STREET AND SMITH'S
WESTERN STORY
MARCH 1948
25 CENTS

TEXAS MAN
A COMPLETE NOVEL BY
ALLAN R. BOSWORTH

For once they actually agree!

Hope and Crosby, in the movies, seldom see eye to eye.

But there's one thing they really do agree on—they both think U.S. Savings Bonds make wonderful Christmas gifts!

SAYS BOB: "They're swell for *anybody* on your list. You couldn't pick a nicer, more sensible, more welcome present. Even Crosby knows that."

SAYS BING: "I hate to admit it, folks, but Hope is right. And remember this—you can buy Bonds at any bank or post office in the U.S.A."

BOB AND BING (together): "This Christmas, why not give the finest gift of all—U.S. Savings Bonds!"

Give the finest gift of all ... U.S. SAVINGS BONDS

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Novelettes

Short Stories and Features

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Tally Branding*

PIONEERS OF 1948

There has been an increasing number of requests recently asking us to publish an occasional modern frontier story.

It is true that there are many places within our boundaries which are still plenty rugged, and human problems are always pretty much the same. Since the end of World War II there has been more than a noticeable shifting of our population. Returning veterans, seeking new worlds to conquer, as well as countless civilians who moved from crowded industrial areas to take jobs in connection with the war effort, have found new interests in new localities.

Imbued with the pioneer spirit of the early settlers, these people are intrigued by the opportunities which present themselves in the far-flung frontiers of our country. They are willing to turn to in the best tradition of their forefathers so that they may carve out careers which will enable them to have the benefits of peaceful, secure lives. And this pioneer spirit has always been a dominating force in our American heritage.

We hope you will enjoy the story of the eleven young men and their experiences in Seth Ranger's timely novel, Go North, Young Man! to be found on page 84 of this issue.

A COWPUNCHIN' SAILOR SPEAKS

"I read Western Story every month and enjoy it from Tally Branding to the very last page and think it is the finest Western published anywhere," writes Seaman First Class Robert Furrow, USN, who is now on duty at the Naval Air Station in Norfolk, Virginia. "I especially like Walt Coburn and the poems by S. Omar Barker, as well as the other top-notch tale spinners in the magazine.

"My home is Rapid City, South Dakota, and I guess I learned all the history of the Black Hills that I could. But I'm afraid I was born about seventy years too late as the West is pretty well civilized now and I am a real old gun-totin' cowpuncher at heart. These modern times kind of cramp my style."

THINKS WE'RE TOO ROMANTIC

Reader James Brandon, of New York City, is feeling right proddy at us and he has this criticism to make: "I buy Western magazines to read thrill-

** Reg. Trademark Applied for.*

ing he-man action stories of the cattle country," he writes, "and I used to enjoy Western Story. However it seems to me that you're overdoing the love stuff lately.

"Take, for instance, the December issue where practically every yarn in the issue had an overdose of girl trouble—including even Walt Coburn's Miracle At San Mateo where his beautiful (?) heroine was pockmarked! I don't think you're doing right by your real fans but of course there's plenty of other Western magazines and I can always change my brand."

AT LONG LAST!

"I was glad to see a story by Peter Dawson in the December issue," Lester Hillis of Green Bay, Wisconsin, informs us, "and it's about time! I want to go on record as saying that I think Tinhorn Tyranny is one of his best and that's saying plenty for a tophand like him.

"I guess I'm partial to stories laid out in that country because I know it so well, having been a riverman myself, and Dawson has a way of making you feel that his characters are real folks. I don't care much for serials but when Western Story was a weekly and ran them, Dawson was always my first choice. How's for more yarns by this fine writer?"

CALLING JIM KJELGAARD

"What has become," inquires Hart Morgan, of Sioux City, Iowa, "of Jim Kjelgaard and those swell animal stories he used to write for Western Story?

"I've been a steady reader for some years now and I've noticed that you don't publish as many animal stories as you used to—I think there should be one in every issue. And Kjelgaard is sure the hombre who can make them interesting.

"Lost Trail Drive, which you ran last May, was a doggone good yarn and that old Longhorn, Big Blue, was a sure enough hero! But what I'm talking about is stories like Night Hunter—which you had in the magazine way back in 1944—and which was a wonderful description of wild life. I certainly hope that we're going to see more of these fine features by Kjelgaard in the near future."

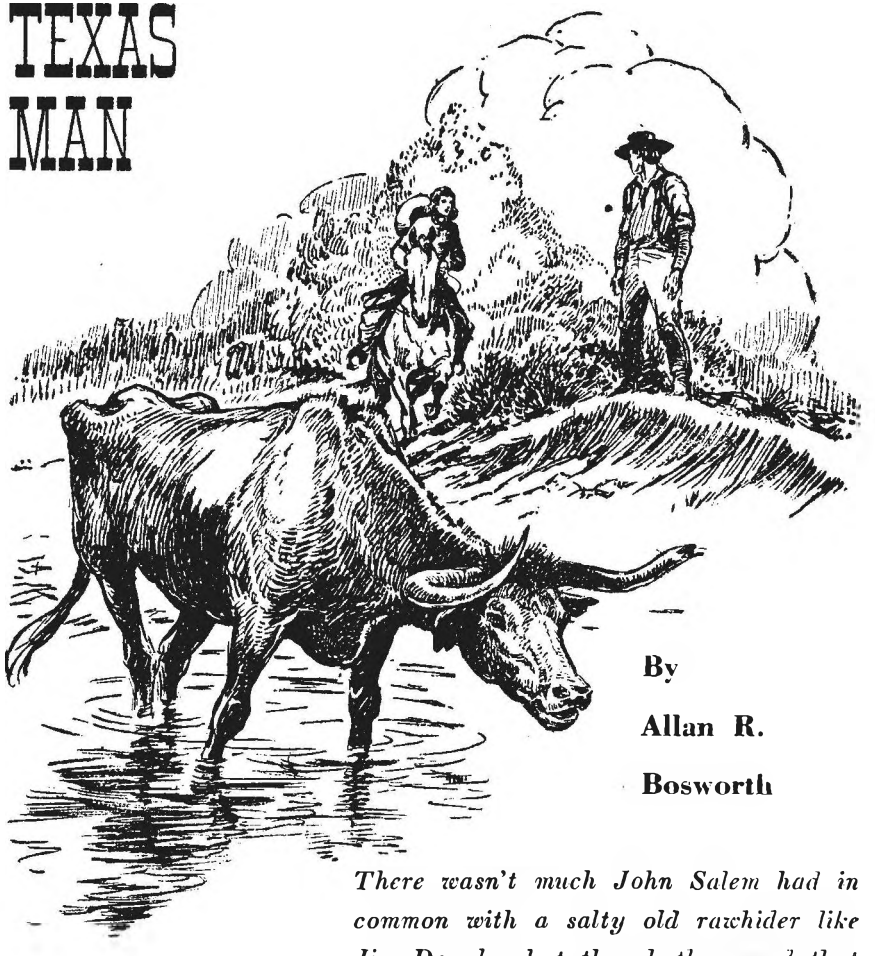
SCOTT DOES IT AGAIN

"I can't say I go for all of H. W. Scott's covers but that one on your December issue sure proves he's the best in the business! It seemed mighty appropriate for a Christmas cover rather than the everlasting gun-shooting you see on so many Westerns," comments Mrs. Marley Addison, of Denver, Colorado. "Not only did the cover have class but the whole issue seemed up to your usual high quality of fiction."

COMING NEXT MONTH ★ ★ ★

***Three** complete novels of the great open spaces—an unusual ranch racing tale of the high country by Frank Richardson Pierce, an epic drama of the Southwest by Walt Coburn and a baffling range mystery by C. K. Shaw . . . **Two** novelettes of distinction by Eli Colter and Van Cort . . **An** article on Western lore by S. Omar Barker, packed with chuckles as well as information . . . **A** cavvy of exciting short stories by tophands including L. P. Holmes and Giff Cheshire . . . **Plus** many other entertaining features including the usual helpful service departments.*

TEXAS MAN



By Allan R. Bosworth

There wasn't much John Salem had in common with a salty old rawhider like Jim Douglas but they both agreed that "A man's got to kill his own snakes!"

I

THEY came to the waterhole at sundown. John Salem leading the way on horseback, the coupled wagons behind, and a sandstorm filling earth and sky with dusty fury. John slid from his saddle, waiting where blown grit almost filled the road ruts. He was a tall and rugged young man with the big hands of an oil-field roustabout, and a stranger to all this: the country, wide and wild, the wind so strong he had to lean against it.

Even in the lee of the turbulent liveoaks there was sand to sting his

cheeks, and the grotesque shapes of tumbleweeds loped by in the queer half light. He saw the twelve-mule team shaping in the gloom, and the two men on the wagon seat. The small one handling the reins was Jeff Printup, burned saddle brown by Texas suns, looking dried-up and ready to blow away if the wind caught his baggy blue overalls. Beside Jeff towered Caleb Todd, solid and substantial, tilting the spring seat sharply with his weight.

Todd owned the wagons, and the steam drilling rig and its Long John boiler. There was more than bigness to him, and more than the prosperity of his beaver hat and broadcloth suit, and you felt whatever it was even when the wind ruffled the authority of his iron-gray beard. John Salem had tried before to analyze this. Caleb Todd's confidence in himself slapped a man on the back like a hearty and jovial hand. It shouted, *Stay with me, and I'll make you rich . . . .*

"Camp here, Jeff," Todd ordered. "I want to look at this little creek. You've been this way before, I suppose?"

Jeff Printup wrapped his reins around the brake handle. "Never been this far west of San Antone," he drawled.

"Then how'd you know which fork to take, back there by the gate? How'd you know water was this way?"

"Mules smelled it," Jeff said laconically. There was nothing he didn't know about mules.

Caleb Todd got down, beating the sand from his clothes and vanishing toward the south end of the waterhole while there was still a little light. Jeff unhitched the mules, then watered and fed them, and John struggled to kindle a fire under the bank of the draw.

John was a little amused at Caleb Todd. This was the fourth waterhole Todd had called a "little creek," the fourth he had searched for signs of oil. Like John, he had come from Pennsylvania, where all the producing wells were along the little streams.

A wildcat operator had nothing but creekology to go by. But nothing here in western Texas resembled that proven terrain of Oil Creek; it didn't even look like Nacogdoches County, where there had been some oil excitement and where John had drifted, looking for a driller's job. This waterhole was only a narrow, curving pool of brown water. Sun-cracked mud bordering it told the long time since rain, and at the water's edge the hoofs of cattle had churned a loblolly.

The campfire caught into leaping flame. Full darkness came all at once, and with it the wind ran wilder. Jeff sat on his boot heels to mend a piece of harness as John put skillet and coffeepot on the fire.

Both of them heard Caleb Todd's shouting, but the wind tore his words apart. They looked that way, alarmed, and saw him coming toward the fire in a stumbling run, clutching a battered tin can.

"Oil!" he yelled breathlessly. "I

told you we'd find it! Look at it—feel it—smell it! It's oil!"

That word was magic anywhere to John Salem. He straightened, only half believing, and Todd thrust the can into his hands.

"Floating on the water, by Jupiter!" he exulted. "Oil Creek all over again!"

There was a greasy scum on the outside of the can, and Todd had the smear of it on his fingers and was rubbing them, loving the slick feel. John tilted the contents toward the fire. They were mostly water, but a black viscous patch spilled out, and the water showed iridescent. John forgot the wind and the blown sand; he whooped and waltzed around the triumphantly smiling Todd with the can for a partner. Only Jeff appeared unmoved, unimpressed.

The little teamster got to his feet and peered into the darkness.

"Company's coming," he announced.

John had just time to hide the can behind a broad-tired wagon wheel. The trees were loud with storm, and he heard nothing over their tossing and the slap of billowed tarps against the wagon bows. But Jeff was watching the rutted road as if he had eyes like a cat, and now two riders loomed indistinctly in the outer rim of the light. When they came nearer, John saw that one was a girl.

The man pushed his horse forward, calling something that was lost in the wind. He was perhaps sixty, with something of Jeff's leathery build, and a white mustache drooped below the corners of his tight mouth. The girl's face was in the higher shadow beyond him, and John could tell only one thing: she had red hair that caught the fire's reflection, and it was loose and wild in the wind.

"Wait, papa!" she said in a scared tone. "Don't lose your temper!"

The man said, gruffly, "Keep back. Susan!" and Caleb Todd stepped forward to fend off whatever trouble this visit meant. It was easy to see that Papa had already lost his temper, and the way he swayed in his saddle showed he was a little drunk.

"I'm Jim Douglas!" he barked in a high, angry voice. "I'll give you hod-dang freighters five minutes to get the hell and gone out of my pasture!"

The oil man smiled. "Now, Mr. Douglas," he said soothingly. "My name's Todd. Caleb Todd, from—"

"I don't give a good hod-dang who you are or where you're from!" Douglas yelled. "I'm sick and tired of you cutting my fence and I've got a bellyful of you using my water. Get out!"

Todd said, "But, Mr. Douglas . . ." and made a mistake out of ignorance of Western ways and the penchant of some men for shoulder holsters. He reached inside his coat for his wallet and the card that would introduce him.

Susan screamed, "Don't—don't!" and John Salem saw the pistol barrel come clear and catch the firelight. He sprang, grabbing for the gun with a long-armed reach. The rancher's horse shied; Susan spurred her mount toward John as if to ride

him down. Jeff Printup was going for the rifle that hung behind the wagon seat, but he was too late. The pistol cracked flatly in the wind, and Todd yelped and fell.

John was jostled between the two horses, and in the melee he laid big hands on Douglas' leg and arm and yanked him out of his saddle. The rancher fell on all fours with the pistol beneath him, and there was a muffled report. The red-headed girl came off her horse clawing and gouging at John's face, and when he threw up his arms to protect himself, she bit his thumb. Pure reflex brought him up straight with a backhand sweep that threw her against the wagon wheel.

He had time to see Douglas rolling clear of the gun, groaning with pain; he picked up the weapon and braced himself for another attack from Susan. But now she dropped to her knees beside her father, sobbing jerkily, her hair disheveled.

"You've killed him!" she accused.

"He's not dead," panted John. He sucked blood from his thumb and spat it out. He was beginning to grow angry. "Besides, he shot himself, and it serves him right!"

Even the wind seemed quieter. John turned away, getting his breath, looking to see how badly Todd had been hurt. Jeff was straightening Todd's right leg. The oil man lay propped on his elbows, face white. John bent over him and cut away the blood-wet trousers leg. The bullet had gone through the outer side of the oil man's heavy thigh.

"Get a couple of white shirts out of his trunk, Jeff," the younger man said.

"And the brandy flask out of the tray," Todd added between his teeth. "Great guns, look at it bleed!"

He looked, himself, and fainted. Jim Douglas groaned again, and the girl was trying to comfort him. Jeff brought the shirts and a breath that said he had made sure of the brandy, and as John applied the bandage a shadow fell across his hands.

It was Susan. He saw now that she wore jeans and a man's shirt. She spoke, in a small, scared voice. "Papa will have to have a doctor. He's shot in the right side."

"Get out of my light," John said.

"But you have no right here. You're trespassing. Papa . . . "

"Papa was drunk," he reminded her. Without looking up, he addressed Jeff again: "Get another of Todd's shirts and see what you can do for him."

A little brandy down the oil man's throat brought him back to life, and John moved him so he could lean against the wagon wheel.

Jim Douglas' voice was high and thin and uncompromising as he said, "Susan, get these hod-dang people out of the pasture, and then take me home. Get the buckboard and take me home. . . ."

Todd shook his head, puzzled and surprised more than angry. "John, do you think that man knows what he's got here?" he asked. "Is that why he shot me?"

"I don't know," John said. He listened, and the wind was blowing it-

self out, and frogs had begun tuning up around the waterhole. "You'll be able to travel in a day or two," he said.

"And leave the oil?" Todd whispered. "No, sir! We've come a long way to find it. We'll stay here and do business with this man!"

With a disdainful glance at John, Susan went toward her horse, walking with a proud, free-limbed stride. He followed her.

"Are you going for the doctor?"

"Not now. It's twenty miles to San Cristobal. I'm going to the ranch for the buckboard."

"I'll go with you. We'll send Jeff for the doctor."

She looked at him coldly. "Thank you, but I don't need your help."

"I didn't offer to help you. Your father started this, and we'll damned well see it through. I don't intend to leave Mr. Todd here. We'll take him to the house and he'll stay there until the doctor says he can travel."

"We'll do nothing of the kind! Papa wouldn't stand for it!"

John Salem swung into the saddle of her father's horse, and smiled mockingly down at her.

"Papa," he said, "can't help himself. Just lead the way."

II

Morning was red and sullen, and as the sun climbed, alkali dust still hanging in the air made a smoky haze to soften the land's incredible distances. It burned the nostrils and made the eyelids smart; everything the hand touched had a harsh and gritty feel, and it seemed to John Salem that everybody labored under a dry, brittle tension.

He had not been to bed at all, and now he was riding back to the waterhole to get some things Todd needed, and to look at the oil sign by daylight. Jeff had gone to San Cristobal to fetch the doctor. Jim Douglas, only half conscious, lay in his bed in the JD ranchhouse, and just outside on the long shaded gallery another bed had been set up for Todd. Susan had been shuttling between the two patients, worried about her father, showing plainly her hostility toward the other men.

The girl was pretty, with a temper to go with her flaming hair, and John Salem found it easy to sympathize with her attitude toward the unwelcome company. Still, Jim Douglas had brought everything upon himself. Looking back, John could remember no sign at the forks of the road, and none at the JD pasture gate to warn that the ranch was posted. Any trespass they had committed was done innocently, and hardly worth shooting a man in reprisal.

Besides, he owed something to Caleb Todd. The oil man had brought the drilling outfit to Indianola by steamer, and shipped it by rail to the end of the line at San Antonio, where he bought the wagons and mules. John was stranded there, broke and hungry, and Todd had hired him at day wages and a share in whatever oil they found, asking no questions beyond satisfying himself that the tall, rugged-looking

young man knew how to operate a drilling rig.

Jeff Printup had been hired the same way. He was on the bitter end of a spree, and the other teamsters at the wagon yard gave him recommendation enough. They said his fondness for liquor was strong and recurrent, but that he knew mules from away back. . . .

Ranch business and ranch country were alien things to John Salem, but it was easy to see the JD was what oil men called a "poor-boy" outfit. A scatter of bony longhorned cattle moved aimlessly through the scrub mesquites, and the sparse, sunburned grass hardly looked adequate for their feed. Dust had drifted in little riffles against clumps of prickly pear and greasewood, and whole stretches of bare ground lay skeleton white with alkali.

It was about four miles from the ranchhouse to the waterhole motte, and John was still more than a mile away when he saw a three-wagon freight outfit leave the line of trees and move out of sight around a hill point to the south. Trespassing on the JD appeared to be a common thing. He remembered the mules, and put his horse into a trot until he had reached the motte and found them safe in the rope corral. Then he swung out of the saddle and walked toward the south end of the waterhole.

Killdeer ran the farther bank with shrill, complaining cries, and dragon flies buzzed over the brown water. On this side was a line of stakes set in the sun-dried mud at irregular intervals—a gauge, John imagined, to mark the rate of evaporation. Across the pool a rocky hill rose steeply, mirrored in what was left of the water.

The more he thought of it, the more he admired Caleb Todd for his boldness. Somebody had brought in an oil well in California—jigging down his tools with a spring pole and manpower, they said—but all this vast country in between East Texas and the Pacific Coast was virgin. A man took a gamble courageously, and it paid off: Todd had found a show of oil here in a place John never would have picked for a prospect hole.

There was no sign of oil on the water now. The breeze was blowing toward the south bank, ruffling a screen of willows that grew there, and John would have turned back if he hadn't seen the scum clinging to a willow branch that touched the water. The oil was under the willows; he parted the branches and looked more closely, seeing the scum hugging the shore. Then a bubble rose and broke, spreading a little circle of viscosity, and another followed it, and he saw that the oil was coming to the surface in a tiny trickle, regular as clockwork.

The excitement swept back through John. This could be an oil spring. It might mean an underground reservoir, needing only a driller's bit and a few joints of casing to tap the riches it had held for thousands of years. Caleb Todd had the tools.

He needed only permission from Jim Douglas to start. . . .

It was noon when John rode back to the ranchhouse. He left his horse at the corrals and noted that Jeff Printup had not yet come with a doctor. He walked through the front gate, and Todd made motions toward an open window to indicate that Douglas was asleep.

John sat down wearily on the steps. The breeze was blowing across the gallery, rustling a screen of dead morning glory vines.

"Where's Susan?" John asked.

"She said she had to doctor some cows. Nice girl." Todd raised suddenly on an elbow. "Not feeling sorry for her, are you?"

John sighed. "Not feeling anything but tired."

"You cultivate her, John. Her father will be hard to handle, but she could persuade him. What did you find out at the creek?"

"There's oil," John said slowly. "A bubble every couple of minutes. It doesn't belong in that place, but it's there."

Todd rubbed his hands. "A bubble every two minutes is enough," he said. "Did I ever tell you how I got my start? I used to skim the float off Oil Creek before they drilled the first well. I bottled and sold it as the Red Man's Marvelous Electric Elixir." He chuckled softly. "Yes, sir, you give me just a little oil in a bottle, and I can make money . . . lots of money!"

"We're a long way from a market," John said thoughtfully. "The nearest rail head is at San Antone."

"You let me worry about the market," Todd told him. "All I want is a well spudded in, and some oil in a bottle. Anyway, they said the railroad is going to build out to El Paso. Now, don't you say anything to the girl about the oil . . . not yet. You just work to make friends with her."

That, John thought, would not be an unpleasant task. He knew the oil game, and it was full of tricks and chicaneries, and he could be sharp and hard, too. But he was a little disappointed in Todd's beginning. A patent medicine swindle seemed a petty thing. . . .

"I owe you and Jeff a couple of weeks' salary," Todd went on. "My checkbook's in the trunk. I'll pay you later."

The corral gate creaked, and John saw Susan unsaddling there. He walked down the path, meeting her as she went into the harness shed with a gallon can bearing the curious label "Screw-worm Killer."

"What's that for?" John asked.

"Medicine for wormy cattle. They're not used to barbed wire. They cut themselves. Flies blow the cuts. They have to be roped and doctored."

This was so much like a reluctant recitation John smiled. Susan started up the path, paying no attention as he walked beside her. Her head came just to his shoulder; the sun found lovely lights in her red hair.

"Susan," John said, "I'm not here

from choice. I'd like to be friends. Is there anything I can do to help?"

She looked up, a quick warmth in her eyes. But it faded, and she said, "Nobody can help us now. Nobody can make it rain." She looked tired and worried, and she sighed as she sat down on a bench just inside the gate where an umbrella china tree threw its shade. John stood for a moment, and then sat down beside her.

"I never knew girls did things like roping cows," he said.

"There's nobody else to do it."

Her hands lay in her lap, brown and strong and capable, yet still feminine. She watched the mesquite flat, and the stray whirlwinds playing tag there with spirals of dust. In the distance the waterhole motte made a dark line against bare, rocky hills. John wondered if Susan knew the secret of the oil, but he said nothing, and in a minute she was talking. Her words came slowly at first, and then, as if it comforted her to have a listener, she was telling him of the JD's troubles. . . .

All this country had been unfenced when Jim Douglas moved out from the Llano ten years before and bought twenty sections. In those days, if the waterholes had failed, he and the other ranchers could fall back on Comanche Creek. This was a live stream a few miles to the south on unstocked land that had belonged to an eastern investment syndicate until Dan Vinson came to San Cristobal.

Susan spoke Vinson's name with a curious self-consciousness. Vinson had built a store, a warehouse and a saloon, making a town out of what had been only a stage stand. He had made money. Then he bought the syndicate's land, and now he owned everything between the JD and the Rio Grande.

"He tried to buy us out, too. Papa wouldn't sell. Dan fenced, and asked papa to share the cost of the wire on this side, because it was our south boundary." She smiled fondly, and said, "You'd have to know papa to understand what happened then. He's proud and stubborn, and he resented Dan's wire. So he borrowed money at the bank and put up his own fence, leaving a lane between it and Dan's so the road to San Cristobal could be re-routed there. That made the road a few miles longer, and that's when our trouble started with the freighters. They kept taking the old short cut, leaving our fence down, and using a lot of water."

And then the two-year drought had come. Jim Douglas couldn't meet the note at the bank. He'd have to move the cattle, because Comanche Creek was the only live water in eighty miles.

"Look," John said, "why can't you lease water rights from Vinson? He sounds like a business man, to me."

She laughed. "He is, to an extreme. Papa tried, and Dan countered with another offer to buy the JD. Then, last month, he made another offer with a string attached."

John thought of the oil. "What kind?" he asked.

"Marriage. Oh, that would have

solved everything. Papa could take down the wire and get water from Comanche Creek."

"Well?" John prompted.

Susan's cheeks flamed. "Do you think any girl would accept a proposal when she wasn't sure whether the man wanted her or a ranch? I lost my temper, and he threatened to starve us out."

She was silent, then, and John smiled, remembering the wildcat fury of her attack at the waterhole, thinking that her temper was something to be reckoned with. And then Jim Douglas woke in the house and found voice.

"Susan!" he shouted. "Who's that on the gallery? Hod-dang it, I told you to run that freight outfit off the ranch!"

"You just take it easy, Douglas," Todd said soothingly. "I'm not a freighter. When you feel better I want to talk to you."

"Ain't interested in anything but good-by!"

"And I'm not saying it. Not yet. You shot me, Douglas, and I'll stay right here till I get well."

"Like hell—like so much old billy hell! Hod-dang it, Susan, bring me my gun! I'll blow him right out of that bed!"

Susan got to her feet, but she was looking down beyond the corrals. The alkali dust stirred and moved there, and John saw four riders coming toward the house.

"Oh, I was afraid of this!" the girl cried. "Doc Eustis is coming, all right, but they've brought Dan Vinson and Sheriff Morgan, too!"

III

She hurried into the house, and John Salem looked after her with a brief and passing thought that Dan Vinson, handling things differently, might have been a very lucky man. He moved to the gallery steps, wondering what Todd's move would be now. Nobody had expected Jeff to bring the law, and as he watched the little teamster lurch up the walk to the rhythm of hiccoughs, John realized that Jeff was probably not responsible for bringing it.

Jeff said, "Howdy, son," smiled a foolish smile, and then sprawled loosely on the lower step, where he snored gently. Doc Eustis, a rotund man with bright eyes and a kindly face, nodded to John and went on inside where Jim Douglas was still shouting.

John studied the other two men as they came through the gate talking in low tones. That would be Sheriff Morgan with the ribs and rawhide build and a turkey-red neck. The smooth-faced, darkly handsome man was Dan Vinson.

You could look at Vinson and see what Susan Douglas meant, and why she had turned him down. There was an arrogance about him, and a consciousness of wealth and power; he might take what he wanted, but he would never take it gently, and it would be impossible for him to accept defeat with the grace of a good loser. He was a big man, nearing forty, and the prosperous years lay thick around his middle.

Vinson glanced at John and stepped

on the gallery, walking heavily, stopping to listen once as Jim Douglas cried out against the doctor's probing. He said, "Morgan, you'll want to ask these men some questions."

"Reckon I do," the sheriff said, and his Adam's apple moved up and down. "Now, Printup told us—"

"Printup is drunk," Todd cut in. "It was an accident."

Dan Vinson looked up. "Accident?" he said sharply. "A man who's handled guns for forty years doesn't have accidents."

"You heard what I said," Todd told him.

Morgan and Vinson exchanged glances. The sheriff looked as if he felt relieved, but was afraid to show it. He said, "Well, in that case . . ." and leaned against a gallery post.

But Vinson wasn't through. "Jim Douglas has a temper like a brush fire," he said. "And he's been threatening freighters."

"I'm not a freighter," Todd said.

"What are you hauling, then?"

"Machinery," the oil man said vaguely. "Machinery to California. I understand you want to buy this ranch, Vinson?"

Vinson looked at him, and saw only an innocent interest. He said, "I offered to buy it . . . yes. Jim will never pull out of this dry spell. I've got water. He hasn't. He'd have been a lot better off if he'd sold it to me a year ago."

"Takes two to make a horse trade," Todd reminded him. He lay back, smiling while Vinson frowned angrily. John was amused: Todd had played his cards shrewdly, putting Jim Douglas in his debt when he might have demanded that the ranchman be jailed. Now Susan and Doc Eustis emerged, and when the doctor went to examine Todd's wound, Dan Vinson faced the girl.

"The answer is still no," she told him promptly.

He flushed. "Think it over, Susan," he said, and called to Morgan. They walked out toward the horses, and John followed.

"I'm a stranger here, Vinson," he said softly. "I don't know much about ranch business."

"What's that got to do with me?" demanded Vinson.

"Tell me something. Takes a pretty good man, does it, to starve a girl out?"

He stood ready, balanced on the balls of his feet, big hands hanging loosely. But Vinson only measured him with cold eyes.

"I'll tell you something, all right!" he said. "If you're smart, you'll stay out of it."

Todd called for John as soon as the others had ridden away. His face was flushed, but there seemed little doubt that his mind was as sharp as ever.

"Vinson," he whispered. "From what Susan told me, he's got a lot of money."

"So I hear," John said.

"H'm," murmured Todd. He rubbed his hands, and chuckled. "I fooled him, didn't I? But he's the one we've got to watch, John. Why would he want this place so much, if he's already got a big ranch with a creek on it? I'll tell you why. He

knows about the oil. John, we've got to work fast, or Vinson might beat us to it somehow!"

John Salem listened, and thought he heard Susan crying softly in the kitchen.

Jeff Printup squatted by the waterhole campfire the next day, a sobered and chastened man. He had heard things in San Cristobal, about Vinson and about the troubles of Jim Douglas; and sympathy ran strong within him.

"Had a little ranch myself, down on the Nueces," he said, blowing on a cup of black coffee. "The same thing happened to me: I didn't own any water, and the big outfit did. Some fool invented barbed wire. The big outfit fenced, and I was up Salt Creek without a paddle." He thought a moment, and then said, "Did you see that new windmill in San Antone?"

John nodded absently. That type of windmill was new, and a hardware store had one set up, pumping water out of a barrel and back into it again. It had interested John only because the wooden tower resembled an oil derrick.

"Well," Jeff went on, "there's the answer to barbed wire. Windmills—and this drilling rig. Did you know this is the first power-driven rig ever brought into this country? They tell me the ranchers out here have tried to dig wells by hand. They can't go deep enough. But there's water around here—and I can find it!"

John got up and went out to inspect the oil sign. He was an oil man; he wasn't interested in water wells. Water was something taken for granted back in Pennsylvania, where nearly every green valley had its stream. Water sand was a menace to be cased off as quickly as possible, before the flow caved in your hole and made you lose a string of tools.

The oil had spread. It covered nearly half the pool with a thin, iridescent scum; it was still rising in slow bubbles under the willows, and as John studied it the driller's fever came hard upon him. If he could bring in a producing well here—if he could open a new field—the Douglases would have nothing to worry about. Water and weather and the price of beef were unimportant factors.

The brush crashed, and a slab-sided longhorn cow came warily down to drink. She sniffed at the water and moved upstream above the oil slick, her hoofs making noises in the mud. Flies swarmed with her, seeking the tiniest break in her red hide. Her ribs showed; her hipbones were like a hat rack above the JD brand, and one horn had been broken at the tip.

She was an unlovely creature, worth perhaps eighteen dollars in beef, hide and tallow, and still her kind had created an empire—a lusty, sprawling kingdom tough as her shaggy hide. It was only some twenty years old, but already it spread from the south Texas brush to Arizona Territory and Wyoming. A million longhorns poured north

every year on the dusty trail to Abilene or Dodge City, helping to feed a nation, bringing wealth to land that could not be plowed. . . .

John watched the cow and saw that she would not drink from the pool where the oil scum lay. He pondered the significance that might be attached to that, and then the willows rustled behind him and a voice said, "Good morning."

It was Susan, smiling a little at his surprise, and then looking at the oil on the water.

"Is this what Mr. Todd meant?" she asked slowly.

"What?" John parried.

"The oil. He was delirious last night. He kept talking about oil."

John grinned, feeling easier because Caleb Todd had given him an opening. He said, "This started it, Susan. Do you mean to tell me you never saw it before?"

"I never did. Where does it come from?"

"I don't know. It may be an oil spring, or a seep. They could be dormant for centuries, I suppose, and then have a seam opened by an earth movement. Susan—Todd's an oil operator, and I'm a wildcat driller. The machinery he said he was hauling is an oil rig. We want to drill here."

She looked at him, puzzled. "But why? What good would oil do anybody here?"

"Oil can make you rich anywhere, Susan. We've got the rig. All you have to do is give us a lease, and take payment in shares. If we bring in a well, you get royalties."

"But it might spoil the water for the cattle." She considered briefly, then shook her head. "Papa would never consent."

"Suppose I guarantee not to pump any waste into the waterhole? Why don't *you* give me permission to set up the rig and start drilling? You have nothing to lose, Susan, and you can trust me. And one other thing—did it ever occur to you that Vinson may know about the oil, and that that's why he wants to buy you out? Let's beat him to it!"

She wavered. "Papa would say no," she said. "He's a cowman, and this is cattle country. We don't need oil. We need water."

"Well, there's always a chance that we'd strike water, and not find a drop of oil. I hate to see the rig idle, I hate not to be drilling."

"All right!" the girl said suddenly. "I guess we can't be any worse off than we are. Go ahead. But when papa gets well enough to be up and around . . ."

"I'll take a chance!" John laughed. He turned at once toward the camp; there were a hundred things to be done. Susan went with him, and they saw Jeff Printup weaving back and forth along the draw bank, walking like a man in his sleep, hands stretched before him. They stared, and then Jeff faced their way, and John saw the willow branch in his hands.

"No water here," Jeff said. "But I'll try farther up in the flat. This

country's full of underground streams."

John leaned against the trunk of a liveoak and laughed. He said, "Jeff, you surely don't believe in that old superstition—you don't think you're a water witch?"

The little man looked at him with dignity. "It's not a superstition, and I'm not a water witch," he said. "I'm a dowser. I can locate water . . . I can't explain how, but I can find it. With me, it's a gift."

"Could you smear a little grease on that willow and locate oil?" John asked, grinning.

"Of course not. A willow naturally feels the pull of water. With oil or minerals, it's different."

"Too bad," John told him. "Because we're going to drill for oil, Jeff. Right here. And we'll start now!"

IV

Hoisting gear had to be rigged to lift the heavy engine and the Long John boiler out of the wagons. John had not set up Todd's rig before, but he was familiar with all of it. It was an old one, already outmoded in the Pennsylvania fields where it had been standard in the early days: a thirty-four-foot derrick, a Samson post and grasshopper-type walking beam, with one end attached by a pitman to a crank on the engine's flywheel shaft.

He laid out tackle and blocks that day, and found he would need more rope than Todd had brought along. It was too late to go to San Cristobal for this. He had sent Jeff into the nearest canyon to cut dry cedar wood and sled it out behind a mule, and now John used the rest of the afternoon to go with Susan as she rode the pasture.

The girl roped cattle that had to be doctored, and John tried to help by main strength and awkwardness. When he attempted to throw a loop himself, she burst into laughter, and he forgot about the steer and turned to look at her. It was the first time he had heard her laugh, and it was a good sound—a musical and healthy sound.

They found one task he could do better than Susan. The fence had been cut southwest of the waterhole, and the broad-tired tracks of freight wagons ran plainly through the gap. John remembered the wagons he had seen pulling away from the waterhole, but he said nothing. He swore at the vandalism and mended the stubborn wire, understanding Jim Douglas better than he had before.

At dusk he rode to the ranch with Susan. They reached the yard gate in time to hear voices raised in an argument that might have been going on most of the day.

Douglas was shouting through the window. "You're wasting my time, Todd! I never asked you to come here, did I? No, hod-dang it, and you brought trouble. I don't want you digging up my land."

"But oil—" Todd began.

"Don't talk to me about oil! I knew a man who had a right nice little ranch till he heard there was some old Spanish treasure buried on it. From then on he spent all his

time digging up the pasture, and his ranch went to pot, and he never found any treasure, either. This is a cow ranch, and it'll stay a cow ranch!"

"Cows!" Todd said in exasperation. "All you think about is cows! I'm offering you a chance at a fortune. All you have to do is put up a little money to help pay the drilling costs. Then you sit back and draw royalties."

"I ain't listening to you, Todd!" said Jim Douglas.

Susan went inside, and began preparing supper. John Salem sat beside Todd's bed, deciding it would be best to say nothing about the arrangements he had made with the girl. Todd might tell Douglas.

"You ought to know better than to try to get any money out of Douglas," he said quietly. "He's a poor man. If you'd seen what I have . . ."

"Pshaw, John, don't let what I said to him fool you! I've got him figured out. With Douglas you've got to start high and then come down—and let him think he beat you down."

"Maybe. But I believe it's always been the custom to pay the land owner for the lease, not to ask him to put up money."

The oil man chuckled, and rubbed his hands. "You let me handle that end of it. You just be ready to spud in."

John sat down in a hide-bottomed rocker, watching the shadows deepen, pondering what he had heard. Todd was right: the financing of the operations was not his business, and he supposed there was nothing wrong in the oil man's scheme. Douglas could be given a larger share of the royalties.

Besides, John was working for Caleb Todd, and when you worked for a man you owed him loyalty. Either that or it was time to look for another job.

John ate supper with Susan, and afterwards they sat for a long time under the umbrella china tree, looking at the stars and listening to a million crickets fiddling in the mesquites—a sure sign, the girl said, of continued dry weather. It was midnight when John reached the waterhole.

He unsaddled at the rope corral. The frogs were chortling, happily unaware that their watery home was growing smaller with every day's sun; the campfire had died to a heap of smoking ashes. And Jeff was not in his bed tarp.

John called the little man's name. The frogs went silent, and there was only the lonesome whisper of wind in the liveoaks. Calling again, John got an odd, strangling wheeze for answer. He threw wood on the fire and made a quick search.

Jeff Printup was tied to one of the tall rear wheels, almost in an attitude of crucifixion. He had been lifted astride the hub, and his legs were securely lashed to two lower spokes. His hands were tied to the outer radius of the wheel, and there

was a knotted rope between his teeth. His face was bloody.

John swore as he cut the lashings. "Who did this, Jeff?" he demanded. "Who was it?"

Jeff spat shreds of bloody hemp. "Two men . . . two freighters," he said painfully. "Water thieves. Never mind . . . I'll track 'em down!"

He limped toward the front of the wagon, where the rifle hung in its scabbard.

"Hold on a minute!" John said. "You mean they watered their team here?"

"I mean they stole water—about twenty barrels of it. Hauled it away."

"Vinson!" John exclaimed. "He said he'd starve her out!"

"You want to be sure," said Jeff. "Some of the other ranches are dry, too. Twenty barrels of water would fill up quite a few cows."

He sat down, rubbing his chafed ankles, and little by little John got the story out of him. Jeff had just crawled into his bed tarp when the three-wagon outfit came in from the east. Apparently the two men had not seen Todd's wagons for the trees; they drove on to the south end of the waterhole and stopped there. Jeff got on his overalls and boots and went that way to warn them against trespassing. He saw only one man, and was arguing with him when the other jumped him from behind. They had beaten him pretty badly.

"At first, judging from what they said, they thought I worked for the JD. Then they saw the wagons, and brought me here and tied me up—as a warning, they said. I could hear them filling the barrels; I could tell every time they covered a barrel with tarp and drove the hoop down."

It was little wonder the JD waterhole had been shrinking. Twenty barrels tonight; no telling how many the other morning, when that freight outfit cut the wire . . .

"They went west," Jeff said. "Not more than two hours ago." He got up again and hobbled to get the gun.

"Wait," John said. "You're in no shape to follow them. I've got to go to town in the morning anyway, to get that rope. I'll see who it was. Besides, I want you to stay here and guard this waterhole, and if you feel up to it you can get more wood. That boiler will eat a lot."

"It's not your fight," Jeff told him.

"I'm making it mine."

The little man grumbled, and sat down on his bed tarp. He said, "These people don't need oil—they need water! And I dowsed up on the flat today. I can show you where an underground river comes out of the hills back of the ranchhouse, and twists down through the flat. It's the same one that breaks out on the surface on Vinson's ranch."

"You can show me," John said. "But I wouldn't believe it unless you showed me the water itself—or at least some mud. Get to bed, and forget about that dowsing business!"

He unrolled his own tarp, and

lay awake for a long time listening to the frogs and watching the slow swing of the stars. Jeff was right: it wasn't his fight. But he could hardly wait to get into it, and he didn't know why. He kept remembering the music of Susan's laughter, and he told himself it wasn't that. When he fell asleep he was thinking about that gaunt red longhorn cow,

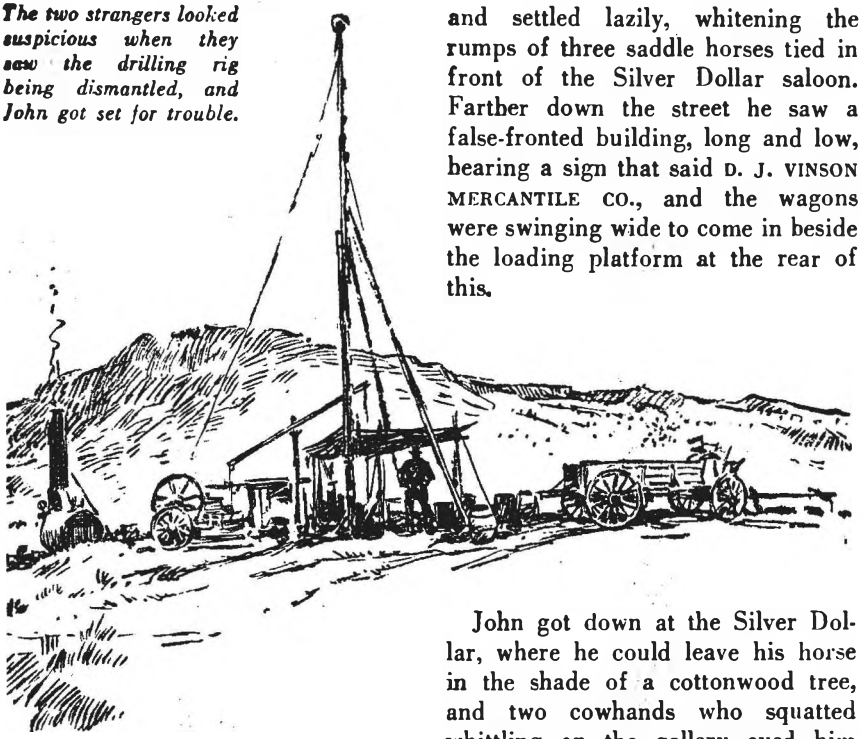
coming down to the waterhole to drink. . . .

At dawn he saddled. Jeff heard him and sat up stiffly. By daylight the little man's face was a shocking map of last night's one-sided affair. There was a rope burn on his mouth, and one eye was swollen shut.

With the other, he appraised John Salem's long-armed, rangy movements. "I've got you sized up, son," he said. "You're a fist fighter in pistol country. When you get to town, you'd better buy yourself a gun."

John grunted and toed his stirrup. The fresh tracks of the broad-tired wheels stayed with the ruts of the old road for a mile, and then turned south. He found another gap in the fence there, and lost half an hour splicing the wire. He came to the new road a little later, following it westward, no longer sure he was still on the trail because a stage had passed since the freight outfit traveled this way.

But just before noon the town



The two strangers looked suspicious when they saw the drilling rig being dismantled, and John got set for trouble.

showed ahead, adobes and weather-beaten frame houses huddled in the distant flat, tin roofs gleaming in the sun. Just this side of the cluster a cloud of alkali dust stirred and crawled. John rose in his stirrups, watching this until wind blew the dust clear and showed him the arched tarps of three wagons.

The sun felt good on his back, loosening his muscles, bringing out just enough sweat to make them supple. He put the horse into an easy lope for the next mile, then slowed to a walk as he came into the single street. Now the wagons were only a few hundred yards ahead. They woke the dust, and it drifted and settled lazily, whitening the rumps of three saddle horses tied in front of the Silver Dollar saloon. Farther down the street he saw a false-fronted building, long and low, bearing a sign that said D. J. VINSON MERCANTILE CO., and the wagons were swinging wide to come in beside the loading platform at the rear of this.

John got down at the Silver Dollar, where he could leave his horse in the shade of a cottonwood tree, and two cowhands who squatted whittling on the gallery eyed him curiously. He wore shoes instead of boots, and a hat too small for this country of fierce sun; he had on a dark suit with high, small lapels on the jacket. It was buttoned only at the top, and the coat fell away in an inverted V to make his shoulders look deceptively narrow.

Crossing the dusty street, John headed down the wooden sidewalk and turned into the front doors of Vinson's store.

V

The place was dim and filled with a clutter of merchandise stacked almost to the rafters, testifying to the

wealth of Dan Vinson and the monopoly he held on this town. John stopped inside until his eyes were accustomed to the dimness. Neither Vinson nor any clerk was in sight. Bluebottle flies buzzed at the spigot of a molasses barrel, and smells made a medley: sorghum and kerosene, ground coffee, vinegar and strong yellow soap and harness oil. Moving quietly toward the rear, John passed through a partition toward doors that framed sunlight.

He could see one wagon against the loading platform, its tarp thrown back. A big man in brown duck jumper and blue jeans stood there, and somebody John could not see spoke:

"Twenty-four barrels. You guarantee they're all full, Haskins?"

The big man made an impatient gesture. "They were full when we started. And you tell Vinson if he wants more water hauled, he's got to up the price!"

"Four bits a barrel is a lot of money for water you pour on the ground," the other voice said.

"Maybe so," Haskins retorted. "But this load takes up most of the wagon, and I have to run it empty from San Antone when I could be hauling freight. Besides, there was another outfit at the waterhole last night, and me and Zack had to use a little persuasion. This time there'll be trouble with the law."

The clerk laughed, and moved into John's range of vision to throw a cigarette stub under the wagon. He was thin and stooped, with black sleeve protectors on his arms and a pencil behind his ear.

"You know better than to worry about that as long as Morgan is sheriff," he said. "Water the cottonwood, and come on in and I'll pay you."

That made the whole pattern clear. John went softly out on the loading platform, remembering Jeff Printup and feeling the clean, hot surge of anger. The clerk looked up, startled. Haskins turned around slowly, facing John, no expression on his heavy features. That would be Zack standing on the ground at the rear of the wagon, pulling out the tie rod so he could remove the end gate and get at the barrels. And yonder was a young cottonwood with the ground around it dampened by water from the JD waterhole.

The tall man from the oil fields hit Haskins so suddenly the freighter had no chance to lift his hands. He grunted and fell on the edge of the platform; he slipped off, clawing, and struck the ground under the wagon. "Here, you—" the clerk yelled, and John whirled on him savagely.

The clerk turned and tried to escape. John grabbed the back of his shirt, ripping it, pulling the man back into his arms. He slammed him against the wall with bruising force, and the clerk lay huddled, gasping for breath.

Zack came charging up the steps at the end of the platform, a thick man with short arms. He had the long slender wagon rod in his right hand and he made a vicious swing

at John's head with it. The driller ducked, losing his hat as the rod whistled down to glance off his shoulder. Pain shot through his arm, and he forgot it as Zack came solidly against him, grunting and clawing at his throat, smelling of sweat.

John brought his knee sharply upward into the freighter's groin, and chopped at Zack's jaw, snapping his head back. Zack went down to his knees, but he grabbed John's legs there and pulled him over, and they rolled tangling on the splintered boards.

This was like the rough and tumble fights of the boom towns, the free-for-all battles that started over nothing and ended with a wrecked saloon or dance hall. John Salem had had experience in them, and he was far more agile than the thick-set freighter. He came out on top and got both hands on Zack's jumper collar. Lifting the man's head, he slammed it hard against the planking. Then he saw Haskins crawling back to the platform level, his broad face contorted, blood running from a corner of his lips.

John slammed Zack's head once more, and got to his feet to meet the bigger man. Haskins cursed, and suddenly stooped for the wagon rod. He was straightening with it in his hand when John kicked him squarely in the jaw.

The wagon rod clattered on the platform. Haskins reeled back and fell with his arms dangling over the edge.

"That's for Jeff, damn you!" John panted. He turned to see the other freighter up again, coming in doggedly. He had his back to the door, and he heard the excited hammering of boots through the store, but there was no time to look that way. Zack smashed a fist alongside his chin, and he stepped back and put all his weight behind a right-hand punch. The crack of his knuckles against bone was a solid and satisfying thing. . . .

Later he could remember that Zack's short arms were already limp at his sides when he toppled off the platform. He remembered, too, that it was a black-sleeved arm swinging the iron rod before he could dodge.

Lights flashed and exploded behind his eyeballs. He saw faces against the sky, faces making a circle like petals of a blue-centered flower; and only one of them was pretty enough to belong in a flower. It came closer, and then faded.

He heard Dan Vinson's voice. It said, "Susan, I warned him to stay out of this! He started it . . ."

Now it was Doc Eustis looking down at him in an intent, professional way.

"Lie still!" Doc said briskly. "One more stitch to go."

The haze went away, leaving a throbbing ache. John's eyes moved, and found Susan's face again. She had been crying.

"Oh, John . . . John!" she said. "Why did they pick on you?"

"I guess they didn't," he answered, managing a smile. "I picked on them. They've been stealing your

water, Susan—by the wagon load. They beat up Jeff Printup. That's why I jumped them—they beat up Jeff."

But he knew it wasn't why. He got down off the table, and said, "Doc, how much do I owe you?"

Doc's eyes twinkled. "Son," he said. "I figure I'm the only man in this town Vinson can't run or scare. Not a cent. If it had been Vinson himself you knocked off that platform, I'd pay *you!* But Vinson is too smart. He pays the other man to do his dirty work. Watch out for him, son!"

Outside, Susan looked up at John, her eyes troubled. She said, "I'm afraid, John! If papa knew about this . . . about the water stealing . . . he'd get up out of bed and go after Vinson with a gun!"

"Don't tell him," John said. He looked down the street, seeing the buckboard in front of Vinson's store. It was like that in San Cristobal: even if you hated Dan Vinson, you had to buy supplies from him. And he knew why Susan was afraid. Jim Douglas might stand a lot of pushing around on his own account, but when they stole his water they were injuring his cattle, and he lived only for cattle business. . . .

Susan waited tensely in the buckboard while he went back inside the store. The black-sleeved clerk paled and put a counter between them, and John laughed.

"You're safe, right now," he said. "I'm here as a customer."

Dan Vinson heard that, and came out of the back room, walking heavily, contempt on his face. "What do you want?" he demanded.

"A hundred feet of that manila rope," John said evenly. "Enough to hang the next man who tries to steal JD water. And I want a six-shooter."

Vinson's cold eyes were measuring him again. "Haven't had enough, eh?"

"Haven't even started, Vinson," John said.

The big man turned on his heel. "Sell it to him," he told the clerk. "If he shoots himself, it's not our lookout."

Jeff Printup put two shots over the wagon bows of a freight outfit that pulled in by the waterhole a few evenings later, and the driver whipped up his team and went away surprised. Jeff figured that one was just out from San Antonio and hadn't got the word. He looked for a lull while Vinson made up his mind what to do next.

John was too busy to worry. He built the derrick flat on the ground, then attached long and stout upright timbers to the higher legs. They ran two ropes from these through a big pulley block, forming a V, and applied mule power to the apex to lever the stilt-legged giant to its feet over the drill pipe. They fired the boiler, and the first time it popped off under a head of steam the sound was more exhilarating to John Salem than the sound of champagne corks could have been. He put a heavy maul on the drilling line, and hammered the drill pipe into the ground.

Twenty feet down, it rested on limestone. Now he was ready to drill. Beyond that rock they might tap the oil pool. The fever burned him; he drove Jeff and himself unmercifully, and they did the work of a five-man crew, making up by lantern light what the day failed to accomplish. There came a morning when Susan drove the buckboard into the motte, and Caleb Todd climbed down and hobbled to the rig with the aid of a cane.

"By Jupiter!" he shouted. "This is what I like to see! Why, you're ready to make hole!"

"Ready, nothing." John grinned. "We're making it. And I've been waiting for this chance to christen the well. Jeff, where's that brandy bottle?"

He watched Susan, disappointed that she showed no more appreciation than she did. The shrinkage of the water worried her, and she had been too busy with the cattle to see the work that had been done so far; to her, the derrick might have grown overnight.

"Will the boiler use much water?" she asked anxiously.

"Not much," John said. He lifted the brandy bottle, which had only a swallow left in it, and said, "Just pretend this is filled with champagne. I christen this oil well—Susan Number One!"

"Hear, hear!" boomed Caleb Todd, and the bottle shattered on the drill pipe. Jeff sniffed the brandy smell, and licked his lips. Susan smiled, but her eyes were worried.

"Jeff," said Todd, "find me another bottle and get me some oil off the creek. I want to take it into town." He chuckled, and rubbed his hands briskly. "You give me a few yards of hole, and a little oil in a bottle, and that's all I need!"

VI

Todd's help would have been invaluable to the short-handed crew, but it was not forthcoming. He borrowed the buckboard and drove to San Cristobal, and the wagonyard employe who returned the rig a few days later brought a message. Colonel Todd, he said, had gone to San Antone on business.

"*Colonel* Todd?" John echoed.

"That's what he said. He's been swallow-forking it all over town the past three days. Said for me to tell you he might be gone quite a spell."

John smiled. If Todd wanted to put on airs and give himself a military title, that was his business. The oil was all that mattered, and that was John's job. He pounded at the earth eighteen and twenty hours a day; he kept the bit sharp, and they made depth steadily, encountering nothing worse than soft limestone. Susan had caught some of his fever now; she rode by as often as ranch work and caring for her father would allow, and sometimes she cooked for John and Jeff.

At seventy-five feet the tools went through the rock, but there was neither oil nor water beneath. That was the first day in a long period in which John took time to go see if

the oil was still bubbling up under the willows.

It wasn't. He knew a brief discouragement, and then reminded himself that the same sort of earth movement that had opened the seam could have closed it again. But he wished Todd were back.

Doc Eustis rode down one day after calling on Jim Douglas, who was almost able to leave his bed. He dismounted and stood watching the walking beam with great interest.

"Any more trouble, son?"

"No," John said. "Quiet as a graveyard."

"Well, you scared the freighters. But watch out. The Colonel let everybody think he's drilling for water out here. Now, Dan Vinson would hate to see you bring in a water well, so keep your eyes peeled. How far down did you strike the first oil?"

"First oil?" John repeated, and a quick suspicion touched him. "What oil, Doc?"

"Why, the Colonel showed me some oil out of this well."

"And you put up how much?"

Doc Eustis produced a paper. It was a receipt in Caleb Todd's flourishing hand. For a thousand dollars, Doc Eustis had bought himself a quarter share in Susan Number One.

"I don't care about getting rich," Doc was explaining. "But it's like the Colonel says. This country needs a new industry. Something besides cattle. And by the time the railroad comes— What's the matter, son?"

"Nothing." John said. He handed back the receipt, and kept his counsel. It was costing Todd nothing but wages to drill this hole—and the wages were yet unpaid. Whatever shares he sold would cut into the returns Susan and her father would receive, if oil were found. The "if" loomed suddenly large, and the thought of Doc's thousand dollars disturbed John.

He drove harder. The hole was down a hundred feet. A hundred and ten . . . a hundred and twenty.

There they ran into heartbreak. They struck blue mud.

John and Jeff Printup were slowly dismantling the rig when Susan came into camp that afternoon. She stared, round-eyed.

"Dry hole!" John said gloomily. "Blue mud means no oil, no water—no anything. Hang it, why doesn't Todd come back?"

There was disappointment on Susan's face, but she smiled. "Don't take it so hard," she said. "I remember you told me at the beginning that it was a gamble. Well, we lost. And what good could Todd do?"

"The Colonel"—he put sarcasm in the title—"owns this rig. And he does know something about oil structures. He could prospect for a new location."

"But there was oil here, John. It must have come from somewhere near!"

"I don't know. There was oil, but there's also blue mud."

They walked down the bank, and nobody needed a line of stakes to see how fast the waterhole was shrink-

ing. At the willows, John frowned moodily on the scum of oil that remained, and then let out a yell.

"Get a rope, Jeff!" he shouted. "We've been played for suckers!"

He pointed, and Susan leaned close to him and saw what he meant. Under a half-submerged willow limb lay a barrel, almost exposed now with the evaporation of the water.

They pulled it out from beneath the limb with some difficulty, and knocked out the bung. A few drops of oil came out, and then nothing but muddy water. Jeff stooped, scraping off mud and examining the barrel.

"Windmill oil," he announced.

John swore. He kicked the barrel, and apologized to Susan, and swore again.

"How did it get here?" he demanded.

"Well, I figure one of Vinson's freighters stopped here to steal water," Jeff speculated. "Maybe he had to shift his load around. This barrel of oil got away from him, and rolled down the bank. Simple enough."

"I'm the one who was simple!" John raged. "The oil man who drilled in a barrel! I was a damned fool not to investigate those bubbles, instead of setting up the rig a few yards away and drilling!"

"Seems like I remember Todd told you to drill here," Jeff observed.

"Yes, and where is Todd now? We've wasted a hundred and twenty feet of hole. And Doc Eustis is out of a thousand dollars. I'm sick of the whole greasy business!"

Susan put her hand on his arm. "You'll find it, John," she told him. "Some day . . . somewhere . . . you'll find oil."

But she could not console him. He climbed the derrick and was dismantling the crown block, and Jeff Printup mounted to help. "You want to keep this outfit working while Todd's gone?" Jeff asked quietly.

"I never want to see it again," John said. Then: "If it weren't for Susan, and Doc Eustis . . ."

He looked down. Susan stood by the Long John boiler, her face turned upward, smiling at him. Jeff Printup said, "Don't forget Vinson. You drill a good water well on the JD, and you're kicking Dan Vinson right in the front teeth!"

It was a pleasant thought. John wrestled savagely with the heavy crown block for a moment.

"All right!" he exclaimed. "We've got nothing but time on our hands. What can we lose?"

"That's the ticket!" Jeff said. "Look. See that widest canyon beyond the ranchhouse? It comes out there. It bends east almost under the corrals, and then swings south to that hackberry motte, and then east again where you see that rocky rise. And then—"

"Hold on!" Jeff interrupted. "I may be the man who drilled a hole in a barrel, but you won't make me believe there's water at the end of a willow switch! Look for surface indications. A sycamore tree, or a cottonwood."

Jeff shook his head. "That would be nothing but surface water," he

said patiently. "You've got to go deep."

"John!" Susan called up anxiously just then. "Here comes somebody. Three men!"

The pistol John had bought that day in Vinson's store was holstered and hanging from a wagon standard; he never had grown accustomed to carrying it. He came down from the derrick hastily, almost stepping on Jeff's hands. Three men could mean trouble—the trouble, long overdue, that Doc Eustis had forecast.

They rode in under the trees, following the old wagon road from the east. In the lead was a tall man, sunburned and dusty, wearing a faded brown duck jumper and a wide-brimmed black hat; following were two patently younger editions of himself, and the Texas cowman's stamp was strong on all three. John had just time to strap the gunbelt around his waist, and to see that the newcomers all packed pistols. Then they were in the camp, and the older man drew rein and looked up at the derrick.

"Hod-dang!" he yelled, so much like Jim Douglas that John was startled. "Here she is, boys! Ain't she a beauty, though?" And then he turned a friendly smile on John. "Howdy! I reckon this is the Susan Number One?"

"It *was* the Susan Number One," he said slowly. The pattern was coming clear. Caleb Todd, swallow-forking it all over Texas with a bottle of oil and a smooth, persuasive line of talk. Whatever loyalty he had owed Todd was gone all at once, leaving John angry and helpless.

"Well, I'm Lance Quillen, from the Llano. This here's my son Ike, and this here's Rowdy. Work was kind of slack at the ranch, and I told the boys we might as well take ourselves a little *pasear*. Jim Douglas used to ranch next to me, and I told them it would be kind of nice to ride over and see him, and have a look at this here oil well. You see"—and he beamed proudly—"me and the boys bought ourselves some stock in this outfit!"

He got off his horse, and Ike and Rowdy followed suit. John suppressed a groan. Susan moved out from the cold Long John boiler, and Lance Quillen stared at her.

"Well, hod-dang!" he exclaimed. "Look here, boys! It's Susan, growed up so I wouldn't have knowed her if it wasn't for that sorrel hair!"

He shook the girl's hand. Ike and Rowdy, blushing bashfully, shook her hand. She introduced John and Jeff Printup.

Then Lance Quillen stood back with his hands on his hips—one of them dangerously near the butt of his gun, John thought—and admired the rig.

"How come you ain't pumping today?" he asked.

John drew a deep breath. "Mr. Quillen, we never have pumped," he said. "We've quit drilling. We're knocking down the rig."

Quillen's blue eyes narrowed on him. "I don't follow your drift."

"How much stock did Todd sell *you?*" John asked him.

"Five hundred apiece. Fifteen hundred, that is. Are you trying to tell me . . ."

"Yes," John said. "Todd thought there was oil here, but there wasn't."

"But, hod-dang it, he *showed* us the oil! Where is Todd? I want to have a little talk with him!"

"I'd like to talk to him, too," John said grimly.

Susan put a tin cup in Lance Quillen's hand, and went for the coffeepot. She said, "Now, Lance, you listen to me . . ."

VII

The waterhole motte, as Jeff put it, was becoming a regular camp-meeting ground. The day after the Quillens came, two ranchmen drove up in a hack. They were Ed Nichols and Fritz Schneeman—thousand-dollar stockholders in something called the Todd Western Oil Development Co. And they didn't like seeing the derrick come down. . . .

Lance Quillen was a man of reputation in cattle business. He walked up and down, rattling his spurs, and made a little speech.

"Now, boys," he said, "keep your shirt tails in, and don't blame Salem and Printup, here. They were just working for day wages, which Todd ain't paid. And Jim Douglas has been laid up with a bullet in his ribs, and didn't know anything about this. I've been up to see Jim. He's between a rock and a hard place, and we've got to help him."

"I'm willing to help Jim, all right," Nichols said. "But what about my thousand dollars?"

"You camp here and wait a couple of days. If Todd don't come back, we'll go find him!"

Nichols and Schneeman camped. They got a jug out of the hack and passed it. They drank to the confusion of Caleb Todd, to rain in September, and a big calf crop. Thus inspired, the whole gathering made light work of loading the drilling rig in the wagons.

They squatted in the shade then, and the jug went the rounds again. A judicious move put Jeff Printup in line twice before it was restored to the hack, and not long after that he saddled a horse and disappeared. The visitors scratched brands in the dirt and talked mildly of beef prices and barbed wire and of hanging Todd to a high limb. Ed Nichols skimmed a flat rock on the waterhole.

"Seems like it was a damn fool idea to drill for oil, anyway," he said. "Shucks, what's oil to a cow?"

"But he eats like a horse!"

"You tell me the best place to drill for water," John said.

That started a debate. Lance Quillen advised drilling on a rocky hill. His own son, Ike, contended the hole should be sunk near the draw, and Fritz Schneeman said hackberry trees were a good indication. Then Nichols summed up everything: "You take water in Texas, any time and anywhere, and it's an act of God. Look at those thunderheads. Anywhere else, they'd mean rain!"

The Quillen boys cooked supper. John was restless: he wanted to move the rig and set it up before Todd came back. It was too mobile on the wagons. The others turned in early, and John was just pulling off his boots when Susan called from the edge of the motte. She was leading Jeff's horse—with an empty saddle.

"I'm afraid he got hurt, John," she said worriedly. "He came up to the ranch and said all the cow talk had made him homesick. He said he was going out to doctor some of the steers."

John groaned. "Holy mackeral—twenty sections of pasture!" he said, and went back to get his pistol. Then he took Jeff's horse, and they moved out on the old San Cristobal road. There was a chance, John thought, that Jeff had taken his aggravated thirst to town.

Summer lightning played fitfully through the dark clouds in the west, and thunder muttered across the rimrocked hills. The moon was nearly full, silvering the alkali flats and making ghosts of the stunted mesquites. They rode within sight of the JD fence gleaming in the moonlight like banjo strings, and then they halted their horses. A shiny new buggy was turning into the gate from the lane, and coming up the road with its team in a gallop.

John made out the vague faces of two men in the rig, and then the driver pulled his horses up short and dust swirled high. It settled, and John saw Doc Eustis' cherubic features. The big man handling the reins was Caleb Todd.

John slid off his horse, feeling a quiet, inward anger. This would be Todd's new rig, a part of his flair for showy things, and the money of men like Lance Quillen had bought it. But he saw Todd was no longer poised and confident. He was looking nervously back down the road.

"All right, Colonel!" John said. "Speak your piece."

"John," Todd said hoarsely, "all hell's popping!"

"I know. They're at the waterhole, Todd. They're talking about stretching your crooked neck!"

Todd blinked. "But . . . but they couldn't have beaten us here, could they, Doc? Vinson was still in the store and—"

"Who do you mean?" John demanded. He caught Todd's coat, and shook him. "You can't lie to me, Todd. Talk straight!"

"Ask Doc," said the oil man.

"John, Vinson and his crowd are coming tonight to put Jim Douglas out of business!" Doc Eustis said.

"They're going to tear out the fence, and drive off all the cattle they can round up!"

Susan uttered a little cry.

"You're crazy, too!" John said. "How could they get away with doing that?"

"By driving the stock to Mexico and blaming Mexican cow thieves," Doc explained simply. "It's not as crazy as you think. Not when Dan Vinson runs the sheriff's office in this county. And not when you know Vinson."

I know him well enough, John thought, and things added up. He said, "How'd you find out, Doc?"

"You know that clerk—Phillips? Vinson fired him. Accused him of looting the till and beat him up pretty bad. I had to take some stitches. Phillips told me what he'd overheard."

Dan Vinson had made the same mistake John made that day on the loading platform. Vinson had ignored and underestimated the weak little man. A scared little man could be more dangerous than one big and brave. . . .

"John," Caleb Todd asked, "did you find any oil?"

"Fine time to ask!" John said. "There never was any oil, except some leaking from a barrel. You went off half-cocked. Now five of your suckers are in camp waiting to see you, Todd."

"I . . . I'm leaving. Before Vinson . . ."

John's big hand closed on his collar. "Not without paying up, you're not!"

"That's right. I . . . I owe you some wages, don't I?"

"The hell with wages! You shell out thirty-five hundred dollars! That'll take care of Doc, too."

"I've already settled with Colonel Todd," Doc said with a half smile.

"Twenty-five hundred," John said. "Or do you want to talk to the boys?"

Todd looked nervously over his shoulder again. "I'll pay, John. I've got money," he said and began counting bills out of a bulging wallet. "There's oil in California. If you come out there, I'll get you a job."

"I won't," John said. He stepped back, and Doc Eustis looked up at Susan. The girl's face was white and scared.

"I'll need you to help keep Jim from saddling up and half killing himself, Susan," Doc said. "He's not well enough to ride. Come on to the ranch with us."

"No—I'll stay with John!"

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" John told her. "Get in that buggy. One of the boys can use your horse."

She didn't move. He saw the Douglas stubbornness around her mouth and remembered her wildcat temper. Curiously enough, it wasn't just tonight that mattered. It was all time, and unless he could tame her now, he was lost.

He lifted her bodily from the saddle. She kicked and beat at him; she cried, "Put me down!" and he held her all the more closely in his arms. He brushed his lips across her ear, and said, "I'll want you

around tomorrow, Susan—I don't want you hurt!"

She quit struggling then, and he put her in the buggy. Caleb Todd looked at John strangely and reached for his whip.

"I . . . I guess this is good-by," he said.

The buggy rolled off on the ranch road. Somehow, John couldn't help wishing the Colonel luck.

It was past midnight, now, with the moon high and wind spilling out of the storm clouds in the west. It whistled across the mesquite flat, and sighed through the liveoaks as John Salem woke the camp and held council.

He returned the money first. With it back in their pockets, the ranchmen seemed inclined to forget and forgive, and John understood that they were a little disappointed. Each of them would rather have seen an oil well pumping. Then he started to tell them of Doc Eustis' warning, and Lance Quillen leaped to his feet and exclaimed. "Hod-dang it, why didn't you tell us before?" and all of them grabbed their saddles. John understood that, too. Dan Vinson was striking a blow at cattle, and that made them closer than a band of brothers.

Lance took charge by common consent. He said. "I'll take my boys and ride the south wire. Rest of you angle over to the west fence and keep your eyes peeled. If we find a break either place, that's where they'll be driving the cows out, and we can set a little trap for them there. If you hear any shooting, get to it fast!"

Schneeman and Nichols went with John. "Who is Vinson, anyhow?" Nichols asked.

"I've heard of him," Schneeman said. "He just about runs this county."

They rode half a mile before Nichols answered that. "I don't live in this county," he said. "Say, maybe we ought to fan out."

John was on the north prong of this maneuver. He had time now to worry about Jeff Printup again, time to remember that moment when he held Susan in his arms. For awhile everything was quiet, and then he gradually became conscious of a sound a Texas man would have heard at first. It came from the north—the confused murmurous sound of cattle on the move.

He stopped and listened. The sound came nearer, stirring a warm excitement in him. He kicked the horse into a gallop and rode toward it, with the mesquites snagging his legs until the horse found a cow trail and followed it. The first of the cattle came by on his left, and he could see nothing but the dust they raised, and then he reached an alkali sink lying flat and open under the moon, just in time to see a bunch of fifteen or twenty cattle break into it from the other side.

There was one rider on their tails. John Salem saw him briefly—a big man wearing a Mexican sombrero—before the dust of the sink rose in a fogging cloud. Cattle and driver

were coming his way. He pulled the horse close in against the mesquites and waited while the longhorns crashed by through the brush.

Wind blew the dust clear in their wake, and there was his man, and the horse bringing him into the trail where John waited. The driller forgot about the pistol he carried. He freed his feet from the stirrups, and made ready. The other man's horse shied, and as John leaped he saw a pistol coming up, spitting powder flame past his cheek.

Then his arms closed around the big man and his weight bore him out of the saddle. They fell hard in the dusty cow trail, landing side by side, tangled in mutual efforts to get at each other's throat. The sombrero flew from the man's head; his face was a blur in the dust, and John smashed a fist into it. He felt the gun barrel glance down the side of his head, gashing his ear and dazing him. His arms were growing heavy. He grabbed for the menacing blue steel barrel, and caught it with one big hand, and they rolled from the thick dust of the trail into bunch grass and the dry crackle of a cat's-claw bush.

Far away, beyond the pounding hammers in his brain, John heard hoof beats and yells, and a straggling burst of gunfire.

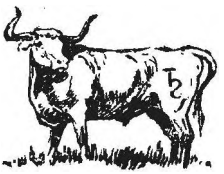
VIII

The moon was in his eyes. The man on top had one hand on his throat. He panted, "I told you to stay out of it, Salem!" and John knew that it was Vinson. The knowledge gave him desperate strength. He twisted the pistol barrel; it fell from Vinson's grasp, and they rolled again, too far to reach it. John found himself astride Vinson for a space, but the big man's arms were viselike around his neck, holding him down so closely he had no advantage.

Bringing up his knee slowly, John ground it into Vinson's groin. The stranglehold loosened. He slammed once at Vinson's jaw and then lurched to his feet. He had to stay out of the reach of those thick arms, had to slug it out with the big man. Vinson was up, too, bent with the pain of breathlessness. Both were too winded for an immediate attack; they circled, heads down, arms hanging heavily. He saw Vinson stooping, and when he saw the glitter of the gun on the ground, it was too late to beat Vinson to it. He grabbed at his own holster, but it was empty. He had lost the gun back there in the dust of the trail . . .

Vinson straightened, his face contorted, lips drawn from his teeth. John heard a shot as the gun came up. He leaped, expecting to feel the shock of a bullet tearing through his body.

But it was Vinson who collapsed, falling on his face, giving way so limply before John's rush that the driller toppled over him. When he regained his feet he saw Jim Douglas slouched in the saddle of a horse standing in the trail. Behind him Susan was biting her hand to keep herself from screaming.



"Look at him, son," Douglas said in a tired, gentle voice. "Take a look at him. Doc Eustis told me I ought not to be getting on and off this horse . . ."

John Salem looked, and turned away. He was a little sick at the pit of his stomach; he told himself it was breathlessness and over-exertion that caused the feeling. He told himself he had known all along that this had to happen.

He looked around for his horse. Jim Douglas said, "You forgot to ground-rein him, didn't you? Sounds like it's about all over, anyway. I don't rightly know how to thank you and Lance and the other boys. Susan, where's Doc?"

"He was still saddling when we left," the girl said. "He told you to stay out of the saddle, and you . . . you . . ."

"Nothing to cry about, honey," her father told her. "I reckon it's a good thing we got here when we did. I always figured a man's got to kill his own snakes."

John found his horse straying in the mesquites, and wondered if Jeff had set himself afoot in the same fashion. Doc Eustis came up just then, and ordered Douglas back to the ranch. He didn't even see Vinson's body lying by the cat's-claw bush, and no one told him about it at the time.

Dawn was breaking when the Quillens came up with two prisoners—Haskins and Zack, the freighters John Salem had thrashed that day in town—and Fritz Schneeman and Ed Nichols arrived a little later.

"We got a little too far west too fast," Nichols said ruefully. "Time we got back, the rustlers had started leaving the cattle and joining the birds. But we chased three of 'em so far their folks won't know them when they get home. Jim, you could open a hat shop with all the sombreros scattered in this pasture. I always said the Mexicans get blamed for twice as much as they ought."

Susan had gone back with her father, and John did not see her until it was daylight. She came out on the gallery then with a pot of coffee, and smiled wanly at him. It was agreed that a search would be started for Jeff at sunup, and Ike Quillen took the buckboard to go after Vinson's body, with Haskins and Zack along to help him.

"Colonel Todd," Doc Eustis remarked suddenly, "left these parts a little too soon. He was a scared man. Scared of Vinson."

"Scared of Vinson?" John echoed. "Why?"

"Where do you think he got all that money? From Vinson. He sold Vinson twenty thousand dollars' worth of oil stock before he went to San Antone!"

John whistled. "Twenty thousand!"

"That's right. Phillips told me

about that, and some other things. Seems like Vinson fell for the oil stock with no trouble at all, because he'd been seeing oil spots under that cottonwood where they dumped the water. Trouble with Vinson was, he wanted everything. He wanted to get richer off of oil. He wanted the JD because he found out the railroad is coming through Jim's land. It'll pass up San Cristobal, and probably turn it into a ghost town pretty soon."

"Why, papa doesn't know that!" Susan said.

Doc Eustis grunted. "He won't be too much interested, either, except that he can put up some loading pens and ship his cows to market instead of driving them. You know that's about all old Jim Douglas thinks about, anyway—"

"Look!" Susan exclaimed, pointing down beyond the corrals. "It's Jeff!"

John Salem leaped to his feet and looked. The sun was just coming up. It was Jeff Printup, all right, but something was wrong with him. He was a half mile away, and walking —walking strangely, like a man in his sleep.

"Dowsing for water again!" John said. "Either that, or he's drunk. No . . that's a willow branch in his hands!"

Jeff stumbled over a bush. He got up in a clumsy, patient way, and moved on. He tripped on a rock, went a little way to the south, and then turned up toward the corrals. And then while they all watched him, he walked squarely into a mesquite tree.

Doc Eustis went down the steps at a run. "The man's blind!" he said sharply. "You come along with me, John!"

They hurried down the slope, and Susan ran after them. Long before they reached Jeff, the truth of Doc's diagnosis was plain. Jeff couldn't see where he was going, but he had a willow branch to guide him. And he was painfully following the route he had pointed out to John Salem from the top of the derrick —the route of the underground stream!

John called him when they got near enough for Jeff to hear. The little man looked up, smiling haggardly.

"I can't see, John . . . I can't see!" he said. "I thought I heard some shooting. What's been happening?"

"Plenty," John told him. "What happened to you?"

He reached Jeff, and took his hand. For a man stricken blind, the little teamster appeared surprisingly cheerful.

"Oh, don't worry about me," he said. "It'll go away, I guess. Happened to me once before. Bad booze."

John shot a quick look at Doc Eustis who nodded. "It sometimes happens," he said. "Denatured alcohol does it. Causes temporary blindness. What have you been drinking, Jeff?"

Jeff Printup hung his head. "Kind of hate to admit it, Doc," he said.

"But when I rode out into the pasture to doctor those steers, I had that can of worm medicine along—that new patent medicine, you know, and—"

"Worm medicine!" Doc Eustis exclaimed in a shocked tone. "But, great Scott, man, you haven't got worms!"

"I know. But you smell that stuff, Doc. It smells like alcohol. It smells like forty rod. Anyway, I took just a couple of swigs. Next thing I knew, I didn't know anything, and when I come to, I couldn't see more'n a yard or two. But I knew where I was—up there by that draw. I knew I could dowse my way back, only I wanted to wait till daylight so somebody would see me when I came by the corrals. That's where I am now, isn't it?"

"Yes," said John. He was both exasperated and overjoyed. He shook his head and said, "Jeff, I apologize. You can pick the spot where we drill for water!"

Jeff shook John's hand off his arm, and held out the willow branch. He said. "John, it's right here—it's strong right here! With me, dowsing is a . . . well, a kind of a gift. I can't explain it. I could make my living that way, maybe, but I haven't got any right to sell something like that. But you drill right here by the corrals, John!"

"*We'll* drill here," John corrected. "As soon as you get your sight back, old-timer." Then he grinned ruefully. "That is, if Todd doesn't come back too soon, and want his rig moved somewhere."

Doc Eustis smiled his cherubic smile. "You can drill here and a lot of other places, John," he said quietly. "Todd didn't want to be slowed down with an oil rig when he thought Vinson and the law would be after him. So I made a deal. He kept the thousand dollars; I own the rig. You and Jeff can pay me back from the profits of your first thirty or forty wells and windmills. This country needs them."

John Salem looked out over the thirsty land, and thought about that windmill he had seen in San Antonio. It would be something to own your own drilling outfit, to delve into the earth with it, to harness the wind and bring water up from the depths so that nobody would have to depend on a waterhole. The barbed wire could come, the big ranchers could fence their creeks. So long as there was a wind to blow, there would be water. . . .

Susan slipped her arm into his, and found his hand. "Just think, John," she said. "Some day you might strike oil!"

"Oil?" he echoed. The word had somehow lost its magic. He looked into her eyes, and saw the lights that sunrise found in her hair. He smiled at her. "What do I want with oil wells?"

THE END

By Dan Kirby

STAR HATER

Justin Trent's greatest victory as a lawyer was an empty triumph when he discovered how much he had to learn about justice

JUSTIN TRENT stood at the bar of the near-empty saloon and poured himself a drink from the bottle of imported brandy the barkeep set before him. With mock solemnity he raised the glass in a silent toast to his reflection in the fly-specked mirror.

"To victory, Charlie," he said mockingly and tossed off the drink.

The barkeep nodded and peered over the batwings toward the courthouse across the street. "Jury's been out near an hour now, Mister Trent. Ain't you goin' to be there when it comes in?"

Trent shrugged. "I can't do any more for Murdock now, Charlie. It's all up to the twelve good men."

The barkeep grinned knowingly. "If I'd had a thousand, I'd've bet it on Murdock gettin' off slick as a whistle. You ain't never lost a case since I can remember."

Trent smiled. He poured another drink from the brandy bottle and

warmed it between his hands. Today he felt like celebrating. Not because Jess Murdock, owner of the big Hat spread, would come clear of the murder charge filed against him, but rather because old Sheriff Jim Stone would have to turn in his badge. Justin Trent had waited a long time for this day.

There was a movement behind him and he turned. A girl stood there. A girl in a low-cut, blue satin dress and spangles in her long black hair.

"Hello, Justin," she said, smiling at him with easy friendliness. She glanced at the brandy bottle and then looked at him quizzically. "You might be celebrating too soon, Justin. You say yourself that no man can tell what a jury'll do."

Trent shrugged. He was a tall, lean man and the Prince Albert coat he wore gave him a kind of grave dignity which was reflected in features that might otherwise have seemed bleak. "Murdock will get off. I tied the sheriff up in knots when he got on the stand. It's my day, Carrie. The day I've waited six years for and I'm goin' to wring the most out of it. I want to be on hand when Sheriff Stone takes off his star. I want to remind him of some things while he's doing it."

Carrie Randall was looking at him curiously. "What kind of things, Justin?" she asked.

Trent smiled, a humorless smile this time. Carrie Randall was new to the town of Temescal. He said, "Six years ago Jim Stone arrested me for getting mixed up in a shooting scrap. I drew five years at Yuma when others just as guilty as I got off scot-free. I swore then that some day I'd come back and ruin Jim Stone at his own game—the law."

"When did you learn this . . . this 'law game,' as you call it?"

"I had plenty of time," Trent said coldly, "Five years in an eight-by-ten cell with nothing to do but read and study."

"I know the rest, Trent," Carrie told him. "You've won acquittals for every outlaw and renegade the sheriff has arrested for the past year. You've used your clients to break the sheriff."

Shrugging, Trent poured himself another drink. "They can't complain," he pointed out. "They're free men today."

The girl studied him a moment. "Did you deserve to go to prison?" she asked quietly.

Trent flushed. "No more than the others who weren't even arrested," he answered. "But they were sons of a couple of big-bellied cowmen, and I was just a down-and-out nester's kid. Stone knew there wouldn't be any trouble sending me up."

"He doesn't seem like that kind of a man," Carrie commented.

Trent turned abruptly and walked away, annoyance tight within him. He had known this girl for less than a month, and yet it was not merely a casual acquaintance. She would anger him and he would walk out as he was doing now, but tomorrow,

perhaps even today, he would come back. They both knew that.

Trent stood out on the high boardwalk in front of the saloon and waited for the first sign that the jury might have reached a verdict. He was not much perturbed about this case. Big Jess Murdock and his gun-slinging shadow, Larkin, had been arrested for the murder of Harley Simmons, a small operator who owned a little piece of cow range next to Murdock's sprawling Hat brand. The evidence had been mostly circumstantial and Trent had picked away at it tirelessly during the trial. He was a good lawyer; too smooth and resourceful for the aged and tired county attorney to cope with successfully.

He could think fast on his feet and he could talk with fluency and ease. He could make the twelve men in the jury box believe that he was taking them into his confidence and letting them in on unknown secrets regarding his client's innocence. But most of all, he was a law baiter and this he enjoyed. This was why he had wanted to practice law in the beginning.

He was clever with it. He could bellow and storm with rage; he could be quietly persuasive, and he could damn the sheriff's office and its bungling, high-handed methods with cold, cutting anger. He could be sincere because he himself felt the things he said. And more often than not, Sheriff Jim Stone wound up the object of the jurors' cold glances and the judge would reprimand the old lawman and the weary prosecuting attorney for arresting a man without sufficient evidence.

Each victory for Trent opened a fresh wound in old Jim Stone's tough hide. Today would finish him off. The County Commissioners had indicated that they would request the old sheriff's resignation if Jess Murdock went free.

A lean, hollow-flanked Hat rider burst out of the courtroom with a suddenness that startled Trent. The man jerked a six-gun from a shoulder holster hide-out, thumbed three shots into the air and followed them with a wild, defiant yell.

"Murdock's clear," the man shouted. "Plumb clear and ready to ride. How do you peace-lovin' city gents like that?"

Trent looked coldly at the loud-mouthed Hat rider. The news brought no special elation to him so far as knowing his client was free. He had no love for the bragging, iron-handed cattle boss, Murdock, and still less for the death-faced Larkin. But this meant that Jim Stone, long-time sheriff of Mesa County, was washed up, and the knowledge set up a heady, drumming sensation in Trent's temples. This was his revenge, and it was all the sweeter for the fact that he had planned and nursed it carefully.

Trent moved down the street, pushing through the crowds of spectators streaming from the open courthouse doors. He could tell from the bitter lines on their faces how they felt about the verdict. He listened with a kind of satisfaction to the harsh

words of disappointment as they passed him.

A big, barrel-chested man wearing an expensive black broadcloth suit and a glittering diamond stickpin in his white shirt front strode jauntily down the courthouse steps and walked over to where Trent stood. He had a fleshy face and square buck teeth that looked too big for his small, thin-lipped mouth. This was Jess Murdock, owner of the big Hat spread.

Murdock bit the tip off a cigar and touched a match to it. He blew out a thick cloud of blue smoke. "You did a good job, Trent," he said condescendingly. "I'll send you a check for a thousand dollars tomorrow."

Trent looked at him. "My fee is two thousand," he said. He walked slowly up the courthouse steps aware of Murdock's cold-eyed stare following him.

A thin, emaciated man with a bony, pock-marked face came out of the doors. As always, Larkin, Murdock's hired trigger man, looked like death in the foothills.

"Thanks for nothing, Trent," he said. "Why didn't you let them hang me? Someone will do it some day."

Trent walked on past Larkin but took some of the gun-slinger's chill with him. He could not understand this man who did not seem to care whether he lived or died.

Inside the courthouse Trent saw two men standing at the back of the room. The tall, gray-haired man with the lined, weather-beaten face was Sheriff Jim Stone. He stood with quiet dignity before the short, fat chairman of the county commissioners, and slowly he pulled the nickel-plated star from his worn doeskin vest.

He said, "There it is, George."

The commissioner accepted the badge reluctantly. "I'm sorry about this, Jim," he declared. "But the people have been dissatisfied with your work, and the commissioners just represent the people. You know, of course, that we can't make you resign, Jim, if you want to hang on."

Jim Stone shook his head. "The law belongs to the people, George," he said quietly. "It's up to them to say who they want."

"We're bringing in Hans Early from Tombstone to finish out your term," the commissioner explained. "He'll be here some time next week. 'Til then I guess we'll appoint someone locally."

Stone nodded and turned away. He walked toward the open doors and as he approached, Trent could plainly see the imprint of the star where it had hung on his vest for the past fifteen years. The ex-sheriff looked old and tired now, but Trent felt no sympathy for him. "Too bad, Stone," he said without feeling.

Jim Stone stopped in front of him. His sharp gray eyes leveled unwaveringly on the man who had broken him. "Not for me, it isn't, Trent," he said. "I've got a little spread up in the mountains, and I've been wanting to go up there and just

take things easy for the past five years. But you're right, Trent. It is too bad about a lot of things.

"When you came back from prison and told me you had become a lawyer, I congratulated you. We needed good lawyers out here, lawyers who respected the law and had some feeling for the people they represented. Then when I saw what you were up to, Trent, that the law didn't mean a thing to you except a chance to break me, I felt sorry for you. I still do. Mighty sorry, Trent. The law is bigger than you or me or any single person and some day you'll see what I mean."

The shadows were long when Trent closed up his law office and started for the restaurant down the street. He glanced across the street at the sheriff's office and missed the familiar figure of Sheriff Jim Stone lounging against the doorway. Trent's lips curled. He hoped Stone was thinking of the day six years ago when he'd arrested Justin Trent. He hoped the man was remembering the somber promise Trent had made to come back to Temescal and strip him of his badge.

Trent was remembering it. Even now that he'd broken the sheriff, the memory still rankled. He could remember like yesterday the night the sheriff had rode out to the cabin to arrest him. It had hit his father hard and it had hurt his sister, Margaret. He could remember Margaret pleading with the sheriff to let him off and he could remember even more vividly the lawman's dogged, unyielding answer to the girl.

"Justin's shot a man," the sheriff had said sternly. "He's got himself in a scrape and it's my job to bring him in. It's up to others to say what will be done with him."

The others, a tobacco-chewing judge and twelve bored, yawning jurors, had sent Justin Trent up for five years. It had nearly driven him crazy at the time. His father was laid up with arthritis and Margaret couldn't carry on all the work around the homestead. Trent was needed there. But Sheriff Jim Stone didn't consider that. He had his duty to do. Duty. The word soured on Trent's tongue. What kind of duty was it that crushed all feeling out of a man and turned him into a heartless, human machine.

Trent was just starting into the restaurant when a wagon bounced around the curve into town, followed by other wagons and several grim-faced, overall-clad men riding bareback on big-hoofed plow horses. It was the nesters who had homesteaded on Turkey Creek. Trent watched them narrowly as they made their way down the street to stop at the sheriff's office.

He could see his sister Margaret sitting beside her husband on the high seat of a flat bed wagon. He hadn't seen much of Margaret since he came back from the prison. Their father had died while Justin was serving out his term, and Margaret had married a neighboring nester kid, young Joe Welch.

There was tension and trouble in the nester men. Trent sensed it and

His desire for food faded. He left the restaurant and angled across the deep-rutted street toward the sheriff's office.

He stopped by Margaret's wagon and rested a foot on the hub of a wheel. "What's up?" he asked.

Margaret Welch looked at him, her face strained and worry lined. "It's coming, Justin. Just like I always tried to tell you it would. Jess Murdock has whipped out most of the small ranchers, so now he's starting in on us nesters. His man Larkin killed Jud Avery this afternoon."

Trent's jaw tightened. "That's crazy, Margaret. Murdock wouldn't let Larkin pull a raw stunt like that with them just coming clear of a murder charge this afternoon. What proof have you?"

The girl's face stiffened. "What proof we have we'll save for the sheriff, Justin. You're a Murdock man."

Trent's face reddened. "I don't care a damn for Jess Murdock, Margaret; you know that. I used him to break Jim Stone, that's all."

His sister's lips twisted in a bitter smile. "You broke more than Jim Stone, Justin Trent. You broke all the decent, hard-working ranchers in this valley and now you're breaking the farmers, your own people."

Trent shifted uneasily. "I'm a lawyer, Margaret. It's my duty to see that a client gets every break legally coming to him. I don't pass on innocence or guilt. If the sheriff couldn't rake up enough evidence to convict Murdock and his men, he shouldn't have arrested them. That's Jim Stone's fault, not mine."

Joe Welch walked up to the wagon. He was a stocky, square-faced man in his late twenties. He looked at Trent coldly, then turned to Margaret.

"Jim Stone's resigned," he said bluntly. "There ain't no law. Nobody around here would take the appointment, and the new sheriff won't be in for a couple of weeks."

Trent saw his sister's face pale and anguish come to her eyes. "We can be wiped out in less than two weeks," she said fearfully.

Joe Welch nodded, his face grim. "We know that. Murdock knows it too." He looked at Trent. "You ought to be proud of yoreself, feller. What's Murdock cuttin' you in for out o' this?" He swung up into the seat before Trent could answer and laid a whip across the rumps of the team. The wagon jerked into motion, leaving Trent staring after it. Other wagons were moving, too, carrying worried, silent men and white-faced women. They looked at Trent coldly as they passed.

Trent moved across the street to the almost deserted saloon. "Whiskey, Charlie," he said to the barkeep. The expensive brandy he had celebrated with that afternoon now seemed distasteful to him. He needed something strong and fiery to clear his confused brain. The things Margaret had said to him hurt like the cut of a lash.

Trent was pouring himself a second drink when the batwing doors

banged open and Jess Murdock came into the saloon, a truculent look on his big, fleshy face. A step behind him was Larkin, his gray-flecked eyes as cold and expressionless as ever. They sat down at a corner table, and Murdock motioned for a bottle. Trent moved away from the bar and walked slowly to where the men sat.

"Murdock," he said, "some nesters from Turkey Creek drove in a while ago. They said that Larkin had shot down Jud Avery. What about it?"

Murdock blew out a cloud of cigar smoke. "You lookin' for another case, Trent?" he asked insolently. "There ain't no law in this county now, so I don't reckon we'll be needin' a shyster this time."

Trent gripped the edge of the table. "Those farmers on Turkey Creek are my people," he said tightly. "I was born and raised with them. They're not in your way down there, Murdock. You told me a year ago you weren't interested in that chunk of land."

Murdock stood up. His face was a cold, hard mask. Don't tell me my business, Trent," he snapped. "I've paid you for everything you've done for me and my men. I don't owe you anything. I aim to have Turkey Creek, and I aim to get it my way. If your sister hasn't got sense enough to get out while there's time, she'll deserve what she gets."

The savage words pounded into Trent's brain, and a cold fury swept through him. He saw the big man's leering face in front of him, and he aimed a vicious, open-handed blow at it. His palm landed with a sharp crack on Murdock's jaw, and the rancher staggered back, stunned by the unexpectedness of it.

Trent took a step toward Murdock. Too late he saw the movement behind him. He spun quickly but already Larkin's gun was swishing through the air. The barrel exploded with thundering force against the side of his head. Trent reeled against the table, and again he felt the searing pain as the gun barrel crashed against his forehead and raked down his face. He fell away from the table and hit the floor hard. Through a blurred haze he saw Larkin thumbing back the hammer of his .45.

"Don't, Larkin!" Murdock's sneering laugh cut trough the fog. "We just might need him later." Trent saw Larkin's gun slide back into its holster, and then a great, roaring darkness engulfed him.

Trent was first aware of a softness beneath him. Slowly, painfully, he opened his eyes, and as the blurriness left them he saw that he was in strange surroundings. And then he saw Carrie Randall standing beside him. He tried to raise up on his elbows, but the throbbing ache in his head was too severe.

"Take it easy," the girl said. "You're in my apartment above the saloon. You've been out over an hour now. The doc came and bandaged the cuts on your scalp."

Slowly remembrance crowded its way back into Trent's head. Now he

forced himself to sit up, swinging his feet around to the floor.

"Where are Murdock and Larkin?" he asked dully.

Carrie shook her head. "On the streets somewhere. I think they're looking for one of the farmers named Lafe Watson."

Trent got to his feet. "Watson is sort of the leader of the farmer settlement. If Murdock scares him out it will affect the others."

The girl shrugged. "I don't think Murdock intends to waste time scaring anybody. He's got Larkin, and Larkin shoots for keeps. They have nothing to fear from the law now." She looked at him queerly. "You've defended Murdock or his men four or five times during the past year when they were accused of shooting or burning out the small ranchers. You made it appear that the small ranchers were feuding among themselves. Did you really believe that?"

Trent flushed. "What does it matter what I believed? The law is supposed to be infallible. The guilty are supposed to be punished and the innocent go free. That's Jim Stone's idea of the law. Why don't you ask him?"

Carrie's face clouded. "You're all twisted inside, Justin. You may have gotten a bad break when they sent you to prison, but it wasn't Stone's fault. He was doing his duty and doing it well. The fault, if any, lay with the lawyer who defended you. There's need for good lawyers, Justin, but not for your kind."

Trent slapped on his hat. "You're a fine nurse, but not much of a preacher, Carrie." He left the apartment and made his way through the saloon into the street.

Looking down the road, Trent saw Lafe Watson's wagon pulling out of the livery stable and watched it stop at the feed store. Lafe had stayed behind when the rest of the nesters rode back to Turkey Creek. He would have been the one to make arrangements for the burial of Jud Avery and he no doubt had a session with the county commissioners about finding a sheriff to fill in the gap until Hans Early came in to take over. As spokesman for the farmers, these things were part of his duties.

Trent, having been a nester kid himself, knew and liked old Lafe Watson. He started down the boardwalk toward the feed store. He wanted to talk to old Lafe. He wanted to make Lafe see that this trouble was none of his doing. The blame lay with the law and the bungling, inept way Jim Stone had of doing things. Somehow it seemed important to Trent to convince Lafe of that.

He was halfway to the feed store when he saw Larkin and Jess Murdock. The big cattleman had stepped out of the barber shop and was standing on the boardwalk directly across from the feed store. Larkin was moving across the street toward Lafe Watson.

Trent knew what was coming off. He knew it from the unhurried, almost uninterested way Larkin was moving. Killing a man was nothing

to excite the thin gunman. He did it with as little fuss and commotion as possible. It was just a matter of getting his gun out and squeezing the trigger.

Trent found himself running along the walk toward Watson. "Lafe," he yelled, "get back inside the store. Get back—" He broke off as he saw Lafe look up at Larkin.

Trent could see from the look that broke over the nester leader's face that he knew his string was running out. But Watson was no coward. He set himself and waited impassionately as the little gunman approached. Larkin made no pretense. He did not try to create a self-defense alibi by taunting Watson into drawing first. He simply reached for his gun and fired one shot. Lafe Watson had not even begun his draw when the bullet took him in the heart. He was dead before he crumpled to the ground.

Trent came up, a cold wave of nausea gripping at his stomach. "That was murder, Larkin," he said hoarsely. "The devil himself couldn't tell a jury any different. You'll hang for that!"

Murdock pushed in front of Larkin. "I'm the law in this valley now, Trent," he snarled. "I'll pick a man to replace Stone as sheriff, and I'll pick my own juries if it comes to that. I hate your guts, Trent, but there'll be times you'll come in handy. You can string along with me like you have for the past year, and you'll make money and be a power in this town. Or you can try to cross me and get killed. Take your choice."

Trent stared at Murdock and Larkin and for the first time realized his complete helplessness. Larkin still had his .45 in his hand and, leaning against a nearby hitchrack, stood another lean, gun-hung Hat rider. Trent was not even armed.

He turned and headed toward his office, the sense of defeat strong within him. He heard Murdock's voice trailing after him. "You'd better get your sister off'n Turkey Creek by tomorrow. There's gonna be a little hell raisin' out that way."

In his office Trent slumped down in the swivel chair behind his desk. He thought of the little homesteads out on Turkey Creek that only now were becoming green and productive with fruit and grain after years of bitter struggle. He knew that neither Margaret's husband, Joe, nor any of the other men would leave their land without a fight to the death. And Trent knew that they would be no match for Jess Murdock and his professional killers.

Trent left his chair and began to pace the floor. There was only one thing that could save the nesters now: the law. But there was no law. Trent cursed. He'd run old Jim Stone out of office too soon. He should have waited. He should have let the old man keep his star and go down under the bullets of Larkin's .45. But Jim Stone would not have had the guts to tackle Murdock and Larkin in a shoot-out.

Suddenly Trent heard hurried

footsteps on the stairs leading to his office and he flung open the door. Carrie Randall came in, out of breath and flushed with running.

"What is it, Carrie?" Larkin demanded.

The girl pointed toward his office window. "Look," she said.

Trent stepped to the window. The street stretched below him. Framed in the double doorway of the livery barn stood Jess Murdock and Larkin. Nearby stood another Hat rider. And walking toward them, a shotgun cradled across his chest, was Sheriff Jim Stone. Trent caught the glitter of the star on the oldster's vest, as the setting sun struck red rays from the metal.

"The county commissioners asked him to take back his star," Carrie explained. "He didn't have to do it. He could have gone out to his ranch and lived in peace like he'd always wanted. But he took the job even though he must know he doesn't stand a chance against Murdock and his men. That's what the law means to Jim Stone, Justin." She looked at him levelly. "What does it mean to you?"

Trent blanched before the girl's accusations. "A man can be wrong, Carrie," he said hoarsely. "It's too late now." He whirled toward his desk and found a short-barreled .38 in a drawer. He stuck it in the pocket of his long coat and turned quickly toward the door.

The girl eyed him anxiously. "What are you going to do, Justin."

There was a thin, grim smile on the lawyer's face. "I'm going to side the sheriff. I'm no gunman. I won't be much help, but I can draw part of the fire off him. I reckon I owe him that." He was down the stairs then and out into the street.

The sheriff was directly across the street and moving toward the livery when Trent stepped out of the shadows. "It's me. Trent, Stone," he called softly. "I'm going with you."

Jim Stone did not turn his head from the livery down the street. "It's gonna be kind o' warm down there, Trent," he warned. I hope yore shootin' is as good as yore talkin'. I thought some day you'd get yore eyes open about Jess Murdock."

Murdock stepped out from the door of the livery barn. He looked at Jim Stone and an ugly grin stretched his coarse lips. "You ain't figurin' on makin' an arrest now, are yuh, Jim?"

Larkin, the thin, pock-faced killer, said slowly, "Let's cut the talk, Murdock. I'll take the sheriff. I always had a hankerin' to get a least one tin badge before I cashed in my chips." His hand dipped in a swift, blurring motion.

Trent saw the killer's gun swinging up. He saw old Jim Stone fall to one knee and cut loose with the shotgun even as Larkin's gun spat flame. Then Jess Murdock moved. The rancher's hand closed on the .45 slung low in its holster and he brought the gun up swiftly, lining it on Trent.

"You're a fool, Trent," he said, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet caught Trent high in the chest. It spun him around and dumped him in the street, a great nausea flooding over him. He saw Murdock's leering face through a haze and groped for his own gun. He could hear the roar of the sheriff's scattergun and vaguely he was aware that Larkin had keeled over and was down on his face.

Bringing up the .38 with an effort, Trent caught Murdock's fat stomach in its sights. He pulled the trigger and a kind of savage satisfaction forced back the fatigue that gripped him as the big rancher doubled over and fell heavily, his arms wrapped tightly around his middle.

Trent pulled himself to his feet. Old Sheriff Jim Stone was standing erect and proud with blood streaming down his neck from a scalp wound. Trent wanted to go over and shake the old lawman's hand, but the energy to move was not in him. He swayed there and would have fallen except for Carrie. She came swiftly across the street and put her arms around his waist, holding him up.

"It's all right, Trent," she said. "Everything's all right now. We'll get a doctor."

Trent looked at Carrie. "Sure," he said. "Everything's all right."

The sheriff walked over and grinned at Trent. "We make a pretty good team, Trent. It's sort of a relief to have you fightin' with me instead of against me. I'd like to make it a permanent arrangement."

Trent looked at him. "What do you mean, sheriff? I'm washed up in this town."

Jim Stone shook his head. "Come next election I'd like to see you runnin' for county attorney, Trent. If you're as good when you're for the law as you have been against it, the two of us can clean this county up neat."

Trent sighed. "I'd like that, Jim. I sure would." He looked at Carrie. "You'll have to get out of that saloon, Carrie. We've got to raise our ethics if we're going to hold down public office."

Carrie smiled and her eyes were suddenly radiant as she repeated his own words. "I'd like that, Justin. I sure would."

THE END

THE OLD LOOK

Now most old-time cowhands, they ain't much for shape;
Their legs may be bowed an' their face needs a scrape;
They may have lumbago from broncs they have rode—
But I never did see one that walked pigeon-toed!

S. Omar Barker

NEW GENERATION OF SHOOTERS

By Captain Philip B. Sharpe

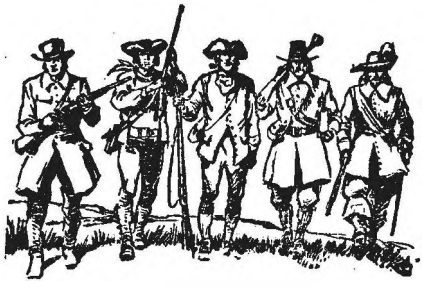
Handling a gun comes naturally to the American sportsman and, whether it's for food or fun, he never lowers his sights

LESS than 175 years ago this country was born. In those early days of Pilgrim life, firearms were as essential a part of everyday life as the kettle hanging in the cabin fireplace. A gun meant food and life. Everywhere the early settler went, his musket accompanied him. It protected his family from wild animals; it provided food for his table; it protected him from his enemies. Historians record that our Pilgrim Fathers took their muskets to church on Sundays—frequently they had to leave interrupted services to deal with hostile Indians. . . .

A century ago descendants of these same hardy pioneers started on a new venture—to conquer the unknown, untamed and mysterious West. Again. guns formed an essential part of their equipment without which they could not have survived. The major difference was the addition of something new. Sam Colt, the Remingtons, and a few others had developed a repeating one-hand gun, then called a "revolving pistol" and later shortened to revolver. Again the firearms provided food, protection—life, itself.

The American thus came to know and love his guns honorably. "The right to bear arms" was a part of his birthright and was written into his Constitution. This natural interest in firearms has never died, and today the "city feller" takes as much interest in firearms as the complicated and restrictive laws will permit.

In this post-war period of 1948, American interest in firearms has reached its highest peak of the Twentieth Century. Newcomers to the game were created by the war.



Hundreds of thousands of them were former service men who have taken an active interest in firearms, not from a military standpoint, but with truly sporting interest.

Today's interest in firearms takes varied channels. The boys want to hunt, and they want proper weapons for this sport. Some want to get into organized competitive target shooting. Still others want to shoot in an unorganized way—that fascinating game of plinking, in which rifles, revolvers, and pistols are used truly for entertainment purposes to shoot at all kinds of inanimate objects. And, of course, we have the group who love guns, love to collect them, but have neither time nor facilities actually to shoot them.

The years 1946 and 1947 saw the greatest growth in organized shooting that this country has ever known. American shooting as an amateur sport has four representatives: The United States Revolver Association of Springfield, Mass., pistol and revolver shooting; The National Rifle Association of America, Washington, D. C., rifle, pistol and revolver shooting; The National Skeet Association, Washington, D. C., skeet shooting; and the Amateur Trapshooting Association, Vandalia, Ohio, traps.

Membership in these groups has grown to the point that the existing facilities of the parent organizations have had to be greatly enlarged.

Perhaps the largest of these groups is the National Rifle Association. In February 1946 membership reached an all-time high with 100,000 shooters. In November 1946 there were 200,000. Today this has leveled out to more than a quarter million, with a slow but steady increase.

Getting into this game of organized shooting is a very simple task. The newest program is that of the Rangers. This is for youths—both boys and girls—who want to begin early. The National Rifle Association, sponsoring this Ranger program, permits any youngster to shoot anywhere under the supervision of an adult, even his own father. After shooting a few qualifying targets, he may become a Ranger and wear the Ranger emblem on his jacket.

Then comes the Junior program. This is more highly organized. The Junior division of the NRA permits youths of either sex under 18 years to participate in organized competitive and qualification shooting. Thousands of Junior Clubs are found throughout the country, with Boy Scout troops, Girl Scouts, YMCA, churches, schools, and so forth. All are adult supervised. Competitive matches are arranged, either by visiting teams or by mail. Medals are offered for individual qualifications as well as in competition.

The senior program includes both

individual membership and group or club memberships. Teams from clubs compete in person or by mail with other clubs. Various county, state and regional matches are held where all shooters may compete for various qualifications, match championships and trophies. Under American rules, many of these matches give cash prizes. About half of the entry fees are devoted to the costs of running the matches, and the remaining cash is returned to the shooters in the form of money awards. Thus, with a long string of cash awards, you might pay a 50¢ entry fee and win back from $2 to $12.50.

The biggest group of shooters is the unorganized family. Remembering that various clubs and associations total about a half-million organized shooters, you will see that the biggest family is really large.

Plinkers—those who enjoy the sport of shooting at tin cans, paper targets on a home range, "bustible" targets ranging from fragile clay saucers through bottles—all get their fun from shooting.

What guns do these chaps use?

The world's most popular cartridge is the little .22 rimfire. Born here in the United States in 1856, it may be found in every country where guns and ammunition are used. Because of its low cost, its popularity for general shooting has remained undisputed. In no other caliber has the shooter such a wide choice of gun makes and models. Every American arms maker produces rifles or hand guns for this cartridge. Prices range from the lowest possible up to several hundred dollars.

As a shooter and a coach, I have handled most of the guns on the American market. I have started many a present fan in the shooting game. In one year I qualified more than 150 youngsters for some 300 medals. Yet I have never told any beginner to buy the best gun he could find.

All American guns shoot better than most good shooters. If you desire to learn to shoot, whether it be just plinking at tin cans, or as a top match competitor, start with any .22 you can find—the cheaper the better. As you begin to learn to master that equipment, ideas start to form. You find the weak points in your weapon—the size and shape of the stock, weight of the barrel, type of sights, lack of sling, etc. Your association with other shooters and their equipment helps to form your ideas as to just what you require.

You are then ready to enter the medium-price field. There you may try to fill your ideas. You will acquire some basic equipment to which accessories may be added, and gradually you step into the market for the best—in accordance with your own ideas. Your old equipment has a ready market, often for as much as it originally cost.

If there isn't a handy shooting club to join, you can form one. The many services of the NRA to its membership include supplying addresses of nearby clubs, information on organizing a club, and directions for build-

ing a suitable range, indoor or outdoor, at a cost within a club budget.

If, as a shooter, you have not explored the bustible target field, you are missing a lot of fun. Ordinary clay targets such as are used for Trap and Skeet are excellent for this purpose. If you wish smaller targets, the Mo-Skeet-O or Mossberg Targo targets intended for use with .22 Long Rifle Shot cartridges may be used.

These targets may be used with any kind of rifle, revolver or automatic pistol, but again, with ammunition costs high, the .22 is the best bet. Pick a safe backstop where stray bullets can create no damage. Hang your clay bird on a nail, and challenge a friend to a duel. Number of shots is unlimited, but the one who first breaks the target wins.

Vary this game with three targets for each shooter. The one who breaks all three first wins. Endless combinations can be worked out.

Trick shooting is also fun. If you have a place to shoot where broken glass is no problem, try old electric light bulbs. Tie a string to the base of the lamp, support it overhead, and start it swinging. It makes an interesting and none-too-easy target.

Support a small weight on a string and try cutting the string. This is not too difficult. Hitting a horizontal string is very difficult.

Spectacular targets also include short pieces of chalk. These are inexpensive, and a hit means a puff of dust. Line them up in rows and see how long a string you can break without missing. When they become too easy, move back and try.

A never-ending argument is the old one of which is faster, the revolver or the automatic pistol. Give two shooters with a pistol and a revolver, five targets and five cartridges. Two shooters on the line, both with guns unloaded. At a signal both load and start to fire when ready. See who starts shooting first, and who breaks the most targets.

Many beginners claim that since they live in a large city, they cannot shoot. Practically every city of any size has a number of clubs with shooting facilities. Locate one near you, either through the local police or through the NRA or USRA. Then drop in for a visit.

Shotgun shooting at aerial targets is a fascinating sport. Skeet fields and trap fields are always open to you. A brief visit with the owner of a suburban farm, and you will have permission to shoot all you wish. You need only a small hand trap and a companion to throw the targets.

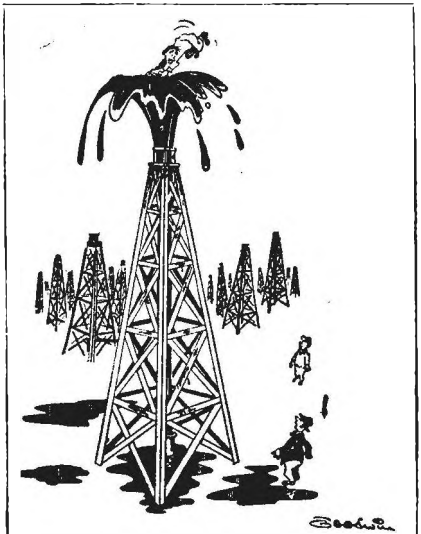
To the chap who feels that standard shotshells are too expensive for much of this sport, the miniature game is fascinating. Small clay targets, a special .22 smoothbore gun made by all of the gunmakers, a small trap, and some .22 long rifle shot cartridges are all you need. There is a little trap, built like a big one, which may be mounted on a box and transported in your car. All you need is about 200 feet of open field for safety.

An even less expensive outfit is the

Mossberg Targo trap, a small gadget which clamps on the barrel of your gun and throws the bird by means of a trigger controlled by the hand gripping the forearm.

This .22 shotgun game is fascinating, and it teaches one to shoot fast. The tiny shot charge will not break targets at a range much greater than 40 feet.

If you are interested in hunting, join one of the many fish and game clubs. Practically every county has one. Many of these clubs have members so active that picnics, shooting matches and other outdoor sports are featured to support the usual monthly meetings. If the game in your area is not plentiful, a good active club will get State help in planting the proper wildlife. Your State Department of Fish and Game, usually located at your State Capitol, will give you the name of your nearest club and the address of its secretary.



"Didn't you tell me to put a cap on it?"

The newcomer in the gun game seems to have one universal question. "How long will a gun last?" or "How much shooting does it take to wear out a barrel?"

A batch of standard shotguns of several makes was used at Elgin Field, Florida, to train aircraft gunners during the war. They really "wore out" but the official record shows that each gun consumed over one million standard 12-gauge Skeet and Trap loads. That is believed to be a world's record.

Any modern high-power hunting rifle should be good for 20,000 rounds, and still retain hunting accuracy. A high-power target rifle will need a new barrel in less than half of that total. A precision target .22 should be good for at least 50,000 rounds (better than $600 worth of match ammunition) and often it can then be salvaged by cutting a short section from the rear of the barrel, rechambering it and doubling its life. I have seen good match .22 barrels that have gone more than 100,000 rounds.

These life figures are rarely reached because most guns "wear out" through neglect. The action should be kept clean, as powder smoke mixes with oil to form a gritty abrasive. Barrels can be overcleaned. Cheap cleaning rods and much scouring wear out the rifling more than the friction of bullets. Rust is the worst enemy. With modern non-corrosive primers, little

damage is done to an uncleaned barrel if it is kept in a dry place.

Which is best—an old gun or a new one? Let's look at facts, not theory. One long-popular shotgun, still made, is the Model 1897 Winchester hammer pump gun. Suppose you found a dealer who had discovered in his storeroom some unused guns in the original factory boxes.

One was made in 1900, another in 1925, and a third in 1947. They all look alike. Which would be best? The 1925 manufacture would be better than the 1900 gun. The 1947 would be far superior to either. Although the design is the same, improved manufacturing methods plus greatly improved alloy steels—items which do not show—would indicate that the 1947 gun is tighter in its parts and stronger in every way. The same thing applies to all makes and models of guns. Don't ever let anyone tell you that "they don't make guns as good as they used to." Only the fancy engraved guns are missing, and they would cost more than shooters care to pay.

If you really want good guns to shoot, do not go in for the "war trophies" now flooding the market. It matters little whether the rifle you plan to get is a fancy sporter or a military weapon, the quality is missing. Most European guns in the sporting family are beautifully decorated with engraving. The reason is obvious: European gun engravers are usually paid less for a week of skilled labor than an American ditch digger makes in a single day.

Another thing—the fantastic prices being charged for these foreign guns in today's market is highly unreasonable regardless of quality. They came in duty free as GI trophies, remember? It cost the average GI nothing for the gun and less than a dollar postage to mail it home.

Perhaps, for the newcomer in the game, there should be a word of explanation concerning another variety of sporting rifle—the "wildcat" varmint guns. To those who have played guns as a hobby, the wildcat is not new. Essentially it is a custom-built or altered rifle to take a cartridge not made by our ammunition firms. Wildcats have been with us for 75 years and will always be with us. Some eventually become standards. The .22 Hornet is an example. The .257 Roberts is another. Developed by private experimenters, their popularity grew until ammunition makers and rifle makers were forced to add these numbers to the line.

Essentially, a wildcat is a privately developed cartridge, primarily developed for varmint shooting. The boys go in for light bullets at ultra-high velocity—from 3,500 to 4,500 feet-per-second, but this demand is practical. They like to shoot vermin at long ranges—from 200 to 400 yards. They demand super accuracy, and usually use high-power target telescope sights. A woodchuck, crow or prairie dog is a very small target at such long range.

These wildcat shooters demand light high-velocity bullets for safety. They want the bullet to kill cleanly.

They insist that bullets shatter on missed shots, to eliminate the danger from ricochets or glancing bullets. And the high velocity not only insures these features, but also makes the cartridge as "flat shooting" as is possible. Errors of distance estimation do not mean missed shots.

Since the wildcat ammunition is usually custom tailored for finest performance and accuracy in the individual rifle, many of these are capable of grouping 10 shots in a 1½-inch circle at 200 yards—far better than most factory loads. Wildcatting is expensive. Besides the cost of the rifle and its expensive telescope sight, the brass cases are usually formed from standard cases in special hand dies, slowly and painfully.

The wildcatter is definitely one of the gunbug hobbyists. He works hard to develop his pet fodder, and gets his satisfaction when he makes his clean kill at 300 yards or more with a single cartridge. I know one of the boys who keeps a record of every shot fired.

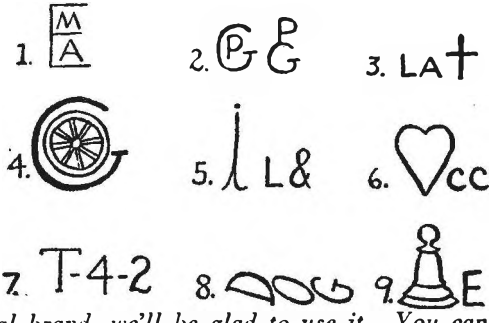
"Last year," he proudly remarks, "I killed 117 chucks, all at ranges over 200 yards. Longest kill, 380 paced yards, average, 250 yards. My score was 64 percent."

Of such enthusiasts is the great family of gunbugs made.

THE END

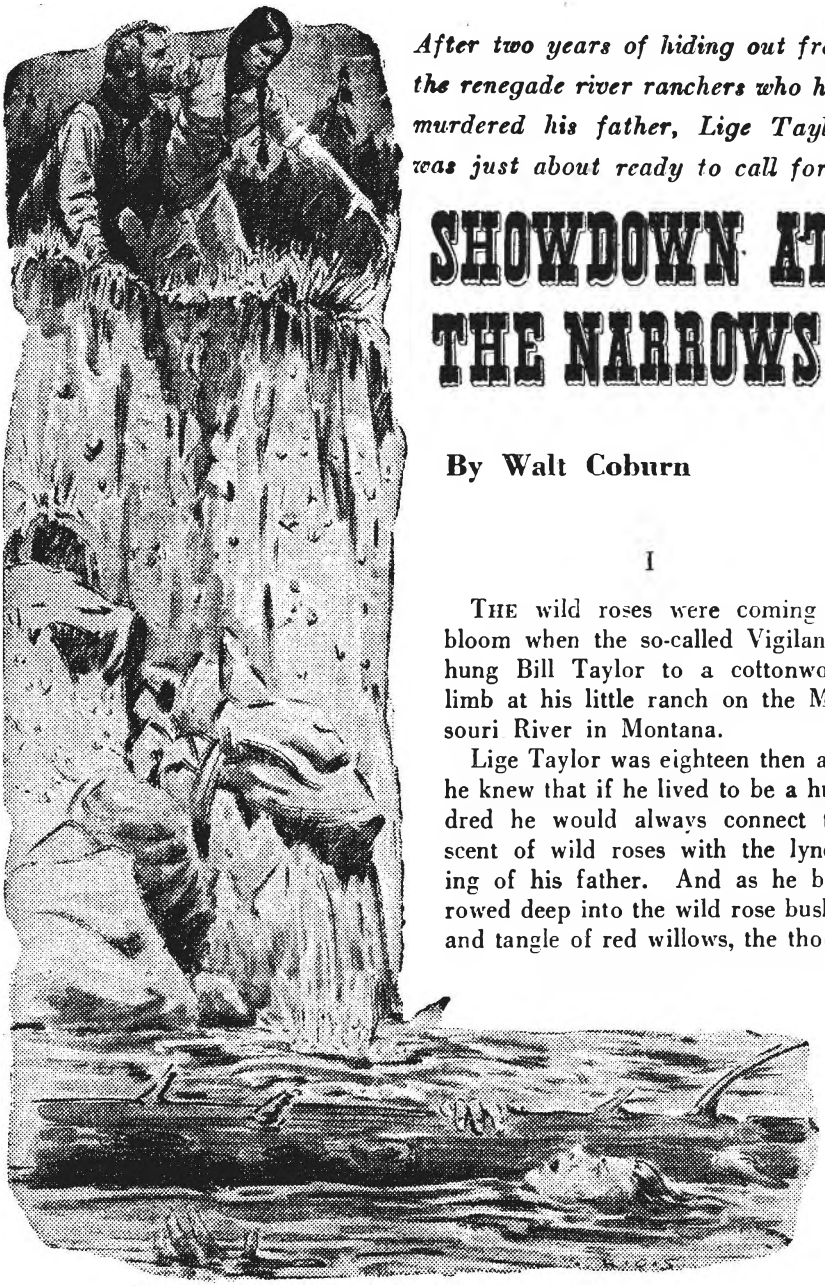
WHAT'S IN A BRAND?

BY JACK LUZZATTO



This month's winning brand is No. 1, submitted by H. J. Bowen, of Brooklyn, New York. Send in your ideas for a chance at the prize. If you can make a clever original brand, we'll be glad to use it. You can use any subject or name that is made into an interesting symbol of simple pictures or letters. The subjects of this group of brands include American place names, sports and even a song title. If you can decipher six out of nine in this group, you are doing some first-rate puzzle solving. Higher scores make you a top-notch brand reader. However you make out, it's good fun and you'll want to try your skill at making some up yourself. Answers are on page 100.

Can you work out an *original* brand? Mr. Luzzatto will pay $5 for each contribution suitable for use in this department. Address him in care of Western Story, 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Be sure to enclose a three cent stamp for material which is not available.



After two years of hiding out from the renegade river ranchers who had murdered his father, Lige Taylor was just about ready to call for a

SHOWDOWN AT THE NARROWS

By Walt Coburn

I

THE wild roses were coming in bloom when the so-called Vigilantes hung Bill Taylor to a cottonwood limb at his little ranch on the Missouri River in Montana.

Lige Taylor was eighteen then and he knew that if he lived to be a hundred he would always connect the scent of wild roses with the lynching of his father. And as he burrowed deep into the wild rose bushes and tangle of red willows, the thorns

ripped his hands and face. He crawled on his belly towards the river's edge. The mud was cold and slimy where the spring flood water had left the bottom land along the Missouri silted over above the brush line.

There in the brush where the heavy silt would bog a saddle horse up to the hocks and not even the drunkest of the night-riding lynchers would muddy their boots, young Lige crouched, watching and listening in the black shadows of the moonlit night. The cold clammy black chill of the mud crept into his young heart and into his boy's mind, poisoning him with a bitter hatred against those men who were murdering his father with a lynching rope. And he let the hate mount because it killed the fear inside him.

They had ridden up out of the night without warning, half a dozen of them. And they had caught big tough Bill Taylor as they had aimed to catch him, sleeping off a bad drunk. Before he was anywhere near awake and in shape to put up a fight, they had him hogtied. As Jess Factor put it, it was as easy as shooting fish in a rain barrel.

Jess Factor was ramrodding the night riders. Three of them were his cowpunchers. The other two were a pair of river ranchers who had a grudge against Taylor. Jess Factor had no cause actually to hate Taylor. He just wanted the Taylor place at the mouth of Hell Creek and he figured this was the easiest way for him to get hold of it. . . .

Bill Taylor had been gone a week on his drunk. He'd showed up about dusk and when he cussed the barbwire gate that was hard to open, young Lige could tell by the sound of the man's voice that his father was ornery ugly drunk again. And from bitter painful experience Lige had learned that the thing to do when his father showed up drunk was to take to the brush and hide out there until the older man was sobered up and too sick to abuse him. So Lige slipped off into the brush where he could hear his father hunting for him, hollering his drunken curses and threats.

The boy had become as tricky and cunning as a young Injun when it came to hiding in the brush. He could burrow in and crouch there for hours and a man could prowl within arm's reach and never see or hear him. It had gotten to be a game that held a thrill and excitement because if ever his father found him he'd take his heavy rawhide quirt to the boy. The fear of punishment spiced the game of hiding.

Taylor had been drunker than usual. When he came stumbling and staggering and lurching past the brush patch Lige had seen the dark stains of the blood that spattered his father's shirt. Taylor's black-whiskered face was battered looking and he'd lost his hat. His iron-gray hair was matted with blood and dirt, and his gray eyes were bloodshot and slivered. With his shirt ripped and blood spattered and a six-shooter gripped in a big fist that was crusted with dried blood and dirt, Bill Tay-

lor had looked ugly and dangerous. Locoed-drunk, he had kept snarling something about his own son quitting him in a tight, calling Lige a white-livered coward and a sneaking, yellow-bellied coyote.

They were names that he had called the boy countless times but this evening there had been an ugly desperation in the sound of his voice. Like he actually needed his son's help. But once or twice before when the boy had decided against his better judgment and come reluctantly out of his hiding place, Bill had collared him and quirted him until Lige's back was ripped and bleeding. Now young Taylor was getting old enough and big enough to have the sense to stay bushed-up when his father was drunk.

For a long time Lige had been making it up in his mind to run away. Saddle a horse and pull out. Drift far and fast until he got a long ways gone and beyond the ugly reach of his father. Mebbyso change his name and start out on his own. Bushed up this evening, Lige had kept telling himself that the sign was right for a getaway, except for the fact that the big muddy Missouri was still up and over its banks and the swift current filled with snags. It would be weeks before even a river rat like young Lige Taylor could swim a horse across its swollen swift treacherous mile width. And always in figuring out his getaway, the boy planned on crossing the river for a head start. Because the one thing on earth that scared big tough Bill Taylor was the Missouri River, for the man couldn't swim a lick and had a fear of the water.

Tonight if the big Missouri wasn't up and booming, young Lige would have stolen one of his father's horses and swum the river and drifted yonderly, as soon as Bill staggered into the log cabin and onto his bunk to sleep off his drunk. But even the best horse in the little Lazy T cavvy would never make it across, especially at night.

Then Bill Taylor had stumbled into the cabin and onto his bunk with his six-shooter in his hand. Lige had waited there in the brush to give his father an hour's time before he'd be dead to the world. While the boy was waiting he dozed off and went sound asleep. It was then the voices of men yanked him awake. He rolled over and onto all fours and then crouched back on his hunkers and froze there motionless, peering out through the brush, ears straining to catch every word.

II

They had left their saddled horses somewhere in the brush behind the cattle shed and pole corrals and slipped up on foot to the log cabin. Now they had Bill Taylor and were dragging him out of his log cabin and out into the moonlit clearing. The big tough drunken cowman put up a short vicious fight. They clubbed him down with their gun barrels and kicked him where he lay on the ground. Then after one of them tied Taylor's hands behind his back. Factor kicked him up onto his feet.

"Stand on your laigs, Bill."

Jess Factor was a six-footer, raw-boned, with a shock of muddy-colored hair and a pair of pale-green eyes. His nose was hawk-beaked and he had a long lean jaw that jutted out on the same angle as his nose. His mouth was a thin-lipped gash. Just now his face was bruised and battered-looking and he had the look of a man who had taken a terrific beating.

Jess Factor grinned like a wolf. He braced his long legs and while big tough Bill Taylor stood weaving drunkenly, his hands tied behind his back, Factor hit him and knocked him down. Then he yanked Taylor back up onto his unsteady legs and knocked him down again and kicked him brutally. Crouched in the brush, Lige could hear the thudding of those big cowhide boots and he gritted his teeth to choke back his shout of protest.

Not that Lige had reason to owe his father any kind of son's devotion or loyalty. Without half trying, the boy could remember the quirtings that same Bill Taylor had given him. Just as sadistic and brutal and merciless as the older man was now getting from Jess Factor. But Lige hated brutality. And this was as cowardly and merciless a thing as one man could do to another. Watching it, Lige felt sick inside. But there wasn't anything he could do to help his father.

"Hell, Jess, don't kill him. We want him alive an' knowin' what's happenin' when we string 'im up."

That was Weasel Ingram who had a place up the river from the Taylor ranch. A small, pale-eyed, bow-legged man with horse-thief tendencies.

"Yeah. Don't hawg all the fun, Jess," leered Purty Joe Pagan.

Pagan was hardly more than a bald-faced kid, twenty-one at the most. Tall, slim, he had wavy yellow hair he wore too long, a small mouth like a girl's, soft-looking, and a cleft in his chin like a deep dimple. He had a straight nose and a skin that tanned smoothly. A pretty boy. Until you looked into his eyes and found them as pale yellow as the eyes of a vicious animal.

When Joe Pagan was fifteen he had killed his own father. He had knifed his father while he slept because the older man had tied him to the snubbing post in the round pole corral at the Pagan ranch down the river and horsewhipped him for stealing money to spend on river breed girls at the Rocky Point Crossing store.

Young Purty Joe had dumped his dead father's body in the river and when it was found washed up on the sandbar at the Taylor place, the bloated carcass was punctured by a score or more of the stab wounds made by a hunting knife.

They hadn't bothered to arrest the boy when he told his story. Purty Joe with his girl's mouth and dimpled chin, the horsewhip scars on his smooth skin. Motherless, Joe Pagan had fallen heir to the ranch and to his father's money cache. He had hired river breeds to do the ranch work while he helped Weasel Ingram drift stolen horses out of the country.

Purty Joe Pagan took in all the cow-country dances. And when he got into any trouble he cut his way free with the same hunting knife he had used to murder his father.

Purty Joe was the youngest one in this lynching party, and the most cold-blooded. His knife flashed in the moonlight. And he bent over Bill Taylor where the big tough river cowman was trying to get his tied hands freed.

Lige heard his father's hoarse rasping snarl of pain. Saw the blood spurt. Saw Purty Joe reach down with his left hand and grab the blood-matted iron-gray hair and the knife blade glint in the moonlight. Then Bill Taylor's cursing voice bellowed in the night.

Jess Factor kicked big Taylor in the belly.

"Can't stand that damn bellerin'," he growled. "You give up head like a mav'rick bull at a brandin'. Put the big son straddle of a horse, boys. . . Where's that Purty thing headed for?"

"I'm goin' after Bill Taylor's whelp Lige." Purty Joe headed on foot towards the barn. "He's holed up somewheres like a coyote pup. You don't want no witnesses left alive to tell this, do you, Jess?"

"Hell, no. But don't miss the show. You're the one said he knowed how to tie a hangman's knot."

Lige burrowed deeper into the brush until he was almost belly deep in the slimy soft silt. Purty Joe wouldn't muddy his fancy alligator boots and showy California pants.

"You lynchin' me, Factor?" There was no slightest note of fear in Bill Taylor's voice. Only hatred and contempt

"Damn right we're stringin' you up, Taylor. Got anything to say to the contrary?"

"I give you a whippin' at Landusky, Factor. Made you bawl an' cry an' beg off. You're a cowardly thing. And them sorry cowhands that do your dirty work is as yellow-bellied as the man that pays 'em cattle-thief wages. I ain't scared to die, you dirty, lowdown, mongrel coyotes. But you'll be scared, the pack of you, from this night on. Montana don't stand for this kind o' murder. You'll git yourn. . . . Now free my hands and I'll tie you a first-class hangman's knot. I'd like for the job to be done right. After all, a man should have some say at his own lynchin'."

Weasel Ingram cut the hogging string that tied Bill Taylor's hands. And the big tough river cowman tied the hangman's knot and slid the noose down over his head. They tied his hands behind his back once more and lifted him straddle of a horse. Making the horse stand under a cottonwood limb, they tied the end of the rope to a stout limb. And while Bill Taylor looked down at them and cursed them, Jess Factor quirted the horse out from under Bill Taylor. .

Purty Joe Pagan had come back from the barn. His brittle laugh and the choked death rattle in the hanged man's throat were the only sounds that broke the silence of the Montana

night. At last Bill Taylor's doubled-up legs slacked and he hung motionless and silent.

"Now we better hunt down that Lige whelp," said Purty Joe. "His saddle's in the barn and his horse is tied up in the stall. He's bound to be somewheres near. Unless we want him left alive to tell the tale, we better find him and kill him."

Leaving the hanged man there, they scattered and began their hunt.

Lige Taylor crawled and floundered through the black slime. Once or twice he tripped and went headlong and the black ooze filled his mouth and nostrils. He coughed and choked and the men hunting him heard the sounds he made and they shouted back and forth to each other and began closing in, regardless of the mud. They were on horseback but Lige was on foot and he went into red willow brush where no horse could follow.

Then they began shooting into the brush at the sounds he made and a sort of panic gripped him when some of the bullets whined so close that he ducked. Now he knew how a young wolf felt with the hound pack closing in. At last Lige was at the river's edge and he stumbled into the water. It was cold and the swift current tugged at his legs. He was waist deep and he ducked his head and face in the water and got the slimy mud washed off.

They were coming closer now on horseback, cursing the mud and shouting back and forth. One of the Factor cowhands yelled something about mebbyso Lige was packing a gun and to watch out.

Lige didn't have a gun. He didn't have anything more deadly than the jackknife in the flank pocket of his old Levi overalls. He had pulled off his boots and shoved his old black silk neck handkerchief through the boot straps and had the boots hung around his neck. And all he had on was a faded blue flannel shirt, his worn overalls and one of his father's old Stetson hats. All he owned on earth, except for an old saddle, a pair of worn-out chaps, a pair of cheap spurs and a ketch rope . . .

The big old Missouri River was swollen and muddy. Down its swift-moving flood stream floated uprooted trees and debris of all sorts. Dead carcasses of cattle and horses now and then, a half-submerged shack or haystack. The river was so wide you couldn't see the far bank. Black and forbidding in the moonlight, its lapping current muttered against the bank.

The old Missouri held no threat for young Lige Taylor, born and reared to his eighteen years on the banks of the river. He couldn't remember when he hadn't been able to swim. Dog paddle, one foot on the bottom, then into deeper water, swimming frog-fashion with a breast stroke and scissors kick. Then somebody had shown him a side stroke. Soon he was crossing the river with the aid of a big hunk of driftwood. Every spring Lige would be the first

across the river, then the first to swim a horse across.

Even when the flood water subsided and there was no more than a short fifty yards of swimming water out in the channel Lige picked up a few dollars swimming horses across for cowhands repping with some roundup wagon on the other side of the river. He was as much at home in the river as he was on dry land. He had his catfish trotlines and his rowboat and he liked to slip off alone to sit on the river bank and watch the muskrats and beaver. He knew every whirlpool and undercurrent each year when the flood cut a change in its channel. The boy liked to listen to the river talking to its bank and he imagined he could savvy its talk. He told the river his secret hopes and his longings and took his pain and grief to its healing water.

Now the big, swift, swollen river was his friend. The only one young Lige Taylor had tonight to count on. And that big friend wouldn't fail him. He stripped to his long underwear, rolling his shirt and overalls in a tight bundle with his boots. When he sighted a big driftwood log he swam to it, hoisted his bundle on it and hung onto it, floating downstream in the night. Leaving behind him the shouts and the scattered gunshots. Leaving his father hanging to the limb of a cottonwood tree. . . .

III

When you killed a man with a gun it was a job done quickly. He was dead before the last far echo of the gunfire died out at the head of the broken badlands.

It was getting rid of the carcass that bothered you more than the killing. A dead man's carcass has to be hidden where it will never again be found.

But if you are a river man and you savvy the ways of the big old Missouri, you can get rid of your dead man. But you've got to do the job right. You didn't want that carcass to swell up and float ashore on some sandbar down the river. So you weighted it and sank it and left the rest of the job to the river. And with the Missouri swollen over its banks and all kinds of truck floating downstream there wasn't one chance in a thousand of that body ever being found. . . .

Tol Tolbert felt almighty pleased with the way he'd done the job. His only regret was that he couldn't collect the reward bounty on the dead outlaw, mebbyso two thousand dollars. But the outlaw had eight thousand dollars in real money on him and he couldn't take that money with him, so it belonged now, every dollar of it, to Tol Tolbert.

"Seems to me," Tol grinned at the muddy river that held his secret drowned deep in its swollen stream, "like I shore earned it, at that."

Tol Tolbert had the ferryboat crossing above the Narrows and a saloon where he sold the rotgut booze he moonshined back in the badlands. He ran what he called a trading post, though his trade goods were mostly cartridges and guns and

what clothing or grub a man on the dodge might need when he holed-up for a while in the badlands. There were always a few good horses in the pasture, too, handy if a man was traveling a few jumps ahead of a law posse and needed a fresh horse.

Tol's prices were scaled according to what the man on the dodge could afford to pay. There were a lot of different angles to it if you made a study of it as Tol did. He could hide a man out for days or weeks or even winter him back there in the badlands and no law hound would ever pick up the hidden man's sign. For years now Tol Tolbert had run that kind of a place at the Narrows and his reputation had gone on down the Outlaw Trail by the rustling of the leaves. It was known at the Hole in the Wall and at Brown's Hole and on down as far south as Robbers' Roost that Tol ran an outlaw way station and blind post office at the Narrows on the Missouri River in Montana, if a man on the dodge had the high price in his pocket to pay for what he needed. . . .

Because first and last and all the way in between, Tol Tolbert was after the almighty dollar. Only a dollar didn't buy a man much at the Narrows. Tol's services came high and cash on the barrelhead. Hold out on Tol and he was tough enough to take it out of your renegade hide.

As Tol would bluntly explain to some renegade who showed signs of holding out on him, it was a lot easier to put some bounty-hunter law officer on your trail than it was to cover your outlaw tracks when you rode away from the Narrows.

Tolbert never sold out an outlaw. But if some renegade cheated him in any way, Tol would put the law on that double-crossing wanted man's trail. For a price. He didn't give away information. He sold it for what he figured it was worth, and to one man only.

That man was a bounty hunter who wore a law badge pinned to his undershirt. His name was Harry Love and he spent his time on the prowl. When he got word to come to the Narrows, he came at night and nobody saw him come and there were no witnesses to what was said between him and Tol Tolbert. And nobody ever sighted the range detective when he rode away from the Narrows.

When the sign was right Range Detective Harry Love got his man and turned him in, dead. The reward dodgers on such men read "Dead or Alive." And for certain reasons it was better all around to fetch wanted outlaws in dead. Saved the expense of a long trial—or mistrial, Love pointed out to the authorities. Then when Love collected his reward he split it, according to agreement, with Tolbert.

Now Tol Tolbert stood there on the bank of the swollen Missouri River and perhaps to justify himself, salve his own conscience if he had one, he cursed the man he had killed and whose weighted dead carcass he had just consigned to the

deep treacherous black muddy river. . . .

"That'll learn you, by Satan. Sneakin', lyin', bustin' the law Tol Tolbert lays down at his Narrows. I don't need the money I took off you. And to hell with the two-bit bounty. I warned you to leave my Magpie alone. But you bothered her. That's why I told you to fill your hand. Then I beat you to it. And I killed you. Now to hell with you . . ."

Because he was almighty close-mouthed about talking to anybody, Tol had gotten into the habit of talking to himself. He stood there now in the first gray light of dawn, with last night's stars fading out and a big lopsided moon setting behind the ragged badlands.

Tol stood six feet five in his bare feet—rawboned, lean, with a shock of coarse rope-colored hair and rough-hewn features. A powerful man about fifty, he had thick hair that hardly showed any gray, but the years were etched in his leathery skin and he had an habitual squint that narrowed his bloodshot pale-blue eyes to slits. A week's growth of yellow whiskers covered his long underslung jaw and one cheek bulged with the quid of plug tobacco that was always there. Then he glanced down into the river where it was shadowed by the high cutbank—and he looked into the white face of young Lige Taylor.

For hours Lige had clung to his driftwood log until he was numbed by the water and chilled to the marrow. The healthy color had drained from his face leaving it pinched and drawn and bluish white like the face of a drowned man. Only his eyes were alive, blue-gray eyes in a drowned mask, and his wiry black hair was plastered down on his skull.

Tol Tolbert stared down from the ten-foot clay cutbank into that drowned face and for a long moment it seemed to be the face of the man he had just dumped weighted and dead into the big muddy river. Then the eyes looked up at Tol from down there in the deep muddy water and the lips of the dead face moved, lips that were blue like the lips of the murdered outlaw. And from that dead face with the alive eyes croaked a voice.

"Tol!"

Young Lige Taylor was half drowned and numb from the long hours in the cold water. He was using the last of his strength to hang onto the big driftwood log, using up the last that was in him to voice the name of the man standing there, though he knew that he could expect no kind of mercy from Tol Tolbert. The thought flashed through Lige's numb brain that he had drifted ten miles down the Missouri River to wash up finally on the opposite shore, at Tol Tolbert's place at the Narrows.

Tol Tolbert and Bill Taylor had hated each other's guts for years. Any time he had to contact Tolbert for any reason, Taylor had always sent young Lige with the message and the boy would fetch back the

answer. Lige would take the money his father gave him and hand it over to Tol who would send him back with a jug. The messages were scrawled on paper and put in a cheap envelope which was sealed. And it would be a sealed message young Lige fetched back to his father.

"Anybody stops you," Taylor would instruct his young son, "I'm sendin' you to the Narrows for a jug of rotgut."

The note never varied in meaning though it might be worded somewhat differently each time. There would be the name of some renegade or perhaps more than one, with a warning to Tol Tolbert to watch out for the man or men mentioned because they were bad hombres and not to be trusted. And always this same blunt warning that was their sworn pact:

You keep your side of the river clean. I'll tend to mine. Stay where you belong on your own side of the Missouri. I'll stay on my side. That way we'll git along.

The sealed message young Lige would take back to Bill Taylor with the jug of whiskey would be of a similar nature. With always a like warning to Taylor to stay on his own side of the wide Missouri River and to keep his ranch clean.

IV

Tol Tolbert didn't believe in ghosts. After that one long horrible moment when he thought that the dead man had come back to life, Tol got a grip on himself. He dropped down on all fours and peered over the edge of the high cutbank into the drowned-looking face.

"It's the Lige whelp . . ." He muttered it aloud.

There in that same water where he'd dumped the weighted dead carcass of the outlaw, Tol Tolbert saw the face of young Lige Taylor. Down there in that black muddy water that held his ugly secret. Better let Lige drown. The kid looked more than half drowned now, anyway. All a man had to do was walk away and let on he hadn't seen the kid there in the water. Let young Lige Taylor drown. . . . Let the drowned take care of the dead-drowned. . . .

"Breakfast's ready, paw. Come and get it. . . . What you lookin' at, paw?"

Tol stiffened, there on all fours. He gripped the edge of the bank in his huge hands with such force a small chunk of it crumpled and he had to rear back to keep from following the caved-off chunk of clay bank into the water.

Then it was too late to lie out of it or get her away from there. His fifteen-year-old daughter was curious as a magpie. Tol called her that. Magpie. Maggie or Mag for short. Black-haired, black-eyed, she had skin that was fair and white except where it was sun-tanned. But in other ways besides the coloring of her eyes and the sleekness of her black braids, the litle Magpie could show her Injun, as Tol called it.

Looking over the edge of the high cutbank and down into the water

where the clod splashed, she caught one brief glimpse of the drowned-looking face of young Lige Taylor. Just then the last of the boy's strength ebbed and his numbed hands slipped their grip on the driftwood log. He got one look at the face of little Magpie Tolbert, the dark eyes and the black braids. Then that was all.

The Magpie was slim and quick. Lithely she dove over the edge of the bank and cut the water with hardly a splash. Then she had both hands gripping Lige's thick black hair and the rest was easy. Lige hadn't swallowed any water or gotten any in his lungs and he knew what was going on when the girl swam on her back, hauling him ashore a little below the high cutbank. But he was too numbed to swim a lick and he felt ashamed of his helplessness. Then when she'd hauled him ashore he saw the giant rawboned Tol looming up and heard the Magpie's taut voice saying she'd get warm blankets.

"Fetch him to the cabin, paw."

Tol Tolbert claimed he was eternally henpecked. By his Assiniboine wife who was mission educated and by his brat of a Magpie. Though his wife was a silent woman and the Magpie's scolding was just that, the scolding of a small magpie.

Whoever damned Tol Tolbert for a blackguard and rascal and worse didn't look deep inside the tough hide of the man to find there in his heart a fierce loyalty and affection for the squaw he had married and the daughter she had borne him. Because if ever a man worshipped anything on this earth, tough Tol Tolbert actually worshipped his daughter. And he kept his family apart from his dangerous business of running a way station for outlaws. So far as he knew or would let himself believe, his wife and daughter believed that he made his money from his saloon and his trading post and his ferryboat, and that his business was lawful. And if his wife or the Magpie suspected otherwise neither of them ever told him so or hinted it by word or action. Though Tol told himself that there was no way of knowing what went on inside the mind of his wife, or just how much the quick-witted little Magpie caught onto, hopping in and out of the trading store.

But neither of them were ever allowed inside the log cabin saloon that he'd purposely built a mile back from the river at the lower edge of the broken badlands. That was where Tol dealt with his outlaw trade and he had a law he laid down to those men. They were never to go near the store or the log cabin where his womenfolks lived. On foot or a-horseback Tol went back and forth between his cabin and the log saloon and his whiskey still back of the saloon. When a man needed anything from the store Tol took his order and fetched back to the saloon what the renegade bought.

Only the river ranchers and cowmen from beyond the badlands and their cowpunchers, and men on honest lawful business were ever welcomed at the ranchhouse or traded

openly at the store which Tol's wife managed with the sprightly aid of the little Magpie.

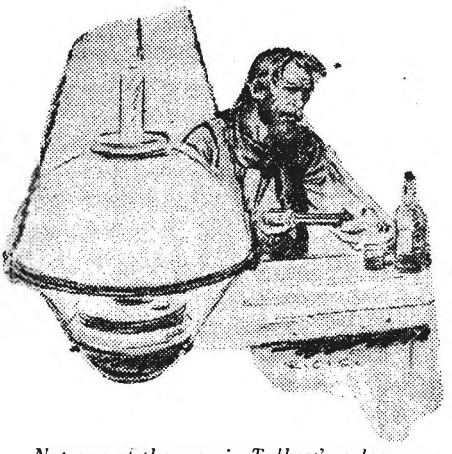
Tol Tolbert felt uneasy and burdened with guilt when he lifted Lige Taylor's half-drowned body in his huge arms and carried him with long strides to the log cabin where his wife already had warm blankets and a bunk in what was called the bunkhouse, ready, and strong hot coffee. She padded in and out on moccasined feet, a fat, moon-faced woman with soft black eyes and a smile that was as warm as the heated Hudson's Bay blankets.

The Magpie had changed her soaked dress for a dry one. Her black eyes were shining with excitement, and she chattered for all the world like a young magpie. . . .

Tol Tolbert stood back, tall, gaunt, rawboned, his eyes wary. He had done a heavy ugly night's work. Killing that damned outlaw at the saloon, laboring in the darkness to lug the dead carcass down that mile from the saloon, getting it weighted and dumped into the river before daybreak. . . . While his wife and daughter slept through the night.

"How'd you know where to find me at the river?" he had asked the Magpie.

"You weren't at the saloon, and it was closed. I took the trail from the saloon to the river. And there you were, down on your hands and knees, looking over the bank. Then the bank caved in at the edge and you reared back and when I looked down, there was Lige's face looking up.



Not one of the men in Tolbert's saloon saw the deadly barrels of a sawed-off shotgun point through the paneless window.

Then when he went under I went in after him. . . . I like Lige Taylor. He's so bashful I want to laugh. . . . Lige is a good boy . . . worth savin', ain't he, paw?"

"I reckon. Though I don't know what for. If he takes after his old man he'll turn out bad. Bill Taylor is the orneriest man on the Missouri River, bar none."

"I like Lige."

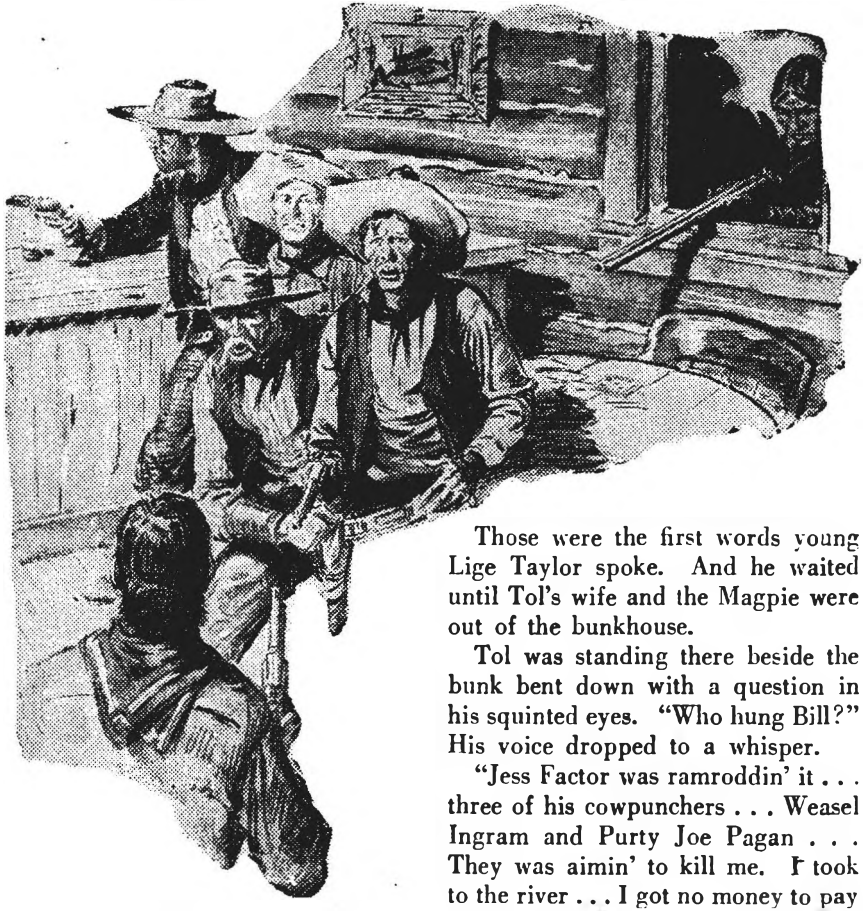
"What's it worth for me not to pass that on to Purty Joe Pagan?"

"Lige is just a kid like me. Purty Joe is a man."

"You're sixteen your next birthday. Girls git married when they're fifteen-sixteen. Joe Pagan is twenty-two. I watched him dance with you. He don't look at you like you was a kid in pigtails."

"That's why you told him to stay away from me."

"When you git married, Maggie, it won't be to no Purty Joe Pagan."



"Lige needs me now. You eat your breakfast before it gets cold, paw."

But Tol stayed there in the log bunkhouse. When young Lige commenced talking Tol wanted to be right there to hear what Bill Taylor's son had to say for himself. He got enough whiskey down the boy's throat and into his empty belly to warm his blood.

"They hung Bill Taylor."

Those were the first words young Lige Taylor spoke. And he waited until Tol's wife and the Magpie were out of the bunkhouse.

Tol was standing there beside the bunk bent down with a question in his squinted eyes. "Who hung Bill?" His voice dropped to a whisper.

"Jess Factor was ramroddin' it . . . three of his cowpunchers . . . Weasel Ingram and Purty Joe Pagan . . . They was aimin' to kill me. I took to the river . . . I got no money to pay you, Tol . . ."

"To hell with your money!" Tolbert snarled. Then he forced a grin.

"I'll hide you out, Lige, where nobody kin locate you. How did Bill die?"

"Game. He tied his own hangman's knot. He was cussin' 'em when Jess Factor quirted the horse out from under him . . . Bill Taylor died game. . . ."

"Nobody could ever say Taylor

didn't have guts. . . . Any of 'em mention Tol Tolbert?"

"No. Not that I heard. And I didn't miss none of it. . . . All I want is enough clothes to cover me and a horse. The ranch is mine. I'll sign it over to you, Tol, for a getaway."

"You aimin' to coyote, Lige?"

"I'm comin' back."

The way he said it, the look that came into his eyes, straightened Tolbert up. He nodded his head. He was looking down at young Lige Taylor, studying him. And Tol Tolbert was a shrewd judge of men.

"I'll take care of you, Lige, and it won't cost you a dollar. . . . When that log of yourn got hung up there below the bank . . . you see or hear anything?"

Tol's voice was no more than a harsh whisper. His eyes were slitted and he bent down close, his whiskey and plug tobacco breath so strong it made the boy feel sick. But Lige's eyes didn't flinch away from Tol's probing scrutiny. And he spoke quietly, measuring each word.

"I reckon I'd be safer if I lied. I saw somethin'. I heard what you said when you throwed . . . it . . . in the river. And this is the last time I ever aim to talk about it. . . . All you got is my word for that, Tol. It'll have to do."

"Yeah . . . it'll have to do. If ever you talk, you know what'll happen to you."

"I know."

"And it don't scare you none?"

"I'm not scared of you, Tol. And I ain't lyin' to you. I told you I ain't talkin' about anything."

"Bill Taylor quirted some hard lessons into your young hide."

"It didn't need quirtin' to make me keep my mouth shut. No more than it takes killin' me. . . . I ain't tryin' to beg off."

"No. No, you ain't beggin' off. . . . The Magpie could be right. She said young Lige Taylor was worth savin'."

"The Magpie said that?" Lige felt a warm glow.

Tol didn't hear him. He was hunting under the half dozen built-in bunks along the log wall and then he straightened up with a wicker-covered demijohn. He pulled the cork, sniffed the demijohn's contents and nodded. He was turning something over in his cunning brain and when he studied over a notion like that he had a habit of talking around it for a while. The talk would ramble and have nothing to do with what he was actually thinking over in his mind. And his disconnected bits of talk were like water splashing from the drip can onto the grindstone while he sharpened a skinning knife. Those words spilling out had no real meaning, but the scheme sharpened in his shrewd brain till it got razor-edged.

". . . always sniff a jug before you drink . . . got a-holt of the woman's vinegar jug thataway and swallered big afore I got the taste . . . like to choked down . . " He tilted the demijohn and let the raw whiskey

gurgle down his gullet. There were times, Tol muttered, when a man needed his likker.

". . . like a ghost . . . fer all the world like the drowned ghost of that thing I'd just throwed into the river . . . called the Outlaw Kid . . ."

Lying there on the bunk, wrapped in the warm red Hudson's Bay wool blankets, the chill inside him thawed by strong coffee spiked with whiskey, young Lige Taylor was no longer shivering and he was commencing to feel drowsy. He was listening to the sound of Tol Tolbert's voice. Tol had his back towards the bunkhouse door so that he couldn't see the door open. And he kept on talking to himself.

". . . and I ain't a man that spooks easy . . . but when that sneakin', lyin', tough renegade Outlaw Kid I'd throwed into the river looked up at me with live eyes, damned if I didn't almost pitch in headfirst on top of that drownded face . . ."

Lige saw the man standing in the bunkhouse doorway with the sunrise behind him. A skinny hatchet-faced man with gimlet eyes and his hat slanted on his head which he had thrust forward.

Tolbert turned. When he saw the man he stiffened, gripping the demijohn like a weapon. His eyes slivered and his voice was a snarl.

"Who sent fer you, Love?"

Range Detective Harry Love was staring at Lige. "Sometimes, Tol, a man just follers his nose." His voice was toneless.

V

Lige Taylor took after his father in size. Big for his age, he was nearly six feet tall and long muscled. Because he had been cheated out of his boyhood he had matured early and in some ways he was a man with a man's build and a man's way of thinking. The quirtings that scarred his hide had gone deeper and left the deep scars inside. When he told Tol Tolbert he knew how to keep his mouth shut he had made an understatement. And there in the bunkhouse at the Narrows, young Lige Taylor proved it.

He lay back on his bunk, wrapped to his head in the blankets, with his uncut thick wiry black hair damp with sweat and the warmth putting color back into his face. From under level black brows his eyes looked up into the beady black eyes of the range detective called Harry Love and he didn't flinch away from that probing gimlet stare.

Only once did young Lige Taylor look away from those wicked cunning black eyes. That was when he looked away deliberately to cut a hard quick look up at the lanky Tol Tolbert who stood now behind Love. Tol had shifted his quid of tobacco to the other cheek and there was a look on his face that few men had ever seen there because it was a look akin to fear. Then Lige was staring back into the gimlet eyes of the man he knew to be Harry Love, bounty hunter and killer. This was the first time he had ever seen the range detective and it was the first time, he

knew, that Harry Love had ever seen him. Though the bounty hunter might have known Bill Taylor by sight, he hadn't ever seen Lige Taylor until now.

"Who it this thing you got wrapped up, Tol?"

"That bloodhound nose of yourn fetched you here, Love. Whose trail was you a-sniffin'?"

"You the Outlaw Kid?" Harry Love spoke without moving his thin lips.

Lige grinned flatly. He caught on quick enough. If this range detective who hid behind a law badge to do his killing could prove a murder against Tol Tolbert, he'd have the giant squawman by the short hairs. From there on he'd have Tol at his mercy. And there was no mercy in the heart of Harry Love.

The range detective stood there beside the bunk, his head thrust down so close that Lige could feel his breath. Harry Love was peering down into Lige's eyes as if he could gimlet the truth out of this blanket-wrapped young cowboy. So he didn't see the squaw standing in the doorway, didn't know she was there because her moccasins made no sound.

Tol spoke to his wife in Assiniboine and Harry Love jerked erect, his teeth showing in a sort of snarl. The woman looked at the range detective stolidly, then turned and went back to the cabin where the Magpie was getting breakfast for Lige.

Love's hatchet face was livid. It was the kind of fury that grips a man and turns him into a ruthless, merciless killer. His hand was on the butt of his holstered six-shooter like a bony claw. But the giant Tol towered head and shoulders above him and so close that he could throttle him with his huge hands.

"Somethin' goes on here," said the range detective flatly, "that I can't figure out . . . yet."

Then he turned away from Tolbert. Reaching out with both hands, he began yanking off the blankets. Tol stood back, shifting his tobacco quid, and his eyes were splinters of ice. Then Lige lay there stripped of the heavy red wool blankets and his naked hide sweated.

Love took a reward dodger from his pocket. It was made of white cloth, with the black lettering stamped on it. He read it aloud in his flat-toned voice, comparing the brief description with the naked youth who lay motionless on the bunk.

"Clifford Jones," Harry Love read aloud, "Alias the Outlaw Kid. Wanted for horse stealing. Suspected of taking a minor part in the train robbery near Cutbank, Wyoming. Five feet ten or eleven, slim, looks younger than his twenty years' age. Black hair, eyes gray or gray-blue, no scars, no other marks of identification. Cowboy. Arresting officers warned to take no chances with him because he is treacherous and tricky, anxious to build himself a tough reputation. Reward $500.00. Dead or Alive."

The range detective studied Lige

from head to foot, then shoved the reward dodger into his pocket.

"Let's go on to the saloon, Tolbert," Love said in his toneless voice.

"Better cover yourself up, Kid," said Tol. "After we gone to the bother of fishin' you out, no sense in your ketchin' your death of cold."

He led the way out. The range detective, dwarfed by Tol's giant figure, followed.

They had time to reach the saloon and Lige had the red wool blankets wrapped around him again when the Magpie came in. Instead of breakfast she brought him a new shirt, a pair of new Levi overalls and a pair of new store boots. And when she unrolled the bundle there was a six-shooter and a box of .45 cartridges, wrapped in some underwear and sox.

"I'll be outside. Holler when you're dressed. . . . You're the Outlaw Kid."

Lige dressed quickly. He shoved the box of cartridges into a pocket and the loaded six-shooter into the waistband of the new overalls. The boots were a good fit.

When he called her, the Magpie came in with a new Stetson hat in her hand. She gave it to him and motioned with her head.

There were two saddled horses behind the barn. One of them was a black-and-white paint branded with the Indian G Dot. The other was a good-looking gelding, with a blotched brand. There was a saddle gun in the scabbard.

"I'll show you the trail," she told him when they mounted and she rode on ahead. Down along the river bank, they were hidden from sight by tall willows.

For once the Magpie wasn't chattering but her black eyes were shining with excitement. When she rode into the river and through water that was stirrup deep and then about two hundred yards downstream, when she reined her paint pony ashore and onto an island made by the flood, Lige was right behind her. She gave him a quick smile when she pulled up. She had on a boy's faded blue cotton shirt and washed overalls and her feet were bare. Except for the two heavy braids she looked like a boy.

"That bounty hunter won't find this hideout. He's scared of water."

She had grub tied in her saddle slicker. They loosened their cinches and, squatting on the ground, made a picnic of it. Cold meat inside big sliced sourdough biscuits, and two cans of tomatoes the Magpie opened with the blade of her jackknife. Lige's shy bashfulness was slipping away rapidly. The Magpie kept telling him he was the Outlaw Kid, but that he didn't look any more like the Outlaw Kid than she did. Actually.

"He had buck teeth and mean eyes. And the way he looked at me made me want to run . . . or stick a knife in him. *He needed killing!*"

So this little daughter of Tol's knew a lot more than ever she let on, even to her father. And she was as cunning at hiding out as ever

Lige had been when he hid out from his drunken father.

"I've had to hide a few times." Her smile tightened. "From things like the Outlaw Kid, and once from Purty Joe Pagan—the last time we made a dance here at the Narrows." Then her eyes teased him. "I never had to run and hide from you, did I?"

"Gosh, no." Lige felt his face reddened.

The Magpie took his hand and held it. Her smile was gone and her eyes were dark and clouded.

"I'm afraid," she told him. "Since I can remember, there have been tough men stopping at the Narrows. I'd slip away from the cabin and hide in the brush behind the saloon. I've seen things that come back to me in my sleep and scare me. But that bounty hunter Harry Love—he's the worst of them all! He's like a shadow that creeps up out of the night. You never know when he's there. You never know what those eyes of his see in the dark. What his ears hear.

"Harry Love scares me. I'll be glad when he's dead. Don't let him kill you, Lige. I remember the first time you came . . . just a little kid. You swam your horse across the river and when you saw me you wanted to run. Your voice sounded scared when you said you wanted to see Tol. I was hoping you'd stay and talk to me—I was lonesome—but you tied the jug on your old saddle and you hit the river like we'd set the hounds on you. . . . You won't run away from me again, will you, Lige?"

"No . . . No, I won't run off from you, Magpie."

"You're the Outlaw Kid. We've got to remember. . . ."

It was dusk that evening when there came the sound of a hoot owl. The Magpie called back an answer so perfectly that Lige was startled. They went back the way they had come and Tol was waiting for them. The Magpie went on to the cabin while Tol and Lige put up the horse with the blotched brand.

"We got that bounty hunter fooled," said Tol, "and unless we git careless and make the wrong move, we'll keep him fooled. We'll be workin' the same trick on Jess Factor an' Weasel Ingram an' Purty Joe Pagan. Lige Taylor is dead; I'm hidin' out the Outlaw Kid back in the badlands."

VI

So Lige hid out in the badlands. Not for just a week or a month. Lige Taylor, alias the Outlaw Kid, wintered at a hidden cabin back in the badlands, summered there the next year, and another winter. He watched the warm Chinook winds melt the deep snowdrifts that released him from his snowbound cabin back deep in the badlands. Then when the wild roses bloomed he rode down at night to the Narrows.

When he called the owlhoot signal, it was the Magpie who returned the call. And it was she who met him out in the dark shadows under the giant cottonwoods. In the darkness

her hands reached up and touched the scraggly black whiskers he'd grown during the long winter. And somehow Lige had his arms around her and their kiss was clumsy and awkward. When Lige's arms tightened around her he felt her shiver a little as though she had a chill, warm as the spring night was. And Lige knew that she was afraid.

"He's here!" she whispered.

She meant the range detective, Harry Love. The bounty hunter.

From where they stood under the cottonwood they could see the light inside the log cabin saloon back from the river. A blob of yellow light with shadows blotting across it where men moved inside the saloon. And their drunken voices lifted too loudly in the night.

"Jess Factor is there," said the Magpie. "He fetched Weasel Ingram and Purty Joe Pagan with him. The river went down and the ferryboat is in the water, so they made paw ferry 'em over before sundown. And just after dark Harry Love showed up, as though they had planned it to meet here tonight. They're all getting drunk. All but Harry Love. He doesn't drink . . . just stays to himself and watches and listens. . . ."

"How about Tol?"

"He's been drinking too hard for a long time, and that rotgut booze is working on him like slow poison. He talks to himself. And he's turned ugly. He curses my mother for no reason and shuts me up right now when I talk out of turn. Something is gnawing at him from the inside. He would have killed Harry Love when that bounty hunter rode up, only there was Jess Factor and Weasel Ingram and Purty Joe Pagan to eye-witness any killing. And for the first time Harry Love is wearing his law badge on the outside of his shirt instead of pinned to his undershirt. . . . There's something going on tonight. I'm scared."

"Where's your maw?"

"Hid out in the brush. I prayed for you to come but you didn't show up. I was going to saddle my pony and go after you when I heard your owl hoot. From now on I'll believe in my prayers. . . ."

"You better keep a-prayin'." Lige's voice was low-toned. quiet, the voice of a man grown.

"You sound . . . different. Lige."

"Holed up as long as I've bin," he said, "does things to a man. Gives him too much time to think. And nobody to talk it over with. A man's got to figure things out for himself. And now I got 'er made, I'm playin' my string out. Regardless."

"What do you mean?" The Magpie drew away from him. Coldness crept into her voice.

"I'm Lige Taylor."

That told it all. Lige heard her sharp intake of breath, as though he'd hit her. Then a silence fell, and in that silence and the black shadows of the night Lige smelled the wild roses in bloom and with their sweet odor the stench of the drying river silt. And as he had visioned it countless times when he tossed and twisted in the throes of a

horrible nightmare, he saw his father Bill Taylor hanged. . . . And the men who had done that lynching. . . .

"I don't know just what or how much Tol Tolbert figures I owe him," said Lige quietly. "I come here tonight to the Narrows to pay him off. But I got my own debt to pay off first. Somethin' I owe to my hanged father. . . ."

Lige's voice sounded quiet and deadly there in the black shadows of the giant cottonwoods. And for a long moment the Magpie stood there rigid and silent as if she were letting every word he had spoken, and all the things he had left unsaid, sink deep into her heart.

He stood motionless, waiting for her to break the silence his words had left in the night. And he was no longer a beardless boy. Lige Taylor had attained his manhood.

And then the girl called the Magpie proved that she had outgrown her childhood and she had come into her young womanhood.

She reached out and took both his hands and she stood there close to him with her face uplifted. There was no smile and her eyes were dark. She spoke quietly, in a voice that matched his.

"That's how Tol Tolbert would want it. I know that, Lige. And when you leave me and go there to the saloon, count Tol on your side. Even though he knows what it means to him when you declare yourself as Lige Taylor. Because Harry Love will know that Tol Tolbert killed that Outlaw Kid and will serve that bench warrant he has packed so long, to take Tol dead or alive. . . . Tol will be on your side, Lige . . ."

"And you?"

"I love you, Lige."

VII

It was some kind of kangaroo court they were holding, with Tol Tolbert on trial. Harry Love was the judge, and Jess Factor, Weasel Ingram and Purty Joe Pagan were a three-man jury. There was a lot of loud whiskey talk that was rough hoorawing. Underneath the profane, drunken joshing, though, was something else that wasn't comical at all, but ugly and deadly.

The bounty hunter kept apart from the other three men who stood at the bar. He was cold sober and his beady black eyes glittered but the faint smile on his thin-lipped mouth was humorless. He stood at the far end of the homemade pine-board bar without a drink in his hand and his law badge pinned to his clean shirt glinted in the light of the big old brass lamp that hung by metal chains from the ridge log.

Tol Tolbert seemed taller and bigger than ever in the lamplight as he stood behind his bar. He had set out the bar bottle and three shot glasses. His own glass was filled and he drank drink for drink with the others. The quid of tobacco bulged one cheek and now and then he would spray his sandbox with tobacco spittle.

Tol's talk was loud and saw-edged and for the first time since he had begun his dangerous business of

running an outlaw way station and blind post office, the big man was telling tales out of school, condemning himself for what he was but tarring his four listeners with the same dirty black brush. Talk that, if proven, could hang them all.

Crouched outside in the dark with a six-shooter in his hand, Lige Taylor could watch every man in the log cabin saloon, and hear every word that was spoken. There was plenty to watch and hear, and there was no way of shutting in Tol's big noise or concealing the men inside. Because in his drunken giant rampage, the big saloonman had smashed out the windows and ripped the door from its hinges. It was all revealed there in the lamplight, and Lige Taylor saw it and heard it.

He heard his dead father branded as one of their lawless brotherhood.

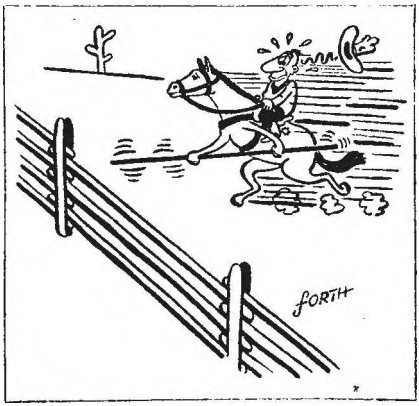
"Bill Taylor was big enough an' tough enough to whup the pack of you on the other side of the river. And he done just that. He give you the worst lickin' a man ever taken and begged off from, Jess Factor. So you taken your three cowhands and Weasel Ingram an' Purty Joe Pagan, and when Taylor got drunk you trailed him to his place and hung him for no other reason than he was too big and tough for your coyote blood. Bill Taylor was the curly wolf and you was yellow-bellied coyotes.

"You'd 've killed young Taylor the night he watched you hang his old man. But you couldn't find Lige. All you found was the tracks he left in the mud where he went into the river. And to your way of thinkin' no man could keep from drowndin' hisself with the ol' Missouri up an' boomin'.

"A week later when I fetched you three things acrost in my rowboat and showed you what was left of a drownded feller with black hair and about that build and a bullet hole or two in the rotted carcass, you was all agreed it was Lige Taylor's carcass and that a couple of bullets from your wild shootin' had hit him because I said the carcass had floated down an' hung up on my sandbar. Right then Jess Factor claimed the Taylor place an' moved in, and it was just one more river crossin' for horse thieves like Weasel Ingram an' Purty Joe Pagan, with the bounty hunter Harry Love always showin' up to nick you fellers for a cut of the horse thief proceeds. . . . You got that law badge shined, Love?"

Harry Love rubbed the heel of his hand across the nickel-plated law badge and smiled thinly.

"So Jess Factor ramrodded the



lynchin' of big tough Bill Taylor. And the Weasel straw-bossed the job, with Purty Joe helpin' out. And the three of you killed them three cowhands of Jess Factor's because you was scared they'd git drunk an' talk too much. But Harry Love nosed out their hidden graves because he's got a bloodhound nose fer murder. . . . That right, Love?"

The bounty hunter's hatchet face never changed expression but there was a deadly glitter in his black eyes.

"Like the same night you fellers hung Bill Taylor, Love slipped down out o' the badlands on the prowl after a two-bit young renegade named Clifford Jones that called hisself the Outlaw Kid. Love wanted me to prod some information out o' the Outlaw Kid I'd had holed-up in the badlands. This Outlaw Kid had held the horses while some real outlaws held up the train near Cutbank, Wyoming, and Love wanted to find out fer certain who them train robbers was.

"Love found a young black-haired, blue-gray-eyed feller wrapped up in blankets warmin' off the chill from the river. Fer once Love was puzzled. He'd heard shootin' at the saloon, here. Found blood on the floor when he finally got there. And he figgered I'd killed the Outlaw Kid, because I'd told Love before that I was goin' to run off this Outlaw Kid if ever he slipped down to the Narrows again to bother my little Magpie.

"The young black-haired feller wrapped in blankets answered the description of the Outlaw Kid an' Love rode off finally. But he never was satisfied in his mind. Love never could ketch me killin' a man. Never dig up proof that I'd ever killed a man in my life. And when it looks like he's nailed me for the killin' of the Outlaw Kid, he finds what looks like that Outlaw Kid alive. And the feller's gone, when Love got back to the bunkhouse to look him over more careful. Harry Love has never had a second look at that young feller he found wrapped in them red blankets. . . ."

"What the devil you leadin' up to, Tol?" snarled Jess Factor.

"Harry Love," grinned Tolbert, "has a bloodhound's nose. And he never quits a trail. Love ain't quit the trail of the Outlaw Kid. When he got to where the trail of the Outlaw Kid crossed the trail of young black-haired, blue-gray-eyed Lige Taylor in the muddy water of the Missouri River, Love knowed he had somethin' to tie to. And Love aims to make somebody pay through the nose. . . . That right, Love?"

The range detective rubbed his hand across his law badge and smiled thinly, but he said nothing.

"Harry Love," said Tolbert, gripping his side of the bar with both hands, "would give a purty to have an eye-witness to your lynchin' murder of Bill Taylor. If that eye-witness was Lige Taylor, Love could hang you three gents. . . . That right, Love?"

The bounty hunter nodded.

"And if Lige Taylor turned out to be the young feller I pawned off on

Love for the Outlaw Kid, then this bounty hunter would have proof enough that I'd killed the Outlaw Kid and throwed the Kid's carcass in the river and when the sign was right I fished the Outlaw Kid's carcass out o' the river and passed it off on Jess Factor an' Weasel Ingram an' Purty Joe Pagan for the drownded carcass of young Lige Taylor. . . . How am I doin', Love?"

"If Lige Taylor walked in that door right now," Range Detective Harry Love spoke in his toneless voice, "he would hang all four of you men."

"I've had Lige Taylor hid out for two years," said Tol Tolbert. "I told him to show up at the Narrows the night of June first. That's tonight. That's why I sent word to you, Jess, to fetch the Weasel an' Purty Joe and I'd ferry you over here. And I sent for Harry Love to show up here with his law badge pinned on the outside fer all eyes to see it."

"You gone locoed, Tol?" snarled Jess Factor. "What kind of double-crossin' game you playin', anyhow?"

"I'm cleanin' up the river. Both sides of the big wide Missouri, includin' the Narrows. I want it cleaned up, misters, an' such renegade scum as Jess Factor an' Weasel Ingram an' Purty Joe Pagan wiped out. Yeah, and that goes for me, Tol Tolbert. I got 'er made. And when I go to hell with my one-way ticket punched by a bullet, I'm takin' this bounty hunter along with me, because, by Satan, as mean an' crooked an' ornery as we all are, this badge-polishin' Harry Love is the lowest-down hydrophobia skunk of us all. And I'm leavin' this river clean when I hand it to my Magpie and young Lige Taylor for their weddin' present!"

Out there in the shadows of the night the sweet odor of wild roses in bloom clogged the nostrils of young Lige Taylor. He was hardly aware of what he was doing when he quit the black shadows behind the wild rose thicket. And then he stood in the doorway of the lamplit log cabin saloon.

VIII

Lige Taylor stood framed in the doorway. And the eyes of every man in the place stared at him. He had made no effort to move quietly: he wanted those men to hear him. He wanted big rawboned Tol Tolbert to know that Lige Taylor was here on the night of the first of June, two years to the very night since the Magpie had hauled him half-drowned out of the old muddy river. And he wanted the three men who had hanged Bill Taylor to see the son of the murdered man standing there, as young Lige Taylor stood now, with a cocked six-shooter in his hand.

With his scraggly black whiskers, his shock of uncut wiry black hair, the gray-blue eyes slitted under black brows, Lige Taylor looked enough like his hanged father to be the lynched cowman's ghost. A grim figure of retribution. Deadly, merciless. Returned to earth to kill.

Not a man of them moved or spoke. Their hands on their guns, Jess Factor and Weasel Ingram were the

closest to the door. Lanky, towheaded, graying Jess Factor had eyes that were slivers of green ice. And beside him stood the weasened little Weasel Ingram, his gun in his hand.

Purty Joe Pagan stood behind Jess Factor and Weasel Ingram, using them as human shields as he slid his hunting knife from its scabbard.

Big Tol Tolbert had a six-shooter in his hand and it was pointed across the bar at Harry Love. And there was a gun in the range detective's clawlike hand. These two had eyes for no other man.

Silence hung like a death pall over the place. Every man was frozen there. One move and it would be the spark that touched off the blast.

Not a man among them saw the twin barrels of the sawed-off shotgun pointed through the paneless window. Tolbert's Assiniboine squaw had made no sound when she moved on moccasined feet out there. And the first sound to betray the woman's presence outside the saloon was the terrific double-barreled blast of buckshot.

Jess Factor and Weasel Ingram caught both loads of buckshot and at that close range the result was horrible for the two men.

Tol Tolbert's gun was cocked. He pulled the trigger and the heavy .45 slug tore through the ribs of Harry Love. The bullet had hit the nickle-plated law badge, smashing it into a shapeless bit of metal pinned to blood-sodden flannel. Harry Love was dying on his feet when he pulled his gun and fired a freakish snap shot. It hit Tolbert in the belly and bored a clean hole through his lanky midriff and didn't mushroom where it came out. Big Tol's legs were braced and, his left hand gripping the edge of his pine-board bar, he stood there and never wobbled or flinched. He grinned into the beady eyes of the bounty hunter as though he was enjoying some grisly joke.

"I'll see you in hell, Love." Tol Tolbert's six-shooter leveled and spat flame and its heavy .45 slug struck Harry Love dead center between the black gimlet eyes.

Jess Factor and Weasel Ingram were on the floor, their buckshot-riddled bodies twisting and writhing in death throes and their horrible screams filling the place. And there stood Purty Joe Pagan with his hunting knife in his hand. . . .

Purty Joe in his fancy range-dude clothes. Pants tucked into the fancy stitched tops of shop-made alligator boots. A red flannel shirt. His curly yellow hair trimmed, the cleft in his chin showing. Pretty-faced, but with murder in his yellow eyes. His two human shields were down from in front of him and nothing was between him and Lige Taylor standing there in the doorway with a six-shooter in his hand.

Lige stared at Purty Joe without pulling the gun trigger. Just staring at the young range-dude renegade whose tough rep the boy Lige had envied with a terrible, jealous envy that was almost hatred. And then Lige Taylor pulled the trigger of his six-shooter without even aiming.

The same instant Purty Joe sprang,

a snarl on his face that bared his white teeth.

Purty Joe and Lige went down together in a tangle. The hunting knife drove into Lige's shoulder and ripped out again and was slashing and stabbing as they clinched and their legs tangled and Purty Joe stabbed with his hunting knife. Lige was clubbing at the curly yellow head and pretty face with his gun barrel. short chopping blows that thudded against flesh and bone. The gun barrel smashed Joe Pagan's handsome nose and knocked his white teeth into broken things that he spat out with their blood. Purty Joe was sobbing and screaming like a girl and the hunting knife in his hand slashed and ripped and stabbed.

Lige never remembered thumbing back the gun hammer and pulling the trigger. but suddenly Purty Joe went limp and the curly yellow head lobbed sideways. Then somebody was dragging Lige Taylor out from underneath the renegade's dead body. . . .

It was the Magpie and her voice sounded shrill and brittle. "Lige! Lige. . . . Maw, come quick. Lige is bleeding to death!"

Lige was not going to bleed to death. He said so. But the Magpie and her mother worked desperately and swiftly and without any wasted motion until they got the blood flow stopped and the knife cuts dressed and bandaged.

And all the time big Tol stood behind his bar. He leaned across it as he was wont to do, with a bottle of his rotgut booze in his hand. And they had no way of knowing that the giant was dying there on his feet as he drank his rotgut and talked to his wife and daughter—and to young Lige Taylor whom they had laid out on a big round-topped poker table to dress his knife wounds.

Tol's talk was pithy and pungent and tough. He told them where he had his money cached under the pine-board floor of the saloon. He told Lige to claim the Jess Factor outfit along with the Weasel Ingram and Pagan river ranches and to re-claim the Taylor place. . . .

Tol Tolbert said he reckoned that as soon as Lige and the Magpie got married they would move to the Taylor place. That would leave the Narrows to the Magpie's mother unless she decided to go back to the Fort Belknap Reservation where her Assiniboine people were. If she did. they could sell the Narrows to one of the big outfits that wanted it for a big winter line camp.

And all the time he talked and swigged at his bottle the eyes of the giant squawman were narrowing. Tol Tolbert was dying there on his feet and death was glazing his hard eyes. And then he spat out his quid of tobacco.

"The woman kin look after herself. . . . You take care of my little Magpie, Lige. . . . So long. . . ."

His giant frame slid back slowly and went down with a dull crash and that was when they knew that Tol Tolbert had been hit by the .38 gun clutched in the dead hand of the bounty hunter, Harry Love. . . .

It was the woman who carried Tol Tolbert's giant dead body outside and when they got Lige Taylor moved to the cabin, she went back to the saloon, leaving the Magpie to take care of Lige. Half an hour later when Lige looked out the window he saw the blaze and knew that Tol's wife had piled the dead men inside after she'd gotten the money from Tol's cache, and had set fire to the saloon she had always hated and called the whiskey tepee.

The widowed woman dug the grave and wrapped her dead husband in his bed tarp and buried him with his guns.

She and the Magpie talked for a while in the Assiniboine tongue and Lige finally dropped into an exhausted sleep. When he woke up the Magpie was sitting there in a chair beside her bed where she and her mother had put the wounded man.

"When your wounds are healed and you can ride with me, Lige," the Magpie explained, "we will ride to the Mission on the reservation and get married. My mother has gone to her people to live. She will be at our wedding. . . .

"She never loved my father. He bought her, Injun style, for a keg of whiskey and ten head of horses he stole back for her father who is a full-blood Assiniboine and a medicine man. She hated it here but my father never knew. She knew how to keep a bargain. Now she has gone back to her own people and she will be happy. . . . I belong to you now. When I am married to you I will be a good wife. That is what my mother told me. That is what Tol Tolbert wanted. . . . But I never asked you . . . you never said you wanted to marry me. How do I know if you even love me?"

Lige reached out and took her into his arms and kissed her. He told her that he loved her. Then he asked her if she would marry him. All very solemn. And she nodded gravely, though her dark eyes were laughing at him. She said she would marry him and be a good wife.

Then the pain and suffering and all that had happened to them was forgotten and they were holding each other and laughing with gay, reckless happiness of youth, of very young youth. Because Lige Taylor had been robbed of his boyhood even as the Magpie had been cheated out of her girlhood. And now, together, they were recapturing that which had been taken from them by ruthless hands.

Lige Taylor, cowman, and his little wife Magpie would never grow up. The cow country said that, and smiled. The cow country of Montana, there on both sides of the big old wide Missouri, was claiming Lige and his Magpie for its own.

Tol Tolbert's grave is at the Narrows. Bill Taylor's grave is under the giant cottonwood that had been his hangman's tree. The wild roses grow there where two tough renegades died to make way for their son and daughter. . . .

THE END

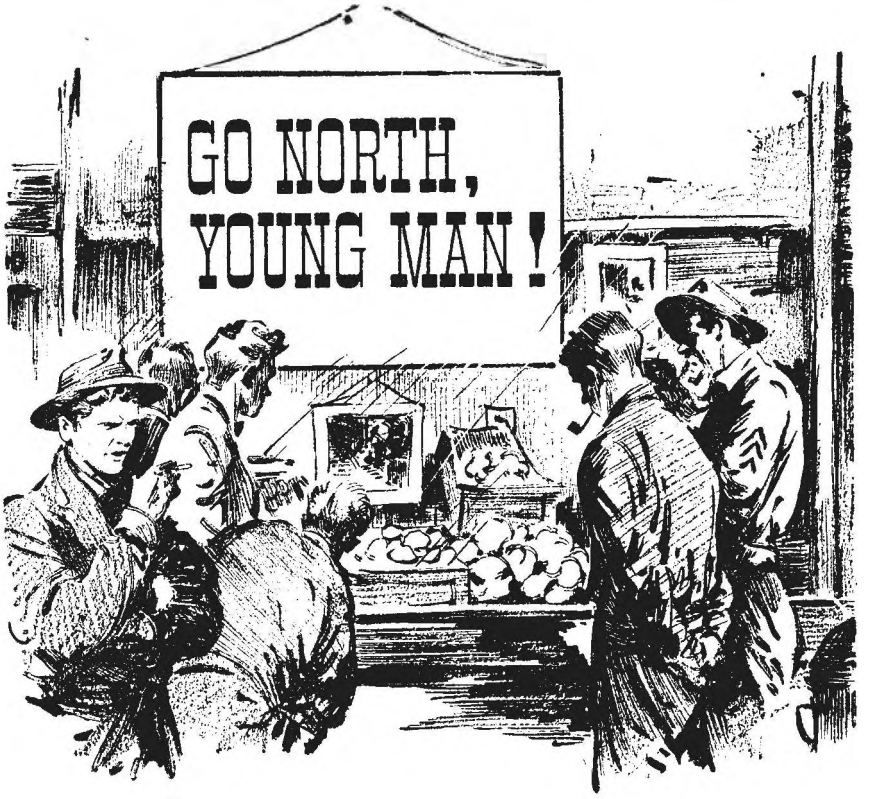
RANGE SAVVY

By Gene King

Westerners, they say, will tackle anything that bucks, jumps, swims or crawls. It must be true. Now they have even done something about the weather. Flying cowboys, teamed up with scientists and a plane load of dry ice, have been making it rain on thirsty ranch country. Arizona was the scene of one of the latest experiments. Recently clouds over the Roosevelt Dam area were forced to give up their moisture in the form of man-made rain squalls. The job was done by sprinkling the clouds with dry ice from an airplane. Local scientists claim a dollar's worth of dry ice will precipitate 300,000 tons of water, if the clouds are there.

Prize blooded cattle are often the pampered pets of the range, but not many of them rate the fancy funeral given Hazford Rupert 81st, champion Hereford, of the famous Turner Ranch at Sulphur, Oklahoma. "Old 81st," who sired $1,000,000 worth of calves in his day, died not long ago at the age of 13 years and was buried at ranch headquarters in a tile-lined vault dug out of limestone and sealed in concrete. A stone marker tops the tomb and a bronze tablet is to be put up telling the story of this prize Hereford and his million-dollar progeny.

Mesquite and sagebrush in the Western range country have long colored Western fiction and made the cowboy song writers happier than the cowboys. As a matter of fact, these tough, aggressive plants, classified as weeds by ranchers and stockmen, are a constant drain on the carrying capacity of the range. They rob soil of moisture and minerals, and choke the life out of weight-producing forage grasses. It has been estimated that already these two weeds alone have seriously affected some hundred million acres of good grazing land. By burning, poisoning or grubbing out such weeds and brush with bulldozers, native grasses are given a chance to thrive again. In some instances doing this has increased stock production on a given block of range as much as 300%.



I

Buck Tremper read the advertisement at first casually, then with growing interest. He went over it a second time before he yelled at his partner: "As I live and breathe, Old Man Opportunity is knocking at the door."

"Well, it's about time." Dan Sutton answered ruefully. "Our luck has been all bad so long that I figured someone must have put a musty Eskimo curse on us. Open the door and let Old Man Opportunity in. They claim his knuckles bruise easily and he doesn't knock twice."

Dan read aloud:

"Go North, young man! Wanted rugged young men who have small-ranch or farm experience to take up homesteads in the False Harbor area of the national forest in Alaska. Only experienced men can hope to succeed. Wishful thinkers need not apply. The soil is rich black loam which will grow root vegetables and hay. You can raise chickens or produce butter and cheese. An abundant supply of wood and water is available. In your front yard you'll have bottom fish, clams and crabs

Those eleven young homesteaders had the dogged determination of their pioneer forefathers, but would they provide the kind of manpower Alaska—and John Skinner—needed?

By Seth Ranger

for the taking. A trout stream runs nearby, and behind you are bear, moose, mountain sheep and grouse. If you can take it as well as dish it out, this is your opportunity. See display in the Central Store window. Free transportation for the first eleven men accepted."

"There's a catch in it somewhere," warned Dan. "The world is full of crooks who live well by taking advantage of the average man's ambition to improve his lot. And, brother, I sure hate to be a sucker."

"Let's have a look at the window display," Buck urged. "Won't cost us anything. If it's a come-on and someone tries to sell us a bill of goods, we'll just give them the old brush off." He reached for his hat.

Dan Sutton, long-legged, black-headed and inclined to be serious, got up from a chair that creaked happily when freed of his two hundred pounds.

"It's high time we got into some-

thing with a future, Buck," he said, "and I've always wanted to take a shot at Alaska. And it *is* the last frontier, but is this really an opportunity? I'm open-minded, but, brother, I'm cautious, too."

Sandy-haired, blue-eyed Buck Tremper had a willingness to gamble and was the impetuous member of a pair of young men who had been through a lot together, and whose luck had been mostly bad. By all odds, the combination was potentially a winning one. The two of them had their differences, but the loser backed the winner of an argument to the limit.

A dozen rugged, healthy young men in rough clothing were gazing intently at the display in the Central Store window when Buck and Dan arrived.

"I've never seen cabbages, lettuce, spuds and squash like them in all my born days," one said in an awed tone. "And look at the length of them oats."

"That ain't oats, it's wheat," another said.

"It's oats."

"And I say it's wheat." The next instant they were swapping lusty punches to the enjoyment of the others. The man Buck nicknamed "Mackinaw" because he wore that type of coat, won out. The other man left, muttering, "And I still say wheat."

Mackinaw bumped Buck a moment later. "Can't you keep out of a man's way?" he asked testily. "All I ask is a chance to look at the window."

"Sorry," apologized Buck who thought he had bumped the men. "Things like this happen."

"Why do they always happen to me? I think you done it a-purpose. I think you're looking for trouble."

"Now, just a minute!" Buck said calmly. "Maybe I bumped you and maybe I didn't. I apologized. I'm not looking for trouble, but I'm not side-stepping it, either."

"So you're lookin' for a fight? One of these guys who go pushin' folks around, gettin' their mad up so you can have the fun of sockin' 'em," Mackinaw said. "Well, you picked the wrong huckleberry this time . . ."

He swung and Buck rolled with the punch. A second later they were standing toe to toe, slugging. Mackinaw went down. He got slowly to his feet.

"Kick like a mule. Maybe I *was* a little hasty," he muttered. "But I'm getting plumb tired of folks always pickin' on me. Hey, you redhead. You stomped on my toe." He whirled on an inoffensive fellow with red hair.

Redhead didn't apologize. "I know what I done," he said, then swung. It lasted almost a minute, then the unsmiling Sutton got mad. Pushing the redhead aside, he hustled Mackinaw around the corner and into an alley.

"Listen, Mackinaw," he said, "we're just a bunch of peaceful citizens who like to mind our own business, but if someone starts pushing

us around we'll cut 'em down to our size or else take a licking in the attempt."

"That's just what I was finding out," was Mackinaw's amazing answer. "Kind of a curious cuss, ain't I?" Then he walked briskly down the alley.

"Just when you've got what goes on in this world all figured out," Dan muttered, "something like this happens. Or am I a mental case? Mackinaw doesn't make sense. Neither does that advertisement Buck found in the paper."

He left the alley and found his partner keeping the crowd back. "My partner has a litle private business with the lad in the mackinaw," Buck was saying. "And when he's in conference he don't like to be interrupted."

"The conference is ended," Dan announced. "Let's go back to the window."

Buck looked curiously at his partner as they returned to the window. "What's the matter with you?" he asked. "You act like you're in a daze."

"I am," Dan answered half seriously. "Nothing is making sense."

"Those pictures do," insisted Buck.

Scattered among the giant vegetables were enlarged photographs of the False Harbor area. In the foreground of the largest there was a restless sea. The harbor was not quite landlocked by heavily timbered hills. Beyond the hills were mountains that supported the main timber belt on their lower slopes.

Above the timber lay a belt of willows and heavy grasses. Above this belt towered the peaks burdened with glaciers and snowfields. Numerous waterfalls spilled down sheer granite walls and were the source of brawling streams that were lost in the timber, but emerged at sea level full of fight. Water surged furiously where it met the sea, if close-up photographs were any indication.

II

Mackinaw was muttering as he left the alley. "I took just about all I could take," he told himself. He crossed the street a block from the window display, doubled back and hurried to a second floor office directly across the street.

"You got out just in time, McAdams," a gaunt man in his sixties observed. "Someone called the police, of course, and a patrol car has just arrived."

"Well, I done like you told me to—picked fights with the toughest lookin' ones to see if they had the stuff," McAdams hold him. "They had," he added grimly. "I never earned a tougher fifty bucks, Mr. Skinner."

"Here's seventy-five," John Skinner said. "Which would you say has natural leadership?"

McAdams pointed to Buck Tremper. "That's the one. His partner will make a leader too, but he's a slow starter. And there's a redheaded guy who's dynamite."

"Thank you, McAdams," said Skinner. "Keep this quiet, of course, and let me remind you again it's strictly on the level."

McAdams buttoned his mackinaw and departed. For the first time Skinner's partner, sitting in a corner of the small office, spoke.

"I tell you, Skinner, you're creating a Frankenstein. You're tricking men into taking up homesteads because we need a road to the mine. You're picking tough men, because they're the only ones that will see it through. Only tough men will put up with the hardships, clear land, build a road from the beach to their claims, cut logs, erect cabins and put in crops."

"That's right," agreed Skinner. His blue eyes were narrowed and unsmiling. Under the stress of emotion, he kept running his hand through his straw-colored hair. His long, thin fingers kept shaking.

"My point is this," his partner continued. "When those men find they've been tricked, they'll turn on you. And that's not something I'd care to face."

"I'm deceiving no one," Skinner said coldly. "The land is open to entry. The vegetables on display came from a small, experimental plot that we cleared. You know that. You know that if we can open up a road over which we can haul machinery, we can get a loan from the bank. And you know, too, that we can't raise a dime on the mine until the road is built. I turned to the only method left—homesteaders—knowing they'd build the road . . ."

"Yes, build it through the muck and swamp just above high water mark," the other man interrupted. "It would cost thousands to get men and machinery to False Harbor by legal methods. Their pay would run from the time they left Seattle until they returned. And their food bill would be no little item. And through trickery you're planning to get this for nothing."

Skinner stood up. "Listen, Willitt. You've mentioned trickery several times. I don't like it. I've never been guilty of trickery in my life—"

"You mean you've never been caught," interrupted Willitt. "I can't understand why I ever tied up with you. My wife said you had a slippery look the first time she laid eyes on you. And you can't fool a woman."

"Hah!" Skinner's snort of laughter lacked mirth. "If you take no more chances than you have to date, Willitt, you'll live to see her eat those words. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll buy you out, or you can buy me out—"

"What'll we use for money?" Willitt jeered.

"You've six or seven thousand, and so have I," Skinner replied. "Whoever owns the mine will need money for development purposes. Suppose we fix a half interest at fifteen thousand dollars? Seller will take buyer's note, secured by a mortgage in that sum. We'll make the note for one year. At the end of that time, if the note isn't paid, the holder can foreclose."

"Wait a minute! Let me think this over," Willitt said, showing excitement. He paced the room for several minutes, pausing only to size up the

crowd gathered before the display window. "They'll find out and tear you apart, Skinner. You're playing with dynamite. But I'll take that offer."

"Step down the hall," Skinner said.

The two entered a law office, where Skinner briefly explained the nature of the deal to an attorney. "Draw up the papers, and we'll sign. The mine is known as Last Hope. I named it. It's the last hope I have of developing a hard-rock proposition into a producing mine that will care for me in my old age."

When Skinner returned to the office Buck Tremper and Dan Sutton were waiting for him. Others were coming down the hall, their steps uncertain, suspicion in their eyes.

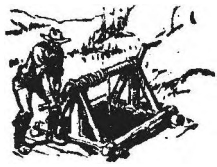
"Come in, all of you," Skinner invited.

The men lined up along the wall, and one sat on Willitt's desk until he returned and began cleaning out the drawers.

"I'm in no way associated with Mr. Skinner," Willitt announced emphatically.

Skinner looked over the young men. "I doubt if any of you have the stuff," he said bluntly. "First, let me say the land involved is owned by the government. I own a mine in the region."

Willitt, listening, found it difficult not to burst forth with the truth. Perhaps it was the greed deep down in the man that sealed his lips. After all, he might have reasoned, if the road was built and Skinner lost the



mine, he would have plenty of use for the road.

"I was curious over the potential productivity of some very rich land a mile from the beach," Skinner continued. "I cleared it, planted several kinds of seed and the result is on display in the window across the street."

"What about drainage?" Buck asked.

"A little ditching will take care of it," answered Skinner. "Gravity will carry off seepage without trouble. It's a south slope and you'll get the full benefit of the sun during the growing season. Now let me warn you men on one pint. No one should go to Alaska with the hope of taking up land, or going into business without first making a full investigation. He should have money enough for the trip back home in case it isn't what he thinks it is. Though the chances are that it is."

"But you say, 'Go North, young man,'" Buck argued.

"Yes, if he's a very special man," Skinner said, looking them directly in the eyes. "And I'm not convinced that you're the special breed that can cut the mustard."

"Why, you old goat," Red yelled, "if you was my age, I'd . . ."

"If I were your age," Skinner said evenly, "I doubt very much if you'd be man enough to do what you have in mind. The land isn't mine. I'm

not offering it for sale. It just seemed a shame for it to go to waste, and I thought I'd let the public know about it in the hope that the right men would get in on it."

"Listen." Buck said. "We're over twenty-one, and we all know the ins and outs of ranching and farming. You have some angle I haven't figured out yet, but what's your proposition?"

"Merely this," replied Skinner. "I've chartered a barge to take certain mining machinery north. I've sold space to other mines and salmon canneries. There's space left. My idea was to take along men who are interested in government land in Alaska. There's room for eleven men; one bulldozer for clearing land; other needed tools, supplies and so on. No women or children, of course. Are any of you married?"

"I am," Red said. "My wife's a car hop at a roadside hash house but she comes from pioneer stock. Her great grandmother crossed the plains in the fifties; her grandmother was a covered wagon woman, and her mother was an orange rancher's wife. She'll stand the gaff."

"You can send for her, if you stick it out yourself," Skinner told him. "Leave your names, and if better men don't show up, I'll send for you."

The young men left Skinner's office with clenched fists, cheeks flushed with anger, and rage almost shutting off their wind.

Willitt mopped his face. "Skinner, your life won't be worth a plugged nickel when those men learn what you're doing to them. And another thing—you get them into the office, then insult them. What're you trying to do, drive them away?"

"If they can be driven away, I don't want them," Skinner answered. There was wisdom in his eyes. "Also it's human nature for men to want something they think is going to be denied them. They'll be back to a man. There must have been twenty. Well, I've picked the eleven I want."

III

"We've got to have a leader," Red said, as the barge was moving slowly up Puget Sound. A long tow rope ran from the barge to the tug which rode low in the water under the weight of supplies. The men had fixed up temporary quarters and were getting organized. "What's the matter with Buck Tremper? He doesn't throw his weight around, but he's big enough to slap us down, or get up after he's been slapped down himself."

"Suits me," said another and several of the men nodded.

"All in favor?" There was a chorus of approval. "Against? It's unanimous, Buck."

The barge put into several small settlements, weathered some rough water, and in time her passengers sighted False Harbor. It was even more inviting than they had expected from looking at the enlarged photographs.

The tug hauled in the line and came alongside. She was then lashed securely to the barge.

"We'll have to wait for high

water," the skipper said. "You know, that would be one of the sweetest little harbors in the world if it weren't for the reef."

"Reef?" Buck asked.

"Yes, a bad one. It's only exposed at low tide," the skipper explained. "Deep sea vessels can't get in at any time. One of the big salmon-canning outfits would have located here long ago but for the reef." He pointed. "Notice the water seems rougher between the headlands? The reef's under that."

It was an hour before they headed for the harbor. In the clear water they saw a line of black rocks that waited, like broken fangs, for a victim. Those fangs would go deep into the hull of any craft within their reach. In less than a minute the barge was over the reef and the water was of great depth and very dark. Off the nearest point salmon broke the water.

"Salmon spawn in Placer Creek," the skipper informed the homesteaders. "There was a little gold strike here fifty years ago. Nothing much. You can still find an occasional sluice box put together by the old square nails. Rotten, of course. The tin can dumps are now rust spots." He kept one hand on the wheel as he talked. The cold wind blowing through the open wheelhouse window didn't seem to bother him.

They passed the headlands and moved through waters that reflected the timber, mountains and sky. It was like a lake and the men climbed to the highest piles of the cargo and looked about excitedly.

"Now we don't want a mad scramble for land," Buck said. "The first thing we know there'd be fights. This is going to be tough enough without getting off to a wrong start. We can stake eleven claims up to a hundred and sixty acres each. First, let's make ourselves a road. We can't get back and forth without one. That road should run along each man's property. Right?"

"Right."

"As soon as we've blazed trail for a road, we'll mark boundaries of each claim. Let's run straight boundary lines, so there'll be no fraction pieces of land left over to fight about," Buck continued. "This done, we'll draw lots. The man drawing number one gets first choice; number eleven last choice. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," Red said, and the others agreed.

"Where do you want this barge grounded?" asked the skipper. "Pick your place carefully so you'll have a short pack to high ground."

"What about landing us and letting us look around?" Buck suggested. "We can't get much of a line on conditions from here."

"I'll give you six hours," the skipper told him. "By that time the tide will be rising again."

"Six hours should do it," Buck said.

They went ashore at the mouth of Placer Creek, which at this point was mostly swamp water. Swamp grasses grew on each side, and they fought their way through the black muck, often going nearly to their knees. A

flock of mallards took off with much squawking, and Buck grinned.

"Duck shooting ought to be good," he remarked.

"Shooting ducks don't build no roads," commented a man named White.

"But it'll brighten a hard day," Buck answered cheerfully.

A half mile trek brought them to higher ground and the creek at this point lost its sluggishness. They could see trout darting about between boulders. There was a definite game trail through the willows and spruces growing along the bank.

"Here's where that man Skinner raised his vegetables," Red said. They made their way to a small clearing. Many vegetables remained in the ground, and some of the cabbages were rotting. Red pulled a carrot, washed it off in a nearby puddle, then began chewing, his teeth crunching rhythmically.

Buck picked up a handful of soil and crumbled it, letting it fall through his fingers—an old farmer's trick.

"Needs liming," White commented.

"Tons of clam shells on the beach," Buck pointed out. "I noticed a sandbar almost white with 'em."

"We got to get a road," White said. "That man Skinner never said a word about a half mile of muck. And I don't see any other way of getting here. Suppose we landed our stuff on a good beach? We could miss all this mess, but we'd have to cut through solid rock in places, or even drive tunnels. And that runs into big money."

"I sized up the shore," Buck said. "Timber comes right down to the water. And in places you could see rocks sticking up between little spruce stands. Funny, we never thought of running into a mess like this."

"You'll remember, boys," Dan reminded, "Skinner wasn't too sold on us, and he advised us to investigate the country, personally, before taking the plunge. Well, here we are."

"But he could've mentioned the road problem," Red grumbled. "Maybe there's a gimmick we haven't found."

"Well, we're here," Buck said. "All in favor of making the first order of business the building of a wailing wall, say aye."

They grinned and fanned out, studying the general lay of the land and the drainage problems. When they had gathered again, Buck said. "Each man pick up the longest down tree he can drag. One that isn't too rotten."

They knocked off the dead branches and started. As soon as the muck got deep they began dropping the trees, end to end, improvising a catwalk.

"You go back and get more," Buck told the others. "I'll see if I can make a deal with the skipper."

The tide was coming in, and he rowed out in a skiff which had thoughtfully been included in their outfit by one homesteader who was a duck hunter. Buck got to the point immediately.

"Do you have to make a port and take on fuel?" he asked the tug skipper. "If so, it'll help us a lot if you'll

leave the barge here while you're gone."

"It'll cost me a hundred dollars to work it that way," the skipper answered. "Will you pay it?"

"We've got to watch every dollar," Buck answered. "But we'll swing it."

At extreme high water the tug shoved the barge ahead until she grounded in the muck. Red, Dan and the others swarmed aboard and shoved two heavy timbers from the barge to another timber laid crossways in the muck.

"Say a prayer for me," Buck said, climbing onto the bulldozer. He started slowly down the improvised ramp. As the weight left the barge, the cross timber began sinking in the ooze. The treads cut into the muck beyond, and the water was over the tread tops before the ponderous machine began moving ahead. When Buck found a solid spot, he stopped.

"What're we going to do about the truck?" Dan asked.

"I'll take her off," Buck said. "After all, while I haven't lived out my span of life yet, I've had a lot of fun. Ask some of the boys to get out that coil of wire rope." Then Buck climbed onto the truck and warmed the motor, realizing he was courting disaster

He came off the ramp with a splash that sent a solid sheet of muddy water over the cab. The truck leaped and bucked fifty feet, then the wheels began spinning. Shutting off the motor, Buck climbed down. The men came off the barge with the coil, attached one end to the truck and the other to the bulldozer.

"We don't want to load the truck," Buck said, "but throw in some crosscut saws, axes, hammers and wedges. Dan, you try your hand at steering the truck."

When everything was ready, Dan started the truck motor, engaged the lowest gear, while Buck hauled with the bulldozer. It was a wild ride that ended with the bulldozer in the brush on dry ground and the truck clear of the muck.

Buck turned around and, with the blade partly lowered, slammed through the trench the machines had made in the muck. When he reached the barge, he turned and came back again, leaving a ditch filled with soup in his wake.

"I thought we was supposed to make a road instead of a ditch," Red said.

"A man can change his mind, can't he?" Buck grinned as he bulldozed a path to the nearest stand of timber.

IV

They cut trees, bucked them into thirty-foot lengths and put chokers around the ends. Then, using the bulldozer, Buck dragged the trees down to the ditch. They removed the chokers, then Buck went around to the end, put the blade against the logs and pushed them in.

"Float 'em out to the barge," he ordered.

They worked until dark, and were up before dawn, driving themselves to the utmost. They laid logs on the ground near the barge when the tide was out. They made a platform well

above high water mark, unloaded everything, covered it with tarps, and then turned in for the night.

The tug's whistle aroused them. The skipper grinned as his crew made fast to the barge. "That's the damndest wharf I ever saw," he said, "but it works. How are you going to get freight to solid ground?"

"Buck will figure out a way," Dan said confidently. "The point is, for a hundred dollars we didn't have to unload our stuff in the muck."

"You don't owe me the hundred," the skipper answered. "I picked up a towing job and made five hundred on the deal."

As the tug and barge cleared the reef, a gasoline-powered boat came into False Harbor. John Skinner was standing in the bow, smiling. He saluted them as the boat edged up to the improvised wharf. "Fine work, gentlemen. American resourcefulness at its best. Men stubborn enough to take a chance in spite of my warning are the kind who'll go ahead."

Then he noticed the ditch, and his heart sank. By some means the homesteaders might shift their relatively light freight to high ground, perhaps in the skiff. But Skinner needed a ball mill and heavy machinery at the mine.

"How do you get ashore from your wharf, Tremper?" he asked.

"See the logs, end to end? We use that. You have to be a kind of a tight-rope walker, or you'll go into the muck," Buck answered. "You do it like this. Watch me."

He put a fifty-pound pack of grub on his shoulders and started. The others followed, each carrying a load. Skinner watched them owlishly. He put a carefully packed lunch into his various pockets, and started over the catwalk. He fell off twice.

Buck went back and picked up two of Skinner's packs. He was younger, his sense of balance better, and he didn't slip into the muck.

"Dan Sutton and I will lug these packs to your mine, Mr. Skinner," he offered cheerfully.

"Thanks." Skinner said. He picked up his own light pack and started up the stream. There was craft in his eyes as he thought, "I think I'll get winded at the gravel bank."

When he sat down, breathing hard and shaking his head to indicate he wasn't the man he used to be, the gravel bank towered above him and the two young men. It was a couple of hundred yards long and no one could tell how deep. The glacier had brought it down: time and the elements had covered it with earth to a depth of several feet, and brush, with a few small trees, grew on it. At some time, the creek had cut through, exposing the gravel. There was a pile almost as large as a house, ready for loading, at the foot of the bank.

Skinner made quite a show of getting his breath, then he remarked casually, "In case you boys need gravel for your roads, there it is for the taking. Push off the overburden with the bulldozer, back your truck up to the bank and push the gravel right into the truck."

"We're sure going to need gravel," Buck admitted.

"I guess I've got my wind now," Skinner said with relief. They went on to the high ground where a truck could make its own road with very little help. They could see a scar on the mountain side, and tailings spilling down to a dump. To the right stood a bench occupied by three very small cabins. Tucked away behind a shoulder of rock stood the powder house.

The door of the main cabin was unlocked, and when Skinner opened it, stale air assailed their nostrils. Bedding, well lashed, was suspended from wires secured to overhead beams.

"Keeps the rats out," Skinner explained. "They'll chew up a whole blanket, just to get material for a nest. Thanks for packing in my stuff, boys. Take the weight off your feet and I'll make a cup of coffee."

"Do you mind if we look at your mine?" Buck asked. He grinned. "That's one of the unwritten laws—never look into a miner's cleanup pan or his ledge without his permission."

"Good law," said Skinner. "Go ahead. I've drifted in. I haven't had the money to operate as I hope to. Just drill and blast, drill and blast, to see if the vein gets better."

"What's that up the mountain side, a windlass?"

"Yeah. Brush has grown around it. Went down to pick up the vein," Skinner explained. "It was there, and it gets better." He pointed to pieces of ore, placed in a row on a window sill. "You can see for yourself. Sample one was taken ten feet in; sample nine at a point below the windlass. You'll notice the samples are progressively richer. Take a look through this magnifying glass."

Buck examined the samples. He had a rough idea of hard-rock mining, having worked a couple of seasons as a mucker. "It looks as if you have something here, Mr. Skinner," he said, "but of course only an assayer could really tell."

"I have an assayer's report, as well as my own," Skinner told him.

Buck and Dan, armed with a flashlight, entered the mine and looked around. It was cold and damp and there was seepage which trickled toward the mine mouth.

"The vein rises slightly," Buck said, "that means Skinner'll have a gravity haul when he moves the ore. That's a big saving in power costs."

They spent about a half hour in the mine. When they came out it was to find Skinner facing the remainder of the homesteaders. He had his fists resting on his hips and was looking them squarely in the eyes as he talked turkey. The boys were in a dangerous mood, as Buck quickly recognized.

"What's wrong?" Buck demanded. "Keep your shirts on! Don't go off half cocked!"

Red did the talking. "We got the straight dope from a guy who just landed from a gas boat. This fellow here tricked us, Buck. He wants a road built, free for nothing, through the muck. He figgered we'd build it to our claims, and he could use it.

It's a dirty trick on his part to get a free road."

"A man who'd trick men into shooting their dough on a deal like this ought to be strung up," another declared.

"Now I'll talk," Skinner said coldly. "I'm a miner, not a rancher or farmer. I saw some land that looked good to me. I tested it and raised some crops. You saw the stuff. I looked you over at the time, and agreed to let you ride up on the barge because you were the best of a damned poor lot. Now, the first time someone comes along with a story you fall for it. How do you know it wasn't a trick to make trouble for me? There're several men who'd like to get hold of this mine. Or maybe others who saw the farm produce in the window that day have decided they'd like to try homesteading on False Harbor and tricked you into working me over while they staked your ground. I didn't see any monuments when I came in, so I don't suppose you've staked any ground yet."

"Let's get out of here!" Buck told the others. "Skinner has put an idea into my head."

V

They ran most of the way, but Buck stopped them near the gravel bank.

"Listen," he said to his companions. "Can't hear a thing," Red declared. "My heart is pounding too hard in my ears."

Presently they heard the ring of an ax. "Skinner was right," one of the men said. He started to take off, but Buck grabbed his belt and halted him.

"Every second counts, Buck," the other man protested.

"A man who tackles a claim-jumper when he's all out of breath has two strikes against him," Buck warned. "Now, we'll saunter over that way. Here's the plan of action. The basic idea is to let them do the running." He talked as he led the way through the scattered timber.

A black-bearded man who kept a nervous eye on the nearest thicket was driving a corner stake into the moist ground. He was using the flat of his ax—a double-bitted weapon that looked very sharp. Buck left the others and began driving a stake a hundred feet from the man. The latter turned in surprise, then with a roar advanced, waving his ax.

"Hello, Blackie," Buck said, tagging him with a nickname that seemed to fit. "Why the rage?"

"I'm staking this ground," bellowed Blackie. "Now clear out before I slice you into cutlets!"

Buck fixed his eyes on something about ten feet behind Blackie. "Grab him, boy!" he yelled. Blackie whirled to meet an attack from the rear and saw only trees and brush. Too late he realized he had fallen for an ancient but very effective trick, human nature being what it is. Buck's hand caught the ax handle, diverted a belated blow, and jerked the weapon

clear. It landed with a thud in the brush.

"Need some help?" another man about a hundred yards distant yelled.

"Yeah!" Blackie answered. "They're gangin' up on me."

At that moment Dan Sutton galloped into view. Dan left Buck to handle Blackie, if he could, and walked slowly toward the huge individual who was galloping to the rescue. Behind this man came a third fellow, burly, and heavily booted. A fourth and fifth loomed up on the horizon. Red ran down a slope as a sixth and seventh man emerged from a clump of timber a half mile distant.

Buck, Dan and Red finished off three claim-jumpers and were sitting on them when the rescuers were dangerously near.

"What'll we do with these guys?" Red asked, "I didn't have too much trouble with my man. He was fresh out of breath."

Buck's man was unconscious. Whipping out his knife, Buck cut the man's belt, then slit the pants at several points on the belt line. His knife did a similar service to the other losers, then with Dan and Red at his heels he led the attack on the others.

"Divide and conquer has always been good strategy," Buck explained, "and if you can catch the enemy at the end of his charge when he's winded, it makes things easier. Don't hit the poor devils too hard."

"Put that six-gun down," Red yelled at his approaching enemy. "Or I'll ram it down your throat."

"Get your hands up," the claim-jumper warned, ignoring Red's order. "All three of you!"

"Shucks," Red snorted, "you're too winded to shoot straight. Look at that muzzle wobble around." Momentary indecision flickered in the other's eyes and Red walked boldly toward the gun.

"Give me that!" he ordered. "Blast it! Point the muzzle down! Didn't your old man tell you never to point a gun at a person?"

The man dropped the gun; then, to Red's astonishment, he began swinging wildly. Red fought a defensive fight for a couple of minutes before he dropped the man.

Again Buck's knife performed major surgery on three pairs of pants. Then Buck picked up the gun and said, "The others seem to be pulling their freight. Let's round up the six advance guards and head 'em toward the beach." The men glowered as they started off, holding up their pants to keep them from falling around their ankles, and tripping them.

"Alaska is a big country," Buck told them. "Why jump ground other men are developing?"

One of them whirled on Buck. "For the same reason you're after this particular ground," he retorted savagely. "Until you stake it, we have just as much right to it as you have."

"Technically, yes, I'll admit," Buck replied, "but morally no. We had to protect our supplies first of all, and we showed our good faith by building a landing for our grub and get-

ting our heavy equipment to high ground. You guys had an idea you'd jump the ground, then make us sell our supplies at your figure. It's an old Klondike trick. You see, my grandfather was a Klondike stampeder and he's told me all of the claim-jumpers' tricks. He learned 'em the hard way."

Buck turned to Red. "Climb the hill and see if they really go aboard their boat."

As Red hurried off, Dan said, "Buck, I guess we'd better play it safe and stake this ground. The rest of our gang is already at it."

Skinner had watched the fight from a nearby ridge. Sensing what was happening, he had followed at a safe distance.

"Well, sir," he told himself in high glee, "it's turning out as I figured it would. That fellow Buck Tremper is a smart one, catching the rescuers winded. Given the right opportunity, he'll go far in this country. In the meantime, in my own quaint way, I shall have to maneuver them into road building. The first thing we know, ducks and geese will be heading south. And soon after that snow will be flying.

"As I see it, if they build the road first, the threat of winter will then make them work like fury putting up their cabins. On the other hand, if cabins go up first, like as not, they'll hang around the stove on bad days and the road never will be built. They'll keep putting it off until there's better weather. And better weather will never seem to come."

The following morning Skinner made a trip to his beach cache for the double purpose of packing in grub and influencing Buck Tremper. He stopped at the homesteaders' beach camp.

"Any excitement?" he asked. "Or are you boys sick of the country?"

"Sick—no!" Buck exploded. "We're crazy about the country. We had to throw off claim-jumpers yesterday. How'd you suppose we got these black eyes?"

"Oh, I thought perhaps cabin fever had broken out and you traded a few punches," answered Skinner. "Sometimes men get on each other's nerves and start quarreling among themselves—nothing a good punch or two won't smooth over. By the way, have you checked on the fall tides? I was thinking they might seriously damage your supplies. Take an extreme high tide, plus wind in a certain direction, and the waves would drench your little platform."

"I'm glad you told us," Buck said. "Boys, we'd better get busy on a road."

"I was thinking, also, that a gasboat will call in a few days with a few items I need, also the mail. If you want to send out a man to the Forest Service office to do the paper work incident to homesteading, it will be a good opportunity," Skinner said.

When he headed back to his mine later in the morning, John Skinner was a very happy man. The bulldozer was scraping a road to the gravel bench and all eleven men were hard at work clearing away trees and

cutting them for bridge spans over the two small creeks.

Day after day, they worked twelve and fifteen hour-shifts, and when Skinner finished his season's work at the mine he was able to walk to the beach over a good gravel road. Many a truckload of gravel had gone into the muck and slowly vanished into the black ooze, but the road builders found bottom at last, and built up from there. With a bank loan in mind. Skinner timed his departure to a sunny day so he could take some good pictures of the road.

"I'll mail you a set," he promised the homesteaders. "And now is there any message you wish me to take to your sweethearts?" He beamed at them.

They beamed right back. "Yes, tell the girls to get started on their wedding gowns," Buck Tremper grinned.

The homesteaders set up a portable saw and began cutting lumber for floors, steps and walks. As soon as one cabin was supplied, they shifted to the next site. Men followed the sawmill crew, putting up the cabins. They brought rocks from the gravel pit and built chimneys on the warmer days when there was no danger of the cement freezing. They killed big game as needed, respecting the game laws and keeping in mind that wardens used seaplanes because they could land on mountain lakes as well as coastal bays.

Winter came, but they cleared land and turned it over so that the air could get to it. Ice formed in the marsh where Placer Creek emptied into the bay, but the bay itself remained ice-free. At low tide they dug clams and varied their diet.

Deecmber wasn't bad, except for a lack of Christmas mail. January and February were tough—gales, snow, a thaw and a warm rain which froze before it ended. All one night they heard the constant crash of ice-burdened limbs and trees hitting the ice-coated soil beneath.

"This will be a fine place to bring a woman," Red growled. "I don't know . . . mebbe the whole business is a mistake."

"We've got too much invested in time and money to back out now," Buck said quietly. "Things will look different when the sun swings north again. As for a woman—if she was in love with you, and that's the only kind a man would bring here, she'd be happy. You'd let the damned wind howl and the ice form. You'd keep on feeding fuel to the stove, and you'd be warm and happy."

"Pretty picture," retorted Red, "from a guy who hasn't a girl. If you had a girl, Buck, would you bring her to this?"

"Yes," Buck answered quickly. Too quickly, because Red's nerves were on edge. "These are the hard weeks," he pointed out reasonably.

"You aren't helping them any," Red said in a threatening voice. "I was the one to move you be leader. And you haven't done much lately that anybody has noticed."

Buck stood up. His face was white

and there was a cold light in his eyes. With studied calmness he said, "I'm going out and harrow my land."

"On a day like this?" demanded Red.

"On a day like this," Buck answered evenly. He lifted his coat from a peg and went outside.

"The big yellow lug backed down," Red exclaimed. "I'll be damned!"

"No," Dan Sutton said, "he didn't back down. He can clean up on any one of us, and we all know it. He's the biggest man in the pack, and not only in size or strength. He was just spoiling to tear into you, Red; the strain of winter months has ridden him as hard as any of us. But he's being sensible—and considerate. Go over by the stove, light a cigarette, and think things over."

Red was on edge, looking for trouble. His gaze shifted to the others' faces. A couple of them nodded in approval of what Dan had said. Red sat down and lit a cigarette. Outside, they heard the tractor cough and splutter as the cold motor turned over. Then they saw Buck head for the forty acres he had cleared. The harrow teeth bounced off the ice crust at first, then dug in, mixing dirt with snow. Every man knew it was a poor time to harrow—knew, too, it was Buck's effort to hold his temper and not brawl with Red and perhaps start a free-for-all fight.

Finishing his cigarette, Red walked over to the window and stared a long time. Then he put on his coat, stalked purposely to the field and waited until the tractor came back. The two men talked briefly, then shook hands. In a moment Buck headed for the shed, with Red trailing along behind him.

"We were just wondering," Red remarked, as he and Buck came into the cabin, "what Skinner is doing these days. He hasn't even sent us a postcard saying, 'Having a good time. Wish you were here.'"

VI

At that moment Skinner was sitting in the banker's office showing his pictures. "The time has come to buy my equipment," he explained. "I waited until winter was almost over to make sure the boys would stick it out. I was confident that they would, but I knew you'd want more than my confidence in someone else. They're still up there."

The banker didn't answer. He was studying the photographs. "Good road," he said finally. "Permanent, too. It would cost a lot of money to build a road like that."

"Not the way it was done," Skinner told him. "It increases the worth of the mine proportionately, though I haven't spent a dime on the road."

What's In A Brand Answers (*page 66*)

1. M A in E (MAINE); 2. P in G, P on G (PING PONG); 3. LACROSSE; 4. Wheel in G (WHEELING); 5. Long i L and (LONG ISLAND); 6. Heart C's (HEARTSEASE); 7. Tea for Two; 8. LAZY DOG; 9. Pawn E (PAWNEE).

"As I see it," the banker said, "the boys have put everything they have, plus their own efforts, into their claims and the road."

"That's right," agreed Skinner.

"Hm," the banker continued. "No other work being available, they must of necessity turn to you for employment. And they'll need jobs."

"That's the way I figured it from the first," Skinner said. "You see, one of my biggest problems is solved. No labor turnover. You have the assayer's report. With the road built, the mine is now a property worth considerably more than the sum I wish to borrow. Under the favorable conditions which I have worked hard to bring about, the mine may be sold to any one of a dozen outfits for cash. You can get your money out of it any time I fail to meet your requirements. But I shall meet them," he concluded grimly.

"How do you plan to ship your machinery?"

"By barge, which I have chartered. I've already sold sufficient space to reduce my own freight costs to a very reasonable figure, if I do say so myself."

The banker was impressed. Here was a man who knew how to take care of himself when the going was tough. He was convinced there was no risk in making the loan. Anyone who had brought a mining property along this far wasn't likely to let it get away from him through neglect or carelessness.

"Very well, Mr. Skinner," he said. "You can order your machinery."

It was late in May, and the warm sun beating constantly against the southern slope during days that were nineteen hours long and getting longer, was making things grow so rapidly Buck Tremper and the others could almost hear them.

There were long rows of potatoes and other root vegetables. Each field was growing a hay crop to feed the cattle due to come in during the summer. Water piped from springs insured running water in every cabin, and no water bill at the end of the month.

"In time," Buck told the others, "we can harness one of these rugged waterfalls and have electric power and light at the cost of installation and upkeep."

"That's going to take dough," Jack White said. He was a man who said very little but did a lot of thinking. "Another thing, what about a market for our produce? We were so excited over rich land that we overlooked that little point. Even Buck missed that one."

"And speaking of dough," Red remarked, "where am I going to raise enough to bring my wife north? And you guys who talked of June weddings last winter when you weren't cussing the weather, what about you? Or are you engaged to girls who'll wait ten or twenty years?"

A Fish and Wildlife plane checking on salmon fishermen roaring overhead interrupted the conversation. To their surprise it banked, turned and landed on the harbor. All eleven men piled onto the truck and rumbled down to the landing.

"Another reason why we built this road, in case you're still wondering," Buck said.

The plane came up to the improvised wharf and tossed a packet of mail to Buck. "Skinner is at Juneau," the pilot reported, "he'll be along in a few days."

If anything, the mail increased the men's restlessness. It had been almost a year since any of them had been home. Although under the law their homesteads must be "home" until they were patented, as yet the roots hadn't gone very deep.

The next few days they kept an eye on the harbor entrance, expecting to see a barge and tow boat crawling in. Instead, a businesslike sixty-footer appeared one afternoon and approached the pier at extreme high tide.

"Great guns!" Red exclaimed. "That object in skirts must be what is known as a girl. I haven't seen one in so long I'm not sure. She has a funny thing on her head with a feather in it. That must be a hat."

"You shouldn't forget what a hat is, even after a year," Buck grinned. "As a married man you must have yelled your head off at the price they cost."

"Wasn't married long enough to reach that state," Red said. He stared intently, then snatched the binoculars from Buck's hands. "Well, I hope to kiss a pig, if that isn't my wife." He jumped up and down like a madman, yelling, "Hi . . . Dixie!"

"You'll be wastin' no kisses on a pig this day," Paddy O'Leary, his next-door neighbor, predicted.

"Hey!" Red said wildly. "One of you guys high-tail it to my cabin, do the dishes and sweep the floor. I haven't swept it for two weeks. And dust things off a bit. Dixie hates dirt."

Paddy took off at a dog trot.

A few minutes later the boat landed and Dixie almost fell over the side into Red's arms. "I brought a cat and kittens and a little dog," she said happily. "You aren't mad, are you? I know you never have liked cats."

"I love cats!" Red told her fervently, clinging to her. "I love everybody. I even love people who try to jump claims."

Skinner came over the side and shook hands with Buck Tremper. He grinned at the others and yelled, "Hello suckers!" He gave them time to resent that, then added, "A tug and barge will be here in a few days with machinery and a year's supplies. Have you got time for a speech while the boat's crew is unloading chechahco grub?"

"Shoot!" Buck invited.

"My problem was to get a road so I could talk the bank into loaning me money on the mine," explained Skinner. "I figured the only way was to induce men to settle on the homesteads that the government permits in special cases where an operating mine is nearby. I wanted men who could dish it out and take it. No others would go through the first winter, which would be the worst. The man in the mackinaw was hired to test your fighting qualities."

"He found out," White said grimly.

"Right," Skinner agreed. "I had to pay him a bonus. Then I tried to discourage you, work up your fight so nothing would stop you. And all the while I was afraid I wouldn't get you."

"So we came," Red said, "and we built your road—"

"And *your* road, too," Skinner broke in quickly. "To make a long story short, the road got me my loan. Figure what it cost you at the going wage and I'll pay half. That should enable some of you boys to light out for home and marry your girls. This boat, here, is permanent—mine property. But she'll make occasional runs to nearby canneries and mines carrying the milk, butter, eggs, poultry and vegetables. Off-season, there'll be jobs for you in the mine."

"I suppose you talked those claim-jumpers into moving in on us?" Red asked. "I know I wanted my ground worse than ever after they tried to get it."

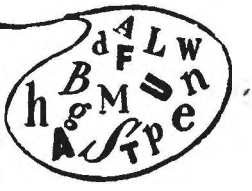
"No, the mackinaw fellow got to talking," Skinner answered, "and a bunch of his listeners decided to go after it on their own hook." He chuckled. "I kind of put one over on you, didn't I?"

"You sure did," Buck admitted, watching Red help his wife onto the truck and then hand up cat, kittens, dog, a crate of chickens, suitcases and hand bag.

"Some day," Buck thought, "I may confess to Skinner that Dan Sutton and I convinced ourselves that he had a mine which could provide jobs and outlet for farm produce for years to come, before we staked a foot of homestead ground. But right now he's glowing over doing something pretty fine all around. And only a heel would want to spoil his fun."

THE END

Here are 15 Scrambled Words all cowhands know. Can you dab your loop on 'em? Answers on page 116.

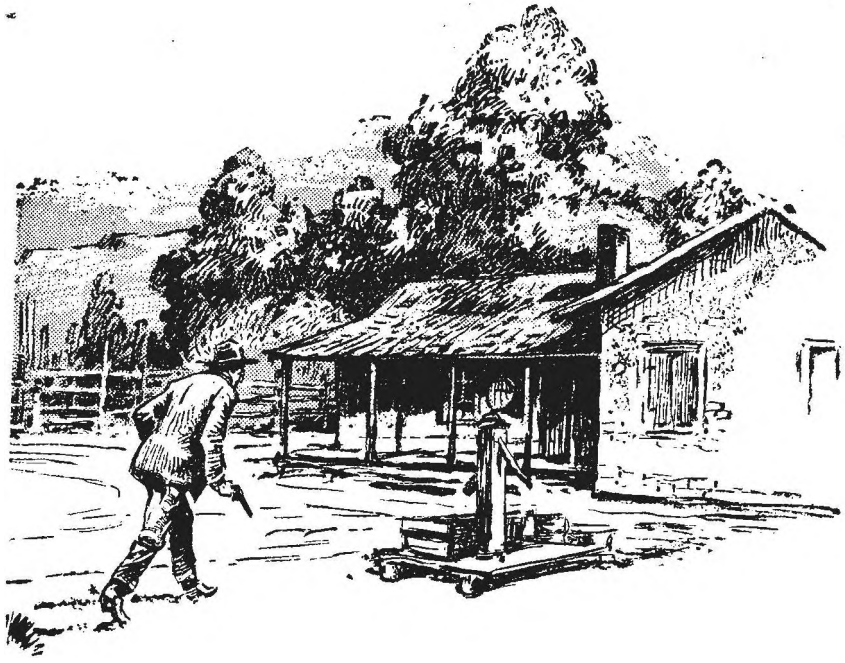


1. racsacs
2. yelbar
3. rohn
4. tontolacti
5. nelnalf
6. ckud
7. guj
8. lyloboll
9. scathif
10. knickjafe
11. rhognonrp
12. ebe
13. tivarclout
14. gep
15. dolg

By Rod Patterson

Was Ed Irons too old to wear a sheriff's star—
or could he prove he was still lawman enough to
handle a pair of treacherous gun wolves who were

BOUND TO THE BAD BUNCH



I

WHEN he awoke that fine September morning in his pleasant bedroom and saw the flashing Colorado sunlight lying golden and warm on the bright-colored Hopi rugs under his window, Sheriff Ed Irons lay quietly for a long time, listening to a Crissal's thrasher singing in the dooryard cottonwood and to the gentle clinking of silverware and china in the ranchhouse kitchen where his wife was getting his breakfast.

Usually his feet hit the floor two minutes after his eyes opened, but not today. The sheriff was a sick man—sick with fear and uncertainty and distrust. He was seventy-two and the years, until last night at least, had lain lightly on his silvery head and lanky, hard-muscled body. But this morning he felt the dull aches and the lassitude of old age; and he was no longer sure of his own intrinsic worth.

"Ed!" It was Letha's voice calling from the kitchen. "Time all old dogs was shakin' a leg!"

He winced at the words, for he felt as an old hound must feel, stiff and unwilling to move. "I'm a-comin'!" he answered as cheerfully as he could make it.

But he lay a moment longer, moving his fingers up to the unraveled tips of his white mustache, twirling and shaping them to sharp points

that didn't droop like a miniature inverted set of steer horns. His thoughts veered backward to two happenings of the day before that had so upset him he hadn't been able to eat his supper.

One thing that had shocked him was the letter he had got from Jason Whitlock, Chairman of the Saldero County Council. In part, it had read:

. . . and the Board feels it should consider the question of your retirement at once. Some members deem that certain laxities, etc., etc., would be eliminated if a younger man . . .

The second blow had come from the Superintendent of the State Penitentiary:

. . . and this is to advise you of the escape of two convicts from this institution on Sept. 10th. See enclosed notice for descriptions of Hade Farnum and Frank Stobo. Our records show that Farnum is a native of your county, and we believe the men are heading your way in an effort to contact Farnum's relatives or friends.

The sheriff sighed and got out of bed, standing slightly bent over in his long-handled woolen underwear. He straightened with a grunt, remembering all those other risings when, with his mind molded and made clear by sleep, he had felt the free and willing action of muscles stir through him.

He drew a deep, shaken breath and moved limpingly to the wash stand where he doused head and face in cold water from the china pitcher. Then he reached blindly for the towel and was drying his face and eyes with swift blotting strokes when he heard hoofs in the yard and then a knock at the kitchen door. He froze in grotesque motionlessness, listening and tense.

Letha's voice came next. "Why, Davie! Is anything wrong?"

The caller was Dave Stack, their son-in-law and the sheriff's deputy for over a year. Ed finished drying himself, still tense with the wondering of what reason Dave had for stopping here on his way to town and the courthouse when it was three miles out of his way.

He heard them talking in the kitchen, but couldn't get the words, only that Letha seemed anxious about something and Dave's deep voice was trying to soothe her. The sheriff slipped into his brown linen shirt and knotted a black string tie loosely under the collar.

He lifted his gunbelt from its hook behind the door and buckled it on, drawing and squinting at the six-gun in the incoming flood of sunlight. It was the weapon he had toted for twenty-five years as sheriff, oiled and polished each day, the metal parts showing small rainbow glints, the bullets lead blue in the cylinder holes, the ivory grips age-yellowed as old cameos.

Putting the gun back in its holster, he straightened the bend out of his back and went down the hallway toward the sunlight in the kitchen.

"Mornin', Dave," he said to his tall young son-in-law but not looking

at him as he reached for a chair at the table. He didn't want to act surprised at Dave, though he had a feeling the boy had an ulterior motive for his early call.

"Morning," Dave said in a slightly strained voice.

Then the sheriff glanced at the bronzed, high-cheekboned face, the thin nose, the brown steady eyes under black straight brows. Dave didn't smile and didn't speak again. His face was impassive, almost blank.

The sheriff tucked his napkin under his collar and began to eat the flapjacks and bacon Letha had brought him when he sat down. His wife's gentle, lined face had that strained look Dave wore; her gray eyes were cloudy with some inner agitation.

It was Dave who broke the silence just as it became unbearable to the sheriff. "Thought maybe I'd take the day off, pop. Been wantin' to try for steelhead on the river a long time, and . . ." He stopped, embarrassed or at loss for words.

The sheriff finished the last mouthful, and saucered and blew on his coffee to cool it. "Why not?" he drawled over the thudding of his heart. "You served them summonses yesterd'y and there ain't apt to be anythin' important come up today at the office."

Dave's face stayed impassive. He wasn't looking at his father-in-law now. It was Letha who said, "Davie, why don't you try and sell the homestead and move closer to us—or to town? It's so far out for Jo Ann to be left alone all day and—"

The sheriff breathed noisily through his nose. "Don't," he warned his wife, "be givin' him something to worry about! Ain't nuthin' c'd happen to Jo Ann that couldn't happen closer to town! Besides, you know Dave can't sell without he gits permission—" He broke it off short, panicked because he had almost mentioned a name he never spoke in Dave's presence.

"Hade Farnum?" Letha blundered. "Can't Davie find out where Hade is, or advertise?"

"No," growled the sheriff. "he can't!" He regretted now not having told his wife about Hade being sent to the State pen for complicity in the murder of a stage driver down at Calaveras two years ago.

"Well, I'll be goin'," Dave said with careful tonelessness, rising from his chair and moving toward the door. "I'll be back at the courthouse by three this afternoon. If Jo Ann should come to town or stop here, will one of you tell her I won't be home for lunch?"

The sheriff nodded. *Why*, he wondered, *didn't he tell Jo Ann that when he left home?*

Dave's homestead ranch was six miles from Canyon City on a back trail, to the west of the sheriff's road, a remote and lonely spot near Sawbuck Creek. Dave hadn't worked the spread since his mother had died some years before, though it was a good lay and could be made to pay in time.

When Dave had gone, the sheriff frowned painfully to himself and

drank the last of his second cup of coffee. He wished the boy *had* said something about Hade Farnum and Frank Stobo because he knew Dave must have seen the letter from the pen the night before at the courthouse—but he was glad he hadn't said anything to Dave about it. The sheriff got his hat and kissed his wife good-by.

"Be home the usual time." He forced a smile and patted her cheek. "'Bout six tonight."

He went out to the stable to hook up his two-bronc buckboard, and he was glad for the second time that he hadn't told Letha about Jason Whitlock and the "resignation business."

Out on the high cambered road to town, he drove his blacks with his usual sedate expertness, though he took no pleasure in the drive as he normally did on days this time of year. He reflected grimly, unhappily, on the calamitous turn of events that had altered the even tenor of his life so suddenly.

Dave was a good son-in-law—a good deputy, too. The sheriff honestly liked him. But there had been a time when the opposite had been true. It had been a hard blow to the Irons household when their only daughter had run off with Dave Stack and had married him first and then had defiantly told them about it afterward.

That Dave hadn't deceived his bride was a big point in his favor, admittedly, but it had been hard to take, especially for the sheriff because he was familiar with Dave's past and background. Not that the boy had ever actually done anything wrong.

But Dave Stack had grown up in an atmosphere of thievery and drunkenness. At the age of ten, his father had died and his mother had promptly remarried. Her second husband was a blackleg pure and simple. Haz Farnum had turned the Stack ranch into a headquarters for the high-line riding fraternity. A year after the birth of Hade, Dave's half brother, the old man had been caught in a rustling raid on one of the valley outfits and summarily hanged along with two of his cronies.

In the years that followed, Dave had tried to get work as a cowboy, a farmer, a railroad section hand, but had never managed to hold any job long. His loyalty to young Hade and to his mother was his undoing.

Hade was in hot water from the age of ten until he left the county at eighteen, and somehow Dave had become smeared with the same brush with which public opinion had painted his family history. And so, when his mother had finally died, he had taken to drinking heavily. Then Jo Ann Irons had fallen in love with him and within six months had married him. Two weeks later, Ed Irons had sworn him in as a deputy sheriff.

These were the sheriff's thoughts as he drove his buckboard team toward Canyon City and his office in the County Courthouse. And his uneasiness increased as the distance lessened between him and his destination.

Of one thing he was almost sure: Dave hadn't gone trout fishing as he had declared. And this conclusion, disturbing as it was, brought another

that was downright frightening—that Dave might be on his way to a rendezvous with Hade Farnum and Frank Stobo this very moment.

Canyon City lay in a pass between two ranges of mountains facing an open valley, a country of rich farms and cattle ranches. The town had one long street of shops and stores and two or three tributary lanes of cottages and nondescript wooden dwellings.

The courthouse, a brick two-story structure, stood midway on Main Street, dominating the town like a fort, the slotlike iron-barred windows of the second-floor jail adding to this effect.

Sheriff Irons left his team and rig at the livery stable next door to the courthouse, and walked toward the entrance of the building that had been his headquarters, his life, for twenty-five years. Dread filled him as he reached his private office at the end of a long corridor on the ground floor.

This Hade Farnum-Frank Stobo business was bad. Everything was bad. A threat to his honor had been implied in the offer of retirement from his superiors. Both had come together and both would have to be dealt with immediately. Today. This morning!

Seated before his ancient rolled-top desk, he anchored his brass-rimmed spectacles to the bridge of his hawk-like nose and stared down at the morning's mail the jail turnkey had got off the early stage: dodgers, reward notices, inquiries. He tried to concentrate on what was before him and to forget for a moment his nagging dread.

He heard the footsteps come into the courthouse corridor even above the noise of the morning's traffic on Main Street and turned his head as the sounds of boots stopped behind him in the office doorway. Peering over the tops of his spectacles, he saw the long, sour face of Jason Whitlock, his one enemy on the County Council.

Jason was a middle-aged man, under-sized but filled with a puffed-up faith in his own importance in the affairs of Saldero County. His eyes, small and as opaque as gray agates, looked down a pointed nose at the sheriff with open suspicion and dislike.

The two men with him were dressed in dusty traveling clothes, box coats and California pants tucked into the tops of high-heeled riders' boots. One was tall and competent-looking, hawk-eyed and taciturn—his companion being short, compact and square-jawed, with the same keen eyes. It did not require the gunbelts under their coats or the glint of small ball-pointed stars on their vests to designate both men as officers of the law.

Whitlock came in first with a possessive manner that now, as always, infuriated the sheriff. With a stiff bow, Whitlock indicated the tall officer. "This here's Ben Blossom of the State Constabulary, sheriff." Nodding at the short man, he added ingratiatingly, "And Henry Flood of the same. Come in, gents."

Blossom wandered into the office, his lean hands hooked over his gunbelt and its glittering, deadly array of brass-cased cartridges. He didn't look at Irons after that first long, assessing stare.

"Ever hear of an hombre named Hade Farnum, sheriff?"he inquired in a not unpleasant tone.

Irons felt a queer tingle go up and down his spine. He sat up a bit straighter in his chair.

"Or Frank Stobo?" Henry Flood added in a nasal drawl, moving into the room on stumpy legs.

"Why, yes, I have," the sheriff said, uncomfortable in his chair. "But—"

Whitlock frowned from his position in the center of the room and cut Irons off impatiently. "Farnum and Stobo are both in this county—perhaps already in this township. I happen to know that Farnum is related to you, sheriff, and—"

"You're a liar!" the lawman blurted angrily, coloring up to the edges of his snowy hair.

"Well, maybe not by blood," Whitlock amended with an acid smile. "But your son-in-law—"

"What's that got to do with it?" demanded the sheriff in a hot, stifled voice.

Blossom waved the councilman aside with an airy gesture. "We thought, sheriff, maybe you'd give us some help in arrestin' Farnum and Stobo and returnin' 'em to the place they busted out of. We trailed 'em as far as Indian Springs night before last, and then lost track of 'em."

"'Course I'll help," Irons said, mollified, though a kind of nausea was spreading inside of him. He raised a hand and jerked at one tip of his white mustache, glaring at Whitlock. "Jason, if you think Dave Stack is mixed up with a pair of killers . . ." He stopped and looked at the officers. "I'll vouch for my deputy from hell to Absolom!"

"Sure," said Blossom with a meager smile.

"Why not?" Flood shrugged.

"Where at's your son-in-law?" Whitlock asked sarcastically.

"None of your blasted business!" Irons retorted.

"Sech talk," warned the councilman icily, "kin cost you your star and job!'

"Just a minute, gents," Blossom interposed in his aloof, cool voice. "Hank and me ain't int'rested in no private feud fight. We want help and if we can't git it here—"

"You'll git it," the sheriff said hastily, rising from his chair. He felt all hollow and limp in the legs and didn't dare move for a moment for fear of staggering. "I'm expectin' my deputy in around three this afternoon and I—"

"Can't wait that long," said Flood. "Whitlock told us your son-in-law's ranch is about eight miles from here. We savvy all about Dave Stack's fam'ly connections with Farnum, and we aim to ride down to Sawbuck Creek and kind of look the place over. You c'n come along if you want."

Irons' throat was dry "I got a two-seater here at the livery. I'll drive you boys out and glad to."

Blossom wandered toward the door. "We ain't et breakfast yet. Back in half an hour."

Whitlock went out last, a strut in his walk. The sheriff called after him, "I'm still sheriff of this county, Jason. Don't forgit that!"

"I'll ride along with you, sheriff"—the man's reply came floating back from the corridor—"and everythin' I see I'll put in my report to the Board!"

The old lawman sank back in his chair, cold sweat beading his forehead and collecting clammily around the hairs of his mustache. He let his mind roam in an effort to stop thinking about Dave Stack and Jo Ann who would suffer most if a scandal broke out of this business.

The law had come to this land during his lifetime and he had helped to make Saldero County what it was—a safe place for women and children to live. Now, for the most part, a man no longer needed to wear a revolver on his right leg to ensure himself life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. And he, as sheriff, had welcomed the change that the rolling years had brought; he even welcomed his forthcoming retirement and a chance to learn the fine pleasures of laziness and the right to stand at last against a bar, drinking with his cronies and swapping yarns of the past. And now this: A forced retirement and the stigma of disgrace!

He needed time to pull himself together. He noted curiously that his hands shook a bit on the arms of his chair. He stared away from them and out through a window with a view of a portion of Main Street. It was a peaceful scene of shopkeepers sluicing off their galleries with mop and pail, of wagons and rigs and riders drifting in through the flashing sunlight of this fall day—but out yonder in the hills two hunted men were hiding, and maybe meeting a third man who wore a deputy sheriff's badge pinned to his flannel shirt.

There was the crisp explosion of a boot toe hitting the door sill behind Irons. He moved his head in a half turn and saw Dave standing before him, not impassive now, not calm. Judging by the drawn look on his bronzed face, the tight alertness of his dark eyes, Dave Stack was a badly worried young man.

"Hullo," the sheriff said in a startled tone, then he strove to speak calmly. "No luck?"

"Bad," Dave said tensely. "All bad! Pop, I got to resign!"

"You—*what?*

The badge made a clinking sound on the desk where Dave had tossed it. "Don't try and make out," Dave said thickly, "you don't know why!"

The knot of tension in the sheriff's middle seemed to break, and, unaccountably, he smiled. "You sure it's the right way to handle it, son?" he asked after a moment of silence.

Dave apparently didn't hear the question. "Hade's back," he said in a bitter tone. "I met him and a man named Stobo about an hour ago."

"Out at your place?" the sheriff said, his voice sharp with alarm.

Dave shook his black head impatiently. "'Course not. I had a letter from Hade yesterday tellin' me to meet him at . . . where I met him."

The sheriff waited, his fear and uncertainty back inside of him stronger than ever.

"They wanted money," Dave went on in a harsh voice, not looking at the old man. "I gave 'em all I had on me and—"

"How much?" the sheriff wanted to know.

"About twenty dollars. They said it wasn't enough. I ought to kill Hade and be rid of him for good!" The last was said with subdued ferocity that shocked the sheriff speechless.

Finally Irons managed, "Kill your own flesh an' blood?"

Dave made a pushing gesture with both hands in front of him. "I c'd even do it," he said harshly, "if I hadn't swore to my mother when she died. I'd take care of him."

The sheriff relaxed. "What're we goin' to do?"

"We? Me, you mean!" Dave's voice rose in pitch and intensity, and there was a visible wildness in his eyes. "You stay out of it! I only came back here to turn in my star and tell you . . ."

"You're my daughter's husband," the sheriff reminded him. "That puts me in it up to my blasted ears!" he finished emphatically.

"I'll go back and try to reason with Hade," Dave said in a calmer tone. "Maybe I c'n dig up more money and—"

"I can give you a hunderd," Irons said quietly. "It's in the safe, and you c'd ride back wherever—"

There was a caged desperation in Dave's next words, "No, by Satan! I won't drag you in my trouble or take your money! If I can't . . ."

"There's some things," the sheriff said quietly, "a man can't buy his way out of. This here's one of 'em. We got to think of something else . . . some other way."

Dave turned back toward the door, not hurrying, but in a kind of jagged desperation at the futility of further talk. "I'll ride back there," he said in a dead tone. "I'll thresh it out with Hade and . . ."

"Wait!" Irons jumped to his feet, protesting, a hand stretched out. But his son-in-law did not stop. "Keep 'em away from your place!" the sheriff called anxiously. "I got to take a couple of officers out there this mornin' and . . ." He sank back, hearing Dave's boots thud down the hallway toward the street.

"I been thinking all wrong about that boy!" he told himself dismally. "He wasn't afraid of anything for himself! He was afraid for Jo Ann . . . for me!"

The clanking arrival of three pairs of boots in the corridor came next. Jason Whitlock came in with Blossom and Flood.

There was a leer of suspicion on Whitlock's dry-skinned, pale-eyed face. "Wasn't that Dave Stack we jest seen skally-hootin' down Main Street on a red horse?"

The sheriff didn't bother to answer. He looked wearily at the other two men and said, "I'm ready any

time now. You want to ride in my buckboard?"

Blossom nodded, his hard eyes expressionless as if by intent. "We'll tie our horses on behind your rig. Might need 'em and I like a saddle under me in a fast run."

III

Ten minutes later, Ed Irons slapped his buckboard blacks out of town and down the turnpike, heading southward in the direction of Sawbuck Creek and Dave Stack's homestead ranch. Blossom sat beside the sheriff, Whitlock and Flood squatting on the rear seat, with two saddle horses trotting on a hackamore fastened to the rig's tailboard.

A mile out of Canyon City the sheriff said to Blossom: "Dave Stack's a good son-in-law and a good deputy. He wouldn't do nuthin' irregular, I'll swear on it!"

"The devil he wouldn't!" Whitlock's sneer came from the back seat. "Blood's thicker'n water, and anybuddy knows it!"

Irons took a slipping hold on his temper and slapped the lines down hard on the rumps of the blacks. Finally Blossom made a comment. "I got nuthin' against your son-in-law, sheriff. Only if there's a chance he might try to hide Farnum and Stobo out of fear, we'd have to take him back to your jail for aidin' and abettin' convicted crim'nals."

The lawman saw the logic of that, but didn't agree with any vocal answer. His disturbance increased as the distance lessened between him and Dave's ranch. What was he going to tell Jo Ann? She'd be bound to ask questions about why two strange officers were hanging around the place. And suppose Hade Farnum and Frank Stobo should happen to . . . But he didn't want to think about that now!

They were approaching the creek trail. The road ran on through the broken hills, climbing slowly along a timbered ridge and coming out suddenly on the caprock rim overlooking a small green valley, neatly fenced, with a clear view of a white ranchhouse and a barn and pole corrals sitting in a yard shaded by a dozen big cottonwoods and dotted with small evergreens and other shrubs.

The sheriff wiped sweat off his forehead, tipping his hat back and pointing with the butt of his whip. "That's Dave's place. My daughter's down there and I sure hope you boys . . ."

"Pull up," Blossom ordered tersely. "We'll get on our horses and kind of move in easy. You and Whitlock c'n drive on in like you was payin' a friendly call."

The sheriff halted the team while the two officers got out and untied their mounts at the rear of the buckboard. There was a sound of rifles jerked from saddle scabbards, but Irons didn't look around. His face felt hot and his hands felt cold.

"I'll git out here," he heard Jason Whitlock say from the back seat.

Irons hipped around and thrust his whip in front of the councilman who

was about to back to the ground. "Set down, Jason," he warned the man in a deadly voice. "You rid this far, you'll ride all the way. Otherwise you'll git back to town on shank's mare!"

Whitlock took one look at the sheriff's strained, gray face and the fierce bristling points of his mustache, and subsided in his seat, mumbling. Blossom said from the rear, "You got a gun on you, Whitlock? We may need an extry one and a man to use it."

Whitlock paled, clinging to the seat rails now. "No, I ain't got a gun!" he stammered around the clatter of his false teeth.

The sheriff laughed harshly. "Jason'd only blow off his own head if you give him a pistol!" He added with heavy irony, "The county'd be shet of a varmint if he done it, but he might plug me in the back first!"

A few minutes later, Ed Irons was driving his team down the last switchback turn and was turning in the lane that led back to the pleasant and peaceful-looking house under the cottonwoods. He didn't see any smoke from the chimney in the kitchen ell, but that didn't mean necessarily that Jo Ann wasn't in the house. Then he hauled back hard on the lines, staring at the barn, fifty feet to the left of the kitchen gallery.

"Wh-what's wrong?" Whitlock chattered from the rear seat. His pale eyes stuck out as on stems and his knuckles were taut and white where he gripped the seat.

Irons didn't answer. He just stared. Something was different about the barn. Then he knew. "Great guns!" he breathed. "They're here!"

"Who's here?" Whitlock queried frightenedly.

"The barn doors 're both shet!" The sheriff kept staring, now at the house, at the windows of the kitchen, with their starched curtains fluttering behind open sashes. "Dave never closes 'em in summer. Now they're shet! There's hosses in there!"

Whitlock blinked his eyes and stared. On the ground close to the closed doors was other incontrovertible evidence of the truth of the sheriff's statement. Whitlock whimpered softly.

Irons lowered a leg out of the buckboard, looping the lines around the whip socket, never taking his flat-lidded gaze from the house as he put both feet on the ground, unbuttoned his coat, drew his six-gun from its holster. His face looked as gray as gypsum rock, though a dark drawn steadiness burned between his long eyelids.

Now there was menace beneath the cottonwoods around the quiet house. The silence was both eerie and sepulchral. Whitlock had slid off the rear seat and was hunched down behind the rig, his thin mouth working in spasmodic little jerks.

"Wh-what you goin' to do, sheriff?" he finally got out.

There was a distant ring of a horseshoe on stone. It came from behind the buckboard. Blossom and Flood were moving in.

The sheriff stood a moment, as if in thought. His gun was in his hand, the hammer cocked, the long blue barrel slanting down along his right pants leg. He didn't know how he appeared to the terrified councilman behind the buckboard's wheel, this picture of himself as he had looked in those long-gone days, the calm and patient fighting man, like an electric ghost stepped out of the past, only the cheeks were thinly veined, the nose, too, and the mustache was white, not black.

"Don't go in there, Ed," Whitlock whimpered, pasty white and pleading. "They'd shoot you down and pump you full of lead . . ."

The sheriff did not answer. *Hade's in the kitchen;* he had the detached thought. *Stobo's in there! Jo Ann . . .*

Then he was moving up the lane, a hundred feet between him and the kitchen gallery. He walked slowly and heavily, as though his legs hurt him, and his boot toes scuffed up geysers of dust ahead of him. Somewhere behind him a man's voice called softly, harshly, "Sheriff . . ." It was Blossom's voice.

Irons went on. His gun began to lift from flat against his leg. It came up an inch with every labored step he took, its black muzzle pointing up the path ahead of him between the rows of shrubs and evergreens that lined his way.

Then all that unearthly silence was split by a rifle shot. It was an incisive sound, like someone breaking a stick across the knee. The sheriff felt the air rip open close to his head; he heard the bullet go snickering through dry leaves in back of him like a tormented hornet zooming for something to sting.

He halted, his mind perfectly clear. His eyes saw the faint, featherly halo of gunsmoke hover before the kitchen window that was to the left of the door. Fear was remote to him now, in that split second after the shot. The sun was bright and hot on his shoulder-blades. Up there in the kitchen of the ranchhouse a rifle barrel was hot, too, but it was another kind of heat. The sun's heat was life—the heat in the rifle barrel was death!

He relaxed all his muscles to rest them, and his spine found a natural bend, the bend he had to fight lately, but now needed to ease his lanky body into a crouch. He started ahead again, not walking up the middle of the lane but hugging one side —the left side, inching along crabwise, his gun flat against his leg again because he did not dare snap a shot at that window. Bullets had a way of hitting the wrong people!

Suddenly, startlingly, he was hearing sounds he had never noticed particularly in the past: the small wind breathing through pine needles like a sigh; the whisper of stirring grasses, the far-off murmur of creek

water tumbling over a shingle bar; the insolent challenge of a crow deep in the breaks behind him, the crunching of his own boots on gravel that seemed suddenly to muffle all those other sounds—all but the second rifle shot from the house. This time he didn't see the puff of muzzle smoke.

Something hit him in the left side, under his ribs. The impact was like a quick push of a hand, painless but peremptory. And it halted him. Something was wrong with his breathing; his eyes ached from staring, and now there were small glints of sparks before them, pin points of light that split with tiny explosions and danced away.

The house seemed to recede, to grow smaller and farther off, the path like a cone with the sharp end touching the window in the kitchen ell—like a tunnel filled with sunlight and shadow, unutterably far away.

The sun no longer shone; it was suddenly, curiously, like dusk. The sheriff summoned up his will. He was tired and wanted to lie down, but he moved off the path, threading his way between brush clumps, always watching the kitchen gallery. A numbness was spreading all over the left side of his body—maybe a stroke. When it reached his brain he would fall and never get up again.

All at once he broke into a small clearing, and there was the kitchen porch about ten feet in front of him. He locked his fingers around the ivory grips of his gun and started to run. Every ounce of strength he had in him he willed into his tottering legs.

"Jo Ann!" He seemed to yell her name but no sound came from his gasping lungs.

Hot spears of flame jabbed toward him out of the kitchen window. They seemed to jump across the gap and enter his body. The reports beat against his ears with unbelievable rapidity.

Other shots smacked the hot still air behind him, but he did not hear these, though he caught the solid "thwunk!" of bullets hitting the roof of the house. The officers were shooting high!

Another blow hit his shoulder and spun him into a long, running stagger. He fell headlong, his face bumping the earth defenselessly. His hat fell off and rolled away in a comical circle. He got up and ran on, his lips drawn back in agony, his eyes staring at the window and the smoke fog before it.

As he came to the edge of the gallery, he stumbled and fell. He lay a moment, his breath sawing in and out, his gun still gripped in his right hand. Then he was crawling up and across the gallery, clawing out for the door, on all fours, hitching over the boards on his knees and one hand . . .

Scrambled Words Answers (*page 103*)

1. carcass. 2. barley. 3. horn. 4. cottontail. 5. flannel. 6. duck. 7. jug. 8. loblolly. 9. catfish. 10. jackknife. 11. pronghorn. 12. bee. 13. cultivator. 14. peg. 15. gold.

Somewhere inside the house a woman's shriek tore at him. "Jo Ann . . . Jo Ann!" he gasped.

There were scuffling sounds in the kitchen, the sounds of blows and snarled-out oaths.

The old lawman was pulling his body upright by a shaky hold on the door knob, clinging one-handedly, turning the knob, straining to lift the gun.

The shots had quit behind him. So had those in the kitchen. Blood splashed the gallery under the sheriff's leaning body. He was on his feet, the knob slippery in his hand. But he turned it and lunged his weight against the panel. The door flew inward and he stood there, blocked against the outer sunlight, a mark even a child could hit with his first shot.

Confusion confronted him. Two men were rolling on the floor, wrestling, thrashing, in a terrible silent battle of fists and flailing arms and legs. Another man lay near the window. on his back, mouth open, motionless, dead.

Irons entered the kitchen on legs that wobbled and bent under him. He couldn't see very much of anything that was before him. All he knew was that the battling men on the floor were no longer there—no, one was there, trying to rise. But the other man was on his feet and coming toward the sheriff. Irons saw the hard shine of sunlight on a gun in the man's hand.

He tried to speak, but choked. He had a glimpse of a contorted face, a pair of maniacal eyes, and he squeezed the trigger once. He felt the gun buck in his fists, but its roar seemed muffled, trivial, like a door slammed hard in a distant room. Then came the darkness.

Struggling up through mingled sensations of light and shadow, consciousness returned to the sheriff with the sound of voices. "Dave! Oh, Dave, is he going to die?"

That was Dave Stack's voice saying hoarsely, "If he does, it'll be me that killed him!"

Irons lay still, feeling sheets under him, and someone doing something to his side. Ben Blossom grunted, "He ain't goin' to die . . . not any. There's a bad one here and another in his shoulder but he'll pull through. Indestructible old cuss!"

"One thing's sure," Henry Flood's voice said with grudging admiration. "Either he's the nerviest old-timer I ever seen in my life—or the biggest fool!"

Then came Jason Whitlock's thoroughly awed voice: "He c'n be sheriff of this county a hunderd years 'fore *I'll* vote to throw him out!" There was a pause, then he added, "But he'll die! No man c'n . . ."

"You're a blasted hassayampa liar!" the sheriff groaned and opened his eyes.

He saw them all around the bed where they had carried him—the bed in Jo Ann's and Dave's room with the blue-flowered wall paper and starchy curtains riffling at the windows. His gaze found his daughter where she stood at the head of the bed. She was shockingly white. but

pretty in spite of it, her full lips trembling, dark eyes round and wide and anxiously held on his.

"You all right, sis?" He tried to smile and reassure her.

"Yes," she breathed and reached for his hands. "Oh, dad, I wasn't afraid of them! Even when Hade threatened to . . . But I didn't want Dave to come home and find them here . . . or you either! I tried to argue them into leaving but they refused and . . ."

The sheriff looked at Dave's bleak face above him then and said, "Where in time did you come from?"

"I went back where I'd met 'em this mornin'," Dave said with a hangdog air. "They'd gone and I hit for home. I rode in the back way and heard all the shootin'. Climbed in through the parlor window and tried to stop your crazy show out front—makin' a damned clay pigeon out of yourself!"

"Stack finished Stobo with his gun barrel," Blossom said grimly, still visibly shaken by what he had witnessed. "Then he jumped Hade Farnum and that prob'ly saved your life, sheriff, and maybe ours!"

"Is Hade . . ."

"Dead," Flood said shortly, and that was all.

Jason Whitlock's pinched face and scrawny shoulders appeared between the two officers. "Sheriff, your son-in-law c'n be sheriff when you wanta quit—if you ever do. I'll git him nominated any election and lick the man that says I can't!"

"Jest so," sighed the sheriff. "I got a life-size' picture . . . Oh, never mind. Now, if you folks'll gimme a hand out of here I'll git in my buckboard and . . . Where in time's my blasted pants?"

They were pushing him down, firmly but gently. That was Dave's face back again above him, smiling now.

"The boys 're ridin' to town and bring the sawbones back," Dave told him. "You just lie still a while and rest."

"Why, looky here, son," the sheriff said indignantly. "I c'n walk jest as good . . ." He tried to sit up but collapsed with a groan.

"We got to git the doc anyways," Dave told him. "For Jo Ann."

The sheriff blinked his eyes. "Jo Ann?" He tried to sit up again, staring around the room. "Where's my gal?"

Dave bent over and whispered something in the sheriff's ear. "The excitement and everything . . . I jest put her to bed in the spare room, pop."

A look of astonishment flickered over Sheriff Ed Irons' face. Then, slowly, his hand came up to the unraveled tips of his white mustache. He twirled them, pointing each end carefully with fingers that shook but not much. Then he lay back with a sigh on his pillow.

"Great guns, son," he said. "Me—Ed Irons—a grandfather!"

THE END

How could Jean Bacette persuade his four-footed problem child to answer the call of the wild?

By Joseph F. Hook

BIG BEAR'S HASH

JEAN BACETTE, French-Canadian trapper and prospector, was sorely tempted. Cuddled against one of his high-topped boots was a tiny cub bear, a whimpering, hungry ball of fuzz that tugged at the big woodsman's heart strings.

Jean reflectively combed his black beard with strong fingers. Then he lifted twinkling blue eyes and surveyed the surrounding country, while Loup and Annette, his two huskies, rested in their sled harness, noses on forepaws, regarding him with a quizzical look of interest.

Spring had come to the Yukon, with here and there patches of bare ground. Pussywillow buds were swelling, and the river ice was turning to slush. The timber was filled with the merry chirping of chickadees, and the bluejays seemed more arrogant than ever. Snow flowers bravely thrust their blooms through the melting crust.

These things Jean Bacette noticed absently. He was thinking about a similar occasion when, while taking up his traps at the close of the season, he had come upon another deserted

cub. In the bigness of his heart he had taken pity on it, had carried it home. That was Napoleon. And how that little bear had grown! A bull in a china shop was as nothing compared to that rascal, even before he was half grown. And what a relief it had been, especially to Loup and Annette, when Napoleon had finally answered the call of the wild and departed for goodness only knew where.

Through unblinking eyes the two huskies watched Jean lower his glance again to the whimpering, pleading little ball of fuzz. A tender smile overspread his face and made crows' feet at the corners of his eyes as he stooped and picked up the puling cub. Feeling the warmth of his big hands, it ceased its whimpering. Jean stroked the fuzzy ball with a gentle forefinger, then put the cub in his mackinaw pocket.

Approaching the sled, he fancied he detected a groan from the huskies. Thereupon he hunched his shoulders and spread out his hands, palm up, as was his habit when arguing.

"But, *mes enfants*," he addressed them, "me, Jean Bacette I cannot leave thees leetle t'ing here to starve. Yes? Absolute' no! Hees mothair leave him. I am not so hard of heart. Listen. I mak' you promise. I keep thees cub till he is weaned, then I take heem to Dawson and sheep heem to some Outside zoo. And me, Jean Bacette, I keep my promise. You are t'inking of Napoleon and those terrible claws and your busted ribs. So am I. But thees cub, when he is weaned, will have only the steel bars of a cage to slap at."

The huskies rose to their feet, stretched and deliberately yawned in his face.

"So that is it, huh?" Jean observed in an injured voice. "You don't believe me. Well, I show you. I repeat, I keep the promise. That is true. Now mush, *mes enfants*."

So that was how the cub, which Jean named Danton, joined the Bacette family, consisting now of the two huskies and Yukon, the tomcat. And when these pets staged a rough-and-tumble scrap in the log cabin, Jean's bellowing remonstrances could be heard for miles in the still north woods air while he tried to separate the combatants.

And always he came out second best, nursing bites and scratches, not intended for him personally, and with clothing ripped and temper frayed. Invariably, he swore he would get rid of the entire bunch so that peace and tranquillity might reign once more in the cabin.

Of course, his promise to the huskies—to get rid of Danton when he was weaned—had long ago been forgotten. The cub grew amazingly, as did his claws and muscles, to the extent that Loup and Annette suffered the exquisite pain of a broken rib or two, Yukon licked a split nose, and Danton himself refrained from sitting on his haunches until his fang-slashed hams healed.

That was the standing of the Bacette household when Angus MacNabb chanced along on the way to his

placer claims. The pack he carried was both bulky and heavy, and the summer sun had bathed his face in sweat. In his hand was a letter which he had brought from Dawson for Jean Bacette. He was very tired and hungry, but the sight of the log cabin lightened his burden. For who had not heard of Bacette's generous hospitality?

The barking huskies brought Jean to the window. When he recognized his visitor, he flung the door wide, bellowing a hearty welcome.

The next moment Jean was pushed violently aside, as Danton barged through the doorway, followed closely by the huskies and Yukon. Here was another human with whom to play, a man with a full pack that would, undoubtedly, contain good things to eat.

Angus stood petrified with terror as the animals bore down upon him. Danton hugged him to his shaggy breast in welcome; and Angus, struggling and yelling bloody murder, went down under the bear's weight, whereupon the huskies started licking his face. Then Danton turned his insatiable attention to the pack and began clawing it. Yukon, the cat, appeared content for the moment to act the part of an interested spectator, purring loudly in pleasant anticipation.

Bellowing dire threats, Jean grabbed Danton and, with a mighty fling, sent him sprawling. He whirled on the two huskies and ordered them to their kennels. Yukon took the hint also and stalked back to the cabin with lazy dignity.

The din was terrific. Angus was still yelling and trying to regain his feet, but the heavy, bulky pack held him down. Jean lifted him up, hustled him inside the cabin and slammed the door in Danton's face.

Slipping out of the pack straps, Angus subsided on a chair. "What sort o' madhoose is this ye're runnin'?" he demanded angrily. "A fine way to treat a visitor, I must say. Ye must be daft, mon, to risk yer life wi' them critters. . . . Oh, me poor ribs!"

"I am ver' soree, Angus, *mon ami*," Jean said. "The pets, they have no manners. You see, seldom dóes anyone come thees way for them to play with."

"Then I'll be seein' to it that I never come this way again," Angus declared. "And do you ca' that playin'? Why, just take a look at me, the noo. Look at me clothes!" But Jean was looking at the letter still clutched in Angus' trembling hand.

"For me?" he inquired.

"Sure," Angus replied sourly. "And it'll be the last I'll ever deliver to ye."

Jean glanced at the envelope. "Ah, from my sistair in Montreal." He laid the letter aside and, busying himself at the stove, soon had a good meal on the table, which somewhat soothed the hungry Scotsman.

Jean then picked up the letter and read it slowly and laboriously.

"My sistair, she say she sends her boy, Henri, to me for a vacation —perhaps a year. Henri, he wants to see hees uncle and thees countree.

Mebbe he wish to learn trapping and wash the gold, no? Henri like me—beeg fella."

He found his nephew's photo and handed it over for Angus' inspection and approval. The dour Scot scrutinized it.

"Aye, a skookum laddie, for eighteen, Jean. Ye could, in a pinch, feed him to yer man-eatin' pets."

Henri Cachot was indeed a skookum lad, the spitting image of his uncle, with the same boisterous laugh, the same twinkling blue eyes and the same powerful build. And in Henri, Danton found a rare playmate who could dish it out plenty rough and take it too. Loup and Annette also were never happier than when in the lad's company. Only Yukon remained aloof to Henri's advances, preferring the comfort of Jean's lap to the lad's rough-housing.

The youth was in love with the north country, and curious about everything. He proved an apt pupil, soon mastering the rudiments of ax and crosscut saw and the gold rocker.

Those were happy days for Jean and Henri—days that sped past all too rapidly. Summer was waning when Henri made a suggestion to his uncle.

"You haven't seen mother since I was about a year old, unc. Why not take a trip back to Montreal now, and stay till the trapping season opens?"

Jean mulled that over for a little while. "I t'ink you got somet'ing there, Henri. And my sistair, she be so glad to see me, no? *Mais oui.*"

"She'd be tickled pink, unc."

"You sure you won't be lonely, no?" Jean asked solicitously.

The lad laughed long and loudly. "Lonesome on the Yukon? Not with the pets, the salmon fishing, the hiking and the gold washing. Not a chance, unc."

So, the next day, Jean packed a few things, preparatory to hitting the trail for Dawson and, eventually, Montreal. He bade the pets farewell with unashamed tears in his big blue eyes and a catch in his voice.

"They'll all be here when you return," Henri assured him. "Now have a good time, unc."

Jean finally tore loose from Danton's rib-cracking embrace. "That bear, you watch heem," he warned, wincing. "He grow like house afire. And he get rougher all the time. *Au 'voir,* Henri."

"Aw, he ain't rough," Henri laughed. "And I ain't so gentle, myself. *Au 'voir,* unc."

Jean returned to Dawson before the stipulated time. The charms of Montreal were many, hut they failed to take the place of his pleasant woodlands life.

He filled his pack with grub, and at eventide plodded up the last knoll and sat on a log to rest. Below, in a small clearing, lay his cabin, lean-to and smoke house. The two huskies were napping on the front stoop. The cat was atop a stump, washing his face. But Danton and Henri were nowhere in sight.

"*A bas* Montreal!" Jean muttered,

and spat in disgust. "Here—ah, here is perfec' peace and contentment, no? But yes. Now I surprise Henri and my pets."

He was about to descend the knoll, when the cabin door opened and out came Henri. His stentorian voice, raised in discordant song, echoed through the timber, bringing a smile to his uncle's face.

At that moment, the massive head of a bear parted the underbrush at the edge of the clearing, to be followed by a huge, shaggy body. Stealthily Danton crept up behind the lad. A warning cry died to a horrified whisper on Jean's lips as the bear charged across the clearing on silent pads and with astounding speed.

Henri whirled and side-stepped Danton's rush. As they sparred for an opening, Jean noticed that the bear's head was on a level with Henri's. The two huskies leaped up with raised hackles and bared fangs, eager to join in the fray.

Henri ducked a lightning-fast paw and closed with Danton. They rolled and thrashed around on the ground, the bear roaring, Henri yelling lustily, and the snapping, snarling huskies circling them. Gone was the peace and tranquillity of which Jean had just boasted.

He groaned in apprehension as bear and youth struggled first with one on top, then the other. They regained their feet, sprang apart for a breathing spell, then flew at it again.

Finally, Henri rolled over on his face and lay very still. Jean's heart almost stopped beating when Danton grabbed Henri by the collar of his mackinaw and dragged him across the clearing and into the underbrush.

Oblivious of his fatigue and the heavy pack, Jean plunged down the knoll. "Henri! Henri!" he called frantically. Receiving no answer, he cried in anguish, "Danton, he keel him!"

The huskies saw him then, lowered their hackles and rushed to meet him with joyous yelps. Jean pushed them away, still calling frantically to his nephew, and did not desist until Henri appeared at the edge of the clearing with a broad grin and a welcoming wave of the hand.

"Hi, unc!" he shouted breathlessly. "Back so soon?" Then, noticing the pale face, he exclaimed, "Why, what's wrong? You look sick!"

Just then Jean caught sight of Danton bounding toward him. "Queek!" he panted. "Into the cabin!" He slammed the door and dropped wearily into a chair. "That —that Danton!" he gasped. "I—I thought he'd—he'd keeled you, Henri!"

Henri roared with laughter. "Danton kill me? Why, unc, he's just full of fun. You said so yourself, when you told me how he mauled old Angus MacNabb that time. Remember?"

"That was a long time ago," Jean replied with serious determination. "Danton is now too beeg, too dangerous to stay around here, Henri. Me, Jean Bacette, I am the perfec' fool. I knew this would happen. Danton

is Napoleon all over again. Only worse. I sheep heem to the Seattle zoo."

Henri finally argued his uncle into compromising. Jean was to build a den for Danton, in which to keep the bear for the winter.

Accordingly, the next morning, Henri fixed up some sandwiches and then announced, "I'm going to buck up the last of the spruce logs for our winter's wood, unc, while you fix the den. I'll be back before twilight."

Henri disappeared into the timber, and then Danton lumbered after him like a big, shaggy dog. Jean watched them go with a troubled expression in his eyes. They'd get to cutting up, as sure as shooting, then—

The trapper hurried into the lean-to for his tools and began working feverishly on the den. But the thought of Henri failing to duck under one of those devastating paws was uppermost in Jean's mind, making him ball up the work frequently.

The sky turned gray in the early afternoon, and a chill wind swept down off the mountain slope. Snow started falling an hour later, at first in large, feathery flakes, changing to powdery particles as the wind increased, and piling up amazingly fast.

When twilight came and no Henri, Jean's morbid thoughts plagued him anew. To dispel them, he occupied himself getting supper, then pacing the floor in sweating agony, making frequent trips to the door to listen for sounds of the lad's approach.

Jean's agony of mind increased as the food cooled. Then, suddenly, the two huskies set up a most mournful, dismal howling.

"That ees it—the death cry!" Jean gasped in an awed whisper. "The huskies—they savvy. They smell death!" He rushed from the cabin calling, "Henri! Henri!"

He came to an abrupt stop at the edge of the clearing, mouth wide in mute surprise. Through the swirling snow he saw Danton emerging from the underbrush, dragging something bulky. The bulky thing was Henri, blood-smeared and out cold.

When the bear caught sight of Jean, it released its hold on the youth's coat collar and promptly sat up on its haunches, begging for food. With a cry of horror, Jean picked up the unconscious form and staggered back to the cabin.

He laid Henri on a bunk, and his terrified glance shifted from the blood-smeared face and staring, vacant eyes to the lad's legs. On one were caked blood and spruce needles adhering to a long rip in the pants, just below the knee.

Jean's eyes hardened and a great rage consumed him. The awful thing he had pictured had come to pass. For once, Henri had failed to side-step in time, and those long, powerful claws had slashed him.

Jean crossed the cabin and snatched his rifle from the wall pegs. Standing on the cabin threshold, he slapped the stock to his shoulder. Danton was still out there, still sitting on his haunches, tongue lolling, making his usual begging noises.

The rifle sights lined up with the

bear's broad chest. Jean's unsteady finger found the trigger, began the fatal squeeze.

"Unc!"

Jean's head swiveled. Consciousness was lighting up Henri's eyes.

"One moment, Henri," Jean cried, "while I keel that so-no-good Danton. Then me and Loup and Annette rush you to the doctair in Dawson. Just a—"

Henri tried to sit up, but shock and loss of blood pinned him down. "No, no, unc!" he cried out weakly. "Danton saved my life—dragged me back here. I . . . I axed myself." Then he fainted.

The rifle slipped from Jean's grasp. He grabbed up an armload of blankets and rushed out with them to the sled. Then he carried Henri out, laid him on the sled and covered him over with more blankets.

Back in the cabin, Jean snatched up the dog harness and rushed out, calling to Loup and Annette. He shot a glance at Danton, and came to a skidding stop. The bear was still patiently sitting on his haunches, begging.

Jean whirled and again disappeared into the cabin, to emerge this time with a loaf of sourdough bread. It went sailing through the maelstrom of snow, and Danton caught it expertly in his mouth.

The dogs were harnessed and hitched to the sled in record time, and the journey to the doctor began. Snow plumed from the steel-shod runners, and the miles unrolled swiftly under the huskies' speeding paws.

The chill night air brought consciousness back to Henri and a tinge of color to his wan cheeks. And as the lights of Dawson came into view, Jean asked anxiously, "You feeling all right, yes? Pretty soon we see doctair."

"I'm all right, unc," Henri assured him. "The leg isn't hurting much."

Well, Jean reflected, that was a lot to be thankful for. However, there was still the future, a future filled with worry because of Danton's lightning-fast paws and Henri's weakness for rough-housing.

Now that the bear had actually saved the boy's life, by dragging him home instead of leaving him either to freeze to death or die from shock and loss of blood, Jean realized that it would be useless again to bring up the matter of getting rid of him. So what to do?

Then a consoling thought came to the big trapper as dogs and sled reached the outskirts of Dawson.

"The call of the wild." Jean muttered in his beard. "*Voila!* That is it!" He nodded vigorously. "*C'vrai.* Some day, soon, the call of the wild will settle that big bear's hash."

Henri's voice came weakly from the sled. "What did you say, unc?"

Jean Bacette flicked the clinging snow from his beard, and a broad grin showed on his kindly face.

"Nothing, Henri," he replied soothingly. "Nothing."

THE END

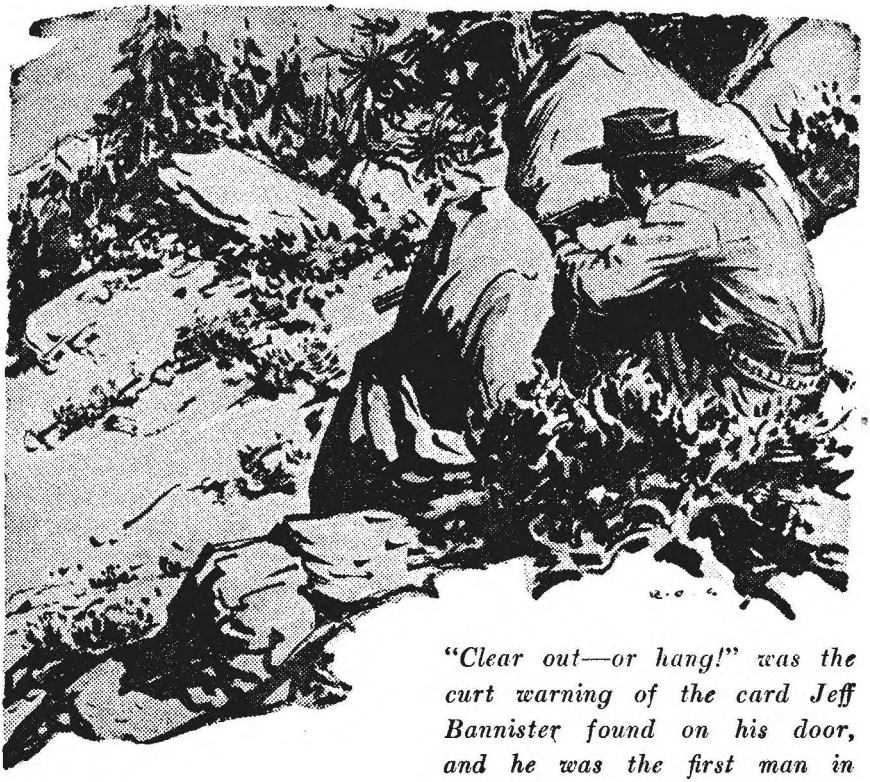
BAIT FOR THE HANG-ROPE CROWD

By Joseph Chadwick

I

BANNISTER found the card, an ace of spades, tacked to his cabin door when he got back to the Pipestem after a down-river trip to Sacramento. He recognized it at once for what it was, a warning that he was marked for death. He had twenty-four hours to settle his affairs; that was, to write his will and arrange for his burial. The vigilantes always gave a victim that much time.

Standing there, Jeff Bannister



"Clear out—or hang!" was the curt warning of the card Jeff Bannister found on his door, and he was the first man in Belle City to meet the ultimatum with a challenge of his own

stared at the grim omen, his insides curdling with fear. He was a big man, over six feet tall, every inch of him packed with muscle. He possessed as much courage as any man along the Mother Lode, but, knowing the odds against him, he considered himself doomed. It was not cowardice to feel fear at such a time. Bannister knew how thorough the Citizens' Committee could be, for he had seen some of its handiwork.

A shout roused him, turned him about. A man was working his way through the maze of rocks and brush that separated Bannister's placer claim from its up-creek neighbor, just around a hairpin bend in the gushing Pipestem. The rusty-bearded, blue-shirted man was the owner of the adjoining claim—Hank Sorensen. He came forward with extended hand and a grin of pleasure for Bannister's return. Often of an evening, they had shared a bottle and talk over a checker board in Bannister's cabin.

"Didn't like seeing you go on your trip," Sorensen said, as they shook hands. "But I'm mighty glad to see you back, Jeff."

"Not so good to get back," muttered Bannister.

"How's that?" Sorensen asked, looking puzzled for a moment. Then he grinned. "Oh, too much sport in the Sacramento honkatonks, eh?"

"Not that, Hank."

"What, then?"

"Take a look at my cabin door."

Sorenson looked, and his matted beard parted as his mouth fell agape. He began to breathe hard, noisily. He seemed unable to speak.

"You see anybody around here?" Bannister asked. He waited, but his neighbor still said nothing. Sorensen's face mirrored his own fear. "You see anybody, Hank?"

Sorensen shook his head. He wiped the palms of his hands on his jeans, as though they were suddenly damp with sweat. His alarm was even greater than Bannister's, though the danger was not his. He began backing away, step by slow step, his gaze still on the warning card.

"I told you," he said finally. "I warned you not to meddle. You went to Sacramento to ask the law to come here and smash the vigilantes. The Committee knew it. Now they'll get you!"

"You didn't see anybody—the man who left that card?"

"I can't see your cabin from my claim, Jeff!"

Bannister sighed. He knew suddenly that even if Sorensen had seen the man, he wouldn't talk. Hank Sorensen was afraid—for himself. He kept on backing away, shrinking from Bannister as from the plague. Suddenly he turned and bolted, crashing through the rocks and head-high chaparral toward the safety of his own claim. Bannister swore, yet he did not blame Hank Sorensen. When the vigilantes marked a man, his friends were suspect too.

Bannister was a methodical man, and he carefully removed the warning card from his door and placed it in his shirt pocket. He took out a key, unlocked the padlock that secured the door and carried his battered valise inside. The sun was about down and shadows were gathering in the one-room cabin. Bannister struck a match and lighted the lantern on the handmade table. He opened the valise and took out his Colt revolver which lay atop his spare clothes and the few purchases he had made down river. He checked the gun's loads, then thrust the weapon inside his waistband.

He looked about, and the cabin was as he had left it—tidy, neat as a pin. Bannister took pride in the place, for he had cut the logs up on the Sierra slopes and raised the walls with his own two hands. He unpacked his bag, put everything away in the cupboards he had built. He was hungry and, still methodical despite his leaden feeling of fear, he started a fire to cook his supper. After eating, he smoked his pipe.

Later he stepped outside, into the still darkness, to knock out the pipe's dottle. Thoughtfully he looked

up creek. Usually he could see the glow of Sorensen's campfire if nothing else. Sorensen lived in a tent and cooked in the open. Bannister saw no glow tonight, and knew that his red-bearded neighbor had gone to town—to likker up. Down creek, however, there was a glow. Bannister turned that way.

Old Will Bone worked the down creek claim. He was one of the original gold rushers, having come around the Horn in '49, and, like Sorensen, he lived under canvas. Will Bone wanted no solid home; he clung to the hope of finding a bonanza, and wanted to be able to pull out for the newest gold strike. The twenty dollars' worth of dust to be panned out of the Pipestem didn't satisfy him. He was considered a miserly old codger, and now, eating his supper out of the skillet, he eyed Bannister warily. He had a big poke cached somewhere. Bannister hunkered down by the fire, without invitation, and refilled his pipe.

"Anybody out here looking for me while I was away?"

"Can't say," Bone answered in a grumbling tone. "Men going by here every day."

"See anybody stop at my claim?"

"Well, that claim broker friend of yours, Mark Holden, came by this afternoon," the old boomer said, thinking back. "Stopped here and offered to buy me out—at a thief's price. Stopped at your claim, looked over your rocker, then went on up creek. Didn't come back down, yet."

"Well, thanks," Bannister said.

He started back to his claim, thinking, *Mark Holden? No; he's my friend. . . .* Then, nearing his cabin, he stopped dead and lay hand to gun butt. A man was leaning against the front of the cabin, sagging there with his hands pressed hard against his right side. His face was gray, stiff with pain. It was a boyish face. Bannister recognized him as Dick Geary, a youngster who owned a claim—one of the Pipestem's richest—a mile farther up creek. Geary took so much dust from his pan that he could afford to spend most of his time carousing in the deadfalls of rowdy Belle City.

"Bannister?" the youth gasped.

Bannister relaxed, strode forward. "What ails you, friend?"

"I've got a slug in me," Dick Geary said hollowly. "Bannister, the vigilantes are after me!"

Bannister caught the injured man as he began to slump down, and dragged him into the cabin. Getting him onto the bunk, Bannister ripped open his shirt and examined the wound. It was an ugly flesh wound through the right side. Geary had lost a lot of blood and suffered shock, but Bannister was sure no ribs were smashed or vital organs ruptured. He poured some brandy into the youth, bringing him around, then cleansed the wound with carbolic solution and applied a bandage. Another dose of brandy made Geary relax. He began to talk, in a hollow tone.

"I've been hiding out in the brush since night before last," he said. "Tonight I came out, figuring on

coming here. I ran into some of the lynch rope crowd. They did some shooting and hit me, but I gave them the slip."

"Why'd you come here?" asked Bannister.

"Heard in town that you're against those vigilantes."

Bannister frowned. "What have you been up to?"

Geary tried to sit up, but couldn't make it. "I didn't do anything wrong, didn't break any law," he said, and now hysteria made his voice shrill. "I got in a fight with a hard-case named Ty Nixon. It was over a dance hall girl I've been seeing. Nixon wasn't as tough as he figured. I knocked him down a couple of times, then he got crazy mad and pulled his gun. I grabbed out my gun when he missed the first shot —and I killed him."

"If you're telling it straight," said Bannister. "it was self-defense—not murder. I knew Ty Nixon. He was a no-good who was chased out of Frisco's Barbary Coast for being too ornery. Why should the vigilantes have jumped you for killing him in self-defense?"

"I don't know," young Geary muttered. "But I'm doing some guessing. Somebody in that Citizens' Committee saw his chance to grab my claim. It's happened before, to other men with good claims. You know that. Bannister. You've been talking against it!" He clutched at Bannister's arm. "You'll help me? You'll get me away from them?"

Bannister's frown deepened. It was true that other men like Dick Geary had found themselves marked as vigilante victims. Some had fled, saved themselves. Some had stood their ground, making a fight of it—and been shot. A few had been hanged. And the crimes of which they had been accused were either trivial or, as in Geary's case, unjust.

Bannister was opposed to any such organization. He had protested the Belle City Citizens' Committee because it was a secret one, its members hiding their identity behind masks. But Bannister's opposition to any vigilante movement was based upon two factors.

First, accused men were given no real trial and so, if not guilty, were unable to establish their innocence. Second, even if organized by decent men eager to establish law and order, such an organization was soon infiltrated by men of another sort—men eager to use the movement to pay off personal grudges and, worse still, to satisfy their greed. That had happened in Belle City and along the Pipestem in three short months. The vigilante movement was not an instrument for good, but for evil. And decent men were the victims.

He himself was caught in the same trap that was closing in on this frightened youth, and he did not know how to save himself. But he had made his protesting talk in Belle City, and now he had to act as well as talk. He could not turn down Dick Geary's plea for help.

"I'll do what I can for you," he said, then winced as the youth's fingers closed like a vise on his forearm.

"They're coming!"

Bannister too heard a drumming of hoofs.

Geary's alarm was communicated to Bannister, and he blew out the lantern's flame. He drew his gun and lifted a corner of the flour sack over the window. He drew a relieved breath.

"Take it easy," he said. "There's only one rider, and I think it's Mark Holden."

A voice hailed, "Hello, the cabin!"

It was Mark Holden's deep voice. Bannister knew it well.

He went to the door. Dick Geary's whisper, "Maybe he's one of them," made him hesitate with a hand on the door bar. Doubt assailed him, but he reasoned that he knew Mark Holden as well as one man could know another.

Holden bought and sold claims, and did well at it. He maintained an office in town, and, along with his claim trading, he banked dust in his safe for the Pipestem miners at a small charge. Mark Holden was one of those men who could prosper without soiling his hands, but Bannister could find no fault with that. He recalled many friendly arguments the two of them had had, for Holden believed in vigilante law as much as Bannister opposed it. But never had Bannister had any reason to believe Mark Holden was a member of the Citizens' Committee.

He said, "No," answering Dick Geary, as well as his own doubt, then opened the door. Holden was just dismounting.

"Was hoping you were back, Jeff."

"Got in a couple hours ago," Bannister told him, as they shook hands. "Stopped at your office when I came through town, but you were away. Out trying to dicker for Pipestem claims?"

"Without any luck," Holden answered. He was a bulky man in his middle thirties, a little too heavy about the body. There was a suggestion of softness about him, showing that he avoided manual labor. He was a handsome sort, ruddy-faced, and he dressed in the style of a big-town man. His grin was open, likable. "The only way you Pipestem boomers will sell out is to be baited by a new strike elsewhere."

"You never made me an offer, Mark."

"I know you wouldn't sell," Holden said, chuckling. "Look, Jeff, are you forgetting your hospitality? Usually you invite me in for a drink."

"Maybe tonight you wouldn't want to come in."

"How's that, Jeff?"

"When I got back today, there was an ace of spades tacked to my door," Bannister told him. He saw the start Holden gave and his quick frown. "That's the way of it, Mark. I've talked too much against the vigilantes. The reason for my trip to Sacramento is known. Any man friendly toward me is apt to find himself in trouble."

II

There was a lengthy silence, and Bannister watched for a change in Holden's expression or manner. But

the claim broker had more character than Hank Sorensen, who had been so quick to shy away. Holden continued to frown, but he showed no fear. And he did not remind Bannister that he too had advised against the Sacramento trip.

"Did you have any luck down river?" Holden asked. "Did you get any promise of help from the authorities?"

Bannister shook his head. "The law is a weak thing in this country," he said. "Sacramento and San Francisco are both having trouble establishing law and order."

"Well, it's too late for you to back down," Holden told him. "Once a man's made enemies, they won't let him quit the fight. But I'll side you, Jeff, short of bucking the Citizens' Committee. If you're ready to clear out, I'll help you make a run for it."

"I haven't made up my mind to run."

"What, then?" Holden asked, in surprise. "What else is there?"

"At the start the Committee was made up of well-meaning men," Bannister said. "They lost control when they took in new members. Some of the new members were blacklegs. I'm going to talk with the men who started this thing and let it get out of hand. Maybe I can make them clean house."

"You know them, Jeff?"

"It won't be hard to find one or two of them, if I try hard enough. Some of them must be pretty scared by now."

"Well, I wish you luck," Holden said. "But you haven't much time."

"I'll make my own time," Bannister told him grimly. "They haven't caught me yet." He forced a grin. "Still want that drink, Mark?"

Holden said he did, and they went inside. Bannister relighted the lantern, and the claim broker stared at the youth on the bunk. Dick Geary stared back, eyes wide with fear. It was clear that he didn't trust Mark Holden—or any man except Jeff Bannister.

"Dick here is one reason why I'm not running," Bannister said, and took brandy bottle and tin cups from the cupboard. He moved to the table, poured the drinks, passed them out. "Here's a toast," he said, holding his cup up. "To the smashing of the Citizens' Committee."

They drank, then were silent. Glumly silent.

Holden brought out a cheroot and lighted it. "You two can't stay here," he said finally. "Where are you going?"

Bannister didn't know. "We'll have to think of something."

Holden puffed on his cheroot, seemed in deep thought. Then: "I own a mine back at Steeple Rock. I bought it cheap after it ran into low-grade ore, figuring that some day I'd be able to unload it on somebody interested in low-grade. It's in a lonely spot, and nobody'll think of looking for you there, Jeff. You can have my horse to move Geary up there. Tomorrow night I'll come up with another horse and provisions. Then you can stay holed up or leave these parts, whichever you decide. You know the way, Jeff?"

Bannister nodded in answer.

They were silent again, then Holden rose and said that he would start for town. He had a three-mile walk. Bannister went outside with him.

"I'm obliged to you, Mark," he said.

Holden shrugged. "It's little enough to do for a friend," he answered. "But watch your step, bucko. The vigilantes hate your guts, and they're afraid of you. I'm surprised that they gave you a warning, but that's something the Committee started at the beginning—give a criminal twenty-four hours' time to clear out or hang. In your case, Jeff, they might have figured that you'd be as much of a threat to them away from Pipestem as here." He paused, puffed at his cheroot. Then he asked, "That's on your mind, isn't it? To fight them from the outside?"

"I'm going to keep on fighting them, Mark."

"Well, if your mind is made up, there's no use my trying to give you advice," Holden told him. He held out his hand. "Luck."

He strode away and the darkness swallowed him.

Bannister led the horse by its bridle reins. He had Dick Geary in the saddle, a sack of provisions tied to the pommel, and a blanket roll at the cantle. There was a Henry rifle in the saddle boot. They headed east into the hills, and, climbing, Bannister saw the lights of Belle City to the south. He kept to the chaparral thickets for several miles, knowing that it would be difficult for anyone to follow a trail through such brush. He reached timber and kept to it for another mile. At midnight he saw the jutting granite spire called Steeple Rock loom high in the darkness. Geary began to speak in a tortured voice, saying he couldn't hold on much longer. "I'm playing out, Bannister!"

"Stick on," Bannister told him. "We're almost to the mine."

He led the horse down a gravel slope, then along a narrow gulch. The ramshackle buildings of the abandoned mine loomed before them, and Bannister told Geary, "This is it."

They halted by a shallow, fast-flowing stream, and Geary slumped to the ground as soon as Bannister helped him dismount. Bannister began to off-saddle. He gave his companion two of the blankets.

"You figure we're safe here?" Geary asked.

"Safe enough. We'll move on tomorrow night if you're still jumpy."

"I don't trust that Mark Holden."

"He's siding us, Dick."

"He's a sharper. He never does anything unless there's a profit to be made," muttered Geary. "I'll bet you any amount of dust that he'll try to talk me into selling him my claim dirt cheap when he shows up tomorrow night. *If* he shows up."

"Dealing in claims is his business," Bannister said.

"I know that! He tried to make a deal with me, often enough!" Geary's voice turned bitter. "All he's got to do now is wait, and he can take over my claim without paying. Unless

somebody beats him to it!" He sat up, cursed in a sullen tone. "You remember Milt Foster?" he asked suddenly.

Bannister nodded. He remembered Foster, all right—a man who had worked a claim up the Pipestem near Geary's spot. Foster had been an easy-going sort who, like Dick Geary, had spent more time in Belle City than at his rocker. He'd gotten into a fight with a gambler and killed him. So the Citizens' Committee had claimed, though there had been no witnesses; the gambler had been shot from ambush two nights after the fight.

Milt Foster had been seized at his claim and hanged. The tragic part of it had been that Foster's young wife was on her way out from Baltimore to join him. She arrived a week after her husband's death. She was still in Belle City, living in the house Foster had had built for her, but nobody knew why she remained in Belle. A woman like Helen Foster didn't belong in a tough mining camp.

Bannister asked what about Milt Foster and Geary said heatedly, "When a man dies, his claim is open to the next hombre. Ty Nixon, that hard-case I killed, filed on Foster's claim soon as word came that Foster was hanged. You know what happened then?"

"What happened?" asked Bannister. With a thousand men working along the Pipestem, he couldn't keep track of all the claims that changed hands. "Nixon sold it?"

"He sold it, all right," Geary answered. "To your friend, Mark Holden!"

Bannister took out pipe and tobacco pouch, methodically began to load up. He didn't know how to answer Dick Geary, so he kept silent. It did look as though Holden and Nixon had worked in cahoots on the Foster deal, but that merely proved that Mark Holden was a shrewd business man, not a dishonest one. Bannister still wasn't convinced that Geary was right in believing that Holden wasn't to be trusted where they were concerned.

Bannister was up and about at dawn, his customary time of rising. He built a fire and cooked breakfast but did not call Geary. He let the youth sleep, thinking that would do him more good than a meal. Geary slept away most of the day, though at midday he did wake long enough to drink some water and eat a little food. He said, "I'm all right," in reply to a question from Bannister. But there was a feverish look about him that worried Bannister.

By sundown Geary was a sick man. He was afire with fever, due to his wound which had festered. Bannister knew that he had to get the youth to a doctor. He decided to wait until Holden came with the other horse, then try to get Geary over the hills to Venton.

With darkness Bannister left the injured man asleep and, carrying his Henry rifle, climbed the sloping gulch wall. He was impatient for Holden's arrival.

The gulch curved south for half a

mile, ending at a bottle-neck pass of hardly more than wagon width. A brush-grown road ran from the old mine, through the pass, and on to Belle City. There was moonlight enough to show Bannister the road as far as the pass, and after perhaps half an hour he sighted a rider coming along it.

He thought it was Holden, but then another rider appeared. And another and another, until there were six. Bannister muttered an oath.

He had been betrayed. Mark Holden had crossed him up. These men were vigilantes, there was no doubt of that. Bannister was equally sure that Holden had sent them, for they were coming direct from Belle City instead of following their quarry's dim trail over the hills from the Pipestem. Mark Holden, then, was one of the blackleg members of the 'Citizens' Committee. All the while he had pretended eagerness to help two men in trouble, he had been planning to betray them. He had maneuvered them to the old mine with the bait of another horse and provisions, so that he would know where to send his night riders. *He wants Geary dead for his claim,* Bannister thought bitterly. *He wants me dead because he's afraid I'll queer his crooked game. Damn him!*

Bannister knew that he would be trapped if he descended the slope and returned to his camp. He wouldn't be able to get away unless he abandoned Dick Geary. So he worked his way south along the gulch wall, to an outcropping of jagged rocks that afforded cover. He crouched among

the rocks, levered a cartridge into the rifle's firing chamber. The Henry fired half-ounce slugs, and it had fifteen cartridges in its under-barrel tube. Bannister could cover the gulch floor from wall to wall.

He let the six riders come on until they were directly below him.

They were masked, as Bannister had expected them to be—faceless men on a mission of murder they would call vigilante law. Bannister shoved the two-foot barrel of the Henry through a notch in the rocks—and fired the first shot.

Confusion broke out below. Horses reared and plunged. Men yelled, cursed. One vigilante shouted, "Up there in those rocks!" and opened fire with his six-gun. Bannister shot him through the chest.

The other five got their guns out, wheeled about and came charging at the slope. Their slugs struck among the rocks, making sharp splintering sounds. Bannister's Henry blazed away, but it was five against one—and it looked as though their charge would carry them up to his barricade. There would be no retreat for him then.

III

It was Jeff Bannister's own life he was fighting for now, not Dick Geary's. It was no longer a matter

of principles, of opposition to a vicious movement. Bannister knew how slim his chances were, but he downed panic and was as steady as a man shooting at a target. He hit a horse, and the animal went tumbling back down the slope with its rider caught under its thrashing body.

Bannister shifted his sights and a rider screamed through his neck scarf mask, hit somewhere but not dropped. That rider whirled his horse about in flight and collided with another rider. There was a tangle of horses and men, and the gravelly slope was treacherous footing. A horse fell, somersaulting.

Suddenly the charge wilted and Bannister found himself shooting at hunched-up backs. He kept on firing, emptying another saddle. Only two mounted men and one afoot reached the brush-covered gulch floor. The dismounted man leaped after a riderless horse, but it bolted back through the gulch. The man jerked about, fired a wild shot upward. Bannister fired twice, missing him with the first shot but downing him with the second. He swung his rifle and fired after the two fleeing riders. But they were loping toward the pass and escape. Bannister couldn't reach them.

The sudden quiet was jarring, and Bannister's nerves wouldn't unknot. He sagged against the rocks, his grip still tight on the Henry. He was alive, but that was all. And he was not safe. They would be after him again, in greater numbers and more determined. He had to get away from this place, but where he could go—and take Dick Geary—he didn't know. Not over to Venton, even if Geary could make such a long ride, for they would be found there. Where, then? Bannister asked himself. The answer came, startling him: *Belle City*.

It was the one place the vigilantes would not search. Not even Mark Holden, for all his shrewdness, would guess that two hunted men would hole up in the midst of their enemies. But where in Belle City, Bannister didn't know. He didn't know whom to trust. Again he had a flash of intuition: Milt Foster's widow!

It might work, if he and Geary could get in under cover of dark.

Bannister left the rocks and started down the slope. He came upon the first dead man, bent over him, jerked away the neck-scarf mask. He shook his head, went on, examined each of the other three men he had killed. Perhaps he had been hoping to find Mark Holden lying there, but he did not. Nor were any of the four men known as respectable Belle City citizens. They were not the men who had started the vigilante movement three months ago in misguided but good faith. They were hard-cases, a parasite breed such as every gold camp spawned, men who came for easy pickings—not to labor or pan for gold. Without a doubt they had been men who hired out their guns—to Mark Holden—and were vigilantes only for pay.

Bannister went on to the camp. Geary was in a feverish sleep from which he could not be roused. Bannister knew that he would have to tie the youth on a horse to make the get-

away. He caught up the mount Holden had given him, saddled it, then rode out to catch up the animal that had bolted back through the gulch during the fight.

Bannister stretched his luck by keeping to the road until he reached Hanlon's Forks, where, four miles south of the mine, two other wagon trails met the Belle City road. There he took to the brush and the timber, to avoid Mike Hanlon's roadhouse, and continued on toward Belle. It was more difficult going, but Bannister felt safer. He knew that by now the two men who had escaped him had reported to Mark Holden; and he was almost certain that more vigilante gunmen would be riding north to the old mine.

Bannister kept the horses moving, and worried about Dick Geary. An occasional groan, curse or scream escaped the unconscious man tied across the saddle of the led horse. Geary's fever had made him delirious. Bannister cursed his own helplessness. He did not know what to do for the suffering youth. Only a doctor could help. There was one in Belle, a young medico recently arrived from the East. But the town was still a long ride.

At midnight Bannister saw the lights of the town. An hour later, he entered the hodge-podge of shacks, tents and plank buildings that made Belle one of the wildest gold camps in the Sierras. He was careful to approach from an off side, then found his way along the rear of a side street of fairly decent houses, one of which Milt Foster had built. Bannister found it dark, but that was something he had expected. A woman who lived alone would be long abed. He swung the horses in close, dismounted and knocked softly on the kitchen door.

There was a lengthy wait, then the door's opening was as guarded as Bannister's knock. A woman's voice said, through the narrow opening, "What is it?"

"Mrs. Foster, I'm Jeff Bannister. Maybe you remember our meeting in Bailey & Dunn's store several weeks ago."

"Yes. You're the man who is opposed to the Citizens' Committee."

"That's right," Bannister said. "And now I'm a marked man. Worse still, I have a fellow with me who was shot by them. I didn't know where to take him until I thought of you. I know that you've suffered because of that vigilante crowd, and it seemed—"

"That I would help you?"

"I was hoping you'd take my friend in," he told her. "He's just a kid. His name is Dick Geary, and he and your husband owned adjoining claims. He needs a doctor, bad. It's asking a lot, I know, but . . . well, I'm kind of desperate."

The door swung wide.

Helen Foster was a tall woman in her late twenties, and darkly attractive. She was in slippers, nightdress and wrapper, but she did not shrink from appearing so, even before a man who was all but a stranger, in a time of emergency. And even before she spoke, Bannister knew that he had appealed to the right person.

"Please bring him in," Helen Foster said.

It turned out to be even easier than Bannister had hoped. He carried Geary into the house and, on Mrs. Foster's urging, lay him upon her own bed. She drew a coat about her shoulders and hurried out for Dr. Tim MacGregor, whose office was but a few houses away. She told Bannister that the doctor could be trusted not to talk, and when the man arrived, bustling in with his black bag, Bannister knew that she was right. MacGregor was an honest-faced young man who asked no questions. He went at once to the bedside and began examining Geary.

Bannister knew that the two horses must not be found near the house—or in town, for that matter—and he told Mrs. Foster that he would take them back into the hills and turn them loose. She nodded gravely and said, "Come back here as soon as you can."

Bannister smiled wryly. "You have enough on your hands without my being here."

"I'd like to talk with you," the woman said. "You and I are opposing the same evil, and perhaps together we could accomplish something."

"You?"

"I've stayed on in Belle City," Helen Foster said determinedly, "in the hope of finding a way to avenge my husband's murder. I've gotten to know many people here in Belle City, and I've learned many things—ugly things. But so far nobody will help me. The decent people are afraid, Mr. Bannister—scared. But you . . . well, you are different."

Bannister suddenly realized that here was no ordinary woman. Helen Foster still mourned her husband, but she was not letting grief overwhelm her. She had courage that would shame many men who, in their weakness, submitted to a vigilante law that had become a reign of terror. Bannister saw that she could be an ally in more ways than one.

"I'll be back, maybe before dawn," he told her. "If not then, tomorrow night as soon as it's dark."

Opening the kitchen door, he slipped out. He mounted one horse, led the other by its reins, and left Belle City by the way he had arrived.

Bannister got back just before dawn, and Mrs. Foster, now wearing a blue gingham dress, opened to his knock and drew him into the kitchen.

"Everything is all right," she told him, smiling. "Dr. MacGregor says Dick will recover. He'll come back tomorrow night. The boy is resting quietly now."

"Then you and I will have our talk," Bannister said.

"After I make some coffee," Helen told him.

Standing the Henry rifle in a corner, he took a chair that stood against the wall and watched Helen's busy movements about the kitchen. She put the coffeepot on the stove and fixed some food for him. Bannister felt like an alien in this house another man had built for a courageous woman, but Helen glanced at him

occasionally and smiled, and gradually he got over his feeling of awkwardness. They sat at the table and ate while outside Belle City came noisily awake.

When he had finished eating, Bannister took out his pipe. "Do you mind?" he asked. And Helen replied, "No. It will be good to smell tobasco in this house."

Loneliness was in her words, but a moment later she was earnestly discussing the thing that had brought Bannister there.

"As I said, I've heard how you opposed the Citizens' Committee from the start," she told him. "I know now that you and I should have talked before this. You see, Jeff"—it seemed natural that she should call him that, now that they were allies—"a woman is handicapped when she involves herself in a man's game."

"But you have found out something?"

"Yes, I think so," she replied. "I made it a point to become acquainted with the few women in Belle. I've even struck up an acquaintance with some of the honkatonk girls. But my main source of information was the wives of the town's leading citizens." She gave Bannister a wry smile. "Married men have few secrets," she went on. "Their wives learn about their activities. And women will talk—to other women. I've learned, Jeff, that the men who organized the Committee have withdrawn from it out of fear."

Bannister nodded. "I suspected that," he said.

"The Committee did good work, at first," Helen went on. "It drove some toughs from town, smashed a wild bunch that was robbing miners and holding up stages, and protected men from claim jumpers. Then suddenly decent men—like my husband—became the victims. Milt may have gotten into a fight with a gambler. I can believe that. But he wasn't the sort to kill a man—even one he'd fought with—from ambush. Yet he was blamed for that murder, and hunted down by the vigilantes. Not the original vigilantes, Jeff, but by the men who had gotten control of the Committee!"

"And Milt Foster was just one of a dozen such victims," Bannister said. "I guessed that the respectable men had lost control of the Committee, and I've been hoping to learn their identity so that I could get them to smash the men who now call themselves vigilantes. But it was a secret organization from the start, and I haven't been able to learn the name of a single Committee member until tonight."

"And the member you've unmasked?"

"He's the one who turned the Committee into a lawless band."

Helen's eyes widened. "Then there's hope," she said. "With what you've found out . . ."

"I'll need help," Bannister told her. "Do you know the names of the men who organized the Committee?"

"Some of them," Helen said. She frowned slightly. "Of course, it's guess work on my part. None of the women I talked with would admit that her husband was involved. But

fear and worry are easily recognized."

"If you could only be sure of one."

"Well, there's Clayton Dunn. When I talked with Mrs. Dunn, she became very upset about the Citizens' Committee. She said she wished that her husband could leave Belle City."

"Clayt Dunn, of Bailey & Dunn's store," Bannister said, thinking aloud. "So he's one. I should have known." He looked squarely at Helen. "I've got to talk with him," he told her.

"But how? It would be dangerous for you to go to his store."

"Tonight. After dark," Bannister said. "It'll be safe then. If you could get word to him so he'd wait for me . . ." His tone was urgent. "Through his wife, maybe?"

Helen nodded. "I'll call on Martha Dunn this afternoon."

IV

It was nine o'clock that night when Bannister furtively worked his way through dark alleyways to the big warehouse that stood at the rear of Bailey & Dunn's store. He carried his reloaded Henry rifle with him, and had his Colt revolver handy in his waistband. If he were sighted by any of the vigilante gunmen, he meant to put up the best possible fight. . . .

Helen Foster had not only arranged a meeting with Clayton Dunn for Bannister, but had warned him that the whole town now knew that he had received a warning card. And that, as the story was being told in Belle, he had ambushed a group of vigilantes at Steeple Rock. Helen had learned from Martha Dunn that a word-of-mouth offer had been made by the Citizens' Committee: a thousand dollars' reward for Jeff Bannister and Dick Geary, dead or alive.

But luck was with Bannister. He reached the dark building and knocked on its door, a door broad enough to open and admit freight wagons. A voice within asked, "Who is it?"

"Bannister. That you, Clayt?"

The door swung partly open, and Bannister entered.

"Stand still," Clayt Dunn told him. "We'll have a light soon as I close the door."

A moment later he struck a match and lighted a lantern. Bannister was surprised to find four other men waiting in the stock-filled warehouse. One was Dan Bailey, Dunn's partner. There was Luke Trevor, a carpenter; Jim Shannon, who owned a freighting firm, and Walt Tolliver, owner of the hotel. It was a grave-looking group. A couple of the men spoke greetings, but the rest merely nodded.

"I didn't expect more than you, Clayt," Bannister said.

Clayt Dunn spoke flatly. "This thing concerns every man here. And some others who were afraid to show up."

"Afraid?"

"That's the word," Dunn muttered, and took something from his coat pocket. It was a playing card—the ace of spades. "Somebody knocked on my door at supper time," he explained. "My wife went to answer,

but all she found was this thing tacked to the door. Every man here got one, Bannister, about the same time."

"Go on," Bannister said.

Dunn was a big man, shrewd and capable-looking, and the fear he showed did not become him. He said, "Twelve of us started the Citizens' Committee, three months ago, figuring we could make Belle City a decent place to live and do business in. We five were in on it. The other seven didn't show up tonight, no doubt because they got warning cards. I went around this afternoon and said we'd have a meeting tonight at nine, and I told them why. It got us this, Bannister!"

He shoved the card at Bannister's face. There were angry mutterings from the other four men.

Bannister knew how they felt. They had reason to blame him, for if he hadn't revived their part of the vigilante mess, they would have let well enough alone and remained reasonably safe. But their fear annoyed him. He hated any show of cowardice.

"Blame yourselves, not me," he told them. "You started the Committee and you let it get out of control. You can't back out now. Those warning cards give you no choice but to clear out of Belle in a hurry or stay and take the consequences. I'm giving you an out, if you've got guts enough to back me up."

"What kind of an out?" the pudgy hotelman, Tolliver, demanded.

"There were twelve of you in the beginning," Bannister said. "Things went wrong, so the honest men backed out. But the Committee kept on operating. Two things happened. Either the lawless element is acting as night riders and posing as vigilantes, or one of the twelve Committee members turned crooked. I've proof that one of you turned crooked."

Nobody spoke. They gazed sullenly at Bannister.

He went on, "Clayt, you told all the others to come to the meeting. One of those you told is the blackleg, and it was he who sent out the warning cards—to scare the rest of you. That man betrayed the Committee, and he's the one we've got to smash."

"Name him!" Dunn demanded, almost shouting.

"Was Mark Holden one of you twelve?"

There was a stunned silence, then Dunn said, "He was. Dammit, you mean to say that Mark Holden would stoop to making war on honest men?"

"It's hard to believe, sure," Bannister said. "But I've got proof enough to convince me." He told them how Holden had urged him to take the wounded Dick Geary to the old mine at Steeple Rock, and how the vigilante gunmen had come there. "Holden is an ambitious man," he went on. "A greedy man. He benefited when Milt Foster was hanged, by getting hold of Foster's Pipestem claim. He's been after Dick Geary's rich claim. I figure that if we looked farther, we'd find that some more

vigilante victims helped satisfy Holden's greed."

Clayt Dunn said warily, "If you're so sure of him, why don't you go after him—alone? He's only one man. Why drag us into it?"

"He knows I'm on to him," explained Bannister. "He won't move a step without being guarded by some of his hired toughs. I'm asking you to keep them off my back and I'll settle with him."

The five didn't move, but Bannister could feel them shy away.

Dan Bailey, Dunn's lanky partner, hedged. "We don't know how many men Holden has siding him. Worse still, we don't know who they are."

"Count me out," the bearded freighter, Shannon, growled. "I quit the Committee more than a month ago, for good. I'm clearing out of Belle—tonight." He glanced about. "Anybody feel as I do?"

"I've a chance to sell out my hotel," Walt Tolliver muttered. And Trevor, the carpenter, added, "All I have to do is pack my tool box. My missus is down at Sacramento on a visit, and she'd rather live there."

Bannister couldn't help showing his contempt. "Run, then—while you're still able." He turned to Dunn and Bailey. "That leaves you two," he told them. "All you own is here in Belle. Maybe you can sell out in twenty-four hours, but I doubt it. And you sure can't pack up a store and a warehouse, and take them along with you. Are you willing to side me?"

Bailey frowned, but Clayt Dunn said, "Looks as though we'll have to."

There was a moment's silence, then Shannon, Trevor and Tolliver edged toward the door. Shannon shoved it open fairly wide. The three stepped out—and guns hidden in the darkness blasted.

Shannon bent double, staggered, collapsed. Trevor reeled back, shot through the left shoulder, and Tolliver's face, the cheek creased by a bullet, spurted blood. Bannister cursed, leaped forward. He blamed himself for not realizing in time that Holden, knowing of the meeting, would certainly make some such desperate play to save himself and his vicious organization.

At the door Bannister caught at Shannon, who was still alive, and dragged him back. The guns outside were still banging away, and Bannister flinched from the close shriek of slugs.

Clayt Dunn got the door closed, but bullets ripped through its planks. As the others retreated among the piles of merchandise, Bannister prowled about in search of a way to fight back. But the few windows were blocked by piles of sacks, cases or barrels. There was a door at the rear, and Dunn and Bailey, who carried the limp Shannon, were heading for it. Trevor and Tolliver crowded after them.

"Be careful," Bannister warned. "They'll have that door covered too!"

Dunn swore. "Then we're done for, sure," he muttered.

Bannister had detected a square patch of pale night in the dark ceiling—a skylight—and he scrambled up

over a high pile of sacked flour. It brought him within four feet of the skylight. He used the Henry's stock to shatter glass panes and window frame.

"Clayt, I'll cover you from the roof," he called down. "When I start shooting, you and the others make a dash for it."

He shoved the rifle out onto the roof, then pulled himself up. The shooting had let up at the front of the building, and Bannister heard a babel of voices. The town was aroused, and a curious throng was gathering. A man—a vigilante gunman—yelled, "We've got a murderer trapped in there! Yeah, that ornery son, Bannister!"

Bannister grinned wryly as he crawled toward the rear. There were no buildings beyond the warehouse at the back, and the sparse brush did not conceal the gunmen waiting there. Bannister saw four masked men watching the warehouse's rear door. They were bunched up, an easy target. Bannister hugged the Henry to his shoulder.

The rifle's dull roar scattered them, and drew a ragged answering fire. Bannister's second shot dropped one of the shadowy figures. His third hit nothing but drew a frightened yell from another vigilante. The trapped men made a break, and the three remaining vigilantes, seeing the odds, turned and fled. Bannister fired twice more after them, then, seeing that his party was well away, dropped his rifle to the ground. He eased himself over the roof edge, hung at arm's length for a moment, then dropped. He landed hard but did not lose his balance. Snatching up the rifle, he turned from the warehouse and ran.

V

Bannister hid in a wagonyard, crouching in a dark corner of it, amid a litter of broken gear, and listened to the hue and cry. Sometimes the search came near and once some mounted men rode through the wagonyard, but mostly it was a confusion of sound in the distance. Holden's men were evidently in the center of town, and the wagonyard was at its edge.

Bannister judged that at least a dozen masked men, those self-styled vigilantes, were manhunting him. They were followed by a great swarm of townsmen who, with no real grudge against him, were out for the excitement. Bannister thought of them with bitterness, for he felt that they—at least the decent men among them—should be on his side. They should be setting upon those gunmen, unmasking them. But a dozen armed and mounted men could cow a whole town. Mark Holden was shrewd enough to know that.

Holden would have no part in the search, Bannister knew. The claim broker would be sitting in some saloon, puffing on a cheroot and drinking the best liquor money could buy in Belle. He would be keyed up, but not too alarmed. He was well aware that he had thrown a scare into the men who had organized the Citizens' Committee. He knew that Bannister, a man alone, could not hide

forever. Holden was counting on his bounty offer to keep his hired toughs searching until the quarry was hunted down.

He had to go after Holden, Bannister told himself. That was his only hope of saving himself.

He waited until long after midnight, then came from hiding. The excitement had died down, but when Bannister reached the main street, by way of a dark alleyway, he saw the masked riders patrolling it. Two of them sat their mounts in front of the two-storied plank building that housed Mark Holden's office, on the first floor, and his living quarters. The two upper windows were lighted. Bannister backed away. There was no getting at the man. Holden had outwitted him again.

In the gray dawn a string of empty freight wagons, bound for Sacramento, rumbled away from the Sierra Freighting Company's wagon yard. They rattled emptily along Belle City's rutted main street, and the masked horsemen, drowsy from an all-night vigil, gave them no more than vacant glances. There were five rigs in the string, and when the third passed Mark Holden's building, in the center of town, a man dropped over its tailgate and bolted up the steps at the side of the place. He carried a Henry rifle and he moved fast, in the way of a desperate man.

He was unseen in the half light, for the two men who had been guarding Holden's building had stepped across the street, to a restaurant just opening, for coffee. At the landing above, Bannister tried the door. It was locked.

He knocked.

Holden's voice came guardedly, "Who is it?"

Bannister made his voice sound husky and rasping. "Come out. We've got him!"

He heard footsteps, heard the key turn in the lock. He flung his weight against the door. It swung wide, and the force of it reeled Mark Holden back into the room. Bannister was inside then, closing the door and locking it.

He faced about in time to see Holden grab a gun from beneath the pillow on the bed. Holden was dressed except for boots, coat and hat. He had been waiting for word of Bannister's death.

Bannister could have killed him in that first moment, but instead he struck out, using the Henry as a club, and knocked the revolver from Holden's hand. Holden cried out hoarsely, in pain and rage. And fear, too. Bannister laughed.

"I want you to hang, Mark," he said. "As a warning for others like you."

Holden started to scream for help and Bannister hit him across the face with the barrel of the rifle. In wild

rage, Holden grabbed the weapon and tore it from Bannister's hand. He clubbed down with it, and though Bannister caught the blow on his arm, he closed in, driving his knee to the claim broker's thick middle. Holden slammed back against the wall, but rebounded. He raked Bannister's face with a blow of the gun and Bannister fell to his knees. Wrapping his arms about Holden's legs, he heaved him over backwards. Then Bannister flung himself upon Holden and closed his hands upon the man's throat.

Holden thrashed wildly, but Bannister tightened his strangling grip. Holden's hands clawed at Bannister's face, tried to get at the eyes, but suddenly the claim broker weakened. His eyes bulged, and his heavy face turned a black-red. He went limp, and only then did Bannister, realizing that in a moment more the man would be dead, relax his hold.

Bannister rose unsteadily. "I want you to hang," he muttered.

Holden was unconscious. He didn't hear the words.

Bannister became aware of the bark of guns and shouting voices. He picked up his hat and his rifle, walked unsteadily out onto the landing. What he saw in the street took him down the open stairs in a hurry. But there was no need of him and his Henry rifle.

Clayton Dunn, with a shotgun in his hands, was leading a crowd of at least fifty men. Not townsmen, but Pipestem claim owners—big Hank Sorensen, Bannister's up-creek neighbor, among them. Every man was armed, and they hadn't had to fire many shots. They had caught the vigilante gunmen off guard. Some of the masked men had fled, but Dunn's crowd had rounded up seven of them and were ripping off their masks. They found hard-cases and outlaws behind those neck-scarf masks.

Dunn saw Bannister and came hurrying to him. "Holden?" he asked anxiously.

"You'll find him upstairs, Clayt."

"Dead?"

"Just unconscious."

"Then we'll find a rope to fit him."

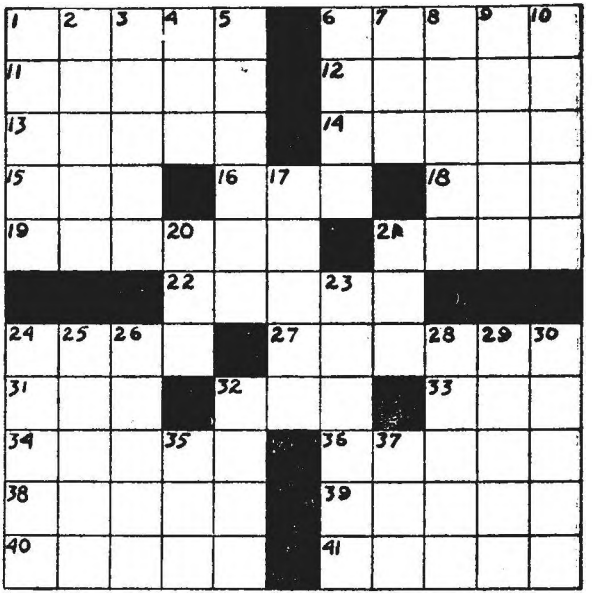
Bannister shook his head. "No vigilante hanging," he said. "We'll have a trial. We'll have somebody who knows law for judge, and we'll swear in a jury. It's got to start sometime, Clayt, and it may as well be now."

Dunn nodded agreement to that. Then he said, "Jeff, you'd better get yourself doctored up."

Only then Bannister was aware that Holden had beaten and clawed his face bloody. He nodded. "I'll go to Dr. MacGregor's place."

But he didn't stop at the young medico's office. He went on to Helen Foster's house. His injuries were minor; they didn't need expert doctoring. Bannister knew that Helen's hands would be gentle, and suddenly he wanted to see her smile again. A spring came back into his step as he neared her tidy little house.

THE END



CROSSWORD PUZZLE

ACROSS

1. Narrow, walled passageway for cattle
6. Leather strip
11. Long-legged wading bird
12. Portion
13. To incense
14. Bestow upon
15. Winter coat
16. Peculiar
18. Exist
19. Snuggle down
21. English queen
22. Pixies
24. Levee
27. Collision
31. Trotted
32. Swiss peak
33. Card game
34. Equivalent to
36. Snake River State
38. Billow
39. Braided, double-lashed thong used as a quirt
40. Circular structures for storing fodder
41. Schoolboy caps

DOWN

1. Metal links
2. From this time
3. Pushes on
4. Low corner end of a gunstock
5. To register
6. Rode swiftly
7. Metal for cans
8. Angular fortification
9. Oak seed
10. Small creature; a runt
17. Demon
20. Rest for a golf ball
21. Viper
23. Vast domain
24. Attire
25. Indian tribe of Mexico and the southwest.
26. Knot in wood
28. Poplar tree
29. George M. ——, composer of *Over There!*
30. Implements
32. Malt beverages
35. In days gone by
37. Speck

(The solution of this puzzle may be found on page 161)

MINES AND MINING

By John A. Thompson

FOOL'S GOLD is the joker in the mineral deck. The bright, glittering, heavy yellow stuff shines out in a vein like a sore thumb. It looks like gold. But it isn't. It is iron pyrites, a combination of iron and sulphur.

Finding a shiny piece of Fool's Gold can bring bitter disappointment to the novice prospector. Especially if he lugs the carefully guarded chunk of it into town under the happy delusion that he has hit the jackpot the first time out. His awakening is apt to be rude, swift and accompanied by plenty of ridicule from the experienced miners in the neighborhood.

Yet it's been done. More often than a lot of old-timers like to admit.

On the other hand, once Fool's Gold has been properly identified there is little chance of mistaking it for real gold in the future. Nor is the discovery of Fool's Gold always a negative proposition. The mineral may be associated with complex sulphide ores of other more valuable metals such as copper or lead. Gold too is sometimes present in veins showing an abundance of the brassy-looking iron pyrites in small crystals.

Testing or assaying may reveal that the other metals, or the gold, occur in sufficient concentration to make the vein workable. So don't pass up a Fool's-Gold-studded vein without thoroughly testing a sample. And if real gold or other minable metals show up, credit the attention-arresting iron pyrites with an assist in first attracting your attention to the vein or ore deposit.

Reader F.L., of Memphis, Tennessee, brought the whole Fool's Gold question up in his recent letter. He plans to go prospecting this spring. "I'd hate to get taken in by a piece of Fool's Gold," he wrote. "What is the stuff like? How can it be told from actual gold? And has it any value or uses as a mineral itself?"

To start with, F.L., Fool's Gold or iron pyrites—take your pick—is a widely distributed mineral. You can run into it in 40 out of the 48 States, and you are almost certain to encounter at least some of it in most of the metallic mining districts of the West. It is also found at times in connection with certain coal beds.

The mineral itself, often found in bright yellow cubical or square-sided crystals, is very hard and brittle. A knife won't scratch it, but quartz will. Under hammer blows Fool's Gold crumbles to a grey powder.

These two easily made physical tests should readily distinguish it from real gold. Gold is yellow too. But gold is also both soft and malleable. A needle point can be stuck into a small flake of gold leaving a tiny pin prick in the metal. It will only glance off or scratch iron pyrites. Hammer a real gold nugget or a small particle of gold all you want. It will flatten out, not crumble to a powder as most minerals do under similar treatment.

Another easy difference to remember is that gold always shows the same yellow color from whatever point it is viewed. Fool's Gold is dull when looked at from an angle. The check can be made simply by turning the suspected specimen in your hand. If the yellow stuff glitters one moment and is dull the next, it is not gold.

On long exposure to atmospheric conditions, iron pyrites showing in surface vein outcrops changes or "weathers" to a brownish, powdery iron oxide or gossan. This is the familiar iron rust stain that hard-rock prospectors often consider a hopeful sign of possible gold when the stain is found in exposed veins in metallically mineralized country. It may also indicate the local presence of other metals as well. Copper for instance.

As for Fool's Gold itself, in the early days of radio the crystals were popular for use as radio detectors. But much more important commercially is the fact that a really large deposit of iron pyrites may be a valuable and thoroughly practical mineral discovery. Large quantities of the mineral are mined, both in the United States and throughout the world, not as iron ore but for the manufacture of sulphuric acid.

Pure iron pyrites contains 53% sulphur, and when the pyrites occurs in accessible and readily minable large tonnage lots the deposit can be mined for use by the chemical manufacturing industry. Vast beds of pyrites exist at Rio Tinto, Spain, for example. These as well as other mines in Italy and Portugal have long been exploited for their sulphur content.

In this country between a half and three-quarters of a million tons of pyrites are produced annually. Much of this is obtained as a by-product from the regular mining and refining of ores carrying their main values in other metals and having associated with them a large amount of Fool's Gold.

Like the real McCoy, Fool's Gold is where you find it. But with this important distinction: To be valuable it must occur in tonnage lots that can be mined cheaply. Just an ounce or two, or a few specimens won't do. They are pretty, and nice to look at, but that's about all.

WHERE TO GO

By John North

By and large, the fisherman who catches the most fish is the one who knows the most about fishing. That's why the kid with a freckled face and a bamboo pole so often hooks a full string or a dream-boat bass to the everlasting astonishment and humiliation of the fancier-equipped once-or-twice-a-season angler.

It also explains why so many city-folk Izaak Waltons hire guides when they go on an extended fishing trip. The guides provide various services but their most important, of course, is to find the fish. Their professional reputation, in fact their whole business is apt to stand or fall on their ability to know where and when the big ones are biting.

We used to know a close-mouthed Maine north-country guide who had a fool-proof answer to that last question.

"Fish bite when they're hungry," old Ira used to say.

Which of course is true as far as it goes, but most anglers feel pretty sure that at least sometimes fish will bite out of what seems to be idle curiosity. They have seen it happen more than once.

On the other hand, old Ira knew from observation and long experience where and when to fish for best results in his home bailiwick. Regardless of the air of mystery surrounding the question of why one angler may do so much better than another on a given lake or stream, there are some pretty definite rules to go by. It pays to know them.

Let's take lake fishing, for instance. Start off by prospecting the water for the most likely fishing spots. Nine times out of ten you will improve your catch.

Prospecting the fishing grounds he covers is what your guide has been doing for years. Consciously or unconsciously, so has the kid with the bamboo pole. And it should help readers like S.R., of Anderson, Indiana, who wrote in asking for some dope on fishing.

Without wanting to cross up an expert like old Ira, the fact is that fish are hungry most of the time. Moreover big fish like to dine on little ones and unless it is altogether too warm for them, the big fellows are likely to be lurking around where most of the little fish are. That means in fairly shallow water around the shore line and particularly in the "meadows" or dense weedy patches that are found at or near the edges of most good fishing lakes.

The weeds are the real key. They can be fished from shore sometimes, or from a boat off shore. The outer borders of the weed bed may yield unexpectedly good results. If not, and the "meadow" is large, move into the growth itself, dropping your line or casting your lure into open pockets or clear channels in the weed patch.

Game fish especially have a habit of lying in the open places below the matted weed tops. The clear spaces afford them quick maneuverability as they wait to pounce on small fish, a chance frog, or anything else that looks new, colorful and exciting in the eating line.

Try a weedless lure or a weedless hook baited with a thin slice of pork rind and you may land yourself a big bass right through the weeds. But be sure you are using a rod strong enough to haul your bait through the cluttering vegetation or to handle a heavy, fighting fish. Pike favor the weed patches, too.

Lighter tackle will serve if you fish only the open spots, or the clear channels and outside fringes of a weed patch. This sort of angling, however, requires at least reasonable skill in casting in order to drop your lure just where you want it.

Small, fairly shallow lakes are likely to be dotted with weed patches, even in the deeper off-shore sections. Such patches may not show on the surface, yet these bottom weeds are popular lurking grounds for large-mouth bass, yellow perch, crappies and now and then both pickerel and pike.

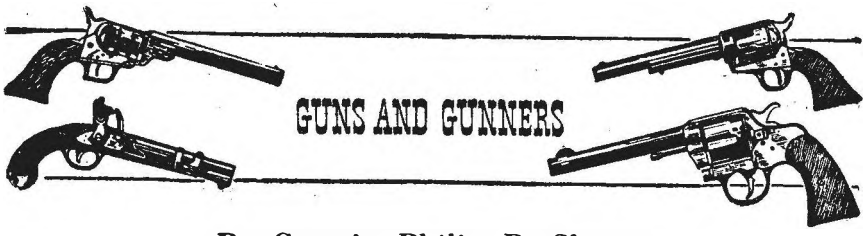
To fish above them you have to know approximately where the weeds are. That's where a guide's or a local angler's knowledge and experience come in.

Early morning and early evening are generally recognized as the best times for fishing the weed-bed haunts of hungry fish. If the big ones are not there around midday, particularly in warm weather, the chances are the water has warmed too much for comfort. Your quarry is probably off somewhere in the deepest part of the lake, usually sluggish and not interested in the most tempting bait you might offer.

Large lakes often combine two kinds of fish cover. Off-shore weed patches and underwater rock ledges and bars. The off-shore underwater rocky ledges are often—once you know where they are—prime hang-outs for rock bass, small-mouth bass and some panfish. If the rock bottom slopes steeply into deep water, so much the better.

Failing the protection of weeds, game fish seem to like deep water to slide into quickly at the first sound of alarm, and for this reason sandy, shallow beaches with a gradual downward slope, though they look pretty, are not apt to furnish good fishing.

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.



By Captain Philip B. Sharpe

In these cold winter months one activity goes on with full force—gun buying and selling. The biggest turnover, as usual, is in the used gun market.

One of the magazines devoted to firearms contains probably the largest classified advertising section in the field. For my own information, I recently checked an issue and came up with the following notes: There were 615 classified ads. of which 306 offered used firearms for sale. Of the 306 ads, 237 offered from one to a dozen or more foreign makes of rifles, shotguns, pistols or revolvers.

Those 237 advertisements offered, or asked for 916 foreign guns. The American used guns offered ran to 211.

If this may be taken as an example of the used gun market, there are nearly five times as many foreign used guns available as there are guns of American manufacture. Why?

Many—in fact most—of these came back as "souvenirs," but many a souvenir hunter was interested in what he could get out of his trophies in cash. He sold them. Since that date a couple of years ago when they were first sold, many have changed hands a dozen times.

This department has warned against most of these guns. Military or sporting—rifle, shotgun, combination guns, pistols and revolvers—they have one thing in common—*for many, it is impossible to obtain ammunition!*

Some chap buys a Belgian Mauser. He decides to convert it to sporter, and after buying a stock, some new sights and accessories, he spends hours of labor on the conversion. Then he discovers that he has a rifle chambered for the 7.65 mm. Belgian military cartridge. We do not make that cartridge.

Or perhaps he buys a beautiful 6.5 mm. Mannlicher-Schoenauer. In a prewar catalogue he finds that ammunition is made by one American firm. But not now. That caliber was dropped last year. This could go on and on. In fact, many of these de luxe rifles and combination rifles and shotguns were built for cartridges never made outside of Germany.

The other side of the world was the source of much more trouble. The Jap 7.7 rifle cartridge was not made outside of Jap arsenals. But the American buyer did not worry; he saw classified ads in some maga-

zine indicating the ammunition was being custom made by a lot of chaps to the tune of 15 to 20 cents per shot.

Then he finds that they used fired .30 Government cases, reforming them in dies. This would be okay except that the 7.7 Jap rimless is larger at the head end than the .30-06. Thus while resized American cases will fit most of the chamber, the head does not fit tightly, and with poor brass a burst case could easily spill high-pressure gas through the action into the shooter's eye.

The average German shotgun brought home is a 16-gauge. Yes, these will handle American shells, but most of them were for the old-type low-pressure loadings. All were for the European loading—the 16-gauge heavy loads about the same as the American 20-gauge standard. Thus European guns are lighter than most American types and when you try American fodder in them, they buck and kick like a frisky Texas steer. Some of them might be safe with the American high-velocity loadings, but it would be unwise to use this type of shell. You can get sufficient punishment with our standard loads.

A lot of the buyers learned these things the hard way. So, to recover their money, they sell the guns to some other gullible buyer. The guns will keep changing hands for years, with every customer losing money on the deal. Money order and express charges when you buy; a search for ammunition with sometimes a few rounds turning up at 35 cents each or more; more dollars to advertise it for sale; boxing and shipping—you don't break even any way you look at it.

* * * Good News * * *

At last! Once again the War Department has released rifles and ammunition for sale to shooters after a wartime ban. This equipment is not sold to dealers. By Act of Congress it is available only to American citizens for their own use.

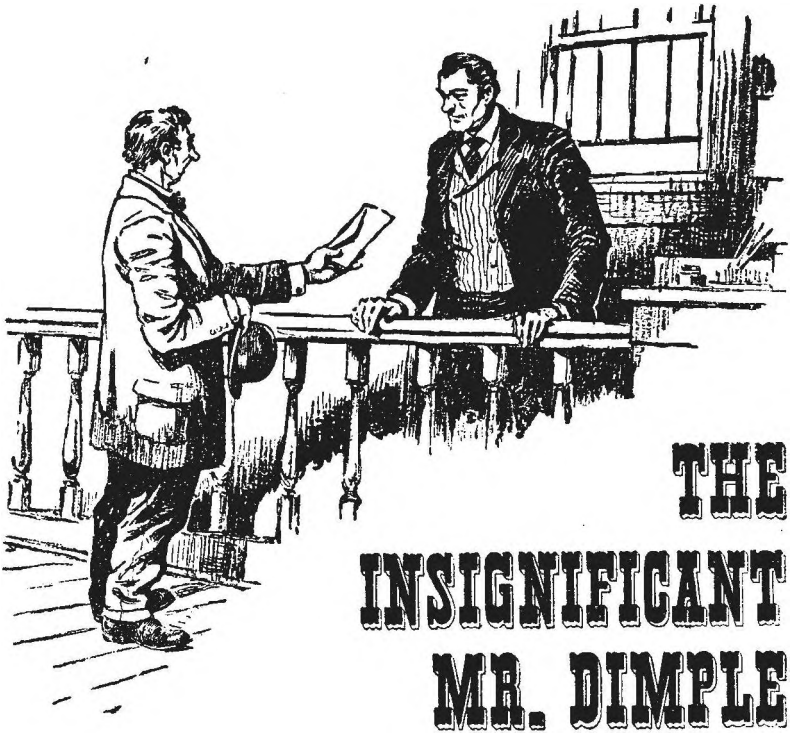
Model 1917 rifles for the .30-06 cartridge are available as "unserviceable," which means that they should be inspected and adjusted by a gunsmith before use—price only $5, no tax.

Most parts, including new barrels for the 1917 at very low prices, are available.

Models 1903, 1903A1 and 1903A3 are available, both new and used at varying prices. No pistols or revolvers, but Model 1903 parts, all kinds of assessories, ammunition, powder, primers, bullets and cartridge cases are available at very low cost.

The Director of Civilian Marksmanship advises me that it will take some time to fill orders because of the great number anticipated.

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.



THE INSIGNIFICANT MR. DIMPLE

By Emmett J. Powell

That new bank clerk looked like a mouse but he could bait his own traps — and spring them, too!

There were worse jobs than being bank cashier. There were worse jobs than working in the Pineburg State Bank. There were worse bosses than Sam Darien who owned the Pineburg State Bank. Bruce Winters had been telling himself that for five years, but he found it hard to keep himself convinced. Earning two hundred dollars a month was a slow way for a man to accumulate a fortune.

There were the compensations. People bowed and scraped around in front of him who would have been glad to give him a punch on the nose if he was anything but a bank cashier. And it made Winters feel important when some farmer who didn't carry much weight around Pineburg came in and asked for a loan. Winters would listen, and then say coldly:

"I'm sorry, but we must have bet-

ter security than you can offer. We'll have to turn down your loan."

It was like playing the Almighty here in Pineburg. Sometimes the farmer went out and shot himself. Or, more likely, he just moved off and Winters bought the place for any old song he cared to sing. Once in awhile one of the farmers would go to Darien, and the president of the bank would raise holy Ned with Winters.

"I know you've got the interest of the bank at heart, Bruce, but, hang it, you've got to show a little mercy." Then Darien would feel sorry for Winters and pat him on the back. "Next time this comes up, Bruce, you talk it over with me before you turn a man down."

But Winters never did. It was too much fun to say no. A man had to have some fun when he worked for two hundred dollars a month. Winters saved most of his salary, but still he wasn't getting anywhere. He thought about it every time a new shipment of currency came in. Stiff, new greenbacks. He liked to look at them and feel of them and thumb through them.

It would have been the easiest thing in the world to have slipped one of those bundles into his pocket, but Winters didn't. Not because of any moral scruples. It was just a proposition of figuring it out so the other fellow took the risk. Winters had held the sack for another fellow once. He'd never do it again.

A holdup would be the answer. Winters had thought about it for most of the five years he'd worked for Sam Darien, but he'd never hooked onto quite the right idea. He could fix it up with the Kline bunch. They'd pulled off some bank jobs around Walla Walla, had cut across the State line into Oregon and were hiding out in the mountains near here right now. Winters had taken grub out to them twice, but he'd never said anything about holding up the bank because if he was there alone, there might be some suspicion that he had had a hand in it.

No, when he pulled this off, he had to have everything exactly right. Too, there was the opposite chance that the old man might be in the bank when they held it up. Sam Darien was the kind who took his cutter to bed with him. Likely as not, he'd pull it out and die with it smoking in his hand.

Right now was the time. The Kline outfit was ready to move on, and there was better than thirty thousand dollars in the bank, a good deal more than Darien usually kept. More than he'd have in another week. Ten thousand was being shipped out to a store in the north end of the county that carried on a banking business of sorts.

That was when the Elgin stage rolled in. Winters, having nothing to do at the moment, idly watched a little man get down and thought nothing about it. Drummer, probably. A few minutes later the little man came across the street from the hotel, and still Winters gave it no thought. Probably the stranger wanted to cash a check. Winters, being in a particu-

larly sour mood at the moment, decided he wouldn't cash the fellow's check under any circumstances. Even if it was for only one dollar and the little man knew Sam Darien himself.

But Winters had guessed wrong. The little man hesitated, standing just inside the door.

"Are you Mr. Darien?" he asked diffidently.

That flattered Winters. The words, "Samuel Darien, President," were lettered on the window, and it always made Winters feel good to be taken for the old man. He wasn't quite so sour when he said: "No, Mr. Darien is out at the ranch. I'm Mr. Winters, the cashier."

"I'm delighted to meet you, Mr. Winters."

The little man came across the bank and held out a small, soft hand. Winters shook it, squeezing it hard. The little man winced. Winters, very cheerful now, asked: "What can I do for you?"

"I'm J. Wimpole Dimple," the little man said, "recently from The Dalles. My middle name is spelled as 'pole,' but pronounced to rhyme with Dimple. It was my mother's maiden name, and she insisted on giving it to me, to my regret, I must admit."

"What can I do for you?" Winters asked, less cheerful now.

"I am looking for a job in a bank," Mr. Dimple said apologetically. He drew an envelope from his pocket and handed it to Winters. "Here are my recommendations. I have worked in several banks. In fact, banking is all I know, but I am finding it very difficult to secure a new position. I sincerely hope you can do something for me."

It was on Winters' tongue to say: "Shucks, I can run the bank alone." He didn't. An idea had suddenly come to full bloom in his mind. He glanced perfunctorily through the papers, lifting his eyes to study the stranger.

Mr. Dimple was the most insignificant little man he had ever seen. He wore a baggy pair of trousers, and an even baggier coat that fitted him like an oversized tent. He was not over five two, weighed perhaps one hundred and ten pounds, and had less than half a chin and pale blue eyes that held a vague, watery look. This was it. Winters felt exceedingly cheerful now as he began to see the possibilities of his idea.

"Your papers seem to be in order, Mr. Dimple. Understand, I can promise nothing, but it does happen that we could use another man. Mr. Darien is nearly always at his ranch, so of course I'm alone here most of the time. Now I suggest that tonight after supper you hire a livery rig and drive out to see Mr. Darien. I think the chances are good that he'll put you on tomorrow."

"Thank you, Mr. Winters." Mr. Dimple beamed and wiped his eyes. "Thank you very much."

"Oh, by the way, why didn't you hold your job at The Dalles?" Winters asked curiously.

"The bank was purchased by another man, and he had a friend he wanted to employ in my place." Mr. Dimple swallowed. "There is another reason which I should tell you. Sev-

eral years ago a bank in California where I was working was held up. The officers thought I had tipped off the outlaws when they should commit the robbery. There was a particularly large amount of money in the safe at the time. I had nothing to do with it, Mr. Winters, but there was so much talk that I was dismissed."

"Don't worry, Dimple." Winters beamed. He had never felt more cheerful. "I'm sure Mr. Darien won't hold that against you. At least I won't." He coughed. "Perhaps you had better not mention it to Mr. Darien."

"All right." Mr. Dimple sighed. "At least I have done my duty by informing you."

Sam Darien sat down on his porch, lit his pipe, and cussed himself. His Rafter D was the biggest spread in the country, but if a man wasn't here on the job all the time, something went wrong. You could hire the best riders in these here United States, and by Jehoshaphat, if you didn't ride herd on them, things didn't go right.

Take that black stallion. Got cut to pieces by the barb wire yesterday. He'd probably wind up having to shoot the animal. Wouldn't have happened if a couple of the boys had been on the job. And the calf crop was about half what it should have been.

Trouble was, Darien told himself, he had his finger in too many pies. He could kick himself all over Wallowa County for having taken on the bank. And letting himself get elected county commissioner. And to the school board. Doggone it, he'd got to the place where he couldn't do any proper riding and see what was going on.

Good thing he had a man like Bruce in the bank. Winters would cut a man off at the pockets to save the bank a bad loan, but maybe that was the way you had to do business. Winters would sit up half the night to keep his books in order. Any time Sam wanted to know something, Winters had the answer right on the tip of his tongue. Greatest memory for figures Sam had ever seen. Chances are, Winters could tell him how much anyone in town had in his savings account down to the last penny.

That was when Sam knocked his pipe out against his boot heel and looked up to see Winters riding into the yard on a livery nag. Been riding pretty fast, too, the way the animal looked. Winters rode like a sack of meal. Fool thing to run a horse that fast when a man can't ride. Winters would fall off and break his neck, and then Sam would be in a fine fix with a bank and nobody to run it.

Sam watched Winters come up, automatically refilling his pipe. What in thunder would bring Winters out here in such a hurry? The bank cashier never rode anywhere if he could help it.

"Howdy, Sam," Winters greeted Darien. He came up the path and took a seat on the porch railing.

"Howdy, Bruce. Looks like you've been moving right along. You want to be a little careful. You're a bank-

er, but you sure as tunket ain't a buckaroo."

"No, I'm not." Winters grinned. "Oh, I didn't come so fast. Wanted to see you a minute and get back to town in time to eat."

"Shucks, you can eat here," Sam said indignantly. "When did Chang's cooking get so bad you couldn't stummick it?"

"It isn't that." Winters began chewing on a cheap cigar. "I've got my board paid in the hotel, so I might as well eat there. Don't get anything off for meals I miss."

Sam grinned as he held a match flame to his pipe. "Bruce, you're the tightest hombre I ever saw. Sometimes I wonder how your skin ever got all over your body."

Winters shifted uneasily. "Well, a man has to get ahead, Sam."

Sam snorted. "I'll bet you save one hundred fifty out of that two hundred I pay you."

"I did better than that last month," Winters said with pride. "Saved one hundred seventy-two. Still seems like I don't get ahead very fast." He paused, eying Sam. "I wouldn't ask for a raise, but I am doing two men's work for one man's salary. I'd like to have another fellow in there with me."

"Why, sure, providing you can find the feller. I allus thought you'd rather do the job yourself."

"It's keeping me penned up too close, Sam. I haven't been feeling very well lately. Got to get out and exercise more, I guess. A fellow rode in on the stage today who wants a job. He's coming out to see you after supper." Winters studied Sam a moment. "I think he'll start for forty dollars a month."

"Hell's bells!" Sam bellowed. "That ain't cigarette money when a man's got to board himself."

Winters shrugged. "Well, pay him what you want to, but he's anxious for a job. I think he'll work cheap."

"I could pay you fifty dollars more a month," suggested Sam.

"No, I want another man in there with me," Winters said quickly. "Take the noon hour. I have to have my dinner sent over from the hotel unless you're there. This way I could get away, say twelve to one, and the other fellow could get his dinner later. It would give me a lot more freedom, Sam."

"All right." Sam waved a big hand as if to dismiss the subject. "I'll hire him."

"Thanks." Winters got up. "Guess I'd better head back. Tell him to show up at eight o'clock in the morning."

"I'll tell him."

Sam watched the cashier ride away, grinning a little around the stem of his pipe. Bruce Winters could make the Indian on a penny whoop before he spent it. Too tight for Sam to like him, but a good man for a bank.

Sam's pipe had gone out. He took it out of his mouth while he fished for a match. Funny thing Winters riding out here just to ask Sam to hire this jayhoo. Winters had never said a word before about wanting help. Sam, still holding his pipe, watched Winters disappear down the

road toward town. He heard the jangle of the supper triangle then, and went in. No use worrying about the loco things Bruce Winters did.

Sam was back on the front porch smoking his after-supper pipe when Mr. Dimple drove a livery rig into the ranchyard. He carefully wrapped the lines around the whipstock, and stepped down.

"Mr. Darien, I presume?" he said politely.

"I presume so," Sam answered, and took his pipe out of his mouth because he'd have swallowed it if he hadn't. This here runt wasn't the man Winters wanted him to hire. That just couldn't be. Jumping hoptoads, this feller wasn't any taller than a peanut, and those clothes he was wearing looked like they'd fit a man as big as Bruce Winters.

Mr. Dimple held out his hand. "I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Darien. I'm J. Wimpole Dimple. My middle name was my mother's maiden name, and I find it very distasteful. It's spelled as if it were pronounced 'pole' and yet it is actually pronounced to rhyme with 'Dimple'."

Sam grunted, and busied himself lighting his pipe. Of all the damned, lame-brained, silly-looking dudes, this here J. Wimpole Dimple took the cake. A runt. That's all he was. Why, if he stood on a two-inch block of wood, he still couldn't see over a peanut! It wasn't so bad just being a runt, but being an idiot besides was too much. Sam wouldn't stand for anything like that in the bank. It'd drive away every customer he had. No, sir! Winters could keep on running the bank just like he had been. Sam would raise his wages, and Winters could keep on sending for his noon meals.

Mr. Dimple waited until Sam had his pipe going again. Then he said: "Mr. Darien, I'm looking for a bank job, and Mr. Winters assured me you'd take me on. I've had lots of experience. If you'll give me a chance, I'm sure you'll never regret it."

Sam shut his eyes and mentally ran through all the cuss words in his vocabulary. Trouble was he'd promised Winters he'd hire this man. He had to keep his word, but he'd sure get rid of J. Wimpole Dimple the first chance he got.

"All right," Sam said bitterly. "Go to work at eight o'clock in the morning."

"Thank you." Mr. Dimple bobbed his head. "Oh, who's the sheriff here?"

"Sheriff?" Sam stared at him in amazement. "It's Matt Tucker. Why?"

"I was just wondering," Mr. Dimple said mildly. "Is he honest?"

"Honest?" bellowed Sam. "He's so damned honest that one time he found a horseshoe buried two feet in the street, and he hunted all summer so he could find the horse that lost that shoe five years ago. Returned the shoe, he did, and wouldn't take no reward. Yessir, Matt's that honest."

"Thank you." Mr. Dimple bobbed his head again, and retreated to the buggy.

Sam watched Mr. Dimple ride away. There was a faint suspicion in him that the new bank clerk wasn't

an idiot. Not complete. But he was sure a runt. No doubt of that. The most insignificant runt Sam Darien had ever seen.

Sheriff Matt Tucker read the letter the seventh time, and in a sweep of gusty temper, wadded it up and threw it into the corner. He knew it word for word. The Kline bunch was wanted. There was a five-thousand-dollar reward offered, but there wasn't a picture of the four anywhere on record.

The Klines had created a reign of terror robbing trains in the Wyoming-Utah-Colorado area for six months, holed up in Robbers' Roost until the hunt died down, and then they'd showed up in the wheat country around Walla Walla, Washington. They'd knocked over five banks in as many days, got away with more than seventy thousand dollars, and it was thought they had hidden out in Oregon. Would Sheriff Tucker please look?

Yeah, would Sheriff Matt Tucker please look! All he had to do was to search Snake River Canyon and the Imnaha Canyon and the Wallowa Mountains, and plenty of other places where an army could hide out. Some lame-brain U. S. marshal in Omaha or Kansas City or Chicago who rode a swivel chair better than a horse thought Wallowa County was flat like a floor, and you could see four outlaws coming fifty miles away. All you had to do was to get out your Winchester and blow the Klines out of their saddles, one after another.

Tucker glanced at his watch. Twelve-thirty. It was time for dinner. He was hungry. Sure. Just like he'd been last Christmas Day when he'd eased himself away from the table. Felt like he had a pound of lead in his stomach.

Matt stiffened. He heard a sound that didn't belong to a sheriff's office. Like a rat gnawing on wood. No, it wasn't exactly like that. It was over here on the wall next to the bank. He moved away from his desk, eyes studying the wall. The racket seemed to be growing louder. Then he dropped his gaze to the floor just as a turning bit broke through, whirled until the hole was clean, and then was withdrawn.

Matt raced out of his office and around the corner. A small man wearing thick glasses was on his hands and knees, a brace and bit and a wooden box beside him, and he was shoving a cord into the sheriff's office.

"What in blazes are you doing, Dimple?" Matt bellowed. "I'll throw you into a cell for boring a hole into my wall if you don't look out."

"No, you won't." The little man stood up. "Within five minutes, unless I've guessed wrong, you'll be busy."

Dimple picked up his brace and bit and the wooden box and, moving around Matt, stepped into the sheriff's office. Matt swore. He followed Dimple. Of all the insignificant little half pints, this Dimple was the prize. Why Sam Darien and Bruce Winters had ever hired him, Matt couldn't see.

"What are you doing?" he burst out. Dimple had taken a small metal

frame from his box, and Matt, looking closer, saw that a tiny bell rested in the top of the frame. Dimple was tying the cord to the bell.

"I didn't get my hunch until a few minutes ago," Dimple said, straightening up, "so I only had a few minutes to get this rigged. Don't let Winters see it if he comes in, and don't tell him about it." Dimple glanced into the street. "Experts like the Klines work on an exact schedule. If you hear that bell, you cover the man in the street who's holding the horses. "I'll take care of the men inside. I've got that fixed so I can pull the cord with my foot."

"Of all the fool notions . . ." Matt Tucker began.

"Save your breath for your shooting," advised Dimple, "and don't let them suck you out of town. You stay here till the bank closes. I may have guessed the wrong day, but the way Winters acted just before he went to lunch, I think this is it."

Matt looked at the metal frame and the bell after Dimple had gone. Just offhand, he had to admit it was a smart rig, but it was a crazy notion to think the Klines would come in here and tackle the bank when they had more trouble now than any four men could handle.

On the other hand, maybe it wasn't so crazy. The Klines might think nobody had an idea where they were. Maybe they figured they'd make their vacation pay. But this Dimple fellow! With glasses on, he didn't look nearly so watery-eyed as he had when Matt had first seen him two days ago. He'd practically said Winters was in on this. That wasn't right. Darien trusted the bank cashier. Winters was a hard man to deal with, but everybody knew he was honest.

Matt sat down and pounded a fist on the desk. He didn't know what to think. He might just as well saddle up and start looking for four men who might be the Kline boys. There wasn't any sense in sitting around here because a funny-looking runt like Dimple had told him to. Then Matt heard a step outside and, looking up, saw Bruce Winters in the doorway.

"Hello, Bruce." Matt leaned back. He was probably imagining it, but Winters *did* seem a little worried. "How's that sawed-off half pint you've got working for you?"

"He's all right." Winters rolled a cigarette, more tobacco dribbling to the floor than onto the paper. "Good worker and all that, but I'm kind of sorry now we took him on. With the Kline outfit still free, it makes me uneasy to have a new man around."

"Shucks, all the Kline jobs were in Washington."

"I know." Winters sealed the cigarette. "Still, a banker can't be too careful. I was wondering if you'd go to the trouble of investigating Dimple. He—"

The bell in the metal frame began to jingle. Matt came up out of his chair and lunged for the door, gun in hand.

"What's that?" Winters demanded.

"Holdup in your bank," answered Matt curtly.

The lawman hit the boardwalk,

and came to a stop. Four men were standing in front of the bank, talking and smoking, and Matt, getting this first, quick look, thought they were just another bunch of cowhands drifting through the country.

"You're crazy, Matt!" Winters scoffed. "That's no holdup."

Matt wheeled. "Maybe you'd better go over and see. It's your bank."

"It's Sam Darien's," Winters snapped. "if you're going to talk about whose it is. This is my noon hour, and I'm not going back to the bank till one."

Matt turned again to the four punchers. Three were drifting into the bank. The one on the walk pinned his eyes on Matt, but he said nothing. He stood holding the reins of the four horses, casually smoking, tipped his head and looked up at the sky, and then brought his gaze back down to Matt.

"I never saw a bank holdup," Winters said contemptuously, "but from the stories I've heard, this isn't the way they go at it."

Matt had never seen a bank holdup, either. He'd always thought the bandits rode into town with their guns smoking and shooting everybody in sight. Right now the only people on the street were the man with the horses, Matt, and Bruce Winters. It was a sultry noon; the fifty-odd people of Pineburg were totally unaware that anything unusual might be taking place.

Inside Matt's office the little bell began to jingle. "What *is* that?" Winters demanded uneasily.

"Holdup, I said," Matt snapped, and, leaving his office, came along the walk to the bank.

The man with the horses shifted so that a gun suddenly came into view, hammer back, muzzle not more than five feet from Matt's belly.

"I wouldn't go in there, mister," the man said indifferently. "Drop your iron."

Matt was caught there in the doorway of the bank, the gun in his hand as useless as a toothpick. He dropped it. He had no choice. He'd get a bullet the first move he made. He'd better have cut loose on the horse holder when he left his office.

Inside a man said roughly: "Hustle up, runt. Toss that dinero in the sack about twice as fast as you're doing."

Dimple straightened his thin shoulders, a pained look on his face. "I'm tired. I can't move any faster."

"Want me to help you?" Matt called.

For just an instant the three men turned to the door, attention away

SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD PUZZLE

C	H	U	T	E	■	S	T	R	A	P
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from Dimple, an instant that was long enough for him to pull a Colt from inside his baggy coat. He set to work in a professional manner.

Matt couldn't watch Dimple, for he was busy scooping up his own gun and getting in a few shots at the horse holder who made the mistake of looking inside the bank when he heard the first shot. Matt got a bullet along his ribs. Another one knocked his right leg out from under him, but he had time to smash the horse holder's right arm and yell: "Stand pat, feller."

The shooting was over before it really got a good start. Matt, lying on his side in front of the bank door, saw Dimple come into the doorway, his gun in his hand. Dimple took in the scene and called: "Winters, you're under arrest for bank robbery."

"I didn't have anything to do with it," Winters howled.

"The devil you didn't!" the wounded horse holder bellowed. "You hired a gunslick to work in the bank, and then pulled us in to hold it up. You sure went out of your way to make it tough."

"That's good enough for me, Winters," Dimple said.

J. Wimpole Dimple! Matt raised his eyes to the little man. He'd heard of Jack Dimple, a special agent for a railroad that had suffered from the forays of the Klines.

"You ain't Jack Dimple, are you?" demanded the sheriff.

"That's what my friends call me," Dimple admitted modestly.

People were pouring into the street, and Pineburg's medico was headed Matt's way, black bag in hand. But Matt couldn't think of anything except that this man was Jack Dimple.

"The three inside are dead," Dimple said soberly. "I almost made a mistake there, sheriff. I was pretty sure Winters would kick this open. He'd served time once in Deer Lodge. My coming here was just the bait to get him to bring the Kline bunch in. We figured they were around here since we had all the other routes in Washington plugged and this was about the only way they could go after their last job. I had never seen the Klines and didn't have their pictures, so I wasn't sure about them when they rode up. They got the drop on me, and until you hollered, I was thinking I wasn't going to have a chance to get my gun."

The doc was there then. He said: "Roll over, Matt."

Slowly Matt obeyed. He heard Dimple say: "I'll get Winters and this other hombre over to the jug."

"Sure. Go ahead." Matt frowned. "I've heard plenty about Jack Dimple, but I can't get over you being him."

There was a bleak smile on Dimple's face. "That's my chief asset, sheriff. Nobody takes me for who I am. The Klines didn't even search me for a gun. Guess I can't blame them. Folks just naturally aren't scared of me. Why, they even call me the *insignificant* Mr. Dimple."

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