttoned blue coat and his ship officer's cap, which he wore at a rakish angle. He moved into the room with a swagger, his smile showing strong teeth, and his dark eyes weighing Jim Logan. He offered a hand, and his grip was brief but firm.

"Logan?" he said. "Seems to me I've heard the name before."

"My brother died on the *Crescent Star*."

Ruman's mouth turned down at the corners. "Oh, yes," he murmured. Then, guardedly: "If you're discussing business with Mrs. Wiley, I can come back later."

"I was just leaving," Jim said. "But I'd like a talk with you, at your convenience. I feel that I owe it to my brother to find the man to blame for what happened to the *Crescent Star*. Since you were the boat's engineer, maybe you can give me some information."

"I'd rather forget all that."

"And I've been warned to forget it," Jim commented pointedly.

"So?" Ruman said curiously. "Who warned you?"

"Mrs. Wiley says the fellow's name is Les Cooke."

"Oh, that poor old codger." Ruman shrugged. "He's a bit touched—loco." He considered a moment. "But I'll be glad to talk with you, since you're set on it. I'll look you up in the morning. Where can I find you?"

"At the Marvin House."

"I'll be there at nine," George Ruman said, and again offered his hand. "But I doubt that I can tell you anything worthwhile."

Jim shook his hand, lifted his hat to Martha Wiley, then left the office. After he closed the door behind him, he stood for a moment staring into the curtain of fog. Then he started walking. Passing the office window, he glanced in and saw George Ruman attempt to take the woman in his arms. But she slipped away from him, smiling slightly and firmly shaking her head. Jim had a last glimpse of Ruman's face. It had turned stiff and ugly, showing an offended male ego. A block further on, Jim turned into a grubby waterfront saloon. The clammy touch of the fog made him feel the need of a drink.

Jim was in the saloon for perhaps half an hour. When he left the place, the fog was denser and through it he heard the dull *tap—tap—tap* of Les Cooke's peg leg. Then, moving away from the saloon's door, Jim heard a closer sound. Boots scraped on gravel and two men leaped from the alleyway alongside the saloon, lunging at Jim without warning. There was no time to draw the six-gun from under his coat. He nearly missed knocking aside the club that swung at his head.

Jim met the attack head-on, and so took the edge off it. He drove his fist into the heavy, bewhiskered face of the club wielder, reeling him back. But the second man was quicker, a wiry little man with a monkeylike face. A knife blade glinted dully, came striking toward Jim's throat. Back-stepping now, Jim managed to throw off the hard-case's aim, but the point of the knife jabbed with sharp pain into his upper chest. Grabbing at the man's knife arm, and catching it, Jim slammed his knee into the fellow's groin. There was a shrill scream, then a yell: "Get him, Hack! Get the dirty son!"

Jim was fighting to keep the knife from finding him again when the bigger hard-case, Hack, swung his club a second time. The blow thudded against Jim's left shoulder, and a current of pain shot the full length of his arm. He lost his hold on the little man, but managed to trip him. As the hard-case fell, Jim drove his boot into the monkey mask of a face. There was an ugly crunching sound as the kicked man collapsed under the weight of the boot.

Then Hack's club found Jim's head. Jim's skull rang with exploding pain, and he went to his knees under the impact of the blow. Dimly he saw the club aimed for a finishing blow, then, oddly, Hack began uttering a coughing sound. A

look of astonishment appeared on his face, remaining there while his knees buckled and sprawled him to the ground.

Getting unsteadily to his feet, Jim saw the hilt of a knife protruding from Hack's left side. He knew the blade must have found its way between the ribs to reach the heart, for Hack was dead.

Whirling about, at last drawing his six-gun, Jim saw a fog-shrouded figure standing no more than ten feet away. Jim leveled and cocked his pistol. "Was that aimed at me?" he demanded, gasping for breath.

"I never miss with a knife," Les Cooke answered hoarsely.

His wooden leg thumped against the plank walk. He bent over the dead man, withdrew the knife and wiped its blade on Hack's coat. Then he leaned over to study the bloody face of the unconscious little hard-case.

"Hack Larris and Chimp Delong," he muttered.

"Who are they?" demanded Jim.

"All I know is that they're a couple of hoodlums from the Barbary Coast," replied Les Cooke. "And that they were on the *Crescent Star* the night she blew her boilers." He stared hard at Jim. "Lucky for you I happened along. Friend, take my advice and clear out of this town. This ain't the end of anything. If you stay, it's just the beginning."

He turned abruptly and thumped away. Jim took a step after him; then, because he was rattled, he swung about and headed in the other direction. There was a clammy feeling inside him, and it did not come from the fog. It was something like foreboding and dread.

III

Once back in his hotel room, which offered little more space than a stall, Jim got a grip on himself and tried to think things out. He had Les Cooke's word for it that he had been jumped for asking too many questions about the river-boat disaster of three months ago. But he hadn't questioned either of the two hard-cases; he had never seen the pair until they came running at him, with intent to kill. He had asked his questions—like a trusting back-country man seeking information on a visit to town—here at the ramshackle Marvin House, and at a nearby chow house. But he had talked also to George Ruman and Martha Wiley. Somebody along the line had decided to stop his prying, and had called upon the two Barbary Coast hoodlums to do the dirty work. It meant, Jim told himself, that somebody was scared of what he might find out.

Right now, he was the one who was scared. A stranger in a strange town, he had to face trouble alone. He had no friends to side him, unless he was crazy enough to count on old Les Cooke.

Jim crossed the candle-lighted room and examined the door. There was no way to lock or bar it, no knob under which he might prop the room's single chair. Opening his pocket knife, Jim thrust the blade into the door jamb so that it was tight against the inward swinging

door. If a prowler tried to enter during the night, Jim knew the knife would fall to the floor with a noisy thud and wake him. So protected, he blew out the candle flame. He stretched out on the bunklike bed, fully dressed except for coat and hat, and slept.

It was after midnight when Jim woke with a start, lifted himself on his elbows and strained to hear whatever it was that had shattered his sleep. There must have been other noises during the early night hours, the usual noises of a flophouse hotel, but they had not disturbed him. This sound must have been something else, something more.

Alert as he was, Jim heard nothing for a long moment. His door, he dimly saw, was still closed. There was no danger at the single window. Finally the sound came—the tapping of Les Cooke's peg leg. The man was moving along the hallway.

Jim swung from the bunk, crossed, and removed his knife from the door. Opening it, he peered out into the gloomy hall. Dim light from a wall lamp at the far end showed him that the hall was now empty. A score of doors, closed and blank, met his gaze. He could not tell which hid Cooke.

Closing and securing his own door, Jim returned to his bunk. He did not sleep at once, but lay thinking that he was a poor hand at this sort of game. He had already made too many mistakes. First he had talked too much, then he had failed to get the truth from Les Cooke—who certainly knew it. And he had

stupidly walked away from the unconscious monkey-faced tough, Chimp Delong, who could have been made to reveal the person who had sent him and Hack Larris to that waterfront saloon ambush. So thinking, Jim slept again.

But not for long. He came awake a second time shortly after three o'clock, when a commotion broke out all through the hotel. Loud, wild voices were shouting, "Fire! Fire!" And Jim caught the smell of smoke. He sprang from his bunk, grabbing in the dark for his hat and coat. The frame building was likely to be a fire trap, if the flames got any start at all. Outside his door, excited men were running back and forth, shouting.

Jim removed his knife from the door, pocketed it. Then, jerking the door open, he noticed a paper —an envelope—on the floor. He stooped and picked it up. The envelope was sealed but it was blank of name or address. It took Jim a moment to understand how it came there, then he remembered his earlier awakening. Les Cooke must have come upstairs and along the hall, pausing by Jim's door to shove the envelope beneath, and then going on. Jim had not noticed it before because he had not opened the door wide enough.

Thrusting the envelope into his pocket, Jim stepped out into the crowded hallway. At least a dozen half-clad men had come from their rooms. The hotel proprietor, a pair of breeches pulled on over his nightshirt, came puffing up the stairs with two slopping buckets of water. The fire was in a room at the far end of the hall.

It was none of Jim Logan's concern, but he followed the hotelman back along the hall, because he did not see Les Cooke among the alarmed gathering. Smoke was pouring from the room, and inside there was a glaring brightness of flames. The hotelman set down one bucket and flung the contents of the other at the blaze. He dropped the empty bucket, grabbed up the other and emptied it. The water hissed and steamed, but did little good. Jim shoved the man from the doorway and plunged into the room. He choked and coughed on smoke, felt the heat of the flames, then, half-blinded, he was at the bunk. He caught hold of the man who lay still upon it, and, by the shoulders, dragged him from the holocaust.

Once back in the hall, Jim dropped his burden. He heard a woman scream wildly, and a man curse. He blinked tears from his smarting eyes, and looked down. He had rescued a dead man. Les Cooke's throat was cut. The man had been killed in his sleep, and the killer must have set fire to the room in the hope of wiping out his gruesome work.

The hotelman was shouting for help, wringing his hands—not because of the murdered man, but because the fire was getting out of control. But help suddenly came. The first members of a fire brigade came running up the stairs, some carrying axes and others dragging

a leather hose that ran down to a pump cart on the street.

Jim turned and pushed through the card. Reaching the stairs, he went down and out to the street. A crowd had already gathered outside and the fire brigade was manning its pump. More people came running through the darkness. Jim kept on walking, away from the excitement. He found himself sweating, not from heat or exertion but from shock.

It might have been me, he told himself, thinking of old Les Cooke.

Jim made his way to another hotel, this one on Fourth Street, and, taking a room, paid with dust from his poke. This room was slightly larger and better furnished, and, though again there was no lock, Jim propped a chair against the door knob so that no one could enter while he slept.

There was an oil lamp, and by its glow Jim took out and opened the envelope. The enclosed sheet of notepaper bore only a few lines of writing, in the careful hand of the clerk. Les Cooke's name was signed at the bottom of the page. Jim read:

Mr. Logan:

My time is about up, for it's now known that I'm not as crazy as I pretend. Like you, I've tried to find out what happened to Cap'n Ed Wiley and the *Crescent Star*—and meddling doesn't pay. You heed my warning and clear out. If you won't do that, Hiram Bates is wearing a beard and going under the name of Henry Blake. He's been holing up at Sacramento, somewhere on Second Street. I saw him here in town today, but he's going back up river. I don't know whether he can be trusted or not, but he sure knows something. Watch out for George Ruman too. because he's bad medicine. Maybe Ed Wiley's widow knows more than she'll tell, but I figure Ruman has pulled the wool over her eyes. I'm writing this because I've got a hunch something's going to happen to me. Something is sure to happen to you too, if you don't watch out.

Jim read the letter a second and a third time, and he knew that if he ever had owed a man a debt of gratitude, it was poor Les Cooke. A sensible man, Jim realized. would do as the letter advised—clear out. But there was anger in him, and hatred. Jim Logan had more than young Dick's death to avenge. He meant to find Les Cooke's murderer.

In the morning, the fog was gone. The sun came up bright and hot. Down at the waterfront, there was the usual bustling activity. Two river boats were coming in, and three other steamboats were getting underway.

Out on the bay, Jim saw two big ocean-going steamers. Stacks of cargo were piled on the wharves, and a steady stream of wagons flowed along Pacific Street. The *Sacramento Star*, a fine 75-ton stern-wheeler, was tied up at the wharf nearest Martha Wiley's office. The office door, when Jim tried it, was locked. But a note tacked to the door told him that in case of emergency Mrs. Martha Wiley could be reached at a Sutter Street address.

An empty hack came along, and Jim hailed the driver and gave him the address. About ten minutes later, he paid off the man and approached a small frame house painted white and trimmed with green. Martha Wiley opened to his knock.

She said, "Good morning," brightly, then her look of pleasure faded. "Oh, I thought it was George Ruman. . . . I'm sorry Mr. Logan, but I've no time to talk. I'm getting ready to go to Sacramento aboard Captain Ruman's boat."

"I'm headed up river, myself," Jim said, and pushed the door wide. Against the woman's startled look, he stepped into the nicely furnished parlor. "We can talk on the way," he added.

"Really, Mr. Logan . . . I don't like this."

"There are a lot of things I don't like," Jim said flatly. "For one thing, Les Cooke was murdered during the night. For another, I was set upon by a couple of Barbary Coast hoodlums after leaving your office last night." He paused, watching the shocked look that crossed the pretty face before him. "I could name some other things. Such as you maybe knowing more about your husband's murder and the *Crescent Star* disaster than you've told. I want to talk some more about that ugly business."

V

For a moment, it seemed that he had given it to Martha Wiley too hard and too fast. Her face blanched, her breathing fluttered and she began to sway. Thinking she was on the verge of fainting, Jim stepped close and slipped his arm about her.

"Steady," he said, conscious of the warm softness of her body against his arm. He caught the fragrance of perfume. He saw the dull-gold of her hair, the softness of her skin, the red fullness of her lips. . . . Ed Wiley's widow was a disturbingly attractive woman.

It was no more than a fleeting instant that Jim's arm was about her, yet George Ruman pushed open the door and found them in that seemingly intimate attitude. His dark handsome face hardened, and his eyes glinted with quick hate.

"What's this?" he demanded.

The woman looked up, startled. Jim moved away from her, facing Ruman.

"I felt faint, George, and . . ." Martha Wiley said uneasily.

"You cheap little flirt!" Ruman cut in and started to turn away. Then he swung back, to face Jim. "Mister, I'm warning you. Get the hell away from here. If I find you around again, I'll kill you."

"George, I swear . . ." Martha cried.

Ruman looked at her, a nasty smile on his lips. "All right, have it your way," he said. "But from now on, I'm taking your talk about being in mourning with a grain of salt. We'll reach an understanding. Get ready and we'll leave. It's time to get aboard the *Sacramento Star*."

The woman's traveling bag was packed and ready by the doorway. She had only to put on her coat and hat, and when that was done she said worriedly: "George, this man says that Les Cooke was murdered. He came here to accuse me of knowing something about Ed's death, and . . . and he says he intends to go up river on the *Star* with me!"

Very quietly, George Ruman said, "So?" He took out and lighted a cheroot, his eyes narrow with thought. Then: "Why are you going up river, Logan?"

"To find Hiram Bates."

"You fool, I've searched for him everywhere! Wells Fargo special agents are hunting him. He's not to be found."

"I'll find him," Jim said. "He's in Sacramento." He stepped closer to Ruman. "As for your loud talk, mister—it's just so much noise. I'm going up river on your boat, and I'm having my talk with Mrs. Wiley." He pushed back his coat and patted his holstered gun. "And when you try to kill me, I'll be ready for you."

Ruman showed another of his twisted smiles. "Like you say, my loud talk is just so much noise." He turned, picked up Martha's bag, and walked out. Jim followed him, and the woman came last, locking the door after her.

It was nine o'clock when the *Sacramento Star* left its mooring, swung out into the bay, its stern paddles churning the water into foam, and then turned its prow toward the mouth of the Sacramento River. Jim Logan heard Captain Ruman tell Martha Wiley that he expected to put in at Sacramento City before midnight.

Black smoke poured from the twin stacks, and the whistle belched steam as it signaled to a barge crossing the course. Once underway, George Ruman remained at the pilothouse, and his first officer was on deck bellowing orders to the crew and making sure that the cargo would not shift.

The deck cargo consisted of a hundred sacks of flour, thirty barrels of brandy and a shipment of hardware. Below decks, there was a big shipment of blasting powder consigned to the up-river mines. The boat also carried fifty-odd passengers—some of them late-coming boomers, others miners returning after a spree in Frisco and along the wild Barbary Coast. Jim Logan, making the rounds with a landsman's curiosity, noted also several flashily dressed men he took for drummers, and an Army officer and his wife. He also saw, perched on one of the brandy barrels, a little man with a wizened face that somehow resembled a monkey's countenance—Chimp Delong.

Below deck, in the boiler room, giant colored men heaved wood into the fires, and the sweating engineer built up his steam. Up in the main cabin again, Jim found Martha Wiley seated in an armchair passing the time with a book. He crossed the ornate room, pulled up a chair

SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD PUZZLE

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and sat down beside her. Half a dozen men were grouped around a deal table, and a card game was already underway. A tall lean man with a rusty brown beard sat alone in a corner, eying everyone who entered or left the cabin. He wore the black garb of a parson.

Jim took Les Cooke's letter from his pocket and silently handed it to Martha Wiley, and she, after reading it, looked at him with chill fury.

"It's not true!" she said. "I know nothing about what happened on the *Crescent Star*—at least no more than everybody knows. Les Cooke had strange notions, after he lost his leg in the explosion. He hinted at all sorts of things to me, but I—"

"What sort of things?"

"Well, that my husband was murdered because he discovered a plot to wreck the *Crescent Star* so that its safe could be looted and the Wells Fargo express box stolen. He claimed that either Hiram Bates or George Ruman was behind the plot."

"Didn't you tell the sheriff or the Wells Fargo agents that?"

"I did, and Les Cooke was questioned. But he acted foolish—crazy. Nobody would believe him. You don't think he knew anything, really?"

"He knew too much," Jim declared. "When he showed that he wasn't loco, he was murdered. He'd learned too much, lately. Maybe it was because he found out where Hiram Bates was holed up that he was killed. What kind of a hombre was this Bates, anyway?"

Martha's face was thoughtful as she said slowly: "He was a big man, a little fat—brown hair, smooth-shaven. He always talked quietly and seemed honest. My husband trusted him. But I . . . well, since he's disappeared I think maybe he did kill Ed and cause the *Crescent Star's* boilers to blow up, so he could steal the express shipment and the dust from the safe."

"How could a man cause the boilers to blow up?"

"By letting the water get low over the fires," explained Martha. "Or by fastening down the boilers' safety valve while traveling under high pressure."

"The engineer should have seen the danger."

"George Ruman had orders from the pilothouse," Martha Wiley said coldly. "He told the sheriff and the special agents from Wells Fargo that Hiram Bates told him to secure the safety valve, so that they could use every ounce of steam in the boilers. You can't put the blame on George. If he had stolen all that bullion and dust, he wouldn't stay on the river, working for wages."

"Not unless he has a good reason," Jim said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Maybe you're the reason," Jim told her. "He's got his eye on you. But maybe he's staying on the river so that he can make another haul like that of the *Crescent Star*. I'm not accusing him yet. I want to find Hiram Bates first."

Martha slammed her book shut. "I'll listen to no more such talk," she said flatly. Rising, she walked

from the cabin with her skirts swirling angrily about her flashing ankles.

After she was gone, Chimp Delong appeared at the doorway and stared around the cabin. His face was marked with cuts and bruises from Jim's kick last night. The hoodlum's beady black eyes glared at Jim, then widened as they caught sight of the black-garbed man who sat alone. There was shock in Chimp's eyes, and, as he stared, his mouth fell agape. Suddenly he whirled and darted off along deck.

Jim looked over at the parson, and he too was shocked when he saw him take out a derringer and examine its loads. And then he remembered what Les Cooke's letter had said about Hiram Bates wearing a beard. True, this gaunt man did not fit Martha Wiley's description of Hiram Bates. But a man living a furtive, hunted life might have thinned down. Jim rose and crossed the room. The man dressed as a parson quickly pocketed his derringer, and looked up with steely gray eyes.

"Hiram Bates?" Jim said, his hand on his holstered gun.

V

A bony hand lifted, started to creep into the black coat. Jim Logan reached out, closed his left hand about the man's wrist with a vise-like grip.

"Don't try it, Bates," he warned, low-voiced. "I could shoot you between the eyes before you got hold of that sneak gun. Ease up. All I want is a talk."

He released the man and sat down beside him on the cushioned seat. Sweat beaded Hiram Bates' hungry-looking face. He had an odd yellow tint, like a person suffering some sort of swamp fever. He said, whispering: "Who are you—a Wells Fargo agent?"

"My name's Logan. My brother died on the *Crescent Star*," Jim explained. "I'm out to find the man to blame for his death. Maybe you're that man, and maybe George Ruman is. I aim to get at the truth!"

"Ruman's your man, damn his soul!" Bates muttered, a look of wildness in his eyes. "He planned the whole thing, and pulled it off with the help of a couple hired killers. I swear, Logan—"

"Never mind that. I believe you, so far."

"Ed Wiley was murdered, see? I found him outside the pilothouse, knifed. I'd been sick with malaria, and I still am. Picked it up in Panama years ago, and it keeps coming back. . . . I was in no shape to buck Ruman and his toughs. Besides, one kept a gun at my back. Ruman built up steam, deliberately trying to blow the boat to hell. He

Scrambled Words Answers (*page 83*)
1. maguey 2. wheat 3. reins 4. fetlock 5. horsehair 6. dove 7. rabbit 8. snowstorm 9. woodpecker 10. field 11. barbecue 12. nester 13. muskrat 14. scythe 15. buckshot

figured it would be easy to get hold of the Wells Fargo bullion and the miners' dust in the safe, when everybody was panicky from the blast."

"Ruman killed Ed Wiley?"

"I'd swear to it," Bates said hoarsely. "Wiley knew Ruman was up to something, and dead men tell no tales. Besides, Ruman's a ladies' man and had his eye on Wiley's wife. He'd have killed me too, but when the boilers went I was thrown over the side. I swam for shore, and Ruman's killers came after me. I gave them the slip, but the next day they nearly got me in Frisco. I was scared, so I went in hiding. I grew this beard and got these clothes from a parson I know in Sacramento. Being sick, I lost weight. I got so sick, I was out of my head for more than a week."

"Go on," Jim said, as Bates paused to mop his sweating forehead.

"I got to thinking," the bearded man went on. "Ruman had got his hands on a hundred thousand dollars in bullion and dust, and I figured I could cut in on it. Two days ago, I went to Frisco for a war talk with Ruman. I never did get to see him. I guess I lost my nerve. . . . But I came aboard this boat, still half hoping I'd get up courage enough to force Ruman to deal with me. But I'm still scared to face him."

"What about Les Cooke?"

"I bumped into him on Pacific Street yesterday, and he recognized me. He accused me of being partly to blame for what happened aboard the *Crescent Star*, but I told him why I'd hid out. Maybe he didn't believe it, loco as he was, but he let me go after holding a knife at my ribs."

"So last night you killed him?"

"No, I swear . . ."

Bates' voice ended in a gasp, as a man said harshly: "All right, Bates—don't move!" Jim turned and saw a group of men approaching, one with a leveled six-gun in his hand.

"I'm Rand, special agent for Wells Fargo," the armed man said. "I've been looking for you a long time—parson."

Behind the Wells Fargo man were two burly crew members, the wizened Chimp Delong—and George Ruman!"

Bates neither put up a fight nor tried to escape. He was relieved of his derringer by Rand. George Ruman stepped forward, saying: "Here's the bag he brought aboard." He was holding a carpetbag. Rand told him to open it up.

Everyone in the cabin watched Ruman set down and open the bag. He lifted out three heavy leather pouches—miners' pokes—and a dozen fifty-dollar gold slugs. A tag was tied to each pouch, and a name was written on each tag.

"These pokes came from the *Crescent Star's* safe," Ruman said. "They can be identified by the names on the tags. No doubt these slugs are part of the Wells Fargo express-box bullion. He's your man, Rand. Your job now is to make him tell where he cached the rest of the loot."

"I never saw that bag before in

my life!" Hiram Bates said wildly. "It's a frame-up. Ruman's lying, I tell you!"

"Come along, you ornery son," Rand growled. "I want a talk with you in private."

He took his prisoner and the bag of evidence away, and Ruman and the other three—the two crewmen and Chimp Delong—followed them to deck.

Jim Logan had remained silent during Hiram Bates' arrest. It had taken him by surprise, and, at the same time, he had realized that no word of his could clear the man. George Ruman had framed Bates too tightly—so tightly that the engineer would end up on the gallows. Hiram Bates had no chance of escaping from the trap. He had played right into Ruman's hands, first by running away, three months ago, and then by reappearing in a ridiculous disguise. That made him *look* guilty. George Ruman, on the other hand, had remained on the river and kept up the appearance of an innocent man. Ruman, Jim Logan realized, was as clever as the devil himself.

Jim silently cursed his own helplessness. At last he knew who had caused the explosion that had taken his brother's life, and he'd have his showdown with that man. But if he settled with Ruman with a six-gun, another man would become the victim of Ruman's treachery. Hiram Bates had plotted to cut in on the loot, through blackmail, and so was not wholly guiltless, yet it was far from right that he should be blamed, and no doubt hang for Ruman's crimes.

Jim Logan was merely a cowpuncher turned gold boomer. In Texas, he had dealt with rustlers, and once, up river, he had handled a couple of claim jumpers. But he did not know how to buck a shrewd blackleg such as George Ruman. It would take proof, solid evidence, to trap the man.

Leaving the cabin, Jim made his way up to the texas deck. Martha Wiley was there, alone, watching the wooded shore as the boat churned its way upstream. She had removed her hat, and the wind was tousling her hair and tugging at her skirt. She gave Jim a chill look, then turned her back to him. Jim Logan was no less a man than George Ruman. He too found Martha Wiley desirable and he regretted that he had had to incur her dislike.

"You heard about Hiram Bates?" he asked.

"I heard. George told me."

"He'll hang for killing your husband."

"It's hard for me to believe . . ." began Martha.

"That Bates is the man?"

She turned to face him. "But he must be," she said. "He's been hiding. He had some of the loot with him."

Jim knew she was having difficulty in convincing herself that Bates was guilty. It occurred to him that perhaps through her he could get at Ruman.

"If Bates got away with the *Crescent Star* loot, why did he risk coming aboard this boat?" he said. "Why did he even stay in California? None of the loot was found in his possession. George Ruman came carrying it into the cabin—after that Barbary Coast tough, Chimp Delong, told him that Bates was aboard."

Martha stared at him, saying nothing.

"Chimp recognized Bates, and ran to tell Ruman," Jim went on. "Ruman is a fast thinker and, right off, he saw a way to rid himself of Hiram Bates forever—and to throw a victim to the law. He knew Rand, the Wells, Fargo special agent, was aboard, so he told him about Bates. He threw a little of the loot into a carpetbag—"

He broke off, startled by a sudden thought. "That carpetbag!" he said excitedly. "It was a red one, and brand new. It was just like the one you left home with!"

Martha still stared at him, now with bewilderment. He caught her by the shoulders and shook her a little, as he might have shaken a child acting needlessly stupid.

"Don't you see?" he demanded. "It's the same bag. Ruman needed some sort of a bag in a hurry, and, since he carried yours from your house to the boat, he thought of it!"

"I don't believe it!" she cried.

"No," Jim's tone was savage. "Because you're in love with that blackleg!"

"That's not true," Martha said furiously. "My husband has been dead only three months, and—"

"Then if you're not in love with him, you'll help save Bates from the gallows. You'll help find the man who really murdered Ed Wiley."

"I'll thank you to take your hands off me," Martha said coldly. "My carpetbag is where I left it—in my cabin. I saw it there just before I came up here. From now on, Mr. Logan, I don't want you to annoy me."

She jerked away so that Jim's hands fell from her shoulders; then, after looking at him angrily for a moment, she walked away.

Jim stood where she had left him, thoroughly shaken. Not until now, knowing about the carpetbag, had he suspected that Martha Wiley might be in on this ugly game with George Ruman.

VI

Darkness overtook the *Sacramento Star*. The night sky was overcast, starless and without any moon. The river boat plowed through murky water, and its light did little to hold back the pitch-black dark. After the evening meal, most of the passengers gathered in the big main cabin. The few that had paid for private cabins—those passengers traveling farther up river than Sacramento City—retired to them.

Jim sat alone in the main cabin, smoking a cheroot and watching the other people. Two cards games were

going. Half a dozen miners were at the bar, drinking heavily. The boomers who were on their way to the diggings had formed another group and there was much low talk and loud laughter.

Captain Ruman stepped in for a minute, talked good-humoredly to some of the passengers, then went his way. Martha Wiley did not appear. Jim had not seen her at supper, either. Rand, the Wells Fargo agent, came in for a drink. A stocky, ruddy-faced man, he wore a scowl tonight that did not invite talk. He left after his drink, and Jim supposed that he had gone back to guard his prisoner.

Ruman had told Martha Wiley, Jim recalled, that the boat would reach Sacramento City before midnight. By the steady pulsing of the deck timbers and the constant pounding of the engines, Jim could tell that the craft was traveling at high speed. Ruman seemed to have no fear of running aground in the darkness.

It was close to nine o'clock when one of the deckhands came into the cabin and said to Jim: "Ed Wiley's widow says for you to come up to the texas, bucko." He grinned, and added slyly: "But you better not let Cap'n Ruman catch you."

Jim didn't answer or grin back. After the hand was gone, he took up his hat and thoughtfully walked from the cabin. This secret meeting that Martha wanted, he told himself, must mean that she had changed her mind about protecting George Ruman. It might mean that she was now ready to admit that Ruman had used her carpetbag to frame Hiram Bates.

The decks were wet and slippery from river mist, for it was foggy now. The lights from the cabins gave the lower deck a dim glow, but when Jim climbed to the texas he found himself walking carefully through a dense murky gloom. He saw a figure standing almost at the same spot where he had talked to Martha Wiley that afternoon—a small figure wrapped in a hooded cloak.

Crossing the deck, he said, low-voiced: "Have you changed your mind, Martha?" Then he halted. He'd caught a smell, not of a woman's perfume but of tobacco smoke and liquor mingled together. It was his abrupt halt that saved him from Chimp Delong's knife.

The hoodlum had turned slowly, as a woman might, trusting the hood and the darkness to conceal his monkey face. Then, facing Jim, he struck out. Jim grabbed the man's arm. It was like grabbing hold of a wildcat. Chimp Delong fought fiercely, silently.

Straining against the hoodlum, Jim had trouble in keeping his footing. His high-heeled cowpuncher boots kept slipping on the wet deck. And Chimp did his best to throw him all the way off balance. A knee slammed into Jim's groin, and the pain of the blow knotted his insides. Chimp's left hand gouged at his eyes. Jim drove his right fist squarely into the man's face, reeling him back against the railing. Then Jim's left hand lost its grip on Chimp's knife arm, and the blade slashed toward him with the suddenness of a striking snake.

To escape the knife, Jim jumped backwards. His boots slipped and he

fell sprawling on his back. Chimp slammed down upon him, aiming the knife at Jim's throat. Missing, the knife was driven hard into the deck, and, as Jim flung the hoodlum off him, it was wrenched loose from the man's hand and remained in the deck. In a rage, Jim jumped up. He caught hold of Chimp, lifted him high, flung him bodily to the deck. Chimp gave a strangled cry and lay like a broken thing. Then, as Jim grabbed him again, he began to whimper and beg.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, let up! You'll kill me!"

"What do you expect?" Jim raged. "You tried to kill me!"

"I had to try it," groaned Chimp. "Ruman—"

Reason came back to Jim Logan. This hoodlum deserved to die, but alive he could serve a purpose. There was fear in him.

"Talk," Jim said. "Talk — or by Satan, I'll kill you!"

"It was Ruman. He made me toll you up here!"

Jim dragged him to his feet, shoved him toward the companionway. "Keep walking ahead of me," he said, and drew his gun. "You try to bolt, and I'll back-shoot you. Head for where Rand has Hiram Bates locked up."

The Wells Fargo agent had his prisoner in one of the small private cabins, a cramped box-sized room. When Jim opened the door and shoved Chimp Delong inside, Rand said: "What in blazes is this?"

Jim pulled the door closed. "This hoodlum will tell you the truth about the *Crescent Star* explosion," he explained. "He had a hand in it." He gestured toward Chimp with his gun and said: "Talk up. Who got the loot off that boat—Ruman or Bates?"

Chimp Delong was still whimpering, a man shaken to the core. "Ruman," he muttered. "He killed Ed Wiley, and last night he killed a man in Frisco — old Les Cooke. I swear I did no killing!"

The Wells Fargo man choked, then swore. "Dammit! And I called Bates a liar!"

Hiram Bates didn't seem to care. He was lying on a bunk, sick.

Rand stared at Jim. "Just who are you, mister?" he demanded.

Jim didn't answer. He let himself out of the cabin, on his way to find George Ruman. He was close to the pilothouse when a wild yell lifted: "Fire!"

Even as the alarm rang out, Jim knew that Ruman was again at work, for twice before the man had used fire in attempts to cover up his crimes. The *Crescent Star* had burned after the explosion. Les Cooke's room had been set ablaze. . . . Murder, robbery, arson.

In that first moment after the shout rang out, Jim Logan realized that George Ruman was a maniac. And in that first moment, a sheet of flame leaped up and engulfed the boat's bow. If the fire had been deliberately started, it had been set at the

right place. The fast forward movement of the *Sacramento Star* was already sweeping the flames back amidship.

Crewmen appeared, and the mate bellowed orders from the pilothouse. The passengers came rushing to deck, panic gripping them, and their cries lifted high above the roar of the flames.

"It's in the hold—and there's powder in the cargo!"

It was that shout that turned fifty and more people into a crazily scrambling mob. A man jumped overboard and two more followed him. The water now had a ruddy sheen, and the night was suddenly brighter than day.

Jim Logan found himself pushing through the milling crowd. He had forgotten George Ruman. He was searching for Martha Wiley. Why he so desperately sought her, he did not stop to think. He merely knew that he had to find her.

The roaring, spreading flames swept back along the port side, and therefore the passengers were driven to the starboard side aft. Jim fought his way through the crowd. He saw the Army officer's wife, but no other woman.

Crossing the after deck, he started along the port side. A curtain of fire seemed to jump at him. Two figures were silhouetted against that glaring curtain — two figures struggling with each other. A man and a woman. As Jim ran forward, the man struck the woman and, as she sagged limply, picked her up. He flung the woman bodily over the rail, and she was lost to Jim's sight.

Ruman was about to jump after Martha Wiley, but Jim's arms caught him and dragged him back. A bellowed curse ripped from Ruman's throat. He broke free and whirled about, striking out. Jim took the blow against his chest, and hit back. His blow drove into Ruman's grimacing face and staggered the man backwards. Ruman fell sprawling amid the flames. He screamed and leaped up, and his clothes had caught fire. He came at Jim, a living torch. A gun was in his hand now, and he fired wildly. Jim drew his six-gun, and shot Ruman through the chest. He did not wait to see the man collapse to the blazing deck, but jumped to the railing.

The *Sacramento Star's* one small boat had been launched, and now was drifting rapidly away. It was into this boat that Ruman had thrown Martha Wiley; Jim saw her lying still, as though unconscious or dazed. Jim threw away his gun as he ran aft, then he peeled off his coat. When he dived over the side, close to the stern, he noticed that the paddles were slowly coming to a stop.

Once in the water, Jim struck out for the drifting rowboat. He was winded by the time he reached it and dragged himself up over the side, but he reached for the oars without waiting to get back his breath. There was work to do. Panic-stricken people had to be taken off the burning river boat before the flames reached the cargo of blasting powder and blew it up.

After it was over, the whole business seemed like a nightmare that

could be easily forgotten. But it had been real enough, terrible enough. Jim Logan had rowed for the river bank and lifted Martha out to safety. He had also removed from the small boat a heavy wooden chest. which he later found to contain the loot from the first boat George Ruman had burned.

Leaving Martha, who had regained consciousness, Jim had shoved off to rescue as many people as he could. He had dragged them from the water as they jumped from the river boat, filling his frail craft. He had made trip after trip. . . . Finally when the *Sacramento Star* was a mass of flames from end to end, the explosion had come. With so much powder going off, it had seemed as though the world had split apart.

There were lives lost—half a dozen at least. Chimp Delong was dead, killed by Rand when he attacked the Wells Fargo agent in an attempt to escape. Hiram Bates had been saved, Rand having gotten him off the burning boat. The survivors huddled wretchedly on the river bank until a side-wheeler headed down river put in to help them.

As the others boarded the rescue craft, Jim Logan went to give Martha Wiley a hand. Despite the brutal treatment she had received from George Ruman, she had no real injuries. She accepted Jim's arm, however, and leaned upon him as they moved slowly along the bank.

"You were right," she said dully. "I went to my cabin and my carpetbag was gone. I went to George and accused him. He acted like a wild man, grabbing me and forcing me back to my room. He locked me in; then later he came and said the boat was on fire, that he was taking me off. . . ." She paused, shuddered. "When we got on deck, I saw the flames just beginning to break out. I knew then that he had set fire to the *Sacramento Star*."

"It's over," Jim said gently. "You needn't be afraid any longer."

Martha turned her face to him, and Jim saw that she was no longer frightened. Her hand tightened on his arm and she leaned more heavily upon him. And somehow, Jim Logan knew that after tonight she would always lean upon him and depend on his strength. And that was the way he wanted it to be—forever.

THE END

COWBOY SAYIN'

U's punchers' eddication
Ain't no problem, we'll allow—
For all a cowpoke needs to be
Is smarter than the cow!

S. OMAR BARKER

PROSPECTING FOR JADE

by

Jim West

A rich deposit of green, translucent jade can be a bonanza find for a lucky prospector. Made into finely carved ornaments that command a high price, jade is a semi-precious mineral that has been highly prized by oriental peoples throughout the ages.

Until recently jade was found and mined chiefly in upper Burma, China and Thibet — off the beat, generally speaking, of American prospectors. It's a different story now. Jade of good quality has been found in Wyoming and in Alaska.

The new jade discoveries have attracted considerable attention. They have been given widespread publicity that has set prospectors talking. A minor jade rush has already occurred in Wyoming, and one in Alaska may well be in the offing.

In Wyoming the deposit of high-grade jade was found in the Crook Mountain district near Lander in the central part of the State not too far from the old Atlantic City gold-mining region. Lander itself is a colorful town built along the willow-lined banks of the Popo Agie River. One of the oldest communities in Wyoming, its thoroughly western Main street attracts blanket Indians, cowboys, ranchers, hunters and tourists.

The jade that brought the town into recent prominence as far as rock hounds, mineral enthusiasts and prospectors are concerned, has been lying around the vicinity for a long time. But nobody seemed to know what it was. For quite a while Lander jewelers made souvenir trinkets out of specimens of black jade found in the locality without knowing its true worth. Incidentally this Wyoming black jade is reportedly the only known black jade in the world.

The Fremont County jade deposits appear to be scattered throughout the area reaching from Dubois, Lysite and north of Shoshoni to Medicine Bow in the south. Samples picked up were tentatively called almost everything but what the stuff really was —jade. Jade, folks seemed to think was a material peculiar to the Orient. It wasn't expected in Wyoming.

Nevertheless it's there. That has been definitely proved, and the mineral identified by experts in Washington. Later jade authorities from the West Coast heard of the discovery, and the hunt was on.

Jade is a fairly light mineral, but extremely hard. A good steel knife won't scratch it. It has a glassy lustre and the color varies from white or

grey to light green, and even black. It occurs as small, unpolished stones, larger pieces and in boulders weighing more than a hundred pounds.

Not long after Wyoming jade began attracting attention another, perhaps even richer, discovery of the valuable mineral was reported in Alaska. The latter find was made along the upper Kobuk River, north of the Arctic Circle. That, too, is gold prospecting country.

In Alaska the jade pieces, of clear, shining cool green, are found in the stream beds, notably in the vicinity of what is known as Jade Mountain. At times the boulders of jade material are more than a pair of strong men can handle.

The boulders, however, are not nuggets of solid jade, the way a similar nugget of gold might be. Often only a small part of the "jade" boulder is sufficiently clear and flaw-free to be classed as gem grade, or suitable for intricate carving by skilled Chinese jade cutters.

Even so the Alaskan jade boulders are real prizes worth any prospector's search. The value of the raw, good grade material, sawed into slabs but not carved or polished runs around $25 a pound according to reports. Much depends on the color, texture, and flawlessness of the material.

During last year's summer season raw jade and jade boulders from Alaska's jade deposits were hauled down river by boat, or freighted to the sea coast and shipped to the States, the largest recorded single piece weighing almost four hundred pounds. A real jade boom seems in the offing. Alaska prospectors who formerly sought placer gold have already been busy around Jade Mountain, staking claims on placer jade.

In Asia, the age-old continent for jade mining, jade is obtained by placer mining stream beds containing stones or pebbles, and, more rarely, boulders of almost pure jade. It is also mined by quarrying large deposits of jade matrix. Some of these early jade quarries are hundreds of years old and have produced fortunes.

The Orient has always treated jade with a peculiar reverence accorded no other gem material. Poems of early Chinese emperors have been carved on tablets of jade. Jade amulets of different forms have always been popular with the Chinese people who value jade above all precious stones.

Like other precious gem stones of the ancients, jade was always supposed to possess certain special curative powers. Powdered and mixed with water, a good grade jade stone was believed a sure cure for all kinds of internal disorders. In addition it strengthened the body, prevented fatigue and prolonged life. At least according to the superstitions surrounding the stone.

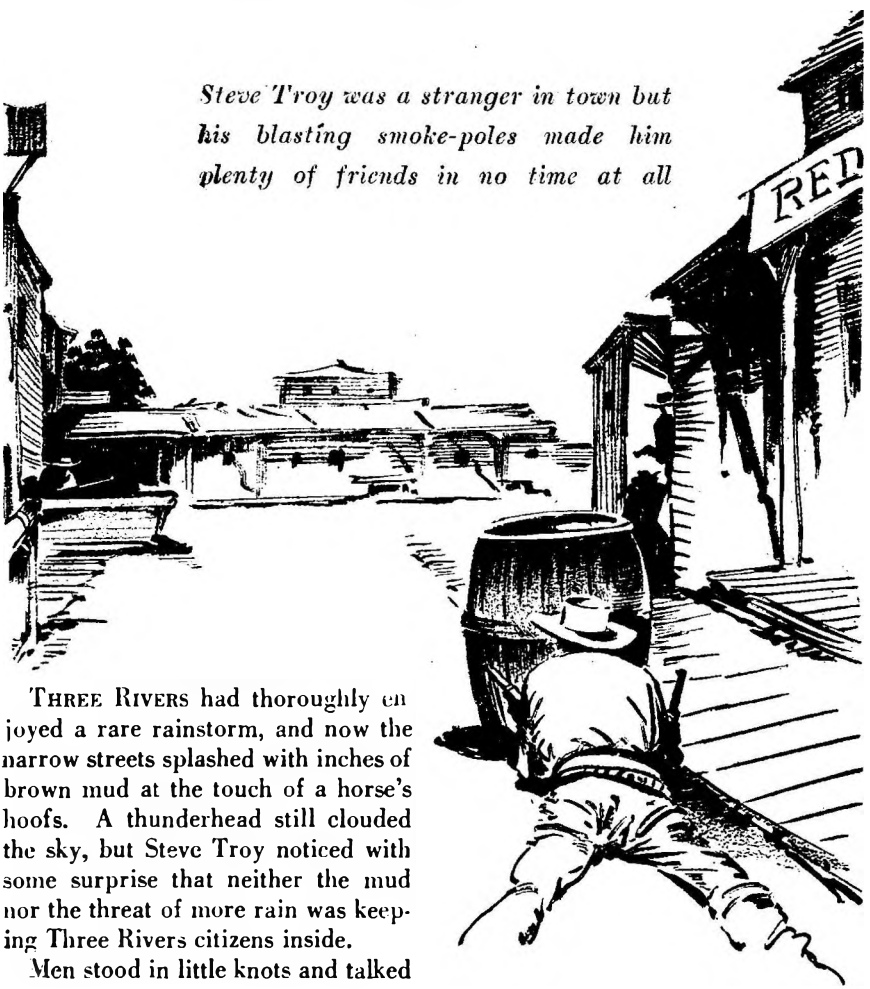
Regardless of jade's doubtful use as a substitute for vitamins, it is a fine gem stone capable of being carved into truly beautiful works of art. It is on this score that its value as a rare mineral rests, and is likely to be maintained whether the jade itself is mined in Asia, or the newly booming Alaska jade fields.

THE END

TRIGGER TRYST

By Ruel McDaniel

Steve Troy was a stranger in town but his blasting smoke-poles made him plenty of friends in no time at all



THREE RIVERS had thoroughly enjoyed a rare rainstorm, and now the narrow streets splashed with inches of brown mud at the touch of a horse's hoofs. A thunderhead still clouded the sky, but Steve Troy noticed with some surprise that neither the mud nor the threat of more rain was keeping Three Rivers citizens inside.

Men stood in little knots and talked

idly, as if they were waiting for something. There was quite a bit of joking, he could tell by the laughter, and even in its drenched blanket, Three Rivers exhibited a vague holiday spirit.

The moment he rode into the end of Main Street, Steve noticed that people began watching him. As he moved leisurely down to the center of the little cattle-trail boom town, men stopped talking to turn and look at him. Some even followed him at a safe distance.

He pulled off to one side where several men had been talking until he rode up.

"Where's Bart Thor's saloon?" he asked.

One man coughed suddenly. The others exchanged glances.

"Third buildin' on the left in the next block," one man spoke in awe. "Say, Bat, you shore believe in startin' at the top, eh?" The other men laughed nervously.

"Thanks," Steve said. He rode on, puzzled at the behavior of these men and the way everyone looked at him. And what did that fellow call him? Bat, or something. He shook his head. Funny how everyone stared at him.

"Must think I'm a couple other cowpokes," he mumbled aloud in the manner of a man who has been a long time alone.

He quickly spotted the saloon indicated. It was easily the most ornate building in town, and even a block away, in the middle of the day, the noise and music coming from the saloon were plain to hear.

Steve pulled up near the sidewalk and reined in his zebra dun. He shoved his black, flat-crowned hat back on his head, wiped his face with a red-and-blue bandanna and removed the makin's from his Levis. By the time he had rolled and lit a smoke, the doors and windows of every building in that part of the block showed heads and shoulders of men and women. He thought they looked like statues, they were so quiet and still. Those near enough for him to see clearly watched his minutest moves.

He shook his head again.

He couldn't understand it at all. It was the first time he had ever set foot in Three Rivers. If he knew anyone within two hundred miles of Three Rivers — besides Bart Thor — it was certainly an accident. Still, the way people were behaving, they must know him.

He scratched his head, adjusted his hat well down over his squinting gray eyes. He was within half a block of Thor's Red Dog Saloon, and this was about right, he finally decided. He dismounted and wrapped his reins through a hitching ring, still dripping from the rain.

He removed his two long-barreled Colt .44s, one at a time, spun the cylinders and tried the hammer mechanism. Satisfied, he returned each to its holsters, tied far down on his thigh.

"He's a wildcat and lobo all mixed up in one hide!" he heard a man back there somewhere in one of the doorways murmur to his next-door neighbor. "I wouldn't believe it if I wasn't seein' it with my own blinkers!"

"Yeah, I told you that's the way he works. Ain't afraid of Old Nick himself," the neighbor answered.

The verbal exchange worried Steve.

This thing was going a little too far. True, he wasn't in the habit of backing water in a shoot-out, but he certainly had no reputation as a gunhawk. He even glanced at his reflection in a plate-glass window and stopped and checked himself up and down. Nothing had been added. There was no mistake about it; they were watching him, talking about him.

"Town's gone plumb loco!" he muttered to himself. Then he flushed with embarrassment. He had forgotten that he was in town, in the presence of other human beings. He'd have to draw a short rope on that one-way talk.

When he turned back to face the street, something in the pattern was missing. Then with a sudden alertness, it dawned on him. There was no longer any music or noise coming from the Red Dog Saloon. He checked then and with a vague uneasiness he realized that the whole town was as quiet as boothill at midnight in the dark of the moon.

Then off in the brush a dog howled. The sound, incongruous in midday, sent a shiver through Steve.

He was really alert now. This thing had gone far enough. It had just rained. Everybody ought to be celebrating. In all the other cattle-country towns of the arid West, every rain was a "million-dollar" rain, and it always called for a celebration.

Then something else caught Steve's eye—something that made his nerves tingle. He saw a man crouching behind an old water trough across the street, a few yards below the Red Dog. And he had no more than spotted him when he saw another poking his head cautiously around the rear corner of a plank building almost across the street. He knew the last man was watching his every move.

He shifted his scrutiny hastily to Bart Thor's saloon and he thought he saw the furtive movements of men behind half-drawn blinds.

He cut his eyes back to the spot where he had observed the man in the rear of the building just in time to see him rise and point a six-gun toward him.

Steve dived for the nearest protection. It happened to be a water barrel about ten feet down the sidewalk from him. He didn't run. He sailed. He landed on his belly and both guns were in his hands. A bullet crashed the plate-glass window where he had just seen himself.

That first shot evidently was a signal. The man behind the water trough below the saloon poked a rifle across the top of the trough, and fire spurted from the long barrel. It thudded into the water barrel and made two clean holes, one in front and one behind. The bullet touched Steve's hat brim as it passed. Splinters from the punctured barrel scratched his right hand. He wished the barrel was plumb full of water to check the power of the bullets.

Now two guns were roaring from inside the saloon. A bullet punctured the lower part of the barrel and water spouted into the muddy street. Another kicked up mud no more than six inches from Steve's toes.

All this naturally had caught Steve unawares. He noticed that the guns shook a little in his hands. He had been too busy thus far ducking lead

to sling any of his own. It was coming too fast and from too many directions. He gathered his wits and decided to hold his fire until somebody showed with a gun in his hand, or at least until the gunmen had exhausted their first round.

The thought that kept running through his mind was how anyone could possibly have tipped off Bart Thor that he was in town. Thor could not possibly have known in advance that he was in the vicinity. So far as Thor could know, Steve was still in Mission City jail, awaiting trial for murder and bank robbery.

Yet he had been the center of attention from the moment he hit Main Street, and before he had got mud on his shoes, Thor had his gang barricaded and slinging lead at him. The whole thing was loco!

At that second, the man behind the store was more daring than cautious. He stepped into the open and aimed deliberately. Before he triggered, one of Steve's .44s roared. The man screamed and hit the mud, to remain there.

The gunmen in the saloon turned a terrific volley upon Steve now, and the rifleman ventured another shot. Lead was coming so thick Steve had to burrow into the mud and lie there. Even then, a bullet tore through his left jacket sleeve and burned his arm. Another nicked his boot heel.

There was nothing to do but wait out this burst. The water barrel was like a sieve now, with water spurting from half a dozen holes. At any moment it might fall apart.

Suddenly the rifleman raised his head for another shot and Steve chanced exposure to draw a bead on him. His bullet sent the man's pinched-crown hat flying. Steve followed with another shot aimed at the bottom of the trough.

The rifleman suddenly leaped, dropped his rifle and zigzagged toward the rear of the saloon. Steve aimed at his legs. One bullet brought him down. He moaned and began snaking along on his belly toward the rear of the Red Dog.

"Hell!" he heard somebody yell from one of the buildings behind him. "I'm not gonna set here and see 'em gang up on the feller. Come on!"

A half-dozen guns roared from behind window facings and window blinds along the street back of Steve. Glass shattered in the Red Dog and splinters flew from the red slabs of the blinds.

"Thanks, gents!" Steve yelled over his shoulder. "But don't harm Bart Thor. Whatever you do, let him live!"

"As you say, marshal!" a man yelled back. "Can't see why, though."

Fire from the saloon was wild now, as though the gunmen in there had been thrown into panic by the sudden turn of the fight. They fired into store fronts, windows, the mud of the street. Momentarily at least, fire had been drawn away from Steve.

The citizens kept firing into the saloon. A cry from the Red Dog told of a hit.

"Burn the hell hole to the ground!" a high-pitched voice yelled behind Steve. "Rid Three Rivers of that cancer for all time!"

As if by magic, a fagot of cotton and kerosene, fiercely flaming, flew from a doorway just back of Steve.

It sailed across the narrow street and fell a dozen feet short of the front of the Red Dog. It sputtered and smoked in the mud.

Another quickly appeared. This landed on the eave of the building and rolled off, landing no more than a foot from the wall of the wood structure.

While the men apparently were preparing more torches, the doors of the Red Dog suddenly burst open. Six or seven men dived out. They crouched and spread out, all firing promiscuously toward Steve and his unknown backers.

"Rush 'em!" a loud, deep voice commanded. "Pete, douse that fire!"

It was Bart Thor! Steve would have recognized that cold, harsh voice anywhere on the darkest night.

"Thor's mine!" he yelled back at the men who were siding him.

Thor's gunnies crouched and weaved. Fire poured from the buildings, and within a second, two of the attackers went down. One flailed his legs around in the mud like a dying prairie chicken.

Suddenly one of the gang flung his gun into the mud and raised his hands. "Don't shoot! I quit!"

That threw panic into the others. Their fire was still wild, and Steve knew they were being driven blindly to their death by the strong will of Bart Thor.

Another quit cold. He tossed his gun into the air, turned around and ran back to the saloon, which was blazing a little at one corner.

Bart Thor looked around and found himself deserted. He began to curse and Steve tingled at sight of a flash of fear on the big man's face.

Steve raised up from behind the barrel, gripped his guns and started toward Thor.

"I want you — alive, Thor!" he called flatly.

"Steve Troy!" The words were tinged in surprised fear. "Where in hades—"

"Drop the guns, Thor!" Steve cut in.

"I'll see you in hell first!" Thor flipped one arm taut and fired from his side. The bullet nicked Steve's left shoulder as he crouched. But his right hand was working. A bullet from his .44, aimed slowly and deliberately, sent Thor's gun to the mud. Thor seized his hand and yelled. Steve felt a shiver of elation as he saw blood spurt from between Thor's gripping fingers.

"Reach!" Steve commanded.

Slowly Bart Thor stood ankle-deep in red mud and eased his hands into the air.

Men poured from buildings on both sides of the street and corraled all the fleeing henchmen they could find. Then some of the townsmen gathered around Steve and Thor.

"Put a bandage on him and then tie his hands behind him. He's taking a long, tiresome ride!" Steve told some of the men.

One man suddenly seized Steve's hand and began pumping it. "Prettiest, coolest gunnin' I ever saw!" he exclaimed. "Might've knowed you'd do it. We should've pitched in and helped you at the start, 'stead of hidin' like old women. Bat, you're—"

"Somebody call my name?" A mild-mannered man in his thirties sat a dapple-gray stallion at the outer circle of men, completely unnoticed until he spoke. There was a twinkle of amusement in his squinted gray eyes.

Some of the citizens idly looked at the stranger. "You're a little late for the excitement, brother," one of them volunteered.

"From the looks of things, I am, at that. Don't see why in thunder you sent for me, with a marshal like that on the ground!" the newcomer said.

"Who — who the heck are you, stranger?"

"Bat Masterson, of course. You sent for me to marshal Three Rivers. Remember?"

"Well I'll be flamboozled!" the spokesman exclaimed. All eyes flashed to the stranger, then back to Steve Troy.

"Then who's this wild ranihan—this fire-eatin' galoot that cleaned out Bart Thor and his whole danged gang?"

Steve's face flushed with embarrassment. "Well. I'll be jiggered!" he exclaimed. "That explains a lot. Couldn't even guess why all the interest in me—and the sudden welcome." He grinned up at Bat Masterson. "They sent for you to be marshal. You were due today and everybody was looking for you—including Bart Thor. I'll be jiggered!"

Bat Masterson dismounted, a grin wreathing his pleasant face. "Good thing for me the rain and mud delayed me. Looks like you saved me a lot of trouble, Mr. . . ."

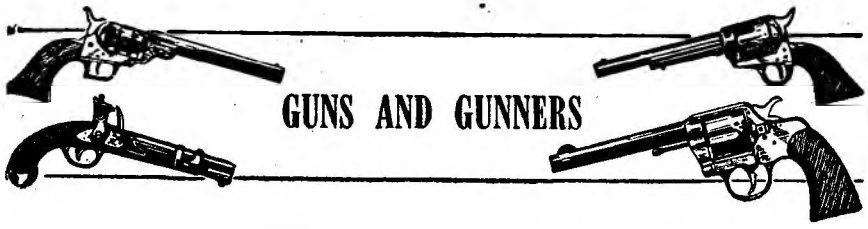
"Steve Troy — from Mission City. I rode up here to take Bart Thor back. He's a little behind with his talking. He robbed the bank in Mission City and murdered the cashier—after planting a frame on me. I managed to break out and after weeks on the owlhoot, I found out where Thor was. So I just rode up to take him back to Mission City, for a talking bee. Didn't mean to cause such a hullabaloo!"

"Well, I'll be flamboozled!" exclaimed the spokesman of Three Rivers. "That beats all get-out!"

And Bat Masterson thought it was the funniest one he ever had heard.

THE END

The Sahuaro National Monument, east of Tucson, Arizona, is one of the most unusual forests in the world. Stretching for miles at the base of the Santa Catalina Mountains, these weirdly shaped sahuaro cacti raise their ancient trunks, some of them two and three feet thick and forty feet high, in a fantastic maze. Since they grow only an inch or two a year it is believed that some of these tallest of desert plants are around 250 years old but, not having rings like trees it is difficult to determine their age. The Indians made sirup and wine from the sahuaro fruit and pounded the seeds into a flour. They also fashioned ribs for their huts from the tough fibers found inside the plants. The large creamy white blossom is the State flower of Arizona.



By Captain Philip B. Sharpe

By the time the ink is dry on this issue, those who handload their own ammunition will get a break. The primer, the most critical part of ammunition in the current shortage, is now coming back on the market.

No one has ever estimated the number of American shooters who handload their ammunition. It began with the first metallic cartridge, and has been practiced in laboratories, in home workshops, in the kitchen, in cities and on farms.

Back some 75 years ago, handloading was a necessity. Ammunition was hard to get, and hunters and target shooters alike considered that they must "roll their own" most of the time. Then factories began to supply plenty of ammunition and the art of handloading slipped. It was never extinct, but shortly after the first World War, it came back on a bigger scale than ever. Cheap, poor-grade loading tools gave way to precision equipment. Today the average gunbug has a shop full of all kinds of these tools.

Not long ago this department received a letter asking a simple question. "In your writings," it began, "you speak of handloading. Many people call it *reloading*. What is the difference?"

Technically, *reloading* means to take a fired cartridge case and make it work again. *Handloading* is the same, but often the handloader uses a new cartridge case, never before loaded.

The average handloader practices the art for several very good reasons. First is the element of cost. The chap who does not reload his ammunition, throws away the most expensive part of the cartridge — the empty brass case. Another very good reason is that the handloader can develop ammunition to fit his individual gun. He experiments with loads slightly different from the normal factory standard, weighs his powder carefully — and finds a load which will give more accuracy than the factory type.

Handloading today requires intelligence and care. It differs from that of fifty years ago in that modern ammunition is far more powerful; powders are different, and jacketed bullets are used for most rifles. Handloaded ammunition can be very dangerous. It is easy to build pressures beyond the safe point, but if proper intelligence and care is used in the assembly of known loading combinations, there is no element of danger.

During the recent war, with no commercial ammunition loaded, hand-

loading was required by the chap who liked to shoot. Although powders were scarce, most of the boys were able to get some, but primers—that was something else. The existing supplies were slowly bought up, and primers retailing at $3.80 per thousand, were frequently sold for as much as $10 for that quantity.

After the war, ammunition makers refused to return primers to the market, claiming that they needed all they could make for limited supplies of their commercial ammunition. But the demand is changing this. The manufacturers are relenting and soon you will be able to get what primers you need.

Reloading tools? There are dozens of makes and styles on the market, ranging from a few dollars to a hundred. You can spend almost any amount of money on this game, and the boys who handload insist that it is more fun to shoot their own precision developments than to burn standard fodder.

Have you had your rifle or shotgun repaired, yet? I visited some of the arms plants last fall and found the worst mess I have ever seen. Repair facilities were limited; skilled labor was hard to find. Every arms plant was far behind in its repair work.

Every factory has been doing its best to produce sufficient parts to keep the repair department in stock on all models, but the lapse of more than four years brought such a flood that they couldn't handle the work. I was at one of the plants when a chap came in. He had driven 150 miles just to get his gun in working order, but there were many ahead of him. I held a conference with one of the boys, then went into the shop and fixed his gun. He'll never know who did it!

Once again, because of the hundreds of letters—there has never been a cartridge made in this country to fit a Japanese rifle. The Japs had two rifles, a 6.5 mm. and a 7.7 mm. Both cartridges are special, and no American cartridge will fit. If you have one of these rifles, you have a souvenir, only.

The standard German rifle cartridge is the 7.92 mm. Mauser, manufactured here as the 8 mm. Special. Your dealer can supply it. The standard Russian cartridge is the 7.62 mm. It is made by all American firms and your dealer can take care of you. The old French cartridge is the 8 mm. Lebel. It is made by American manufacturers.

Pistol ammunition for foreign weapons is also easy to get—in some calibers. Most foreign pocket pistols are 6.35, 7.65 and 9 mm. The first two are the .25 automatic, .32 automatic, and the last is the 9 mm. short or .380 automatic. Military guns, like the Luger and P-38, use the 9 mm. Luger cartridge. All are made here. Most other guns take special cartridges that are *not* made here.

Captain Sharpe is back after more than three years in the Army and your letters concerning firearms will receive his prompt attention. Address your inquiries to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.

MINES AND MINING

By John A. Thompson

DRIFT MINING is a form of placer mining that can lead to rich results.

Ordinarily the placer gold prospector searches for his yellow-metal pay streak along and in the present beds of streams, creeks and mountain watercourses. But in the age-old movements and upheavals of our restless earth, some ancient stream channels carrying their burden of virgin gold have been shifted or blocked. They no longer follow the line of the present stream beds.

In gold placer country, these old channels remain as bench placers or as so-called "buried" placers. The old channels may be either higher or lower than the present stream beds. They may even cut across present valleys instead of running through them.

Such placer deposits are often hard to find. Usually prospect shafts must be sunk to locate the pay streak beneath its covering of waste material. Once located, the pay streaks are likely to be rich. An individual or small group of partners can generally, where the overburden is thick, reach the pay gravel and get out the values by what is known as "drifting."

Reader J.N., of Boise, Idaho, a placer prospector of several years' experience, has just asked us for the story on drift mining.

As far as the placer prospector is concerned, drift mining is essentially the mining of a placer deposit by underground mining methods.

Bonanza gold placer deposits in ancient stream channels have been discovered and drift-mined in California, Alaska, British Columbia and other prominent gold placer mining sections.

The first problem, once prospecting has divulged the existence of, and the values in, an old channel pay streak, is of course to reach the streak and bedrock. If the deposit is buried in the bottom of a valley, a shaft is sunk, then drifts or tunnels are run along the bedrock following the streak. If the deposit lies on a bench or hillside above the present local stream level, a drift or tunnel just above the bedrock can sometimes be driven directly along the pay streak.

The primary difference between drift mining and hardrock mining is that, in most cases, the drift miner must put his shafts down or cut his tunnels through loosely consolidated material — packed sand, gravel and often boulders. The hardrock miner blasts his way through solid rock.

As a rule, in drift mining timbering has to go along with the excavation. Drifting in permanently frozen

ground such as is found in Alaska or the Far North is an exception. There a tunnel or drift in ice-cemented gravel will usually stand pretty well.

Where timbering is needed, the ground can be held by timber sets consisting of two stout posts or uprights, a cap and a sill. The latter are top and bottom cross pieces respectively. Logs cut from small trees make good set timbers. The bark should be peeled off before using them.

In putting up the set, the posts rest on the sill; the cap rests on the posts. Both cap and sill should be notched to prevent the posts slipping under side pressure. When the drift is directly on solid bedrock the sill or ground piece is not needed. Sets are customarily placed four feet apart. That is, at four foot intervals along the tunnel.

The tunnel walls and roof are held back by driving lagging or spiling between the sets, in back of the timbers and against the walls or roof. Spiling may be sawn lumber or split timber cut from logs of large trees. The individual pieces should be about two inches thick, from six to nine inches wide, and from five to six feet long.

Small poles are sometimes used for lagging, but they are not, as a rule, very satisfactory.

Drifts should be run on a down grade towards the portal or tunnel entrance. There are two important reasons for this. One: a down grade provides drainage. Two: a down grade means pushing a loaded car or wheelbarrow downhill, and the empty car or wheelbarrow into the tunnel against the grade.

Don't make the grade too steep. A one-foot grade in a hundred-foot length of tunnel will take care of quite a large water flow and is not too steep for working in. If, however, the water flow doesn't require such a slope, reduce the grade to six inches in a hundred feet of tunnel.

A drainage ditch should be cut along one side of the tunnel floor. Its size, like the steepness of the grade, will depend on the flow of water. Where full timber sets are used—sets that include a sill or bottom piece—the ditch naturally passes under the sills.

For moderately short drifts and small-scale work, a wheelbarrow can be used for handling the muck and bringing out the gold-bearing material for washing and recovery of the metal. But lay down a plank or split timber runway for the barrow to be pushed on.

In longer tunnels it may be better to use a light ore car. You can build the car yourself if you can get hold of a couple of pairs of flanged wheels and axles. Homemade wooden rails can be made to do too, if the work isn't too heavy. Surface the wood rails with strap iron and they will be much better.

If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosng a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Sreet & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y., will bring a prompt, authoritative, personal reply.

WHERE TO GO

By John North

THERE is one sure way to get into back country. Pack in. Armed with maps, a compass, and carrying your victuals, sleeping shelter, and a few other indispensable items on your back, the wilderness is yours.

Back-packing is the sort of vacation trip fellows like R.F., of Chester, Pennsylvania, enjoy. "It may sound like a postman's holiday," he wrote us. "I was a foot soldier during the war, a lowly member of the lowly Infantry, but we got there just the same. Before the war I used to take back-packing trips. I still enjoy them. I always take fishing tackle along and, depending on the season, sometimes my hunting rifle. Even so I would appreciate some practical dope on different types of pack sacks, pack boards and so forth. Do you favor a tumpline for packing in essential camping equipment?"

Getting at that tumpline query first, R.F.—personally, no. Most tumpline harnesses which support the pack by means of a tump or wide strap across the forehead are designed for professional packing and heavy loads, say from sixty or eighty pounds up to a hundred pounds and over. That's more weight than the average vacation back-packer usually carries.

On the other hand, if you want to save several trips on a canoe portage, a tumpline will enable you to double up the customary loads. For special occasions such as provisioning a permanent wilderness camp or toting in a camp cook stove, a tumpline will also come in handy.

Tumplines have been the Indian method of carrying since Hector was a pup. They were the traditional packing method of the early Hudson's Bay Company voyageurs. They are still a favorite packing device among trappers and professional packers in the Hudson Bay country.

Most pack boards, too, such as the famous "Yukon" board which has a spruce frame, canvas-covered and fitted with wide web shoulder straps, are designed primarily for outsize loads. Using such a board, a fifty-pound carry is "easy," and with a little experience most outdoorsmen can handle a hundred pounds without too much trouble.

Incidentally during the war our troops in Alaska made good use of a new pack-board development — a Yukon-type board with an aluminum frame. The whole thing weighed only between three and four pounds, had excellent carrying capacity and was not easily broken. If bent or damaged, the frame could be hammered

back into shape. Such a model ought to be a good bet for the civilian packer requiring or partial towards the pack-board type of carry.

For the outfit of the average back-packer a simple pack harness is both light and inexpensive. The harness generally consists of shoulder straps connected by a single back strap through which may be looped two additional straps holding your neatly bundled equipment.

The harness will handle an outfit packed inside blankets and sleeping gear, or packed in two medium-sized duffle bags. One bag can be used for grub and cooking utensils. The other for blankets and personal stuff.

Don't make the mistake, though, of using your light tent, if you carry one, or your shelter cloth as an outside covering to wrap your outfit in. Tent or shelter cloth are important items of your equipment. A rip or tear when squeezing through rough country can ruin them. Instead of running this risk, wrap your outfit tightly in a strong, waterproof canvas sheet. The added protection is well worth the extra weight.

Old U.S. Army type knapsacks are, in general, too small for a back-packer's complete camp equipment. Moreover they are not designed for heavy loads. The drag is on the outer part of the shoulders instead of in nearer the neck where it should be.

Rucksacks, on the other hand, are light and roomy. They are made-to-order for day trips where the night's stay will be made at some established camp or cabin. They are not so good for the back-packer sleeping out and toting his sleeping quarters with him. Rucksacks ride too low with a heavy load, throwing much of the weight against the small of the back, and their contents tend to bunch up uncomfortably.

A regular pack sack large enough to hold the back-packer's entire light camping equipment is about the best bet. They come in many types. A long-time favorite among trappers and experienced woodsmen is the "Duluth" sack.

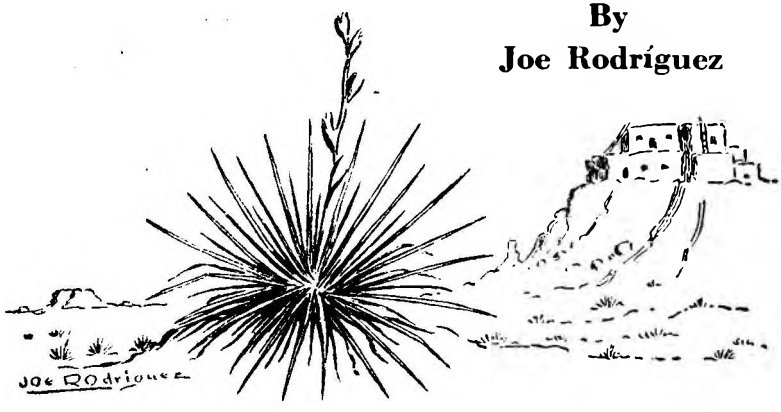
Fitted with two broad-banded shoulder straps, it has no stiff frame sides but is made in the form of a simple bag with a large flap half as long as the bag itself. The "Duluth" type sacks are easy to load. Their soft construction permits them to rest flatly against the bearer's back. And a size large enough to hold a foot camper's essential needs—twenty-six inches wide by twenty-eight inches long—weighs less than three pounds.

As a final word of warning, shun any pack sack or harness having crossed front straps or a horizontal strap across the chest. Such designs may be intended as weight equalizers, but they tend to press against the lungs, constricting the breathing. You'll notice this particularly wherever the going gets really tough.

Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply. Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

DESERT SHAMPOO

By
Joe Rodríguez



Indian tribes in the Southwest knew the luxury of foamy shampoos long before the Spanish and the Anglo even thought of putting foot on American shores. For the root of the yucca is rich with soap and, when peeled of the bark, beaten and rubbed between the hands with water like soap, it produces fluffy suds that leave the hair soft and shiny.

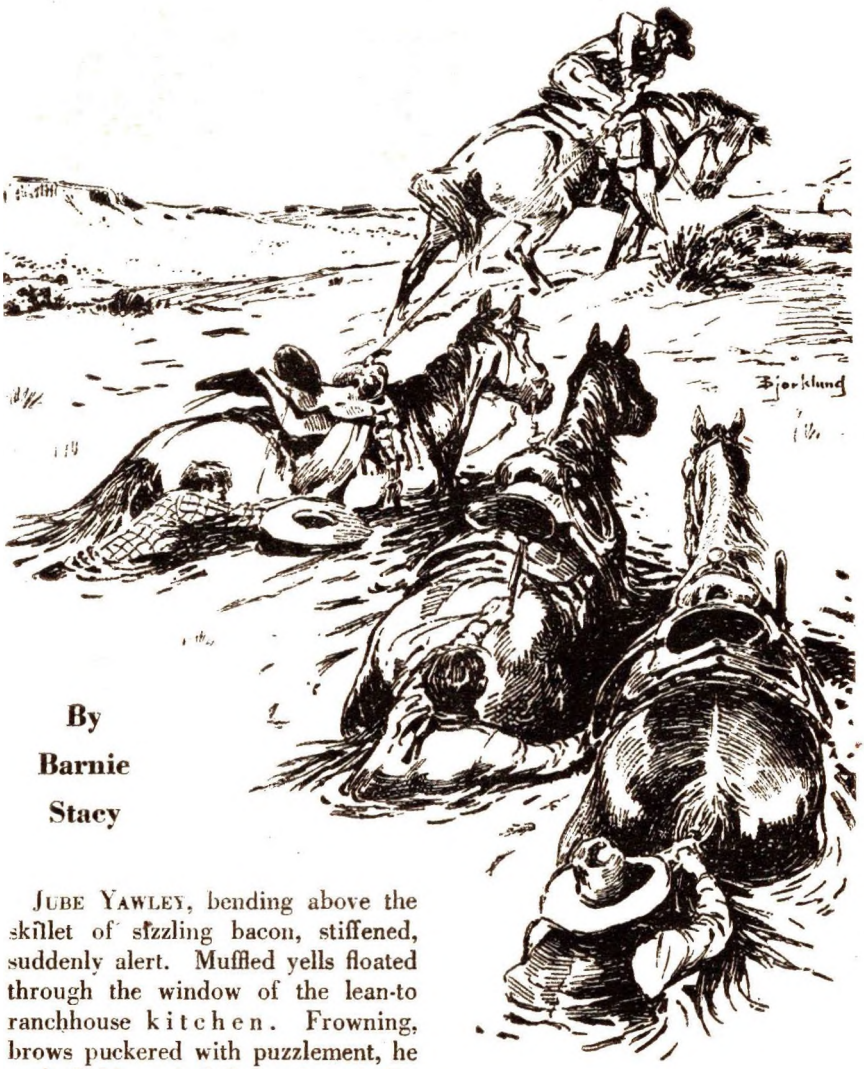
When beaten, this root has a very pleasant, fragrant tang very much like palm leaves, and tastes like any of our modern toilet soap with the effect on the hair equal to any shampoo on the market. Even the top of the yucca is utilized, for the pointed stalks are shredded and the long fibers tied together in a round bundle, forming a very effective brush. This is used to brush the particles of the root pulp left after the hair has been washed, rinsed and dried.

Today this primitive shampoo is still a household byword in the Indian villages of Arizona and New Mexico in spite of the modern standards of living that are rapidly coming into the scene. One can imagine the surprise that the Spanish must have experienced on seeing beautiful, healthy hair in a land where even water was a priceless luxury.

To the average traveler this picturesque cactus which he sees so abundant throughout the arid West is apparently useless, just another hostile plant among many. The sharp, daggerlike stalks raise their porcupine fingers, threatening the unwary passerby. But to our first Western inhabitants it was just another of nature's gifts extended in her usual zany manner — a trick package, so to speak. And the only explanation that we can surmise is that the thorns have been nature's way of protecting it for man's exclusive and much-needed use.

Saving those double-crossing renegades from the quicksand led Jube Hawley himself into a

DEATH TRAP



By Barnie Stacy

JUBE YAWLEY, bending above the skillet of sizzling bacon, stiffened, suddenly alert. Muffled yells floated through the window of the lean-to ranchhouse kitchen. Frowning, brows puckered with puzzlement, he cocked his grizzled head and lis-

tened. Several fast shots perforated the squawking chorus as he stalked to the window.

A moment later his perplexity turned slowly into a scowl as disgusted comprehension dawned. Taking the skillet off the stove, he shucked his greasy feed-sack apron.

Dusk was settling as, with a final sniff at the savory aroma of his supper, he hurried to the corral and hastily saddled his stocky buckskin roping horse. The howls, now more insistent, came from the direction of the ford across the Brazos, some two hundred yards distant.

Jube double-cinched the buckskin, mentally piecing out what had probably happened. His two cowhands, Ab and Turk, and old Gus, his cook and roustabout, had evidently hit the ford down there with their hides so full of red-eye they'd forgotten to shy around that bed of quicksand, which shifted with almost every rise. Now they were down there, scared half sober, bellerin' their fool heads off, like lost dogies.

Jube swore good-naturedly in his creaky voice. "Dang knotheads! I told 'em to lay over in Santo a couple days, and get their likkerin' and hellin' over with."

Still, he conceded, they were good boys. They had worked hard this past year, and were due large credit for bringing that herd of two-year-old steers through in top shape, so that Jube was able to turn them at a premium above market.

They'd pushed the herd to the railhead at Santo yesterday. And this morning the pleased commission buyer there had paid Jube five thousand dollars cash for the steers. Jube, in turn, had handed his weary crew their back wages, then added a bonus and turned them loose on the town.

"Lay over here in Santo two, three days," he told them. "See the elephant, bay at the moon, stay out o' jail, and come home sober. I'll ride on back, look after the horse string and do the chorin'."

Jube grunted as he climbed stiffly into saddle, headed the dun for the ford in a rocking lope. He reckoned the town marshal had shooed the boys out of Santo; or they'd gotten so orey-eyed they'd forgotten they were on the loose.

He had pushed to the water's edge, and was uncoiling his rope in the fast-failing light before he realized he had jumped too hastily to conclusions. There were three horsemen out there, all right; and they were certainly caught in the quicksand. But they were total strangers.

They were some fifty feet from the bank. The foremost one, a hulking giant of a figure, croaked: "Help, feller! The damn stuff's suckin' us down fast!"

Jube regarded with contempt their futile efforts to heel and quirt the struggling, frenzied beasts out of the sand. Every move tightened the tentacles of the sucking sand.

"Simmer down, dang it!" he roared wrathfully. "And stop floggin' them spooked cayuses."

His loop sailed to the foremost horseman. "Make it fast to your saddlehorn. Slide over your horse's

rump, grab onto his tail, kick your feet and wallop him when I pull."

The big man whined a protest. Jube swore. "Suit yourself. It's either that or get sucked straight down to hell." He slid off into the chill, waist-deep water.

The powerful, short-coupled buckskin had snaked many half-ton steers from bogs and quick holes. He dug in, leaned into the rope, pulled steadily, holding every inch gained. Thus helped, the mired horse was able to break the sand's grip, struggled to the bank, trailing his rider. The procedure was twice repeated, and in minutes all were safely out.

"Dadburnit," Jube growled, "if you'd swung thirty feet to the right, you'd 've steered clear of that mess of quicksand." He waved an arm vaguely.

The big man grunted something unintelligible.

"Might as well come on up to the house," Jube said gruffly. "Git some grub and hot coffee, and dry your duds before you trail on."

They turned their horses into the corral, followed Jube inside in sullen silence, and while he fried more bacon, flapjacks, and boiled coffee, they hunkered, shivering, around the stove.

When he viewed them in the feeble, smoky kerosene lamplight, he almost regretted his hospitality. They were a tough-looking trio. One was heavy, bull-chested, with a crooked nose; another tall, thin, stooped, a patch over one eye. The third was short, bowlegged and shifted-eyed.

The renegade brand was seared deeply into their hard features. Jube covertly eyed his gun and belt, hanging on a peg in the far corner. Uneasily, he observed that the trio's own first concern had been to wipe dry their guns and cartridges. But to reach for his gun now, he realized, would only hasten a showdown if villainy was in their minds.

"You gents must've got lost," Jube remarked, trying to sound casual.

The big man eyed him suspiciously. "We was headin' for Mingus," he growled. "Missed the trail." It was plainly a lie. This fork of the trail stopped here.

The three men wolfed their grub, finishing before Jube. When they pushed back from the table the slim one and the short one looked expectantly at the big one. He cleared his throat.

"You're Jube Yawley, ain't you?" he demanded.

Jube nodded. "Could be, reckon, if a man had any business for knowin'."

The skinny man arose, mumbled something about being thirsty, and moved toward the water bucket. It brought him in behind Jube who faced the big one across the table. This, Jube guessed, was it. His right hand clutched a full tin cup of hot coffee. The big fellow leaned forward, snarling: "Hell, old man, we got plenty business with you right now!"

It was the signal, Jube knew, and he moved fast. The cup of hot coffee described an arc over his shoulder at the same time his knees came up, to slam the table against the

bulky man. Slim screamed behind him, and Heavy went over backward, cursing and clawing for his gun. But Shorty had leaped around in time to lay his gun against Jube's head and send him sprawling from his chair, and he lay there, sick and dizzy as they piled onto him.

Another minute and he was jerked up, thrust into his rope-bottom chair, hands bound around the chair back, and anchored to a rung. The big one, leering, rammed a gun into his belly, and rained stinging, open-palmed slaps into his face. Obviously, it was meant as a softening-up treatment. The slim ruffian's talonlike hands were already exploring Jube's pockets.

"He ain't got it on him," he grunted.

"All right now, you old fossil," Big Boy grated, "where you got the cash hid?"

Jube was still groggy. "What money you talkin' about?" he gasped.

His answer drew more jarring slaps. Blood began to trickle from Jube's nose.

"Don't lie and stall," Heavy warned. "We know you got it. And how much. And that you didn't bank it. It just happens," he gloated, "that your dumb, likkered cowhands done some braggin' around Santo, mentionin' the swell boss they ride for, and how you got a premium for them cows."

He paused to let that sink in.

Jube's head cleared a little. He knew he was close to death. He stared into eyes that burned with killer lust. Physical resistance was

out of the question. It was a case of outthink them, or lose the stake he'd been years building. Or die. He had to think fast.

Sweat popped out on Jube's forehead. He licked dry lips, glared wildly about as the big one watched him closely. His head swiveled and his pale-blue eyes swung apprehensively to come to rest on the shelf behind the stove. So ill-concealed was his anxiety that it could not fail to focus the attention of all eyes on the old baking powder can, by the side of a newer, identical tin. Too late, his actions told, he realized the blunder. He tore his telltale gaze away from the can, and cackled inanely.

"Y-you boys are m-makin' a mistake," he stammered. "I don't know nothin'—"

Big Boy gasped. "Well, by Jupiter! Reg'lar old miser, ain't you—hoardin' your money in tin cans." He stomped to the shelf and reached for the can, chuckling derisively.

Jube felt the stab of poignant regret that there was no bank in Santo. He stared, face twisted in agony, as the burly hard-case struggled with the tight cover.

Frantically Jube lunged, struggled part way up, lifting the chair. "No!" he shrilled. "It ain't there, I tell you. Leave that can be. It's . . . it's nothin' but, uh . . . soap coupons the cook's been savin' up."

Slim slammed Jube back down. "Shut up, you yammerin' old goat."

Big Boy laughed raucously. There wasn't the slightest doubt in his mind of what he would find as he wrested the lid off. And, in the flickering yellow glow of the smudgy lamp, his eyes saw what they expected to see. Folded oblongs of green and gold engraved treasure revealed themselves to his greedy gaze as crisp, newly minted currency. Satisfied, he pounded the lid back on as Jube groaned.

"Boys," Jube pleaded, "you shorely wouldn't take the last dollar a man's been a lifetime savin', would you?"

The hulking renegade faced him, leering. "Tell you what, Gramps: We aimed to kill you. But you've cooperated with us nice. Saved our lives, fed us, and now this . . ."

He broke off to laugh jeeringly. "So," he went on generously, "we won't kill you. Fetch the horses around, Shorty."

He instructed the thin ruffian to bind Jube's feet to the chair, after which, with a mocking laugh, they went out, slamming the door. But the big one was back, almost immediately, a frown of perplexity on his face.

"By the way," he said, watching Jube's face closely, "I know we got to go back across the ford. You mentioned somethin' about we ought to have swung to the right to miss that mess of quicksand. Did you mean our right, as we faced you?

Or was it the other way around?"

Jube hesitated for a fraction of a moment. A crafty light came in his pale-blue eyes. "Why, I meant . . . uh . . . your right hand, of course. You should've veered upstream."

Big Boy grinned. "You're a pore liar, old man. But you told me what I want to know, 'cause I'm good at readin' poker faces. It's plain enough you meant the opposite—downstream."

With a final parting slap he stomped out, the can clamped under one arm, and Jube could hear a coarse receding laugh as he evidently described to his accomplices how he'd cleverly wrung the secret of the quicksand from the gullible oldster. In a moment thudding hoofbeats faded into the night.

Jube, smiling thinly, cocked his head expectantly and waited for the sounds he felt certain he would presently hear. He didn't have long to wait. Ragged yells, mingled with oaths and scattered shots, wafted up on the light night breeze. Wails accented with notes of hopeless despair. Jube shuddered. It was the devil of a way for a good horse to have to die.

Fatigue came like a crushing weight on his shoulders, and he gave way to overpowering drowsiness and slept.

He didn't know how long it was before he awoke, to hear anxious voices and to feel hands shaking him. He blinked up into the face of the sheriff, and behind him the solicitous countenances of his posse-men. And beyond them was the trio of sulking renegades.

"You hurt, Jube?" the sheriff queried anxiously as he cut Yawley's bonds.

Jube shook his head. "I'm all right. But how . . . what—" He stared at the hard-cases.

"It's Jake Hogaw and what's left of his gang," the lawman explained. "We lost their trail, went on past, and was backtrackin' when we heard 'em howlin' and shoutin'. We snaked 'em out of the quicksand, in time to save 'em for hang ropes. Got the horses out, too. However," he went on regretfully, "reckon your money's plumb lost, Jube. The big un here says he accidentally dropped the can in the Brazos, and it floated away."

Jube cackled. "Heck, that wasn't money. It was soap coupons, just like I told 'em. And old Gus'll shore be on the prod when he learns they're gone. When he got a hundred he was sendin' off for a banjo."

Rising stiffly, Jube walked over and lifted a loose board from the floor. Almost under the feet of the chagrined owlhooters there was exposed a small, iron safe, its knob and dial facing upward.

"Nope, reckon my money's safe. But it's funny," Jube mused, grinning at the writhing trio. "A crook judges everybody by himself. He always figures the other fellow will lie to him, and that's how I crossed 'em up. I told 'em the truth about the soap coupons, and then the quicksand—but they wouldn't believe me. and the truth tripped 'em."

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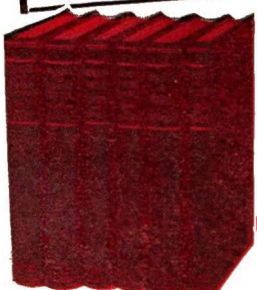

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