STREET AND SMITH'S
WESTERN STORY

MARCH 1949
25 CENTS

TRIGGER TRAITOR A Novel of the Southwest

By L. L. FOREMAN

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

Fastest force in the world

America's superiority and leadership in the air can only be maintained with fighters like North American's F-86. With speed in excess of 650 miles an hour, it is one of the world's foremost supersonic planes.

Don't miss important developments in air progress and aviation careers. Read AIR TRAILS—for 20 years the leading aviation magazine.

AIR TRAILS

25¢ at your newsdealer's

To the readers of WESTERN STORY:

This is *your* magazine and, by telling us what kind of features you like most, you can help us give you the best in Western reading entertainment by answering the questions which appear below.

Maybe this list doesn't include all of your ideas. Let's have 'em. As, for example, whether or not you like humorous stories, historical yarns, tales of the present-day West, etc.

Anyhow, let's hear from you and

Thanks,

JOHN BURR
Editor

Are you Male? ..... Female? ..... Your age? .....

Check your educational background:

.....Attending high school .....High school graduate .....Attending college

.....Attended college .....College graduate

How long have you been reading WESTERN STORY? .....

How many read your copy? ..... Are you presently employed? .....

What type of work do you do? .....

What features in WESTERN STORY do you like best (please number 1, 2, 3, etc., in order of importance).

NOVELS ..... ARTICLES .....

NOVELETTES ..... CARTOONS .....

SHORT STORIES ..... PUZZLES .....

PERSONAL SERVICE DEPARTMENTS .....

What other type of feature would you like to see added to the book? .....

What other Western magazines, if any, do you read .....

Mail this completed questionnaire to:

RESEARCH DEPARTMENT
WESTERN STORY
122 East 42nd Street, New York City 17, N. Y.

WS—1D

Street & Smith's

WESTERN STORY

Title Registered U.S. Patent Office

March, 1949, Vol. CCXX, No. 5

Novels

Novelettes

Short Stories and Features

Cover by A. Leslie Ross

Editor
John Burr

Assistant Editor
J. L. McCulloch

Publication issued monthly by Street & Smith Publications, Incorporated, at 775 Lidgerwood Avenue, Elizabeth, New Jersey. Re-entered as second class matter, September 21, 1948, at the Post Office at Elizabeth, New Jersey, under the Act of March 3rd, 1879. Copyright 1949 in the U.S.A. and Great Britain by Street and Smith Publications, Inc. Allen L. Grammer, Chairman of the Board; Gerald H. Smith, President; Henry W. Ralston, Vice President and Secretary; Thomas H. Kaiser, Treasurer. General and Executive offices at 122 East 42nd Street, New York 17, New York. Subscriptions: $2.50 per year in the U. S. A.; $2.75 per year in countries in the Pan American Union; $3.00 per year in Canada; $3.25 per year elsewhere. All subscription mail should be addressed to: P.O. Box 494, Elizabeth, N. J. We cannot accept responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts or artwork. Any material submitted must include return postage.

16 Printed in the U.S.A.

25 cents per copy

Tally Branding*

LIFE IN THE OPEN SPACES

Michael Oblinger (Old Baldy, The Killer, page 140), once ran a spread on the flat, bleak Alberta prairie south of Calgary, where wind-driven alkali dust blinded his eyes forever to all appreciation of the flatlands' beauty.

"Finally, in desperation," he tells us, "I pulled stakes for the big humpy province to the west—British Columbia—and I've never regretted the move. The towering assurance of white peaks and the rich promise of lush, green valleys between them is a combination pretty hard to beat. Add to that the interesting flora and fauna of the region and you have all you need to make life worthwhile.

"On the fauna side, for example, and in Old Baldy, is the passing mention of *pika*, little chief hare. One of the most remarkable small animals in the mountains, it's usually found among loose stones at the base of all slopes up to 7,000 feet. Its home or nest can always be found near the neat heaps of herbs and flowers stacked near the entrance and which most mountaineers call 'pika hay.'

"Another little varmint mentioned in my story is the better-known bush-tailed (Neatoma Drummondii) pack rat. One of these saucy little devils once ate the tops off of my best pair of boots," Oblinger observes ruefully. "But to the traveler, this species often is as annoying as the wolverine is to the trapper. Now, nobody can love a little glutton and kleptomaniac like him but, just the same, you'd hate to see him exterminated. For a man with a sense of humour, that little old pack rat is a lively entertainer. I'll have to say, though, that it sure takes patience to understand him."

THE GENTLEMAN REQUESTS . . .

"I just want to tell you how much I enjoyed reading First Mondays in Texas, by Harold Preece, which ran in your December issue," writes Gerald J. McIntosh, a long-time reader from Little Rock, Arkansas.

"Them monthly 'git-togethers' hadn't entirely petered out 'long about the turn of the century and, as a pint-sized younker, I remember 'em mighty well in North Texas and not far from

** Reg. U.S. Pat. Off.*

the vicinity mentioned by Mr. Preece. Believe me, he sure knows about them, for he describes 'em to a T. Let's have another piece along these lines.

"Comanche Code, by Clark Gray, in the same issue, was swell, too. I'm familiar with the locale of that yarn. How's for some more by Author Gray? I have a suggestion to make. Ralph Yergen's Light Up Your Six-Gun in September had a rather salty character in Horatio Oberlander Holyoke. Why not make Horatio into a series?

"And I liked, too, those Western paintings you had on the covers for August, September and October. Why not give us more? They are different and interesting. I'd still like to see some by Frederic Remington and Charlie Russell. Hope you'll oblige.

"To top things off, your What's In A Brand Department is tops. And I'm still waiting for some more animal stories by Jim Kjelgaard."

PUZZLE FAN'S COMPLAINT

"Just got my January issue," says Dana Suffern, of Providence, Rhode Island, "and I'm pretty griped to find no Scrambled Words! What gives, anyway? First you take out the Western Crossword Puzzle and now this. I've had plenty of fun with these two brain ticklers and I certainly hope you're not going to cut out What's In A Brand too!"

3W HANDS PREFERRED

And from Bartley, West Virginia, Mrs. W. C. Deskins confides that she likes all magazines put out by Street & Smith. She has been a faithful reader of our publications for years and believes we should include some of the old Wild West Weekly characters in W. S. "It would be swell to pick up a Western Story," she comments, "and find the Whistlin' Kid or Old Buck, of The Circle Bar, among those present."

AN EASTERN-WESTERN FAN

We have an ardent fan from Staten Island, New York, Josephine Krycki, who thinks our January issue "topped any you've had in a long time.

"Not only," she says, "did you corral stories by my favorite authors—Tom Blackburn, Bennett Foster, L. L. Foreman and Jim Kjelgaard (Cousin Lightner is sure entertaining)—but I found that article on how to make 'Dobes enjoyable as well as practical.

"My husband and I plan to live in the Southwest when he retires in a few years and I'm going to keep Mr. Thompson's article for reference just in case the housing shortage hasn't eased up by then. Perhaps you could print some articles on home-made furniture to go with those home-made houses. I'm sure many of your readers would be interested."

COMING NEXT MONTH ★ ★ ★

***Two** dramatic novels—a vividly colorful story of early California, by Tom W. Blackburn, and a powerful tale of Montana's vigilantes, by Walt Coburn . . . **Three** rapid-fire action novelettes of pioneer danger trails by Ralph Yergen, Michael Trent and William J. Glynn . . . **Another** practical article by John A. Thompson on low-cost Homestead Homes . . . **A cavvy** of short stories including such ace yarn spinners as Joseph F. Hook and Howard Haynes . . . **Unusual** illustrated features including, of course, your personal service departments.*

WANTED—WATER

By Rolland Lynch

The Lone Watch country had everything Jim Tylee was looking for—plus a bullet-backed "no trespass" sign

It was one o'clock in the afternoon when he topped the ridge and the valley spread away below him. Behind lay fifteen miles of alkali and sage so this sight quickened his pulse a little.

Jim Tylee pulled his wagon team to a stop and scrubbed a brown-burned hand across his jaw. What little breeze there was came right off the sun. It made him squint his eyes to probe this valley.

It was a big golden sea of grass with a clump of trees near its center. That would be a town or a ranch, either one of good size. It was the grass which interested him most. Grass meant there was moisture beneath the now hard-packed surface. Moisture that held on this long meant water; and when Jim Tylee found water, he was going to settle there and stay.

His eyes swept the Lone Watch Range floating in the heat waves across the valley and he knew that somewhere along its base a man would find all the water he needed.

With a show of eager impatience, he lifted his reins and said, "Get along, you two," and his team went plowing through the grass of the slope down toward the far clump of trees. He'd seek information there.

It was a town and it was a little larger than the distance from the ridge had revealed, despite Jim's guess. There was a twin line of false-fronted buildings separated by a dusty street. Cur dogs slept fitfully beneath the shade of the boardwalks. Along either side was the Potluck Blacksmith Shop, the Potluck Mercantile; and down where the four horses stood rein-tied to the rack paralleling the water trough was the Potluck Saloon. There were two men on the walk before the saloon. The only ones on the street. One leaned indolently against the saloon wall while the other was in the middle of the walk watching Jim Tylee come on with a narrowed interest.

Jim stopped his wagon by the trough and nodded to both men. The one against the wall was about Jim's size. A little over six feet, lean and hard, but loose-muscled from many years in the saddle. Jim guessed that this man had done most of his riding in front of a posse while his own had been acquired in the Pennsylvania Volunteers. The man's guns were low on his thighs and tied down. The other fellow had a gun jammed in the waist band of his Levis but he was a pleasant-looking sort.

"Where would a fella be most likely to find water around here, friend?" Jim addressed him.

The man's eyes left Jim's face and ran over the dust-covered contents of the wagon, then back to Jim again.

"Right there in the trough," he said.

Jim shook his head. "You don't understand. I speak of a spring or year-round live creek where a man can settle and build."

The interest of this man deepened; and out of the corner of his eye Jim could see the ghost of a smile part the lips of the tough-looking man.

"If that's what you're looking for," said the pleasant man, "better come in and talk to Rand Grafton. He knows all about them things." He jerked his head toward the saloon.

"Much obliged." Jim nodded and got stiffly down from the wagon.

On the boardwalk he was arrested for a moment by the chording of a piano and the lifting of a woman's voice. The words came soothingly soft in lullaby:

"Sleep, my Little Cowboy,
Time to hit the trail:
Sandman rides the prairie . . .
Weaves a Western fairy tale. . . ."

The man jerked his head again and Jim followed him inside. He was aware of the tough man tagging behind, his grin deepened as if by some long-forgotten joke.

Inside the batwings, Jim's man stayed him with a hand. The patrons of this place were standing or sitting

in rapt attention. The portly bartender was transfixed in the middle of wiping a glass.

The girl at the piano sat on the stool so that her body was half turned to her audience. Her posture revealed the fullness of her figure and the tightly laced bodice of her gown. The natural carmine of her lips made cherries of them and as she sang her teeth were a line of quicksilver against her olive complexion. Dark, shining hair fell to her shoulders. Jim's lips parted slightly and he was completely captured, as were the others, as she finished her song.

As the last chord trailed off, the patrons clapped and stomped and whistled. The girl curtsied and then moved to the bar where three men stood apart from the others. The expensively dressed one in the center took her hand. He was an enormous man in every physical detail, his face florid and speaking of violent indulgence in all things. The man with Jim jerked his head at him again and led him up to the three men and the girl. The tough man from outside, Jim noticed, was at the bar asking for a straight whiskey.

Jim's guide was saying to the one holding the girl's hand: "Rand, this fella is looking for water so's he can settle and set."

Rand Grafton's protruding eyes eyes turned from the girl singer and, in the turning, seemed to gather amusement. The two men flanking Rand looked sharply at him and got their cues. They started to smile. The girl withdrew her hand from Rand's and a quick frown stamped her forehead.

"Water, eh?" Rand said. "He does now? Set and settle? Jake, a pitcher of water for our friend."

The attention of the saloon was drawn by Rand's booming voice and all eyes fastened on Jim Tylee. Jim's body stiffened and his half smile of friendliness froze.

Rand calmly tock the pitcher of water from the bartender and sloshed it against Tylee's chest. It splashed into Jim's face, down his collar and into his boots. The puddle at his feet grew with the tide of laughter sweeping the saloon.

"There's your water, friend," Rand said. "All you'll get in this valley. Set and settle until you dry. Then get going out of here!" He looked at his two companions and then tilted his head back and laughed. They aped his actions. The girl singer just stared at Jim, lips parted, her hands clasped near her throat.

The cold water shocked heat into Jim. The surging wildness he had felt many times during a charge in the Civil War just past was in him again, a wildness he had hoped to lose in this new land.

He reached out and grabbed the pleasant-looking man of the boardwalk by the back of the neck. With a violent shove, he rammed the man's head into Grafton's quivering belly. Rand's breath made a loud "Umph!" as he lost it.

The saloon noises died as if someone had suddenly shut off a faucet.

There was only the heavy rasping of Rand Grafton's effort to breathe and the shuffle of the other man's boots as he regained his balance and whirled to face Jim in a crouching position, fists balled. The girl's eyes were wide, the knuckles of her clenched fists showing white. Jim was aware that the tough-looking man had hooked his elbows on the bar, his inner amusement undisturbed.

Rand Grafton got his breath at last and his face was livid with fury. Deep shadows of cruelty had come into his bulging eyes.

"If that's your idea of answering a civil question, I don't like it," Jim said flatly.

"Get 'im, Pete!" Rand cut across him.

The crouching Pete licked his lips and his eyes went to Jim's gunless thighs. Then he came rushing in.

Jim stepped aside and clubbed Pete across the back of the neck with his forearm as he went past. Pete's nose plowed a furrow in the sawdust of the floor until he stopped and lay still.

Jim faced Rand squarely. "Seems you don't understand."

"Bull . . . Marty!" Rand and the three moved toward Jim.

Something hit Jim hard from behind. Pete had regained consciousness. The rest was a nightmare of blinding lights. Once Jim was slammed so hard against the bar it jarred him to reality and he found himself still punching feebly at his tormentors. He thought he saw the girl singer's face twisted with fright and the tough man, elbows still hooked to the bar, grinning in that unperturbed way. Then everything went black.

Jim Tylee was conscious of a woman saying, "You've made a pretty mess of that."

"It'll be prettier if he stops in this valley for long," a heavy coarse voice answered.

"Rand, you're crazy," she said. "There'll be another like him—and another—until there's too many for you. How you going to stop them?"

"I'll stop 'em, Linda. Don't you worry about that. Stop 'em like I've stopped him."

Jim rolled over and sat up. The effort made him put his hands to his head. There was a sledgelike throbbing at his temples and the sour taste of dust was in his mouth. When he could force himself to look around, a tight oath escaped his lips.

The girl singer was standing there by his overturned wagon, hands on her hips as she watched Rand Grafton and his men go back into the saloon. The crowd on the boardwalk followed. All but the tough-looking man. He leaned up against the batwinged doors and rolled a cigarette. Jim's belongings littered the street beside the wagon.

Now Linda turned and saw that Jim had regained a sitting position. She came to his side and knelt down. "You feel good enough to get out of here?" she asked.

Jim felt of his jaw several times. It made him wince. "I guess so," he

muttered hollowly. "I must be a sight."

"The trough," she said and put a hand under his arm.

Jim got up and made the trough with her aid. He whooshed the tepid water into his face and over his head. Feeling better, he turned and surveyed the wreckage.

It wasn't as bad as it looked. The tugs were pulled from the trees by the frightened horses, but that was the extent of the damage. Jim could see the team at the far end of the town grazing on the yellow grass.

He went back to the wagon and, kicking some of his belongings out of the way, tried to right it. It went up a little, but fell back. The girl joined him and together they got it a little further. It fell back again.

The tough-looking man on the boardwalk flipped away his cigarette and joined them. The three of them got it back on its wheels.

Jim said, "Thanks," but the man never turned his head. Just went back to lean against the saloon front and roll another cigarette. Jim looked at Linda and shrugged.

"I'll get the horses," he said.

He went down the street and caught up the team. Back in the traces, he fashioned some new tug catches of baling wire and hitched up. Linda had piled all his belongings back in the wagon.

"I'm much obliged," he said humbly. "Maybe you can tell me where I'll find water?"

Linda's eyes widened. "You intend to stay after what happened?"

"If there's good water here."

"Rand Grafton gave you the idea he runs things around here," Linda said. "His Potluck iron controls the whole valley—and this town. Maybe you didn't understand it that way."

"Does he own it all? Got the deed to it?"

"No-o . . ."

"Then," Jim said simply, "I've got my rights. Where did you say that water was?"

"I didn't."

"Obliged," said Jim. "I'll find it myself."

"You're a fool like all the others. Just looking for trouble."

"Not necessarily," corrected Jim. "Just water. But I've found that when you bump into trouble, it's usually too high to climb and too wide to go around. Best thing to do is go right through it."

Linda kept looking at him and he at her. Finally, her long lashes came down to hide her eyes. She said, "Your kind are always fools. Take this main street out for a mile. Leave the road there and use Misty Peak as a guide. You can get across the mountains easiest there."

Jim reached out and took her hand and shook it. "Thanks for the advice," he said. "When I'm set up I'll come a-callin'."

Linda looked quickly up at him and as quickly withdrew her hand. She laughed. "You stay away from me . . . and keep going!"

Jim climbed into the wagon. He lifted the reins and said stubbornly, "Jim Tylee will come a-callin'. Get

along, you two." The team hit the tugs and the wagon rolled on down the street.

Linda looked after him. Her fists were clenched at her sides. Then a tight sob wracked her and she ran into the saloon.

The tough-looking man leaning against the wall stared moodily down at his boots. He flipped his cigarette into the street and muttered: "I'll be damned."

A mile west of town, Jim Tylee fastened his sights on the haze-shrouded peak of the Lone Watch Range and cut through the belly-deep grass. Amid a grove of aspen and cottonwoods, in the reaches of the slopes, he found a pool and spring.

While his horses drank, Jim got down from his wagon and stretched. The effort hurt him a little but it was overshadowed by the potentialities he saw in this land. He wondered if the girl, in directing him how to leave this valley, had guided him to this cool, clear water. She hadn't been very friendly.

The gently sloping terrain was made for cultivation. Jim dug his fingers into the loam and felt of its richness. Then he parked his wagon and unhitched his team. Once they were hobbled, he got an ax from the wagon and cut two poles. He made a lean-to against the wagon and laid out his bed. With a sigh, he placed his rifle alongside the blankets and lay down. For a moment he listened to the wild sounds and then drifted into a deep, exhausted sleep.

Suddenly, Jim was wide awake. He did not move, for his combat training had taught him that. This awakening had been caused by a strange presence. It was dark now and slowly his eyes made out the form of a man hunkered at the opening of the lean-to. Jim's hand crept to his rifle.

"No need for that," said the silhouette.

Jim did not shift his position. "Who are you?"

"Smoke."

"Don't use 'em."

"No. That's what people call me."

Jim's hand came away from the rifle and he sat up. Peering through the starshine he saw that it was the tough-looking man who had been leaning against the saloon wall. That stolid, unperturbed expression was on his face except for the ghost of a smile.

"All right, Smoke. What's on your mind?"

The man disdained answer until he had rolled a cigarette and got it going. "Curiosity," he said. "You aim to stay?"

"Yes."

"Water is that important?"

"Who lives . . . what grows . . . how are things built without water?"

Smoke took a deep drag on his cigarette. "And who dies?"

Jim scrubbed the palms of his hands together. "Many men have," he mused. "Many will. But there's no going on without it."

"A fella can get a drink at any stream for the price of bendin' over."

Jim let the silence run now. Then: "I tried that after the war was over . . . drinkin' out of any stream. Saw thousands of others. Not one of them had anything to tie to. But this! Good land and plenty of it. Plenty of water. A home and . . ."

"And a girl singer?" interrupted Smoke. "She didn't seem to cotton to you."

For a long moment there was only the rasp of the crickets and burp of frogs around the pool. "Maybe not. But if a fella built well enough . . ."

"Rand Grafton won't let you."

"Grafton has enough. He doesn't need half of this valley to be a bigger rancher than he probably already is. I'm not encroaching on his rights. He has no rights here but those he'd force on you with a gun." There was heat in Jim's voice now.

"He's got plenty of guns and they can be persuasive. You'd buck all that for a little water?"

"If I must." Jim said it simply.

There was silence between them. Finally, Smoke straightened, a lean, hard silhouette in the darkness. He flipped his cigarette and its coal made an arcing flare in the darkness.

"I'll be hanged!" he muttered and strode away. Then the strike of his horse's hoofs beat back.

Jim stared hard into the darkness, but Smoke was completely swallowed up. A strange man. Tough-looking, with low-tied guns. Jim shrugged. He lay back and, with the vision of the cultivated land, outbuildings, a singing girl and a tough-looking outlaw whirling in kaleidoscopic parade, he returned to sleep.

In the warm days that followed, Jim Tylee staked out his hundred-and-sixty. He saw the possibilities of a dam down the slope to capture the spring waters against the lean years. It could be located near his southeast corner stake. It could serve for feeders into other parts of the valley so all could have the precious water. Cattle could drink and others could water their homesteads. That would be Jim's first task, so with the help of his team he began logging timber down from the higher reaches.

One day he saw smoke swirling from the aspen and cottonwood grove in which he had made camp. With a light oath, he cut the timber hitch on the log the team was dragging and urged them on at a run. He held the reins in one hand and cocked his rifle with the other.

When he broke into the grove, he reined his team down and stared. His wagon was gone and so were his belongings. The sign was plain in the hoof-torn ground. His lean-to had been uprooted and everything he owned piled into the wagon. The strange smell of the smoke said that coal oil had been poured over the heap before lighting. Food, clothing, seed were beyond redemption.

Black fury gripped Jim. And with that heat surging through him, he was unaware of the approaching rider until the horse was almost on top of him. He whirled, rifle raising.

"That was bound to happen. You should have kept going like I said."

Linda Marshall's voice shocked the glaze of anger from Jim's eyes and he lowered his rifle. She swung down, ground reining her mount and looked at the fire.

"Potluck men." he said hollowly.

"Who else?" Linda shrugged. "I warned you. Maybe you'll believe me now."

He stared at her in a detached way, barely hearing her. The heat and wildness in him was that strong.

He turned and looked at the ruins of his camp. Without turning back, he said, "I'll go into Potluck and see Rand Grafton."

"That's just the thing to do if you don't want to live."

Jim stared at the ground. Then he looked from under lowered lids at that charred pile. "Nothing left," he muttered. "The last of my army pay that was to give me my start. This is good water here and meant for everyone. One man has no right to think he owns it all."

"One man will never take it away from Grafton. Find some other place."

He shook his head stubbornly. "There's other land and other water. but if a man looked at it that way he'd never settle. Someone like Rand Grafton would always be running him off. It was that way after the war. First the land sharks, then the carpetbaggers and shysters. A never-ending circle. When a man finds his place he's got to stay and fight for it. I fought once, looking for something like this. I've got to stay. This is it . . ."

"You're a fool!" Whirling, Linda leaped astride her horse and roweled toward Potluck.

For a long moment, Jim looked after her. Then his eyes went back to what had been his earthly possessions. Cradling his rifle in his arm, he took the path through the tall grass the hoofs of Linda's horse had made. In the distance, the trees surrounding Potluck shimmered in the day's heat waves.

Halfway to town, Jim was perspiring freely and it wasn't all from the heat of the sun. The fire of what had happened and the arrogance of Rand Grafton was in him and he was seeing some of the things the war had done. He was seeing hordes of people milling about a land they had called home, homeless because of men like Rand Grafton. Tyranny and oppression had sickened him then. Here he was faced with it again.

A man setting himself up as God, conquering with bullet and fire, smug in his knowledge that he was all powerful and that no one dared stand against him. But there were always those who must stand . . . Jim plodded on.

He raised his rifle as a rider topped the rise ahead of him and came on. Lazily, the man circled his horse and cut in alongside. They were of a size and this man was hard and lean and tough-looking and his guns were tied low. His reins were draped over the saddlehorn as he rolled a cig-

arette and looked down at the plodding Jim.

Finally he said, "Figured you'd be heading this way."

Jim eased his rifle and said nothing.

"Figured," said Smoke, "after I saw Grafton and his boys ride in and Linda Marshall ride out, then ride back and come out of the saloon wearing a gun."

Jim stopped dead in his tracks. "What?" he exploded.

The man exhaled a huge cloud of smoke and chuckled with a maddening slowness. "Good girl," he said. "One to tie to. She'd try to get Grafton if she could find him. But she probably told you to move on."

Color drained from Jim's face. She *had* told him to move on. She had laughed at him because she didn't want him in trouble. Jim turned and started running for town. Smoke gigged his mount into a lope and ranged alongside him.

"No use getting out of wind, son," he said. "Grafton's hid out with his boys. He knows you're comin', too. He could tell that by the way you fought back the first day."

Jim slowed to a walk. "Hid out?"

"Sure. Linda asked me and I gave her a bum steer. Grafton ain't one to play unless the odds are in his favor."

Jim's eyes narrowed. "What's your interest in this?" he demanded sharply.

The ghost of a smile parted Smoke's lips. "I've been on a long, dim trail for quite a spell," he answered blandly. "Maybeso I'm getting old. I find it more pleasant listening to conversation than the hoot of the owl. And this hullabaloo about water . . . it's importance to humankind. Tried drinkin' some. Must be more to it than that. I've got to find out."

Jim waited out the long pause while Smoke rolled and lighted another cigarette.

"Funny how a lone man gets to thinkin'. Women and whiskey is the only thing in the world worth lookin' for. Then along comes a hombre lookin' for just plain water. He'll fight for it—won't take the advice of a good woman—buck crazy odds—die for it. Maybeso there *is* somethin' besides women and whiskey. I've got to find out."

They plodded along in silence for a while. Then Jim raised his eyes to the musing Smoke and said, "Grafton thinks a lot of water. So much he doesn't want anyone to have any but him."

Smoke nodded. "You and him like water about the same," he said laconically.

At the edge of town, Smoke reined down. Jim would have kept on.

"Where you going?" demanded Smoke.

"To see Grafton," answered Jim simply.

"Sure," grinned Smoke. "I suppose you think him and his boys are bunched in the middle of the street with bull's-eyes hangin' to their vests. They're hid out."

"Where?"

"Follow me."

Smoke got down and tied his horse to a sapling tree. Then he was run-

ning in a crouch behind the building that marked the edge of the town. Behind the bank and the Potluck Restaurant, he held up his hand for silence. The rattle of dishes and the strike of pots and pans came through the flimsy walls.

"They're in the kitchen eating, with the waiter spotting the street," Smoke whispered. "You'd naturally walk up to the saloon. His men could fan out from the rear door and get you in the back. Now, you get up to the front edge of the building. Count a slow four, then fire your rifle. I'm going in the back way and flush 'em. When you hear me, come in the front way. We'll give 'em a little of their own medicine."

As Smoke started to move away Jim gripped his arm hard. "I don't get this," he said. "You dealin' yourself in."

That ghost of a smile was back on Smoke's lips. "I'm thirsty," he countered, "and Grafton ain't gonna cut my water off, too. Hold it!" He grabbed Jim in a viselike grip.

There was a run of boots and men were breaking from the front of the restaurant.

"Heard us talkin'!" swore Smoke. "Come on, kid!" Then he was hitting the street at a crouching run, his two guns in his hands.

Jim came out a step behind, his rifle raised.

Rand Grafton and his three companions had made the middle of the street. Grafton screamed, "Marty . . . Bull . . . Pete!" His guns began working.

Jim fired and jacked the lever of his rifle. He saw two men wilt down and was conscious that Smoke's guns were barking with startling rapidity. Jim fired again and felt something bite into his arm. Then it was over as swiftly as it had begun.

Four men lay sprawled in the street. Smoke was on his knees, his head swaying from side to side, a big red splotch seeping from his shoulder. Jim's rifle was on the boardwalk as he clutched at his forearm.

Jim eased Smoke back and cradled him in his good arm. People were running to them, ignoring the figures in the street. Linda rushed up, crying out, "Jim, what a crazy thing to do!"

"Right," he acknowledged. "Smoke here . . ."

"Sure crazy," grinned the outlaw. Then his eyes swept the circle of awed townspeople. "I could use a drink of water."

"Water for my pardner," called Jim. "It's free to everyone now."

"Yip . . . ee!" chortled the townsman who turned to fetch it. "Now we'll build a town around here."

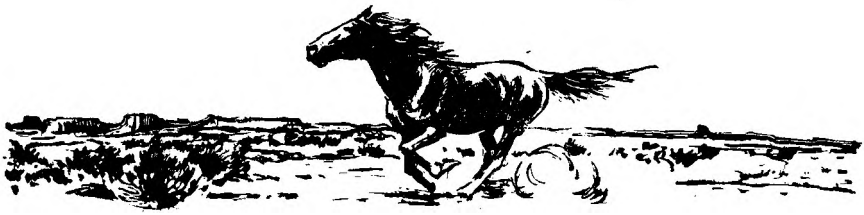
"That's right," said Jim emphatically. And as Linda helped him get Smoke to his feet, her hair fell across his face. He whispered for her ears alone: "I'll be comin' a-callin' sooner than I thought."

"Any time, Jim," Linda said, her eyes shining. "Any time at all . . ."

THE END

BUCKAROO'S BEST BET

By S. Omar Barker



If I had to be an animal instid of what I am,
I wouldn't be no lion an' I wouldn't be no lamb.
I wouldn't be no panther with his weird an' woeful wail,
For I'd be sure to git a knot in such a lengthy tail.

Although I've knowed some good ones, I would hate to be a dog,
An' though there's lots of critters in the critter catalog
There ain't but one I know of that, in case he had to swap,
A cowboy still could figger he was somewheres near the top.

Of course such talk is foolish, but in case it come to pass,
I'd choose to be a pony on a range with plenty grass.
In other words, a cow horse, saddle-backed and pridey-necked,
For that is one dumb animal that's got my full respect.
He's honest an' he's able an' he ain't afraid of sweat;
He's friendly an' he's loyal, but he ain't no teacher's pet.

He knows which end his tail is on, an' when the goin's tough,
He gives the best that's in him—an' it always is enough.
He can't read print nor writin' an' he can't shoot off a gun,
But he sure knows how to turn 'em when the cattle start to run.
He can't quite swing a lariat, but when you rope a calf
You sure can count a cow horse in to do his level half.

He's tough, he's smart, he's useful an' his head is carried proud
Because he knows he's worth his salt in any kind of crowd.
Another thing about him that I'd sort o' like to name
Is that, although he don't run wild, he never gits too tame
To set some store by freedom an' to kick up frisky heels
When springtime stirs his gizzard—just to show you how he feels.

Of course such talk is foolish, but in case I had to be
Some animal besides a man, it sure does seem to me
I'd join the ol' remuda—an' one reason, I'll allow,
Is that, as some ol' cow horse, I would still be punchin' cow!

"I'm for peace—an' I'll fight for it!" declared Santone Sutton when he was branded a

TRIGGER TRAITOR

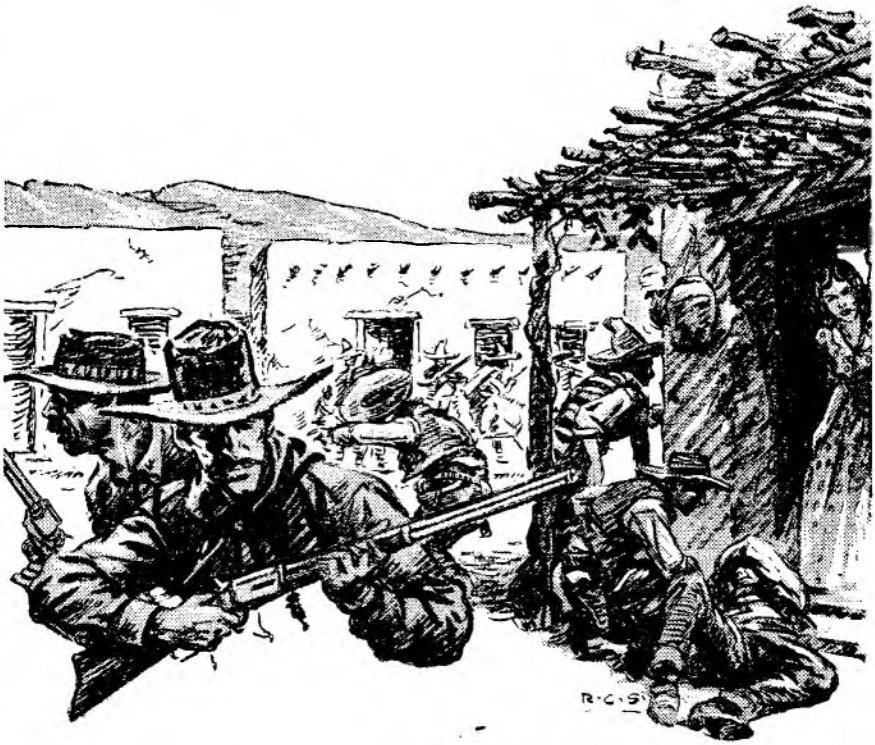
By L. L. Foreman

I

SANTONE SUTTON wasn't endowed with any clairvoyant second sight, nor greatly addicted to foresight, but he rode into Flatfork with a pretty close idea of why the leading cattlemen of the West Corazon range had called him to their meeting. And he could predict how it was going to turn out.

He saw Lyla Shorebank leave her father at the hotel door of the Two Jacks and come stepping toward him with her quick little stride, and he had a moment's wonder. But when he saw Lyla's look, and noticed that Anse Shorebank wasn't frowning, he guessed things were going to turn out worse than he'd expected.

He drew his big sorrel over to the



boardwalk and pulled up. "'Lo, Lyla." His voice, almost soft in its controlled quietness, always came as an odd contrast to his large size and general appearance of shaggy toughness. The signs of a latent talent for turbulent violence were naked on him, and nothing he did could cloak them. Even leaving off his guns didn't help much. It took somebody like Lyla to see beneath the hard surface.

"Hello, Santone!" She was smiling up at him, frankly and openly, where previously a fleeting glance, guarded from watchful eyes, had usually had to suffice. "They're all waiting for you in the hotel."

"Yeah," he said, and sent a look past her.

There was still no frown on Anse Shorebank's face. That stiff, cold man, never forgetful of pride, would ordinarily be stalking up to take his daughter by an arm and lead her off without condescending to pass the time of day with an ex-gun-slinger whose name stood for nothing except a powdersmoke prestige. But today Anse Shorebank, whatever his inner feeling, was keeping his expression masked.

"This is your chance, Santone!" Lyla whispered.

He nodded. "Yeah."

He knew what she meant. Although he had bought the little Sunrise Ranch three years back, and put his guns aside, this was the first time that the West Corazon ranchers had ever asked him to a meeting. They had never accepted him. His past stood in the way. They regarded him, these solid ranchers, as the wild dog of the range, temporarily on his good behavior but likely at any time to break loose and rip the neat pattern of their profit-weaving ways all to blazes.

But they had a valuable use for him now, so they had deigned to call him in. He twitched his wide lips in a dour grin. Toss a bone to the outcast dog, and see him gratefully guard the house better than the well-fed hounds whelped in the kitchen.

Lyla said again, eagerly, her eyes shining, "They're all waiting for you."

"Yeah."

He felt a kind of angry pity for her blind belief. Touching the broad brim of his black hat to her, he rode on to the Two Jacks' hitching rail. As he stood down, Anse Shorebank called to him, carefully courteous, "Good morning, Sutton. We're waiting for you."

"Yeah," said Santone, and followed Shorebank into the hotel.

The lobby was full of men, mostly cowmen. Santone noted that Henry Eberhard's HE Cross was well represented. That was to be expected. Eberhard's outfit was about as big as Shorebank's Swinging S. Men were there, too, from Payne and Barstow's 66, and from Wirt Flint's Star F. They all nodded to Santone, studying him afresh, recalling his reputation and appreciating it. As a fellow cowman he'd found the door barred, but as a top-rank six-gun scrapper he was welcomed now.

There was a high prospect, he mused, that he could make his welcome permanent. And they could do a lot for him. Good neighbors meant much to a man struggling to put a run-down little outfit on its feet. They could lighten his lone-handed struggle with little more than an obliging gesture. Shorebank might even learn to step down off his high horse, in time, and consider the thought of his daughter marrying somebody who wasn't a duke or a banker or some such mighty augur.

Santone sighed to himself. Dammit, a man was foolish to throw away a chance when he badly needed one. The only way to get somewhere was to keep your eyes ahead and never look back.

II

Cigar smoke clouded the meeting room. The cattlemen talked, puffing hard. Each one had his say and said it strongly in agreement with the rest. Their self-roused tempers crackled, and prejudice crept darkly in and routed the last retreating vanguard of tolerance.

The Valle Concha folk, they declared, must go. They had received the logical demands of the cattle interests, and refused to come to terms. The only thing left was to drive

them out of the Valle Concha. They held no title to the land, anyhow.

Cows, Wirt Flint reiterated for the seventh time, were the mainstay of this New Mexico country. This Corazon range hadn't amounted to anything much until the cows came. Cows had to have water. The drought was costing considerable loss. Those damned Concha Mexicans had water the year round from the big spring at Ojo Bello, and what did they use it for? For sheep, mostly, and a clutter of two-bit irrigation farms.

"Hell!" blared Flint. "I say they're standing in the path of prosperity and progress! We need that water." He had something of a knack for getting off a resounding phrase. "In the name of reason, let's have the water before we perish!" he said.

The others, relieved to know that they were contributing to progress, carried the motion and looked at Santone Sutton. He, of them all, had not yet spoken, but there was nothing unusual in that. They knew him for a silent kind of man. It was one of his traits, and it hadn't helped to allay the uneasy suspicion with which they always regarded him. But now they looked to him to voice a sharp edge to their progressive intentions and to talk plans of operation. They had honored him by calling him in, and were sure that he could do no less than volunteer to spearhead the cause.

Slowly Santone scraped his chair back and stood up. "You want me to talk?" he asked in his quiet voice, and they all nodded confidently.

In his thoughts, that had no reflection on his scarred, broad-boned face, he compared these solid ranchers with some candidly lawless land-and-cattle grabbers he had known, and could find small difference. They were scanning him expectantly. He was, by common consent, elected their Big Gun, on the grounds of the tall reputation for which they had condemned him for three long years. They were assuming as a matter of course that he would gladly accept the nomination. They needed him.

Shorebank, tapping ash from his cigar, sent Santone a nod of kindly encouragement. Henry Eberhard, a sleekly fat man with a lot of bounce to him, leaned back in his creaking chair and tipped him a look of semi-intimate good will.

Yet his size and trained control gave him some dominance over them. that they couldn't miss sensing. Flint shifted, pulling his brows together. Payne and Barstow straightened up like new army captains fearing a dig at their dignity.

Santone drifted his gaze over them, and suddenly found himself thinking back to Joe Campora. Old Joe had taken him in as a homeless squatter's brat, raised him, and taught him all that any boy needed to know. A tide of anger rolled slowly up in him. From old habit he felt for crossed gunbelts to hook his thumbs into, but he had given up wearing them some years back.

"Well, Sutton?" Shorebank asked a little impatiently. "What do you say? We need water, don't we?"

"Yeah," Santone said tonelessly.

"And," put in Eberhard, "if they won't share the big spring we're in for a loss? Eh?"

"Yeah," Santone said.

"So we take it, eh?"

"No!" Santone said for the first time.

They were on their feet in an instant, shouting, chewing their cigars, hurling a dozen arguments at him. Disappointment made their speech intemperate and dangerous. The cursed ingratitude of the dog!

Santone raised a hand, though not his voice. "You called me in. I came. You wanted me to talk. I'm talkin'. So kindly shut up while I have my say!"

Thick silence fell. Their eyes, bitterly hostile now, stabbed at him. Anse Shorebank seated himself again, as stiff and cold as he'd ever been. Eberhard lighted a fresh cigar and shrugged. The others stood glowering.

Santone said. "The Valle Concha folk use the big spring for irrigatin' their farms. They been here a mighty long time, a lot longer'n any of us. They learned how to irrigate from the Pueblo Indians, before Columbus was a sailor. They're pretty good folk. I hear 'em called Mexicans an' 'conchas' an' I don't like it any more'n they do. They're Spanish-American people. They're New Mexicans, descended from the Spanish *conquistadors* who landed here over three hundred years ago, an' there's some Indian blood there, too. New Mexicans are Americans from way back—a lot more American than we are, if it comes to that!"

Speech had always come hard to him. He was aware of the Spanish inflection edging into his tone, and was not ashamed of it. Joe Campora had raised him as a Spanish-speaking New Mexican. Old Joe had been a good hombre, a real man, a man of wise tolerance and understanding.

So, when Flint began shouting, "Dammit, he's a white Mex!" all Santone could find to say was, "Shut your fool mouth or I'll fill it with my fist!"

There were so many things he had in mind, but couldn't put into words. The Valle Concha folk—the "conchas"—typical New Mexicans, all of them. And all of them Americans, born on American soil. They had settled this big Southwest and put it on the right track. Cattlemen? The *vaquero* was in their bones and heart, and in them ran the fighting blood of the Spanish adventurers-in-armor who had brought cattle and horses into this sun-washed land long before Miles Standish was even born.

Why, the language of the range was rich with their musical words. The name, buckaroo, was itself a corruption of *vaquero*. The lasso came from *lazo*, the *mangana* was the old New Mexican fore-footing loop, the McCarty hair rope was the *mecate*, and the dally came directly from the *dar la vuelta*, meaning to give a turn or twist, as any fool knew.

Every stock saddle was a copy of the Spanish mounted throne. The *latigo* had originally come up from

below the Rio Grande, along with the *concha*, the cinch or *cincha*, the *rozaderos*, *tapaderos*, and the rest.

Any cowpuncher knew that his chaps were *chaparejos*, just as well as he knew his *sombrero*, the *remuda* of his outfit, and his own private *grulla* or *bayo coyote* that he never used on *rodeo*—roundup—if he could help it, even though the *caporal* cajoled and the *cocinero* threatened to quit cooking. He'd be *loco* if he didn't *sabe*.

"I've sat here an' listened to how you need water," said Santone. "You need it, yeah. The handiest is the big spring at Ojo Bello in the Valle Concha. The Valle Concha folk need it, too, just as much as we do. What if they hold no paper title to their land? In the old days all they asked was a man's word, not his name an' oath on paper. They still figure a man's word ought to be good, a heap better'n a lawyer's document with a notary seal on it. But not you! Not you smart, progressive hombres! You *sabe* the law, an' you know your way around its back alleys!"

He was mad all through, with a hard anger, but he barely showed it. This was his disadvantage—the trained control that he had imposed on himself. It made him appear calm and coolly calculating, while fury boiled deep down below the surface and his next word had to be sought for with laborious difficulty.

"An' you figure me for your Number One Gun—me! The big bullet bucko who'll teach your damned cow nurses how to spill smoke an' take what don't belong to you! Why," he said quietly, "damn your dollar souls, I'll take you to hell first!"

They were remembering tales told of his youth, of his upbringing among New Mexican folk down in Old Mesilla. He could read it in their faces. They were thinking of Billy the Kid, that sure-thing killer with a quirk of loyalty, that buck-toothed, grinning pal of the *paisanos*, who had gone mad dog and taken his bloody toll from cattlemen.

"A white Mex!" muttered Flint, wetting his lips and sliding a hand under his coat.

"Stop it right there!" Santone warned him. "I got no gun on me. Better not show me one!"

"So you're for the conchas?" Shorebank queried icily.

Santone shook his head. "They can take care o' themselves, as you'll find out if you start anything. I'm for peace. I'll fight for it."

Behind his words lay all the tired sickness, the sufficiency of gunsmoke that three years back had caused him to quit the trigger trail and try to settle down. He recalled that in buying the little Sunrise spread he had crossed Anse Shorebank. The previous owner, caught with Swinging S calves he'd not yet misbranded, had died at the end of a seven-sixteenths rope. It had pleased nobody, Shorebank least of all, when a wandering powdersmoke pilgrim bought the place.

"I'm for peace," Santone repeated, and he believed it. "I'm for peace, an' I'll fight you or anybody else for

it every damn inch o' the way! You don't grab the Villa Concha if I can help it! *Sabe, hombres?*"

"White Mex!" muttered Flint, as Santone left the room.

III

He sat that night in the two-room cabin that he called, with some humor, his ranchhouse, mentally casting up the accounts of the day and wishing he could have avoided making his stand. From here on, all cattlemen of the West Corazon, as well as most of the citizens of Flatfork, would condemn him as a traitor to his own kind. They'd understand that he had no other course open to him. They couldn't see it, not one of them. Even Lyla.

He'd had another brief talk with Lyla after he walked out of the hotel. She had been watching for him, and she hurried over to him as he stepped to his horse.

"Santone!" Her eyes were more brightly expectant than ever. "Is everything settled?"

"Yeah," he told her. "Everything's settled. G'bye."

She caught his somber tone, and detected his underlying anger. "Did something go wrong?"

He shortened his faraway gaze and looked at her. "Yeah. They figured me wrong. So did you, I reckon. I was s'posed to jump at the chance to be a cattlemen's hero. Well, I didn't jump!"

Lyla's dismay was clear to read, but she only said, "It was your big chance. What have you done with it?"

"I guess I threw it back at 'em," he answered.

But it was her father who supplied a more complete answer. Anse Shorebank appeared at the hotel door, and called frigidly, "Lyla, I've told you before that I don't care for your habit of speaking with every stray tramp who comes along! Come here, please!"

Lyla paled. She asked Santone hurriedly, "Why did you do it? Oh, why? Why?"

He shrugged, incapable of glib explanations. "I want no part in robbin' decent folks of their land. Your father an' the others can call it what they like. I call it robbery!"

She went as stiff as the cold-faced man calling to her from the hotel doorway. "Are you calling my father a robber?"

"No," Santone replied thoughtfully, seriously. "But he's sure got his eye out for profit!"

Such a remark, he thought now, maybe hadn't been too tactful. Lyla couldn't be blamed for turning her back on him and marching off to her unbending ramrod of a father. With a sharp feeling of being utterly alone, Santone poured himself some more coffee, rolled another cigarette, and tried to bend his mind toward other matters.

Something that sounded like hoofs striking stone penetrated his consciousness. It was entirely natural for him to turn down the lamp, place

it on the floor, and lift a gun from the pair of holstered belts hanging on a nail, without hurry or alarm. He only half opened the door when he stepped outside, and he closed it immediately behind him and waited. A cloud-banked sky made the night black.

The hoofbeats came on. Santone knew, listening to them, when the rider passed the stony up-hill stretch and clopped onto hard clay, and he sang out, "Howdy! Can you see your way or d'you want a light?"

A gun slapped an abrupt report, then paused, and cracked again twice. Santone ducked from instinct, and set off on a crouching sprint around his corral. The shape of a mounted man loomed up, whirled around, and went crashing through the dense piñons. Santone spent one shot, missed, and saved the rest of his shells. The unknown rider was gone, pounding around the piñon-dotted hills, keeping to the winding little valleys and shallow arroyos.

The disturbed horses in the corral were snorting and trotting back and forth, willing to make the most of the excuse to act up. Santone leaned on the top rail and spoke to them, to keep them from kicking the fence down. and went on around the corral back toward the cabin.

As was his way, he weighed and analysed the incident. Whoever had done the shooting was in a nervous hurry, which tended to rule out the likelihood of his being an old enemy from somewhere back along the trigger trail. That kind of man would have come in closer and done a cooler, more capable job, not a clumsy bushwhack botch.

Halfway between the corral and the cabin, Santone stopped short at sight of two dark bulks lying on the ground. He moved swiftly toward them, and with nearness saw that one was a dead horse and the other its rider—the same rider, he realized, who had come up the stony stretch. He knelt beside him, struck a match, and looked soberly down into a dead face that he at once recognized.

"Ramon Alarid!" he muttered, and scowled, wishing he had got a better shot at that bushwhacking horseman.

Ramon Alarid was a tall youngster of the Valle Concha, fiery and impetuous, given to a reckless temper and quick conclusions, but a good kid who'd cut his own hand off before he'd ever unjustly hurt anybody. Two bullets through his back had settled him. It must have been the first shot that dropped the horse, and, as dark as the night was, the shots must have been fired at pretty close range. Horse and rider had fallen without a cry or kick.

Santone straightened up and stared unseeingly into the darkness. He voiced a thought aloud. "Why? Has it started, then?"

He had believed that by refusing to spearhead the cattlemen's cause, he had at least postponed the outbreak of trouble. But here, already, was a murdered Valle Concha man. "Here—right here, on my place! I reckon a cowman did this. I reckon

they're on the warpath! Lord save everybody! The fools!"

He had seen so much of it. He, gun fighter and war hand, had put in more than his share, and lived to wish that he could wipe it all out of his memory. Danger and bloodshed held no morbid thrill for him.

He went and caught his sorrel, saddled him, and strapped a blanket on Old Blackie, who'd pack a sack of grain or a dead man and not roll an eye. The return of young Ramon to his people wasn't going to be a pleasant task. The Valle Concha folk would want to know who did the killing.

The night was blacker than ever when Santone followed the hard-beaten trail down into the flat bottom lands of the Valle Concha, causing the lights ahead of the Ojo Bello village to appear extraordinarily bright. He was surprised at so many lights at such a late hour, for usually Ojo Bello folks went to bed early and rose before dawn, except in times of *fiesta*.

The village was small, consisting of a tiny plaza with a giant cottonwood growing in the center, and from that square hub a half dozen narrow streets ran out a short distance and frayed off into the patternless fringe of cabins, hen coops, goat pens, and midget fields of hand-tilled soil.

What with the lights, the constantly moving shadows and the noise of many voices, Santone wondered if a *fiesta* was going on and what it was about. It seemed a strange time for one. The Valle Concha people were fully aware of the trouble that was brewing between themselves and the West Corazon cattlemen, and their mood was anything but festive.

It was on the fringe that he came upon the crowd, gathered before the flat-roofed adobe cabin of aged Dionicio Ortega, and it was evident at once that something was wrong.

Don 'Nicio, as he was affectionately called, was never one to seek any public attention. Nevertheless, he was an acknowledged leader, an unofficial *alcalde* respected for his down-to-earth wisdom and invariably consulted when any important decision had to be made. In the matter of the big spring it was well known that he had strongly counseled his people to stand firm.

"For," said he shrewdly, "when you let a powerful neighbor share your garden, some day he will be your landlord!"

Santone drew up on the edge of the crowd. In the dark shadow his arrival was hardly noticed until he asked in Spanish, "Has something happened to Don 'Nicio?"

The muttering voices broke off, and faces turned toward him. After a moment's silence somebody replied, "Yes. he is dead."

"No!" Santone exclaimed. "How did he die?"

He was their friend. He knew them all, and they knew him. His knowledge of their mother language, customs and subtle jokes tickled them. But tonight they wore the looks of strangers. Half a dozen of the men came slowly out of the crowd and

stood before him. One of them, a stocky man with heavy eyelids, said harshly, "He was shot dead!"

"Who did it, Nat?" Santone asked.

Nat Davalos let one heavy eyelid droop and opened the other wide. With that round black eye he scanned Santone intently up and down as if searching him for evidence of something.

"All we know," he said at last, "is that somebody rode up in the dark, roused Don 'Nicio out of bed, shot him when he opened the door, and rode off again! Don 'Nicio had no enemies here. But among the cattlemen, yes! So we know where to look!"

The women were cautiously withdrawing out of the crowd, taking the children with them. They were all hastily half dressed, like the men. The murder had obviously got everybody out of bed, and the silence was an indication of their rage. The men stared steadily at Santone, and it came to him that they were seeing him as one of the West Corazon cattlemen.

"The cattlemen held a meeting today," Nat Davalos said. "A war council! And you were there, no? Perhaps this was one of the things planned at that meeting! Hah! Perhaps you . . ."

He shifted the aim of his round eye at patient Old Blackie. He stepped around to the mare, examined briefly its burden, and drew in his breath in a sharp hiss.

"Vic!" he called. "Oh, Vic Alarid —here is your brother!"

IV

Santone dropped Old Blackie's lead rope. He was unarmed, and in the weak light from Don 'Nicio's cabin the eyes of the Valle Concha men were glaring at him.

"Somebody shot Ramon outside my shack tonight," he explained. "I don't know why, unless it was in mistake for me." It didn't sound convincing. The eyes still glared.

Vic Alarid turned slowly from inspecting the body of his young brother. He was a gaunt, active man who worked his small farm well and hired out to break horses on the side.

"Ramon drank some wine," he said in a pinched, shaking voice. "He said he guessed he would go and ask you, Santone Sutton, to your face, if you were going to fight for the cattlemen against us. I didn't want him to go, but he went. You gave him his answer, yes?"

Santone shook his head. "No, Vic. He didn't reach my shack."

"You gave him his answer!" Alarid's voice rose to a fearful shout. "And then, curse your killer's heart, you add the insult of a barbarian—you bring his body back as a warning and to show your contempt! You would have thrown it in the dust of the plaza and ridden away, if we had not been awake to see you! Cattlemen's gunman! I'll kill you for this, Santone Sutton! I'll kill you any way I can! If I had a gun now—"

"There's a shotgun in Don 'Nicio's cabin!" Nat Davalos put in, and Vic darted in to get it.

Reason was gone from this crowd. Like the cattlemen, these Valle Concha men had gone over to bloody violence. In their faces Santone saw the same implacable hatred. They were surging forward to surround him, to drag him down and batter him. Words were straws against this torrent of blind rage. He heeled the sorrel and spun it rearing around, planted a boot heel and stirrup on the chest of Nat Davalos, who was leaping at the bridle, and took off in a shower of gravel.

He couldn't blame them. Two cold-blooded murders in one night were too many. And, as Nat Davalos had said, they figured they knew where to look for the killers. Plunging headlong up the steep trail, Santone looked back in time to glimpse Vic Alarid leveling the shotgun. He veered aside to avoid sky-lining himself, an instant before the shotgun boomed. The charge whistled high and to the left.

It occurred to him that this wouldn't be the last time he'd be dodging pot shots from Vic Alarid and the Valle Concha folks. From the Corazon cowmen, too, likely enough. He wasn't a man to complain at fate, but it did seem to him ironic that he, who had made his stand for peace, should find himself standing alone between the two warring factions, condemned as an enemy by both, and marked as a traitor and outcast. Old Joe Campora would have got a dry chuckle out of that.

He could have sworn he had put the lamp out before leaving, but when he reached his Sunrise ranchhouse a light shone at the window. He approached with some care, but saw no strange horse anywhere around, and it wasn't likely that anyone laying for him would light the lamp. Pushing open the door, he went on in, and the first thing he saw was Lyla Shorebank sitting tiredly at the table.

She regarded him levelly. "Where have you been?"

He didn't answer that. Instead, he put a question of his own. "What's wrong? You look done up."

"Somebody rode out of the brush in a hurry, near Ridge Crossing, and nearly collided with me in the dark," she said. "My horse took fright. Threw me and bolted. I had to walk the rest of the way here." She was dusty, her shirt torn at the shoulder, her hair a tumbled mop.

"Why did you come here?" Santone asked her, starting the fire for coffee. She looked as if she needed it.

"To see if you were home," she answered woodenly. "They're saying you led the raid tonight. I begin to wonder if they're not right! This is a queer time to be coming in. It'll be sunup in a couple of hours."

"What raid?"

"A band of 'conchas' burned the Star F ranchhouse down, shot Wirt Flint dead, and kept his hands holed up in the bunkhouse for an hour while they tore the corrals down and stampeded the horses! None of them was seen well enough to be identified, but one was heard to call your name and say something in Spanish!"

Santone straightened up from the stove. The skin was tight across his wide cheek bones, and his eyes glimmered. "It's a lie!" he said. He touched his gunless waist and pointed to his gunbelts hanging on the nail. "I'd take more'n a quirt on a raid!"

Relief misted Lyla's eyes. "I'm glad, Santone," she whispered. "I didn't want to believe it. But they do! The word has gone out, and they're all gathering in town to organize a vigilante posse. They intend to hunt you down first, then ride over to Ojo Bello and clean it out."

"A lie!" he said again. "I was in Ojo Bello around midnight. I didn't see a man missing. They'd all just got out o' bed, because somebody killed old Don 'Nicio. I went there to take Ramon Alarid's body back. Somebody killed him, too—right outside here. Prob'ly the same man who nearly collided with you in the dark. He was in a consid'rable hurry when he left here."

He took his gunbelts off the nail, and for the first time in three years he buckled them on. They felt weighty and very familiar, and all he had to do was brush the palms of his hands lightly over the poking butts to know that the holsters hung right.

"Where are you going now?" Lyla asked.

"To Flatfork!" he said tersely. "I tried to throw some sense into 'em, an' couldn't. This time I'll try harder!"

She rose swiftly from the table. "No, Santone! You can't go there! You can't!"

"The devil I can't!" he said, and left with a long, light stride that she'd never noticed him use before.

She raced to the door after him.

"They're swearing they'll shoot you on sight! Don't you understand? You've got to get away!"

There had been too many getaways in his life. If life consisted of nothing more than a struggle to dodge death, it wasn't worth living. He called back to her, "I know the Valle Concha men weren't in that raid, as well as I know I wasn't. If I didn't try to stop this hell from breakin' loose, I wouldn't want to live with myself afterward!" His saddle creaked, and he started off. "S'long, Lyla!"

"You . . . you fool!" she whispered chokedly, alone in the doorway of his cabin. "Oh, you stubborn, gun-fighting, glorious, splendid fool!"

V

The thin gray light of pre-dawn greeted Santone while he still had a mile or more to go to Flatfork. It was a low hour, the time when a man could most easily bend toward cynical realism and self-interest. The world lay brooding between darkness and light at such an hour, thinking of the past's certain loss and the future's possible profit.

The stress of his mood was taut, heavy, and the ghosts of old getaways told him that he was heading in the wrong direction. He told himself that what he was doing was for his own benefit. His life was at stake, along

with the ranch that he'd given three years to building up into something worthwhile.

The sun edged up, and it's first sliver of direct light met him as he entered Flatfork. The temper of the town made itself known at once to his trained senses. Outside the Two Jacks, the mob of armed men stood in unrelaxed attitudes, their gestures short and impatient. Even the horses stood tense and ear-pricked, caught by the mood of violent expectancy.

Here was a potential explosion. Here were edgy-nerved men, keyed to commit bloodshed, muttering in tinny voices and restlessly fingering their guns, waiting only for their leaders to come out from confab and give them the nod to hit the rapid road to chaos.

It was suicide to ride into them. Worse, it would spark the fuse and bring on the catastrophe that Santone sought to prevent. He turned the sorrel aside and rode down the straggling alley off the main street, until he reached the rear of the Two Jacks.

With all the seemingly cool recklessness that underlay his past reputation, he tied the sorrel, and walked through the back door into the hotel. He hoped to get to the meeting room and make his talk to Shorebank and the other leaders.

His hope went flittering as soon as he came face to face with Jack McGavin in the passage leading to the rear of the lobby. McGavin, one of the original two Jacks, the partners who had given the place its name, was now the sole proprietor and had grown cautious with prosperity. He blurted, "Holy Smoke, Santone! What the hell?"

"Take it easy, Jack," Santone murmured. He had known the portly proprietor when he didn't call himself McGavin and had run a highly risky business down in Chihuahua. "All I want is to see Shorebank an' comrades in legal crime! How 'bout it?"

Jack McGavin heaved an oath. "No dice, Santone! Sorry. Look, I got a good business here. I can't afford to make enemies like them. You damn fool, slide out o' here quick! Know who they got to take your place? Gar Converse, no less! Know him? I guess you do!"

Santone nodded. "I guess I do. Must've cost 'em plenty."

"Know who Gar Converse brought with him? pursued the troubled McGavin. "His old trigger team—Halfluck Halpern, Windy Rivers an' the Dancer! Man, this is war! I got to figure my bets in it. I hate to turn down an old pal, but . . ."

"Sure, Jack," Santone said. "I know how it is. No hard feelin's, Jack."

He watched McGavin hurry into the lobby and up the stairs, and a cynical grin he hadn't worn for three years quirked his lips. He knew where Jack was going, and what was coming. Oh, well, there was an old score to settle with Gar Converse, and it might as well be here as anywhere. He brushed his palms lightly against his gun butts again, and walked on into the lobby.

A voice at the head of the stairs drawled, "Hi, Santone!"

Gar Converse must have stepped fast from the meeting room to get there so soon after Jack McGavin spilled the word, but he didn't look as if he'd hurried at any time in all his life. He was a blond man who wore his yellow hair long, a man who would have been handsome if it hadn't been for the scar that ran from his broken nose to the left side of his mouth. Santone had given him that scar, in an impersonal range war that had become strictly personal between two top war hands.

It was like Dandy Gar to disdain shooting a man from cover, when others were watching. It was like him to keep his notorious trigger team in the background, when the limelight was beaming on him. The hush that came over the crowd in the lobby was wine and opium to him. He came stepping leisurely down the stairs, his coat open, his hat cocked, a smile on his face.

" 'Lo, Gar," Santone said.

Gar Converse's smile brightened. "Long time no see, eh? How's everything, Santone?"

It was like him to trip on the third-to-last stair. To throw his arms apart to catch his balance. To bring his arms back, and whip his long-fingered hands under his coat in a lightning move calculated to confuse anybody. A clever Converse draw, well rehearsed and smoothly applied, its only serious fault was that it had been played before and Santone knew of it.

The roar of Santone's guns wrecked the last completing motion of the trick. The punch of the butts against hard palms still had the old savage satisfaction. Santone saw Converse's gold-plated, engraved pistols blare their premature spurts, and smoke balls mingled and burned powder grains stung his face. The hot shock passed, and by his cooling skin he knew that, as always at such a moment, there was sweat on his face.

The foursome blast crashed into the silence of the lobby, rang faint echoes from the bottles in the barroom, and with its passing the tense hush returned. Among all the watchers, none knew which of the two gunhawks had come out on top, it had erupted so fast. Then the banisters cracked as Dandy Gar lurched and fell against them.

Sliding down the banisters, he dropped his expensive pistols, and sprawled at the foot of the stairs. He uttered a sound like a sighing laugh, and then was still. A watcher in the lobby grunted a shocked oath. Three men came into sight on the gallery above, their faces stony: Half-luck Halpern, Windy Rivers, and the Dancer. And, after them, Anse Shorebank, Henry Eberhard, Payne and Barstow.

They came trooping down the stairs. The trigger team, their eyes blank, glanced down at the dead Dandy Gar. They said nothing, did nothing. Santone's guns were still out, and he held the edge. But Shorebank rasped icily, "You've killed him, damn you! He was our man, and you've killed him!"

"Yeah," Santone said. "He should've tried a newer trick."

The aftermath of turbulence made him brittle. He was ready to shoot again, and he watched the three gunmen.

"I'm set to accommodate anybody who wants to go on from where he left off," he said deliberately. "Anybody! *Sabe?*"

It was an invidious tribute to his six-gun standing that the efficient trio remained passive. The cowmen in the lobby cursed him under their breaths. And in that moment of mastery he knew that he had lost. He had come in the name of peace, and brought death instead. He had shown final evidence that he was a dangerous gun-slinger, a wild hound who sought out trouble for its own sake.

"I knew it!" he heard Shorebank murmur. "I've known it from the day he came to this range! He's a mad wolf, and he's gone over to that concha pack of thieves and murderers!"

"Murderers?" Santone caught him up harshly. "Somebody murdered old Don Nicio last night. Somebody else murdered young Ramon Alarid. Some others murdered Wirt Flint. Valle Concha men didn't do it. They were all at Ojo Bello when I was there last night, when Flint's place was raided. Hell, they think I gunned young Alarid! They're as innocent o' murder as—"

"Who did it, then?" somebody jeered. "Us?"

"Maybe you've got the answer there!" Santone rapped back. "Maybe some o' you boxheads better look closer to home! Look at the score. The Valle Concha folks have got nothing to win, an' everything to lose. Why would they start trouble? But there are cattlemen I could mention who stand to win high stakes by riggin' up a game that . . ."

Henry Eberhard burst into laughter that shook his ponderous stomach, but Payne and Barstow let out roars of wrathy protest that were taken up by every cowman within hearing. Santone was shouted down.

As for Shorebank, his face was a carved icicle. When the noise partly subsided, he raised a hand for attention. "We have heard the words of the . . . ahem . . . esteemed Mr. Sutton," he stated crisply. "Mr. Sutton has a certain notoriety, deservedly earned. No doubt he has discovered from personal experience that a scoundrel can sometimes side-step judgment by accusing his accusers! In this case, though, his method is somewhat clumsy!"

That clinched it. Fluent speech was the winner. The dry and pungent phrase packed more power than powdersmoke, and ridicule was the mightiest weapon of all. The cowmen snickered, their reluctant respect for Santone shrunken and limited to his guns. The Star F foreman, bitterly bereft of his boss, shouted, "What're we waiting for? Who's riding with me to Ojo Bello?"

It started the exodus. Men poured out of the lobby, joined those outside in the street, and swung into their saddles. There was no stopping them

now. They needed no Big Gun to spur them on and steer them to slaughter.

Santone stared at Shorebank. He thought of Lyla. He thought of the men down in Ojo Bello, men as full of fight and furious indignation as these cowmen. And he thought of the Valle Concha women, of the kids, the little farms.

"That was a clever piece o' talk," he said to Anse Shorebank. "It'll cost the lives of maybe twenty men. I hope you'll always remember that! You can keep in mind, too, that I came in—me, the hombre you call a mad wolf—to try to hold the trouble down. While you—the big law-lovin' rancher—kicked the gate open an' let hell in!"

Shorebank's eyes narrowed, grew studying. "You say you're for peace, Sutton. You say you're not a concha man. Well, come along and prove it! I dare you to ride with our men to Ojo Bello, and there stand up and tell the conchas you're on neither side!"

Santone wondered if it were a trick. Somebody was behind this trouble, deliberately and callously stirring it up. It could be Shorebank. In any case, all a two-gun peacemaker could expect to get out of it was a bullet in the back. But maybe there was still a chance, a faint ghost of a chance, that the bloody chaos could be stalled off. He had gone this far. He might as well go farther. He could almost see old Joe Campora nodding wry agreement.

"I'll go along," he said. "Yeah."

VI

They sat unrelaxed astride their horses, on the rise overlooking Ojo Bello. This was the time to draw deep breaths, take a last smoke, and allow anger to take full control. The village looked dead, but here and there the hot sun flashed on the barrel of a rifle or shotgun poking over a flat roof or around a corner. The men of the Valle Concha had sighted the coming army of cowmen, and had time to order their women and children into the houses and to get themselves ready.

There was the inevitable delay that always assails the attack. It was caused by Henry Eberhard. That fat, easy-going man had cut out of the main party with his group, and gone to gather more of his HE Cross hands. He'd catch up, he said, but he didn't.

He finally did, after keeping them waiting on the rise. He was alone, and they muttered over that. But he motioned behind him to a cloud of dust. "All my boys are coming," he assured them comfortably. "I'll take 'em round to the south side, see. and we'll romp in as soon as you start moving down. Those conchas don't know we've got two forces. They'll be caught in the pinch before they can count their kin! Okay?"

"You oughta been a general, H. E.!" A Swinging S puncher called approvingly.

"Thank you kindly," returned Eberhard, riding off to head his men around to the south.

There was an additional delay of

waiting for the HE Cross force to get into position. During it, Eberhard came back.

"I forgot to tell you," he told Shorebank, "that your daughter's probably down there in Ojo Bello."

"*Wha-aa-at?*" For once Shorebank lost his poise.

Eberhard nodded solemnly. "We ran into a bunch of conchas on the way, an' took a few shots at 'em. They took off. Sam Crissal, he had a spy-scope, and he swore he saw your daughter among 'em. I reckon they rounded in ahead of you, with her."

"Don't worry, they won't hurt her," Santone said. "I reckon they were after me, an' went to my place an' found her there."

"My daughter—at your place?" thundered Shorebank.

"Yeah," Santone said. "She came to tell me about the raid on Flint's."

Shorebank looked ready to explode. The listening cowmen swapped glances and scowled at Santone, their eyes saying plainly that he was a low-down devil who was willing to gamble with the life of a young girl. Eberhard shook his head and rode off to rejoin his men.

"So your friends down there have dared to lay their murdering hands on my daughter!" Shorebank said gratingly. "And no doubt you put them up to it. By heaven, Sutton—"

"We've got to get her out of there!" put in Barstow, who was never able to see beyond the simplest essentials of a matter. "Let's ride on down right now and get the job done!"

There was a chorus of agreement. The doubtfully righteous cause of securing water had abruptly become an almost pious crusade to rescue Lyla, and there was no slightest uncertainty left.

Santone rose in his stirrups. "Hold on a minute!" He looked them over. "Let me go down an' talk to 'em."

"Let you join 'em?" Barstow roared. "Like the devil! You try it an' we'll blast you down!"

Santone shook his head. "I expect *them* to blast me down! If they do, it should go to prove what I've been tryin' to tell you, shouldn't it?" His gaze ranged over them, demanding an answer.

Shorebank, his eyes narrowed and studying again, said, "It would prove, I suppose, that they believe you're their enemy, not their friend."

"Wouldn't it go to show I've told you the truth?" Santone inquired dryly. "Wouldn't it show that there was no reason for me to lie, when I told you that I saw all the Valle Concha men in Ojo Bello at the time when they were s'posed to be raidin' Flint's place?"

Nobody had an answer to that, and even the single-minded Barstow began frowning doubtfully. Santone unbuckled his gunbelts and pushed them into Shorebank's hands. "Maybe they'll let me get near enough to habla, an' I'll talk 'em into lettin' Lyla come out. Anyhow, if they gun me, think it over!"

"And if they don't," said Payne, an untrusting man, "we'll know you're a liar—and *we'll* gun you!"

"It's a deal," Santone agreed. "Keep your gun sights on me!"

Barstow's frown deepened. "In that case you—hell, man, you don't stand a chance to come out alive! I can't figure it. Believe me, if you get as close as a hundred feet from that plaza, we'll riddle you an' you know it! Same goes if you try to duck for cover! What are you up to?"

"You can think that over, too, later on!" said Santone, as he got off the sorrel and started walking down the steep trail to Ojo Bello.

He knew what he was going into, and his sense of fatality was strong. The only prospect for peace lay in his being shot down by Vic Alarid before reaching the plaza. If Vic failed, the enraged cowmen would certainly do it and then come storming down to smoke the folks out of Ojo Bello. Santone's life wasn't worth a dime bet.

And yet, like any man going to his death, while his mind fully accepted the logic of it, his living senses refused to admit its inevitability. Nor did he feel that he was throwing his life away. It would count for something. It might cancel out the tall score of violence that was tallied to his account in the Big Book. Few gun-slingers got that chance before they stumbled off the end of their smoky trail.

His tangled thoughts and feelings, though sustaining him in his walk down the slope, were too much to weigh and consider in such a short space of time. He tried to disregard everything but the remembrance of Joe Campora. Old Joe would have done this thing if he had to, and not bothered to explain why even to himself.

He passed a few empty cabins on the fringe of tiny Ojo Bello, and paused. They were all watching him, but the silence was such that he had the strange feeling of wandering alone through a place that was lifeless and abandoned. He saw the muzzles of a dozen guns covering him from the flat roofs on this side of the square plaza, but they looked unreal. He saw Vic Alarid step out openly into the miniature street ahead of him, with a rifle, and his only emotion was one of sympathy for Vic.

All the Valle Concha folk had withdrawn to the plaza and there forted in—the women and children crowded into the little houses, the armed men on the roofs and waiting behind corners to make their fight as they had often done in other times when under the threat of raiding Mescaleros and Comanches. They weren't running away from the new enemy.

Santone walked a few steps onward and paused again. He called out in Spanish, "To hold a girl hostage! Does it give you pride?"

Old Mariano de Sosa, *alcalde* and master of the *acequias,* rose from a roof. Contemptuous of the cattlemen's guns, he stood upright.

"The daughter of Shorebank is free to leave when she wishes!" he rasped indignantly. "She is not a hostage! We met her coming here from your place, while we were on our way to Flatforks to see if we could talk peace.

She asked to ride in with us. She said she was sure you were not fighting against us, and that she believed she might convince her father and the others that this trouble is being caused by somebody else."

"*Mil perdones, señor,*" Santone apologized.

The aged man inclined his head in acknowledgment. "But we met a crowd of cowmen. They opened fire on us. We were unarmed, and we returned here. She came here with us. And now," he said with chill courtesy, "Vic Alarid has a certain matter to discuss with you!" He lowered himself out of sight again.

Above and beyond the roofs, Santone sighted the heads of Eberhard's party bobbing up here and there against the skyline of little hills. Eberhard had evidently collected a big bunch of men, more than those who worked on his HE Cross. Santone thought he glimpsed the flat-brimmed hat of the Dancer, and it occurred to him that he hadn't noticed any of Gar Converse's trigger team in Shorebank's bunch.

A mute rage filled him. The Valle Concha men, at bay with their women and kids, their attention on him and the cattle crowd up the slope, hadn't yet spied the peril moving furtively up behind them. They were caught in a nutcracker trap, and didn't know it.

"Damn all gunmen who hire to fight—an' damn all those who hire 'em!" he thought. And in the thought he damned and condemned himself, for he had been a hired war hand in his time and taken his pay for it.

Aloud he said, "There's nothin' to discuss, Vic. Go ahead an' shoot!" He would stop the coming slaughter, if he had to stop a bullet doing it.

Vic Alarid, his gaunt face pale, came a few steps farther, hesitated, raised the rifle to his shoulder, and hesitated again. His burning eyes went to Santone's empty hands and gunless waist.

"I never shot at an unarmed man yet," he muttered. "Get a gun!"

Santone scowled. Blast the man, he was going soft, going decent. You could look for that every time, with men like Vic. But the cowmen up the slope were watching and waiting, and they'd come in on the wild lope if Vic didn't shoot—and so would those furtive, sinisterly approaching Eberhard jiggers. He called out harshly, "The devil take your Spanish soul, Victoriano Alarid—you lack the lights an' liver of a rabbit! Shoot, damn you!"

Relievedly, he saw Vic Alarid tighten his lips and line up the sights, saw the forefinger of the right hand curl around the trigger. With a kind of angry dismay, then, he saw Lyla dart around the corner behind Vic, with a fair-sized rock in her hand, and he yelled, "Lyla! Don't you—"

She threw the rock. For a girl, her aim was pretty good. The rock conked Vic Alarid on his bared head, bounced off, and he pulled the trigger as he stumbled to his knees with a surprised and somewhat silly expression

on his face. He didn't shoot again. He let the rifle fall, and held his head with both hands.

Santone gave a gasp of pain, and went down. He pushed himself up on his elbows, looked at the left leg of his Levis, that was already becoming darkly wet and limp, and swore softly. Leave it to a woman to wreck a man's best intentions!

There was some shouting up on the top of the slope. Santone got up, his face a mask hiding pain, and took a test step. The leg bore him. He limped awkwardly on.

"Dammit. Lyla! You shouldn't have done that!" he muttered. He was obsessed by the idea that he had to die. Nothing short of it would do. "Let that rifle be!"

VII

A voice that he recognized as Barstow's sang out, up the slope, "Jumpin' Jupiter! They *did* gun him! Don't tell me he called the score right! Don't tell me! Shorebank, what d'you know about that, eh? Hey, let's go down! No shootin', boys, till we know what's what!"

Santone's leg seemed to creak under him. He stiffened it at the knee and hobbled on. Lyla, holding Vic's rifle, was coming toward him. She reached him in a hurry and propped him up, pulling his left arm around her shoulders.

"I hope you haven't hurt Vic," he said. "He's a good man."

Vic Alarid hadn't fallen farther than to his knees. He knelt there on the ground, looking at them, frowning bewilderedly, not quite himself. "*Mil perdones,*" he mumbled dazedly to Santone.

"*Por nada* . . . it is nothing." Santone answered and nearly fell flat on his face.

They were coming down, the cattlemen, on the fast lope but not with gunsmoke fanfare. Valle Concha men, seeing all guns holstered, began dropping from the low roofs, at first warily, then freely. Visitors were to be met and greeted. Mariano de Sosa, direct descendent of Don Gaspar Castaño de Sosa, early lieutenant-governor of Nueva León, appeared in grave dignity, followed by Nat Davalos, one hard black eye rounded, the other lid closed.

The foremost cattlemen reached Santone, and Shorebank was one of them. Shorebank said something to Lyla, but she replied crisply, "Give him your shoulder on the other side—he's hurt!"

Cowmen and Valle Concha men were mingling cautiously, all talking together, arguing.

"No, *señores,* we were caring for our own dead when the Flint *rancho* was raided."

"Who done it, then? Was Sutton here, too?"

"*Si.* Yes, Santone was here. We thought he had killed Ramon Alarid—and perhaps Don 'Nicio, too. But if one mistake can be made, two can be made. *No es verdad?* Poor Vic—he shot Santone. *Que lastima!* What a pity!"

Supported on one side by Lyla and

on the other by her father, Santone looked around and listencd. Be damn if they weren't making peace talk! It sounded good to him. Then he raised his eyes to the little hills that lay south of Ojo Bello, and drew a swift breath.

Those furtive fighting men weren't touched by peace. They were coming in closer. They were pouring down through the midget valleys and shallow arroyos, guns in hands, and among them he spotted not only the Dancer, but Half-luck Halpern and Windy Rivers. And others—not HE Cross men he knew, but strangers with cool, blank eyes, double-gunned, most of them, and resting saddle carbines across their knees. They were quietly and very efficiently moving to surround the tiny plaza, where women and children, crying and laughing from relief, were emerging timidly from the adobe houses.

"Look!" Santone said urgently to Shorebank. "Tell 'em, quick! Tell 'em the trouble's over!"

Shorebank raised his head, saw them, and with a muttered apology he left Santone and hurried into sight of the advancing horde.

"Henry!" he called to Eberhard. "Call your men off! It's all over!"

"That's fine, Anse!" Henry Eberhard called back to him, pushing forward with his granite-faced jiggers. "That's just fine!" He raised his carbine and fired, and Anse Shorebank clapped both hands to his head and came staggering blindly back into the plaza. Eberhard's laugh rang out.

Santone limped away from Lyla. "Look out, everybody!" he yelled. "Take cover! They're comin' in on the scrap!"

Most of the Valle Concha folk, their alertness sharpened by recent alarm, dived for cover without question. But the cowmen stared, not comprehending how any danger could threaten them now.

A ragged crash of gunfire made thunder outside the plaza. Three cowmen dropped like rags, and a couple of running Valle Concha men scraped dust with their chins and chests. The smack of bullets tearing into adobe walls sounded like the whack of hands on an Indian drum. A wounded cowman lurched against Santone, mumbled something, and sprawled. Barstow, his mind unfailingly reaching for simplification, shouted, "Great Scott, they're out to drop the lot of us!" In this case he happened to be correct.

Santone hobbled over to Shorebank, who had blood tricking down his carved-icicle face.

"Damn your profit-huntin' soul!" he growled. "If you wasn't hit, I think I'd clout you down! Here's what you been plannin' an' schemin' for—the big grab! The free water! How d'you like it? How d'you like bein' in this little two-by-four plaza, eh? With the folks you call conchas an' murderin' Mexicans—fightin' for your damn life!"

The first gunfire blast subsided. The ace-in-the-hole gunmen of the Eberhard mob were reloading, riding around the village, probing it for its

first weakness, Indian fashion. Many of the Valle Concha men were armed only with shotguns, useless at long range.

Shorebank was distraught. "Great guns, Sutton. I never thought of anything like this! On my oath, I thought these people could be bluffed out. No bloodshed . . ." His eyes, glazed with pain and horror, went to groaning men lying in the dust of the plaza, to screaming women and terrified children.

"You took the chance!" Santone grated. "Look around you, damn you, look around! This is just the beginnin'! Your pal Eberhard has double-crossed you as well as the rest of us! Give me my guns!"

Voiceless. Shorebank slid the twin gunbelts off his shoulder and passed them over. "Do what you can!" he whispered shakenly. "Do what you can for these people . . . the women and children . . ."

A man was crying. It was Nat Davalos. He lay half across the doorway through which he had attempted to dart to cover. He had a carbine bullet through his back, and he looked to be dying. "After all I done for 'em!" he sobbed. His Spanish had become a mongrel mixture of Mexican, *Californio*, and execrable English.

He gazed upward with unseeing eyes that were hot pools of hatred. "I worked for 'em, the high-heeled *cabrones!* They said I'd have a good job, high pay, and a house in town. And they shoot me in the back!"

"Who?" queried Santone, bending over him.

"Eberhard and his *banda! Quadrilla de ladrones!* Hidden gunmen!" The dying man gasped a breath. "They pulled the Flint raid. I shot Ramon Alarid—I thought he was you! Gar Converse killed Don 'Nicio. *Y por que?* Converse died. I die! There is no profit. I die from the bullet in the back—from Eberhard, the *patron* I work for! May he roast everlastingly! May he . . ."

A renewed blast from the surrounding men, and an answering volley from those in the plaza, drowned out all other sound. A man, a Shorebank hand, staggered back and sat down clumsily. The flurry slackened.

Nat Davalos' eyelids still fluttered, though he was obviously gone. "Two-tongued *cabrones!*" he spat venomously. "I worked an' killed for Eberhard an' a bullet in the back is my pay!"

He was dead, then, and Santone glanced aside at Vic Alarid and said, "He's gone, Vic. He's gone . . ."

Payne came through the doorway, cursing. "Think of it! Henry Eberhard—him! What's he trying to pull? A massacre? He must be crazy! He can't get away with it!"

"The hell he can't!" retorted Santone. "He can lay the blame later on these Valle Concha folks. He can claim they jumped us an' that he had to fight 'em to a standstill in tryin' to come to our rescue. Who'll be here to call him a liar? By that time his jiggers will have hunted out o' the country those who are still alive—an'

he'll be king of all the West Corazon range, the Valle Concha, an' the big spring!"

"That smart son of a gun!" said Payne almost respectfully. "He must've figured every move of it. What do we do?"

"We'll do what we can," said Santone, "an' what we can't do we'll make a stab at! I want you an' Barstow to get the boys together an' make a play to break out, over there at the southeast corner, 'longside the church. Try an' keep those Eberhard jiggers busy for a while there."

Vic Alarid still stared broodingly down at dead Nat Davalos, the killer of his brother. Santone turned to him. "Vic, you got a field of Indian wheat just south o' the plaza. I figure to try to get there an' set it afire. The wind's about right to carry the smoke east, roughly."

Vic nodded. His gaunt face showed no betraying flinch at the thought of a hard-worked crop that would never be harvested. In times of common emergency, individual sacrifices had to be made, and made with good grace.

Santone was clicking off decisions in his mind. The three tame years had not dulled the sharp edge of his fighting craft. He was Santone Sutton, top-rank gun-slinger, and in the old days he'd never been rid of the conviction that some day, somewhere, he would go out in a last trigger tempest.

He said to Vic, "Get some men with axes, an' have 'em ready to chop through the back walls o' the houses on the south side as soon as there's smoke enough to keep 'em from being seen breaking through. Tell Mariano de Sosa to gather ev'ry man into those houses, ready to follow your axmen through when I raise the yell. We'll show those damn outland jiggers if us New Mexicans can fight or not! We'll show 'em all!"

VIII

His leg dragging painfully, Santone crossed the bullet-swept plaza. At the southeast corner a stuttering volley of gunfire crashed out. Led by Payne and Barstow, the cowmen were passing the church and shooting their way on through the little street behind it. Bullets ceased scarring the hard-baked earth of the plaza, as the Eberhard gunmen raced to converge on that corner. A desperate attempt at a break-out came as no surprise to them.

Santone heard Lyla's voice, muffled and thinned by the racket, calling urgently after him. He didn't respond, didn't look back. Women were complications in a man's last fight. Made him tend to think twice, and shook his decision and efficiency. He took the southwest corner, quit the plaza, ducked into a backyard and laboriously climbed a fence. Somebody off to his left must have caught sight of him, for a bullet split a dry fence post under his hand. He tumbled on over, flattened out, and began crawling.

On this south side the little houses

all ran together, in the old style that was fashioned primarily for defense against Indian marauders, so that all that was presented was an uneven and doorless wall of rough adobe. Vic Alarid's wheat field reached to within a hundred feet of the wall. It was on the hundred-foot margin, dotted with goat and sheep pens and burro stables, that Santone knew he faced the worst risk.

Somebody was stalking him. A man with a rifle. Santone spotted him darting at a crouch around a pen of frightened and bleating sheep, and guessed it was the sharpshooter who had tried to pick him off the fence. The Eberhard guns were blocking the southeast corner with a lot of force, but they weren't neglecting other avenues of escape. They were keeping close watch on all exits from the plaza.

Lying flat, Santone slid his fingers to his right-hand gun. Immediately, the stalker rose, catching the slight movement, and over the leveled rifle Santone recognized the pale blue eyes of Half-luck Halpern. While still on his stomach, Santone drew and fired. An instant later the rifle spat once, and by the sudden rake of pain across his shoulder blades he knew he was hit again.

But Half-luck Halpern was sagging against the pen, while the sheep cried out their terror and jammed themselves into one corner. The smoking rifle sagged, too, and fell, and Santone crawled on.

He spoke a thought aloud, something he hadn't done in a long time. "I'm goin' to make it!"

He reached the edge of the wheat, tore out handfuls of it, balled it in his hands. It was ripe and dry and crisp. When he thumbed a match and put the flame to it, it blazed and crackled. He tossed the burning ball into the field, and did the same again, farther on. And again. The ragged tongues of fire ate into the wheat. Smoke, thrust forward by the heat and the light wind, rolled ahead like a low-lying fog across the field.

The fight at the southeast corner was not going well for the cowmen, from the sounds of it. The guns of the Eberhard mob were thudding rapidly nearer. This was the catastrophe that Santone had hoped wouldn't materialize—that the cowmen would be forced back too soon, and the Eberhard gunmen, making the most of it, would break through into the besieged plaza. The smoke was actually aiding the attackers by affording them a screen.

He looked back. All along the wall holes were appearing and chunks of adobe were caving outward, as the axmen chopped through. It bore an odd resemblance to giant earthworms breaking through a crust of mud. Santone raised the yell.

"Come on, hombres!"

They came plunging and tumbling through the holes, the dark-eyed Americans of the Valle Concha with old fighters' names like Villagra, Ortega, de Baca, Ulibarri and Otero. They wore no battle-dented armor and

carried no desert-tattered banners emblazoned with their arms, but their answering yells might have come from the throats of lean, sun-blackened adventurers who, for all their faults, could fight like devils and die like *caballeros.*

Santone pushed himself up onto his feet and limped on over the charred wheat field and into the smoke. He didn't look back again. He didn't need to. The *caballeros* of the Valle Concha were right with him, and would still be there at the finish.

The front of flame, though it roared fast before the wind, retarded their progress across the field. The smoke was so thick nothing could be seen until, through stinging eyes, Santone made out the spire of the church a good bit off to his left, and knew that his wounded leg had caused him to veer off direction. But he was near the edge of the burned field and his feet were heating up, so he made the last few steps and found himself at the tail end of the little street behind the church.

From the thunder of gunfire near the church it was terribly obvious that the Eberhard gunmen had already passed by here. Santone guessed that they must be staging a final assault on the cowmen. He turned his steps in that direction and trudged up the narrow street, guns cocked in his hands, to make a one-man rear attack on them. He wondered if the Valle Concha men had got there in time to be caught with the cowmen, and he cursed himself for having gone astray in the smoke. He belonged there with them, making their stand behind the church.

Two horsemen came charging down the street. He could see their outlined bulks in the smoke, but he figured they were cowmen or Valle Concha men who had somehow managed to break out, and he stood in the street and waved them to halt. Dammit, they'd have to join him in a rear attack, whether they liked it or not.

The horses, already spooked and almost uncontrollable, reared up before him. He dodged out of the way before they came down, and at that short distance he recognized the two riders. And they recognized him.

He saw Henry Eberhard twist his fat bulk in the saddle, reaching for a gun. But it was to Windy Rivers, thin and lithe, that Santone gave his first attention. And there, for once, he misjudged. Windy Rivers was a trigger hound, and Eberhard was a cattleman who had often freely admitted that it took him two minutes to shoot and five shots to hit a mountain—but it was Eberhard who whipped his gun out first and fired.

Santone, punched off balance, missed Rivers by a wide margin and hit Eberhard's horse. He fired again, bracing himself, and Windy Rivers lurched forward and cried out, "Damn you, Santone, can't you ever die?" Windy's horse threw him then and took off across the burned field. The gunhand lit on his head and said nothing more.

Like a great lizard, Eberhard's horse struggled forward on the knees of its forelegs, eyes wild and glaring. It toppled over slowly, hardly kicking, and Santone knew regret for it. A good horse was a good horse, whatever its rider.

Eberhard had time to step off. He did it swiftly, adeptly, holding his gun high and ready to slice down. His clothes were torn and stained, and he was hatless. But his eyes, fastened on Santone, were as cool and deadly as those of any gun-slinger that Santone had ever met.

Eberhard brought his gun barrel down. "Good-by, Santone Sutton!"

"G'bye, Henry Eberhard!" Santone said.

They fired together. Santone thought he saw, through the smoke that was somehow becoming thicker when it shouldn't, the fat man weave like a drunk and sink down on the street. By that time he couldn't trust his eyesight. He was falling over. The world had become a place of black smoke, and he was very tired.

"Damn 'em!" he muttered. "Who do they think us New Mexicans are?"

Then—it seemed years later—men were crowding the little street. Their mouths went through the motions, but all he heard was noise.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, we were backed to the wall when the conchas ramped in an' saved our skins!" Barstow shouted. "Can they scrap? I'm tellin' you! I mean," he appended carefully, "the Valle Concha men. Brother! You dropped Eberhard, eh, Sutton? That's good! That's damn good!"

And Shorebank, his face gray and grimed, a gun stuck in his belt, said gravely, "You puzzled me, Sutton. I wondered about you. It isn't very often, you know, that a man turns up who . . . well . . . fights alone for what he believes in. Especially a gun—ahem! I . . . I wish to apologize." It was a lot, coming from him.

But Santone could catch only a word here and there. He was stiff with pain, and his throat was dry from swallowing smoke, and right now he didn't much care what anybody was saying, anyhow. All he wanted was some peace and quietness, a place where he could rest and hang up his guns, where the neighbors would drink a beer with him and swap favors.

"Help me up, dammit, you fellows," he said croakingly. "Help me home."

And still they talked. "We can cut the ditch and make a waterhole," Vic Alarid suggested, and Payne interposed promptly, "Not without we pay for it—in cash or cattle. You fellows have taken a loss here, that wheat field and all. We'll get together on that, eh?"

It was Lyla who stopped the talk. It was her lap, Santone discovered, that his head was resting on.

"Darn your cattle and wheat!" she told them. "Help us home, will you? Here, dad, take his guns. They're heavy on him . . ."

THE END

SHOW YOUR COLOR, TINHORN!

By A. Kenneth Brent

Royce Brandon was through in Hangman's Gulch unless he could prove he had a man's courage as well as a gambler's cunning

MR. ROYCE BRANDON had answered to many names in his varied and spotted career. He had been called a gambler but that was not quite correct, for, while he often dealt the pasteboards in a game of stud or blackjack, the element of chance was seldom involved. Again, he had been known as a mining promoter and though it was true that on occasion he had peddled gold or silver stocks, he had never been too convinced that the companies he represented were as interested in taking riches from the

the earth as from their investors' pockets.

But the name he had heard most frequently in connection with himself was that of tinhorn. He had never objected particularly to being called this. But he always insisted that, if it were true, he was a tinhorn of very superior talents.

At the moment Brandon was lounging on the porch of Hangman Gulch's only hotel enjoying a rich Cuban cigar. He liked to sit here after a good breakfast and watch the noisy activity of this turbulent gold-mining town. Already this morning high-bedded ore wagons creaked through the muddy, deep-rutted streets on their way to the mills. Bearded, lean-featured prospectors shouldered along the crowded board sidewalks heading for assay offices. And roistering miners, free from the night shifts, flocked to the saloons and hurdy-gurdies.

Brandon liked this sort of raw frontier turmoil and felt at home in it. He had done very well for himself what with one thing and another during his first month in Hangman Gulch, but he had yet to make the sort of big-money killing that had made him famous or notorious in more than one Western mining town.

He was speculating idly on some means of doing this when he saw young Jack Embree, clerk at Western Union, leave the telegraph office and cut across the street toward the public bulletin board in front of the express office. Embree carried in his hand a piece of yellow paper.

Brandon stood up and walked to the edge of the porch. He was always curious about public notices that came over the wire. Sometimes the information they contained could be turned to a profit if used right.

"Jack," he called.

Young Embree heard him and swung over to the hotel. Brandon motioned to the telegram and Embree handed it to him. The message said:

Public Notice: Dude Cornish, bare-knuckle champion of Australia and other British Dominions, is now on exhibition tour of Western America. He will be in Hangman Gulch on Saturday, July 4. Any and all challenges accepted. Prize for staying five rounds with Cornish—$100; for a victory—$500. Admission to exhibition—$5.

Brandon dipped a hand into his coat pocket and came up with a double eagle. He flipped the gold piece to Embree.

"That's for letting me tack this notice up, Jack," he said.

The young telegraph clerk's eyes popped. "Sure, Mr. Brandon," he said. "You bet!"

Brandon let another coin clink into the youth's hand. "And that's for not saying anything about this until I do get it posted. May be a couple of hours or so."

Embree pocketed his sudden wealth and headed back to the telegraph office. "Not a word," he promised.

Brandon studied the telegram again and rubbed his long jaw reflectively. He didn't quite see it yet, but he knew that there was money for him in this if he handled it right. He closed his

eyes in concentration for a moment, and then it came to him clearly and fool-proof. Royce Brandon's brain worked fast when there was hard cash involved.

He smiled, thrust the telegram into his pocket, and stepped out onto the boardwalk. In dress, Brandon, with his expensive black suit, white silk shirt, diamond stickpin, and gray flat-crowned sombrero, made a strange contrast to the rough-clad men he brushed past. But in build he might have been one of them, for he was a big man, wide of shoulder and lean-waisted, and he topped six feet by an even inch. There was no flabbiness about him, either, for the calling of his trade made it necessary for him to stay in trim.

Brandon turned in at the Lucky Cuss Saloon and made his way to the long cherrywood bar. Sid Potter, the fat, balding bartender, came over to him.

"Sid," Brandon said, "pass the word that I'm taking even money bets that Olaf Jorgensen will be beaten at bare-knuckle fighting July 4th—day after tomorrow."

Jorgensen, a huge, heavy-boned Swede, had been bare-knuckle king of Hangman Gulch since the camp had mushroomed into existence.

Sid Potter's eyes widened. "You're crazy, Brandon," he said. "In the first place Swede Jorgensen has already half butchered every good fighter in camp who's tried to beat him."

"My offer stands," Brandon said.

"In the second place," the bartender went on, "I don't think the Swede will fight any more. I hear Lynn Baxter has about convinced him that bare-knuckle scrapping is plumb uncivilized."

A slight frown knitted Royce Brandon's forehead. He had heard that rumor also. Lynn Baxter and her father worked a small claim about two miles east of Hangman Gulch, and Olaf Jorgensen did the heavy work for them. He was pretty much under the girl's influence, as many men in camp would like to be if they had the chance.

"Jorgensen will fight," Brandon asserted. "You pass the word about my betting offer."

Sid Potter shrugged and began marking the announcement on the back-bar mirror with a cake of soap. He turned around and said. "I don't know who you're figuring on, Brandon, but for my money no one in the Gulch can last through three knockdowns with the Swede. Put me on your list for a hundred."

Brandon smiled. "Agreed," he said. "Pass the word I'll be back here in an hour to take any other bets."

He left the saloon then, crossed to the livery barn, and called for his horse, a deep-chested black stallion. Riding east out of Hangman Gulch, Brandon reflected with satisfaction on the affair he was brewing. Olaf Jorgensen was plenty good for the kind of untrained competition where he had only to rely on brute strength and power for victory.

But when he fought Dude Cornish it would be a different story. Cornish was a big, power-laden Australian, and years of battling for a living had made him master of every trick, fair and unfair, in the bare-knuckle game. Brandon had seen Cornish fight several times in the past, and he knew how good the man was.

At the end of a quarter hour's easy canter through the rough, rock-scarred hills Brandon reached the Baxter diggings. It was not an impressive layout. Brandon pulled rein on his stallion and surveyed with critical eye the narrow-mouthed tunnel opening into the hillside, the long, rickety-looking sluice trough, and the shabby two-room living shack that made up the camp. And yet, Brandon knew, the wealth of a location could not be judged by externals, and he had felt from the first time he saw this claim that, if worked right, it would some day yield a real treasure in gold.

Olaf Jorgensen came out of the tunnel while Brandon was still looking the place over. The Swede was a big man in every respect. He towered well over six feet, but his long, thick-muscled arms and great barrel chest made him seem even taller. There was a boniness about him that seemed almost like a plating of armor. His wide, flat face was, curiously, almost unmarked in spite of many fights and it usually held a little smile, for the Swede was by nature a good-tempered man.

Now, however, he eased his heavy miner's pick to the ground and looked at Brandon with faint suspicion. "You vant somet'ing, maybe?" he asked.

Brandon stayed on his horse. "I just wanted to make sure that you'd be in the bare knuckle challenge fights at the 4th celebration, Swede," he said.

Jorgensen shook his massive head. "I fight no more, mister," he answered.

Brandon let a carefully calculated smile touch his lips. "Getting fist shy?" he asked.

"You heard him say he was through fighting!"

The sound of a woman's voice made Brandon twist quickly in the saddle, and he saw Lynn Baxter standing there in the doorway of the shack. She was a pretty girl by any standards, but here in this raw mining country her beauty was doubly impressive. She had black curly hair that touched her shoulders, and her eyes were an unusual shade of golden brown. The Levis and rough flannel shirt she wore could not destroy the contours of her shapely body.

Brandon removed his hat. He had seen this girl several times and had, in fact, gone for a Sunday ride in the hills with her once. Had he had his way that would only have been the beginning between them, but she had made it very clear that day that she had no interest in a man who made his living at cards and in ways even more doubtful.

He said to her now, "The rumor has

been going around that Olaf is afraid to fight any more. Of course, I didn't believe that but now . . ."

Brandon let his words trail off, the meaning clear. He looked at Jorgensen, and a dark, angry redness climbed into the Swede's face.

"You tank I von't fight." Jorgensen growled. "You tank I'm scared. I fight, mister. I fight anybody, anytime."

"Olaf!" Lynn Baxter said angrily. "He's just baiting you!"

A thin, wiry old man came to the mine entrance. In spite of his size and age there was a look of tough endurance about him. This was Jim Baxter, Lynn's father and one of the smartest prospectors in the hills.

"Let Olaf do what he wants to do, Lynn," he said quietly. He turned to Brandon. "You think you know someone who can stand up to Jorgensen, friend?"

Brandon shrugged. "There are one or two new boys in town who look pretty good to me," he said.

"I fight anybody," Jorgensen muttered again.

"I'd bet my whole poke on Olaf to beat anyone in the Gulch." Jim Baxter said, and added ruefully, "If I had a poke to bet."

This was the opening Brandon wanted. "If you're that set on the Swede," he said, "we might make a deal. I've got a thousand dollars that says he'll get beat Saturday. I'll bet it against an eighth interest in this hole you've dug here."

Jim Baxter squinted up at Brandon. "You're pretty sure of yourself," he commented. "But then I'm sure too. I'll just take you up on that little bet, my friend."

"Dad!" Lynn exclaimed. "Don't be a fool!"

Baxter turned to her. "Lynn, honey," he said, "any man who digs for gold is bound to have a little gambling blood in him. Now, we need money bad to work this property right. I'm thinking Olaf can get it for us, come Saturday."

"You bet," Jorgensen said happily. "I vin you a thousand."

Lynn turned on Brandon, her eyes blazing. "All right," she said scathingly. "I guess the bet is on. I can't stop it but I can change the terms. The only reason we need money is to hire more help to work the mine. This is going to be our bet: If you lose we'll take your labor instead of your cash. You'll work out the thousand at the rate of $200 a month. I'd love to see you get your hands dirty and keep them that way for a while!"

Brandon was startled momentarily by the vehemence of the girl's words, but he recovered quickly. He put his hand in his pocket and heard the reassuring rustle of the telegram announcing the coming of Dude Cornish.

"I'll agree to those terms, Miss Baxter," he smiled. "Of course, Jorgensen has to agree to meet all comers. And if he should change his mind about fighting, you forfeit the bet."

"Any three," the Swede said.

"Half hour rest between fights if I need. And don't worry, I fight."

Jim Baxter fixed Brandon with his stare. "You know what happens to a man in this country who welches on a bet," he said.

Brandon knew. He said, "I've got my faults, Baxter. Welching isn't one of them."

He swung his stallion around then and rode out of the camp. On the way back to town he tried to whistle a tune, but it died in his throat. He should be feeling good, he knew, for he had accomplished everything he came for. And yet he found himself thinking of Lynn Baxter and the scornful look she had given him as he left. It troubled him, as such things seldom did, and took the edge from his self-satisfaction.

When he reached Hangman Gulch, he went directly to the Lucky Cuss Saloon. The news of the even odds he was offering against Olaf Jorgensen had spread, and for half an hour he did a brisk business, taking all bets large and small. His last customer was the county sheriff.

"I'll take fifty of that," the old lawman said. "You've finally got yourself out on a limb that won't hold, tinhorn."

Brandon felt the brashness his encounter with Lynn Baxter had taken from him returning. He slowly lit a cigar and blew out a cloud of smoke.

"You may be right, sheriff," he said. He took the telegram about Dude Cornish from his pocket and handed it to the lawman. "Oh, by the way, I wonder if you'd mind posting this for me?"

The sheriff took the paper and read it slowly, an angry whiteness tightening his mouth. Brandon did not wait for the man's verbal explosion. He left the saloon quickly and crossed the street to the telegraph office. On a yellow message pad he wrote:

Hangman Gulch welcomes Dude Cornish. Royce Brandon offers five hundred dollars for victory over local champion Olaf Jorgensen.

Brandon signed his name and handed the telegram to Jack Embree. "Send that to where the Cornish wire came from," he said. "Pine Ridge, I guess."

That night Brandon sat at a corner table of the hotel dining room slowly working his way through the house's special steak dinner, a token of his day's success. He had just reached the dessert course when he glanced up and saw Lynn Baxter coming toward him. The long blue chambray dress and bonnet to match that she wore now made a sharp contrast to her appearance in trousers and flannel shirt that afternoon.

Brandon stood up and offered her a chair as she reached his table, but the girl ignored it. Her eyes, angry and concerned, found his, and there was a whiteness in her cheeks that drove out the golden tan.

"I suppose you're well satisfied

with yourself, Mr. Brandon," she said, her words edged with scorn.

"I don't understand," Brandon said politely.

"You understand," Lynn Baxter told him. "I'm talking about the fact that Dude Cornish will be here to fight on Saturday."

Brandon moved his hands deprecatingly. "A lucky break for me," he admitted.

"It wasn't luck," the girl contradicted. "I asked Olaf not to fight when I heard about it, but he wouldn't agree to that, of course. He has a man's courage, not a tinhorn's cunning."

Brandon reddened. He had no answer for that. "The Swede has a chance to win," he said defensively.

"You know he hasn't," the girl said. "We've heard about Cornish. We know how good he is. He's killed one man or more in fights. Olaf has been with dad and me for a long time, Mr. Brandon, long before we came to this camp. He's like part of the family to us. I came here tonight to tell you that if anything happens to him Saturday, I won't forget that it was you who caused it."

Lynn Baxter turned quickly and left the hotel dining room before Brandon had a chance to speak again. He stared after her until she was gone, and then he looked down at the wedge of apple pie on the table before him. It was a dessert that he usually relished but now he had no stomach for it. He threw a gold piece down beside the plate and walked out of the dining room.

In his room Brandon undressed slowly and slid into bed. He lay there a long time staring into the darkness, trying to occupy himself with small, unimportant thoughts. But the last thing that crossed his mind before drowsiness touched him was the word "tinhorn."

The sharp tattoo of knuckles on the pine door paneling brought Brandon out of a light sleep. He opened his eyes and blinked them against the strong sunlight beating through the unshaded window. Rolling out of bed, he put his clothes on loosely and opened the door.

Jack Embree stood there, a telegram clutched in his hand, a frown on his smooth face.

"Come in, Jack," Brandon said. He took the telegram and read it at a glance. It said:

Dude Cornish broke hand in fight at Pine Ridge last night. Appearance at Hangman Gulch indefinitely postponed.

Brandon crushed the paper in his lean fingers and let it drop to the floor. He stared blankly at the brown-papered wall for a long moment and then sat down heavily on the edge of the bed.

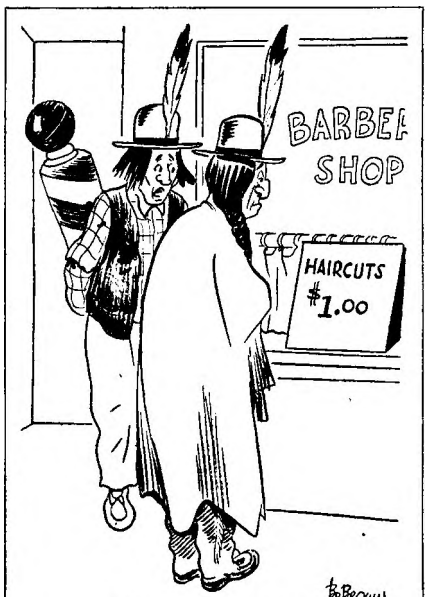
"A tough break for you, Mr. Brandon," young Embree said sympathetically.

Brandon nodded absently. Years of living by his wits had taught him that there was nothing to be gained by self-pity. Already his brain was active, looking for some angle or

outlet that could turn this disaster to his advantage. And yet he knew there was none. The unreckonable factor that lay in any good scheme had risen up to beat him. The money he had bet he could stand to lose, for he had won and lost big money in the past. But the thought of laboring almost half a year in the Baxters' mine was another thing.

"Jack, go out and find Tiny Greathouse." Brandon said finally. "Tell him to come up here."

Twenty minutes later an enormous, flabby-bellied man came into Brandon's hotel room. This was Tiny Greathouse, a saloon loafer. He was not a hard man, but his tremendous size and weight had won him some



"Just think—we used to do it for nothing!"

important bare-knuckle fights in this mining camp.

"Tiny," Brandon said, "how would you like to fight Jorgensen tomorrow?"

"I'll tell you how, Brandon," Greathouse said in a curiously high-pitched voice. "I wouldn't like it worth a damn. I fought that Swede a month ago and I'm not over it yet. He almost killed me."

Brandon took his wallet from his pocket. "It's worth five hundred dollars to me to see him beaten."

"You've sent for the wrong man," Greathouse told him. "My guts are worth a lot more than that to me."

The big man left the room, and Brandon put his wallet back in his coat pocket. He got up and followed Greathouse out of the hotel.

He spent the morning looking up other men, most of them mine laborers, who had done bare-knuckle fighting in Hangman Gulch. But. like Tiny Greathouse, none of them was interested in meeting Olaf Jorgensen, for the simple reason that most had already fought him once.

At the end of the day Brandon put a notice on the public bulletin board raising his offer to $750 for anyone who beat the Swede. It brought him no response.

At three o'clock the following day Royce Brandon left his hotel and walked to the big vacant lot behind the express office. Already the clearing was packed with raucous, yelling miners and prospectors demanding action. In the center of the lot was

a small, bare, roped-off space. Here all of the camp's prize fighting took place.

Brandon saw Olaf Jorgensen, stripped to the waist and looking like a brown mountain of bone and muscle. He was standing in one corner of the makeshift ring and with him was Jim Baxter. Brandon also saw Lynn Baxter. one of the few women in the crowd. standing near the Swede's corner.

Brandon pushed his way through the throng of men and climbed into the ring. Immediately an expectant silence blanketed the noisy crowd.

"My price has gone up," Brandon announced. "I'll pay a thousand dollars to any man here who can beat Olaf Jorgensen!"

An excited murmur traveled through the crowd and there was some pushing and shoving as men tried to coax their buddies into fighting, but no one came forward. Brandon watched them tensely for a minute, and then he knew that his offer would have no takers.

Jim Baxter took a step toward the center of the ring. "You'll pay big money to have someone else do your fighting for you, won't you, Brandon?" he said. "You've got the build for it. How about doing your own dirty work for a change?"

A spontaneous roar of approval swelled from the spectators. Someone yelled, "Show your color, tinhorn!"

Fine beads of sweat broke out on Brandon's forehead. He looked at the shouting crowd and at Olaf Jorgensen's grinning face. And then his eyes shifted involuntarily to where Lynn Baxter stood. He saw the momentary flicker of surprise on her face as she heard her father's challenge. But as Brandon watched he saw the surprise change into a smile of understanding. It was a smile that said she knew he would not fight, that now he would crawl from the ring and, in front of everyone, show his true color—yellow.

It was not Baxter's challenge nor the shouted demands of the crowd that kept Brandon in the ring. It was that smile. Slowly he walked to the corner of the ring opposite Jorgensen. He pulled off his coat and threw it across the ring post. and then he stripped off his shirt, baring himself to the waist. He felt the fierce sun biting into his shoulders and back, and yet inside he was cold.

Brandon turned around. "All right," he said.

Judge Potter Wilts, a fat. walrus-mustached man who referee-ed all of Hangman Gulch's bare-knuckle fights, climbed through the ropes and walked importantly to the center of the ring.

"You gents know the rules," he said. "What few there is. No kneeing or eye-gougin'—leastways when I'm lookin'. Ever' knockdown ends a round. Either of you falls down a-purpose to end a round loses the fight. That's all. Let's git 'er goin'."

Wilts sounded a gong hooked to one of the ring posts and Olaf Jorgensen lunged from his corner. The last thing Brandon remembered see-

ing before he closed with the Swede was Lynn Baxter's face. She was no longer smiling.

Jorgensen threw a wild overhead punch that missed Brandon's bobbing head and fell harmlessly on his shoulder. He jabbed a straight left hand to the Swede's stomach and moved nimbly out of striking distance. Jorgensen laughed and charged after him. Again Brandon drove a stinging left to the big man's mid-section and danced away quickly.

Hit and run. It was the pattern of Royce Brandon's whole life, and he had no intention of abandoning it now. Jorgensen had great power in his arms and shoulders because of his work in Baxter's mine, but that did not necessarily mean that he would have the wind and endurance for a long-running fight.

The Swede came at him again, took his left to the stomach with a contemptuous grin, and swung mightily at his head. Brandon ducked low, side-stepped, and came up behind his opponent. He hammered a blow to Jorgensen's kidney, and when the big man spun with a roar, drove another left under the heart and then backstepped quickly across the ring.

Jorgensen followed him to the center of the ring and stopped dead. He was panting now and his head was lowered in angry bewilderment. "You stand still and fight, tinhorn," he growled. "I yust wait 'til you ready to fight."

Brandon laughed. Getting other people mad and forcing them to act rashly was a bit of business that he knew well. "Worried, laddie?" he asked, and laughed again.

Olaf Jorgensen's head jerked up and his eyes blazed. He lunged forward, and so quick was his action that Brandon found himself trapped in one of the ring's corners. The Swede closed in with deliberate slowness.

"Ve see who's worried now," he said.

He swung a crushing overhead blow, and Brandon stepped deftly to one side in the small space that he had. The punch grazed the side of his cheek, taking some skin but not hurting much. Brandon let his knees buckle, and he fell face down on the hard-packed earth, breaking his fall with his hands. No one, not even the referee, could say for sure whether or not the blow had knocked him down, he knew. And it was his only chance of getting out of that corner without being battered senseless.

Jorgensen stepped back in amazement. "Get up, coward," he muttered. "You not hurt."

But Potter Wilts stepped in front of the Swede and motioned him to his corner. The referee looked at Brandon suspiciously as Brandon got up and walked to his own corner, but he said nothing.

Brandon leaned against the ropes during the rest period, and he was aware of the boos and cat calls of the crowd as they yelled for him to stand up and fight. He smiled for he did not care what they thought. But when his eyes moved to where

Lynn Baxter was sitting, the smile left him. On her face he saw that same look of contempt and half pity that he had seen there when she had thought he was going to climb out of the ring without fighting at all.

The bell rang and Brandon took up where he had left off. Hit and run, hit and run. Jorgensen's stomach was a mass of red welts now, and his breath tore from his lungs in rasping gasps as he chased Brandon about the ring. He was tiring badly, Brandon knew, and soon that tiredness would rob his punches of their crushing power.

On the few times that the Swede trapped him in a corner, Brandon followed his first-round procedure. He would take a glancing blow and go to the ground with it. He was a good actor and he made it convincing.

It was on the third such knockdown that he fell only a foot or two from where Lynn Baxter was standing. As he rose to his feet, he looked at her and saw the white tenseness of her face. She spoke to him and her voice was soft, but it reached him clearly through the din of the crowd.

"For a while I thought I was wrong about you," she said. "But I wasn't. It's still a man's courage against a tinhorn's cunning."

Brandon went to his corner, and the words stayed with him. They stayed with him when the bell rang and he met Olaf Jorgensen in the center of the ring. It was because of this that the Swede's looping hook caught him flush on the chin and drove him all the way to the ropes.

It was the first solid punch he had taken during the fight, and curiously, Brandon found that it did not hurt as much as he thought it would. He shook his head and when Jorgensen came at him, he put all of his weight behind a driving right hand. It exploded on the Swede's jaw, and the big man stopped still in his tracks and blinked.

Brandon felt a strange elation surge slowly through his veins. It was the first time in his life he had ever met a man on that man's own terms in any kind of fight or game. It was a good feeling. He drove a smashing right at the Swede's head and took a left in return.

"I tank ve fight now, eh?" said Jorgensen.

Brandon touched his back to the ropes and came away from them with a rush. He met Jorgensen's onward charge and they pounded at each other with savage fury. The Swede smashed into him and by weight alone crushed him back against the ropes. The Swede's huge hands were coming at him like trip hammers, and Brandon could find no defense against them, nor did he try to. They thudded against his stomach and ribs, making flat hollow sounds, and he returned them with interest.

It was a whistling left hook that finally knocked Brandon to the ground. He did not see the punch start, and he did not know that he was down until he felt the bite of

hard earth against his shoulders. After a moment he sat up and shook his head to clear the ringing sound. He got to his feet and staggered to his corner.

Almost immediately the bell rang, and Brandon met Jorgensen again in the ring's center. He knew that he was being hit and battered savagely, but there was a sort of numbness on him now and he felt no pain. He knew, too, that he was hitting the Swede, for there was blood on the big man's face, and his movements were becoming slow and labored.

And then Jorgensen was giving ground, and it was his back against the ropes and not Brandon's. Brandon kept his fists driving in, and that strange feeling of elation was strong in him. He shifted his attack to the Swede's stomach, and now the big man was no longer hitting back at him. Jorgensen's arms reached out in an attempt to clinch, but Brandon brushed them aside and smashed into him at close quarters.

The Swede fell against him, and only then did Brandon step back. Jorgensen swayed for a moment like a great tree and then he was down with a thud that shook the earth. It was the first time he had been on the ground during the entire fight, but Brandon knew that he would not get up.

The strength was gone from Brandon's legs now, and he could only half see through the red haze that stung his eyes. But somehow he groped his way to his corner and fell gasping against the ropes. The spectators were pushing toward the ring and shouting their surprise but he paid no attention. He looked for Lynn but he could not see her.

He did not know whether a minute or five of them had passed, but suddenly Olaf Jorgensen was in his corner and the big Swede was grasping his hand with a grip that hurt.

"You damn fine fighter, mister," Olaf said. "You all right, I tank."

Brandon smiled through his cut lips. He said simply, "Thanks, Olaf. From you that means something."

Ten minutes later the crowd was gone, and Brandon took his shirt and coat from the ring post and walked to the water pump at the side of the express office. He had just finished washing when Lynn came to him.

"Dad wanted me to tell you that he's glad to have you as a partner in the mine," she said. And she added, "I'm glad, too."

Brandon looked at this girl whose scorn had made him stand and fight for the first time in his life.

"You won't be sorry," he told her. "I have some money and I'll pitch it in for expansion. And I'll be there working with your dad and Olaf. I'll be there Monday morning."

Lynn was gone then, and Brandon looked at the black coat and expensive silk shirt he still held in his hand. He slipped them on loosely and started for the general store that sold miners' work clothes.

It would be a good trade, he thought.

THE END

LOCO JONES

By Walt Coburn

A range war won the San Marcos Rim for the Wagon Wheel but it took the wildest brush popper of them all to clear it of bushwhacking Tiptons

I

WHEN Old Man Hub Wagoner of the Wagon Wheel outfit heard that sheep were being trailed across the Rim and threatened his San Marcos Valley with invasion, he told his two sons to "Let 'em come!"

And no cowman on earth ever hated sheep more than Hub Wagoner. He hated the sight of sheep, their blatting, everything about them.

Loco Jones fetched the bad news down off the Rim. And broke it with great glee to Wagoner and his big sons, Bart and Clyde.

"Five bands of big wethers, Hub!" Loco Jones' lean, long-jawed face twitched and his almost colorless steel-blue eyes were slivers of evil light. He had a habit of licking his lips. "Besides the herder, there's two gunslingers ridin' guard. And each band has a wagon and camp tender and you ain't got but one guess a-comin' who them rascals might be." Loco Jones licked his sun-cracked lips. "The Tiptons is fetchin' in sheep!"

Jones talked in a rapid-fire twang. Though the day was almost chilly, sweat glistened on his swarthy hawk-beaked face. Besides the six-shooter he had buckled on, he packed a saddle gun in the crook of his arm.

No bearer of evil tidings ever enjoyed his job more than did Loco Jones. He oozed it from every pore and Old Man Hub Wagoner claimed

there was a slow poison inside him that never kills.

"I reckon this means war, Hub!" Jones' pale eyes glittered wickedly. "I'm ready and a-r'arin' to go!"

"And you can't go for r'arin', Jones." Old Hub had a lazy drawl to his voice. "Take 'er easy or you'll r'ar and fall over backwards. There won't be no war if I can help it."

Loco Jones paid no attention whatever. When he took time to listen to any man, it was a rare occasion. So wrapped up in his own thoughts, he could hear only the sound of his own voice and did not see the direct effect it had on any listeners. He lived, for the most part, the life of a recluse, there at his ranch up on the Rim, thinking out his own thoughts and talking to himself when there was nobody around to listen.

Jones had a little bunch of wild mountain cattle and he was forever on the prowl for mavericks. He rode a string of the best cow horses in all Arizona Territory and he was the wildest of the wild brush-popper cowhands.

No slant was ever too steep for Loco Jones to lead a pony down at break-neck open speed, in the wake of some wild maverick. If he could not catch his critter on level ground, he roped it on the slant with his rope tied hard and fast to the saddle-horn. And where more cautious men would have picked up a fall, Loco Jones was lucky. A broken bone was no more than a bad cold to the man. He was back in the saddle by the time the bones were half knit, with a home-made crutch or cane on his saddle. Or a splinted arm still in a sling. If ever he felt pain he never showed it.

Tough as a boot, Loco Jones. Dangerous, too, and treacherous. You never quite knew where you stood with him. He'd drink from the same bottle with you until the booze was gone and ride off to his outfit on the Rim with a friendly "So long." Get back to his lonesome cabin and start thinking it over and by some twisted kink in his way of reasoning, Loco Jones was apt to get it in for that same man. And the next time they'd meet, Loco would cuss him out for some wholly imaginary slight or fancied insult. If the man knew Loco Jones and had the good sense to keep his mouth shut and take the cussing out like water off a duck's back, shedding it, then the lanky gray-haired Jones would suddenly grin his wicked grin, his pale eyes squinted.

"You know dang well I never meant it." Loco would lick his lips.

Old Man Hub Wagoner was a short, heavy-set man, with hard meat on his tough bones. In his sixties, he had thick gray hair and a drooping, iron-gray mustache. Blunt-jawed and blunt-nosed with a straight, square-cornered mouth, he had a pair of sky-blue eyes, puckered at the corners, deep set under shaggy brows. Slow to anger but when he was on the prod it took a lot to stop him. His blue eyes cut a look at his black-haired six-foot younger son Bart who was hot-tempered and headstrong,

and he saw Bart's lips flatten and his heavy black brows pull into a scowl.

Then Hub Wagoner looked at his older son Clyde who had his father's short, blocky build and blue eyes, and he was relieved when Clyde grinned back at him. Clyde was steady-tempered and dependable.

"Just say the word, Hub"—Loco Jones was carried away by his own notions—"and I'll take Bart and Clyde and go back up on the Rim and finish up where I left off at daybreak this mornin'. It'll be pickin's . . . pickin's."

The trouble with Loco Jones was to tell when he was lying or when he told the truth. He was more than apt to lie. Moreover he believed his own lies.

"I'd taken me a greasy-sack pack outfit and a couple of ponies and was range brandin' back in the roughs. So help me, men, I was plumb tuckered out from a hard day's shindaddy. I'd run my iron on three big mavericks—got the ears here in my chaps to prove it—and I bedded down and was shore a-dreamin' about my cuttin' pigeon wings on the dance floor and a-waltzin' with a purty little thing with yaller hair. The perfume she was a-wearin' was shore sweet smellin' and I was a-sniffin' it for all I was worth.

"Then I come wide-awake. That purty-smellin' perfume was the stink of sheep. Mind you, men, it was pitch dark and the stink of them woolies was a-comin' down wind in the night and no mistake. So strong on the night wind it made me sick.

"I saddled up and taken my Winchester and headed into the wind. Must've been all of five miles. Th band of sheep was bedded down there in the little park. Two lit lanterns was set on tall sticks to scare off the coyotes. So a-settin' my horse, I got the first lantern in my gun sights and pulled the trigger. Then I shot out the second lantern. And you should've seen them two gun-slingers come a-pawin' out from their tarps and a-clawin' franticlike for their guns. Then the rookus commenced. I kicked dust in their faces and fogged hell out o' them. The sheep dawgs was shore yappin' when I rode away . . . yonderly and driftin' fast.

"Betwixt then and daybreak I counted five bands of woolies. I shot up them sheep camps and got away clean. It was sunrise when I dropped down off the Rim and into the Valley to fetch the news."

"Kill anybody, Jones?" drawled Hub.

"Didn't stop to make a tally. But I wasn't shootin' to miss. You kill off all them damned Tiptons down to the last one of the tribe of shirt-tail kin, and you wouldn't get a single man that was worth the price of a ca'tridge."

Maybe Loco Jones was lying. But most probably there was a lot of truth in what he was telling.

II

Time had been when Loco Jones himself was one of the Tipton outfit up on the Rim. Old-timers in the

country said that his real name was Tipton. His past was shrouded in mystery and his back trail covered. There was the rumor that years ago he had gone into prison under the name of Tipton. But he had come out and into this section of Arizona under the name of Jones and had thrown in with the Tiptons.

That was when Hub Wagoner and his five sons had fetched in a trail herd of Texas longhorns in the Wagon Wheel brand and dumped them into the San Marcos Valley, claiming it for free range. They'd built cabins and corrals and fenced in a horse pasture on the San Marcos River. Nobody had showed up to dispute their claim.

Only Loco Jones had ridden down off the Rim into the Valley. He had made them welcome after his own fashion. But he had dropped hints that up on the Rim where the cattle were wild and the cowhands were wilder, there were the Tiptons who were cattle rustlers and half outlaws and tough as they come.

Before long the Tiptons commenced proving their toughness. They were whittling on the Wagon Wheel cattle. Then the Wagoners were forced into open range war.

Hub Wagoner was not the man to take it setting back. He had never wanted that range war. But when there was no way out of it, Hub and his five sons and a bunch of Wagon Wheel cowhands took it up on the Rim to the Tiptons.

Months, a year or more went by. The law backed away from the fracas and let the Wagoners and Tiptons fight it out. How many Tiptons were killed no man save Loco Jones knew and you couldn't take his word for it. But three of Hub's sons were killed and more than a few of his cowhands who were drawing fighting pay were shot down. In the end the Wagoner Wagon Wheel outfit ran the Tiptons off the Rim and out of the country.

Leaving only Loco Jones. Loco Jones, who was loud and profane in his declaration of remaining neutral and taking no hand or part in the blood-spattered range war. All during the bushwhacker range war, Loco Jones was apt to show up at the camp of either side.

"Hold your fire, men!" he would holler out. "It's nobody but Loco Jones! I'm wavin' a white rag!"

Nobody ever fired a shot at Loco Jones all during the range war that took its bloody toll of both the Tiptons and the Wagoners.

At the Wagoner ranch, Loco Jones would declare his eternal hatred for all the Tiptons.

"I hate t'eir Tipton guts. Take it fer what it'll be worth to you, men, the Tiptons is fixin' to raid you tonight. And free for nothin' and a-holdin' you to no obligation, I kin tell you men how to set the trap for them Tiptons. Take it or let it lay."

Every time Loco Jones tipped off the Wagoners, he'd been right. He hadn't lied.

But on the other hand, Hub Wagoner had never trusted him. He told his outfit by way of grim warning

never to let Loco Jones know any of the plans they had figured out.

"Because Loco Jones will carry it up to the Rim and peddle it to the Tiptons for what it's worth."

Loco Jones had played it lone-handed, riding by daylight wherever he chose to go, traveling alone and at night. Nobody would ever know how many Tiptons or Wagon Wheel cowhands he had bushwhacked. That white silk neck handkerchief he carried tied to the end of his saddle gun and held aloft for a flag of truce, was soiled and tattered. Parts of it, ripped off for rags, fitted in the slitted end of a ramrod for gun-cleaning rags. Loco Jones had many times dirtied a gun barrel in that range war.

When the Tiptons had been run out of the country, Loco Jones had stayed on, though the Wagon Wheel laid claim by right of might to the rough cow country up on the Rim. They rounded up all the Tipton Leaning T cattle that could be gathered on the roundups. But there were enough of those wild mountain cattle that could not be gathered, to furnish the wild brush-popper cowhand, Loco Jones, with plenty of mavericks. And he prowled the Rim from daybreak till dark, day in and day out, to range-brand everything his hungry loop could ketch.

He made up his own song, sung in a wild off-key voice to the tune of Casey Jones. From time to time new verses were added to the colorful saga that exploited in song his own wild deeds of daring, real or fancied. And it was nothing unusual to have the night's peaceful silence wildly shattered by that off-key song, bellowed at the rasping, high-pitched top of his voice.

"Come, all you cowhands, if you want to hear
The story of a cowboy who has never known fear!
Loco Jones is that brush-popper's name
It was up on the Rim that he rode to fame!"

Loco Jones grinned at Hub Wagoner and his two sons. His grin was wicked.

"I made me up a new verse," he said. He spat out his quid of tobacco and hawked and cleared his throat that was hided with skin the color of old rawhide.

"Fer every dead Tipton who plays out his hand
The Devil sends a fresh 'un to join the band
Fresh from Hell from where all Tiptons come
With a two-way ticket punched by a Wagoner gun!

"So foller this feller called Loco Jones.
He'll lead you to the Rim to pick the Tiptons' bones.
If you ain't got the guts to foller, he'll play a lone hand
To burn them Tiptons in the Loco Jones brand!"

Loco Jones' song ended with a wild wail. He grinned at the Wagoners and bit a corner off a plug of tobacco. There was an evil glint in his pale eyes that were watching Hub Wagoner.

Hub had no desire to anger Loco Jones. He nodded his approval at the song.

"Put up your horse, Jones. You'll find a jug in the manger. When you've had a bait of grub we'll hold us a powwow."

Hub told Bart to go along to the barn with Loco Jones to make certain he located the right jug instead of the crock of cattle dip.

When they had left, Hub shook his head. There was a sort of haunted look in his sky-blue eyes and there seemed to appear new, desperate, etched lines around the corners of his eyes and mouth.

"You and Bart." he told Clyde. his voice heavy with dread, "are all I got left, for sons. You saw your three other brothers git killed in that last Tipton war that was crowded on us. After your mother died and I had the handlin' of you, I done my best to raise you accordin' to my own way of right agin' wrong. But I lost my three other boys in a useless range war that was crowded down on us from up yonder on the Rim. I don't want to lose you and Bart. No price on the earth is worth losin' either of my sons. And for two-bits I'd gather my cattle and trail 'em out of the San Marcos Valley and yonderly to some peaceful range. Let them Tiptons move their sheep across the Rim and spill 'em in the valley. That's just what I got a mind to do, Clyde. You'll understand, where Bart's too hot-headed and prideful to savvy."

Clyde Wagoner nodded. Of all Hub's sons, Clyde was the only one who, as Hub Wagoner put it, was the livin', spittin' image of the old man in build and looks and inside his heart and the way his mind worked. It was as if Old Man Hub were talking to himself as he had been in his younger days. Clyde savvied.

"Loco Jones kept cuttin' his eyes at Bart like he wanted to git him off confidential," remarked Clyde. "Dollars to hotcakes, he's fetchin' Bart some sort of message from Tess Tipton."

Hub nodded. "If she ain't sent Bart some word, you kin depend on it Loco Jones will conjure up somethin' that'll shore ring the bulls-eye where Bart Wagoner is concerned. Loco Jones takes the world's prize for ribbin' up trouble. But Tess Tipton runs him a close second. Takes a female woman to actually stir up gun trouble. That Tipton gal is rank poison."

Clyde Wagoner was staring off in the direction of the barn. his eyes following his brother and Loco Jones, and he was watching when Jones reached into his chaps pocket and pulled out what appeared to be a letter. But before he could hand it to Bart, the young cowhand reached out and grabbed it and shoved it quickly into his pocket.

Loco Jones chuckled. His rasping voice lifted raucously in his endless song.

"There's plenty Tipton men and they're all hell bound
But little Tess Tipton is the purtiest gal around.
Hair like a crow's wing and eyes shore blue,
Ary man that wins her'll git a sweetheart true!"

Loco Jones' wailing song ended in a rasping chuckle. He reached out and stabbed Bart's ribs with a long thumb.

"You damned Loco Jones! You gotta beller it fer the wide world to hear?" Bart's snarl came back to where Clyde and Hub Wagoner were standing at the hitchrack in front of the ranchhouse.

"That's what that Loco Jones is feedin' your ' rother Bart fer a poison bait." Old Man Hub's leathery face had gone gray. His hand was on his six-shooter. His eyes, watching Loco Jones, were slitted and cold blue as a winter sky. "If I'd killed that Loco Jones the first time he come down from the Rim into the Valley"—Hub's voice lost its lazy drawl—"I might have prevented that range war that robbed me of three of my boys. I might take a notion to kill that Loco Jones before he kin rib up more trouble."

"No. I'd give that a second thought, paw. It could do more harm than it'd do good. You see, Loco Jones is Tess Tipton's real father."

"How do you know that, Clyde?"

"Aw Fat told me. But Bart don't know it."

III

Loco Jones was alone when he came from the barn and headed straight for the cook shack. The kitchen was at one end and joining it was a long narrow-built room where there was one long table covered with oilcloth and benches. In this room the Wagoners and the Wagon Wheel cowhands ate.

Hub and Clyde met Loco Jones there in the kitchen, talking to the pigtailed Chinaman cook in pidgin English that had Aw Fat chuckling.

"Aw Fat—now that's a hell of a name, Aw Fat!"

"Loco Jones," cackled Aw Fat. "Hell o' name, Loco Jones. Allee same loco. Allee same clazy!"

Loco Jones' thumb poked the Chinaman's round paunch.

Aw Fat pointed to his pigtailed head and his forefinger made little circles.

"Allee same clazy head!"

It was their stock joke between them. Both enjoyed it hugely as if it were always new.

Aw Fat dug up a dried-apple pie. And only for Loco Jones would he bother to cut a thick T-bone steak and fry potatoes. He would cook and set in front of Loco Jones as fine a meal as ever a hungry man could want.

It had been Loco Jones who had fetched Aw Fat to the ranch from

town, telling the Wagoners they had hired the best Chinese cook on earth.

"I got his Chinee 'chock gee' papers," Loco Jones had explained. "Without his chock gee Aw Fat kin be picked up fer an alien and shipped on the first boat back to China. Aw Fat belongs to Loco Jones. I'm a-loanin' him to you for a ranch cook. Don't ever sit into a poker game with that heathen Chinese. When he pushes back his chair, he'll own the Wagon Wheel outfit, lock, stock and barrel. An' Aw Fat is as handy with a gun as he is with a skillet. He'd kill a man fer Loco Jones. He'd wipe out a whole damn cavalry troop. Or the Texas Rangers. So don't ever make the mistake of grabbin' at his pigtail."

"Loco Jones," cackled the fat Chinaman, "allee same loco . . . allee same clazy!"

But something in Aw Fat's opaque black eyes forbade any questioning. They were veiled. Nobody ever entered the white-washed adobe cabin where Aw Fat lived, without an invitation. That cabin was neat as a pin. His tarp was scrubbed and his blankets and soogans aired frequently. Aw Fat rolled his fine-cut tobacco in cigarette papers made from the pages of a thick last year's mail-order catalogue. The Chinaman rolled them by the hundred and laid them on a shelf.

There was always the odor of opium smoke, hanging stale in Aw Fat's cabin. He kept his supply of opium and his pipe and opium-cooking layout locked in an old tin Saratoga trunk. When his supply ran low he drew his back wages and went to town for a week or a month to gamble and to replenish his supply of opium. One day he'd show up, fetching with him Chinese nuts and candy and rice wine which he handed out in packaged gifts to Old Man Hub and his sons and to every Wagon Wheel cowhand.

There was a pair of pearl-handled .45 Colt six-shooters with the barrels sawed off for belly guns which Aw Fat kept under his pillow. A short-handled polished-steel hatchet with a honed edge was in the tin trunk with his opium layout and half a dozen sealed decks of playing cards.

Save for Loco Jones, Clyde Wagoner was the only man who had ever seen the guns or the hatchet or the opium pipes which Aw Fat kept in their plush-lined Chinese carved-ebony and pearl-inlaid case, or the opium-cooking layout.

Clyde was the Chinaman's favorite. Clyde had one time knocked down and whipped a drunken cowhand who had made a playful grab at Aw Fat's pigtail. From then on the Chinaman was his friend. And when the graying, ageless Chinese gave his friendship to any man, he was ready and willing to die for that friend.

Clyde Wagoner was the only man who saw behind the veiled, opaque black eyes to penetrate that curtain and to know that Aw Fat, whose real name on the chock gee paper was Sing Lee, actually, deep in his heart, nursed a secret hatred for the man called Loco Jones. Loco Jones, who

held his chock gee paper—his permit to live in the United States of America. Clyde knew that Loco Jones actually held the Chinaman in a sort of bondage. But Aw Fat's cackling chuckle hid that secret, covering it over.

Aw Fat would gladly, happily have killed Loco Jones. But to kill the man who had his chock gee paper hidden was to jeopardize himself and his freedom. Without his chock gee paper, Aw Fat could be deported, picked up by some immigration officer and sent back to China.

If Aw Fat gave his loyal friendship to but one man, he offered up his secret devotion to only one woman on earth. That was the girl Tess Tipton, daughter of Loco Jones. The Chinaman told Clyde, in good American, rather than pidgin English, that he had raised Tess Tipton almost from babyhood when her mother died and her father was sent to prison. He had been a gambling man then. He had taken the orphaned baby to raise. When she was old enough he had put her in a convent school.

After Tess' father had served his ten years he showed up, using the name Loco Jones. He'd managed to steal the Chinaman's chock gee papers. Using those papers as a weapon, Loco Jones had made Aw Fat reveal the whereabouts of his daughter. Loco Jones had let the girl finish school, never claiming her as his daughter. When the cow town of San Marcos, down in the lower valley, needed a schoolmarm, Tess got the job, applying for the schoolteacher's job under her own name—Tess Tipton.

She would have nothing to do with the rest of the Tipton tribe up on the Rim. Nor did she know then that her father was Loco Jones.

Then at a dance one night Dude Tipton, the range dude of the Rim Tiptons and the natural leader because he had courage and swagger and was a born leader of men, asked her to dance and she refused.

"Don't be high-chinned, Tess. Loco Jones is your father. You can't be that prideful."

Dude's pale-gray eyes had looked her over boldly. Then he had grinned and lifted her from the bench and into his arms and waltzed with her.

"I'm third or fifth cousin to you, Tess. I aim to marry you. I'll make you Mrs. Dude Tipton. I aim to own the whole cow country—the Rim and all the San Marcos Valley them Wagoners claim. I'll be the Cattle King and you'll be Dude Tipton's Cattle Queen when I've cleaned out the Wagoners and taken their Wagon Wheel outfit. Come hell and high water, you'd better make up your mind to it. Because that's for certain."

Tess Tipton had taken the story to Aw Fat. He told her the truth. He told her that when she got her mind made up and wanted to marry the man she actually loved, she would marry him. And nobody else.

But there was no man that Tess Tipton cared enough about ever to think of marrying until Bart Wagoner

came along. Yet when Bart wanted to marry her, Tess Tipton told him she did not love him. She had never met any man she wanted to marry. Marriage was a sacred thing. She was going to play for keeps. When she met a man she could love, she would marry him.

"When that man shows up, Bart, I'll know it. But don't let that spoil our friendship. It means a lot to me. You're the best friend I've got. I can talk to you. I like to be with you. You'll be my friend, won't you, Bart?"

"That's a tough job," Bart answered. "I love you. I never felt that way about any girl. You can't keep me from hopin'. I'm goin' to keep right on askin' you to marry me. In time I hope to get the right answer."

"You're a good man, Bart Wagoner." Tess held his face between her hands and looked into his eyes. When she kissed him, tears misted her gray-blue eyes.

But when Bart tried to put his arms around her, Tess shook her head.

"Don't spoil it, Bart."

Tess Tipton and Bart Wagoner exchanged notes. There was an old lightning-blasted hackberry tree midway between the Wagon Wheel home ranch and the cowtown of San Marcos in the lower valley. The charred core of that tree was their blind post office where they left notes for each other.

Now, today, Loco Jones had handed Bart a plain envelope with the flap opened and a note from Tess inside.

"I picked this up on the way, Bart. Save you sneakin' down the valley to the blind post office at the lightnin'-struck hackberry tree."

Bart's tanned face had whitened. He'd grabbed the envelope from Loco Jones' hand, found its sealed flap unbroken. He stared into Loco Jones's pale eyes.

Loco saw Bart's hand on his six-shooter. He just grinned and shook his head.

"Go easy, Bart. There's no harm done."

"How'd you find out about the hackberry tree?"

"I've knowed it all along."

Then Loco Jones had chuckled and given voice to his song.

IV

Old Man Hub and Clyde sat sipping black coffee while Loco Jones wolfed his grub, and finally shoved back his bench and straddled it.

"I'm ready to start now whenever your outfit's set to ride up on the Rim. What are we waitin' for?"

"Sheep," answered Hub. "More sheep. Let 'em move in all the sheep they got a mind to. That Rim is a shore sorry cow country at the best. With the low price of beef and them cattle gone outlaw-wild, it don't pay a man to gather 'em. You got to rope everything and lead it off the Rim and throw it in with gentle valley cattle. Too much grief. Unless you enjoy the brush-poppin'. It'll make shore good sheep country.

Let the Tiptons move in all the sheep the Rim range will hold. They got to stand fer the sheep stink and the blattin'. In no time them cowhands will all be more loco than Loco Jones. Call it God's punishment fer a cowman to handle sheep. The Tiptons is welcome to the Rim fer sheep herdin'."

Old Hub was grinning and there was a twinkle in his puckered blue eyes.

"You come barkin' up the wrong tree, Jones." he continued. "You ain't ribbin' no sheep and cattle war between the Tiptons' sheep outfit and the Wagon Wheel here in the Valley. And that's the final verdict."

"Mebbyso you got somethin' there." Loco Jones grinned back at Hub, but there the grin ended and his eyes were cold and pale. "The Rim would make good sheep country. There's money in sheep if a man kin put up with their blattin' stink."

Then his lips flattened back in a snarl and, sitting there a-straddle of the bench, he cursed the Tiptons while the cold sweat broke out and beaded his face.

"I was born a Tipton . . . Jones Tipton. Named Jones for my mother's side of the family. There was a hell's slue of the Tipton tribe and some bad blood in all of us. When my pappy got shot by the Ranger an' the outfit got run out of Texas I went with 'em, a button of a kid. We located here in the San Marcos Valley and up on the Rim and claimed the whole cow country because us Tiptons had killed off the men who were in the country first an' I done my kid's ornery part. Then the Law moved in and they needed a feller to take all the blame and them Tipton kinfolks just natchelly turned me over to the law and swore to it that I was guilty of everything from horse stealin' and cattle rustlin' to bushwhackin' murder.

"They told me to stand trial and they'd hire the smartest lawyer in the country to clear me. An' if I got sent to the pen they'd take me away from the law officers and hide me out up on the Rim.

"They done neither. They wouldn't spend a dollar fer a lawyer. I was sent over the road to serve time in the pen. They never made a move to free me.

"I'd married a honkatonk gal but she was too good fer the likes of me. She was clean and decent, and we was two kids in love or somethin'. When the Tiptons quit me there was only one man I could turn to in a tight. The Chinaman here. Aw Fat. I give him what money I had saved and told him to look after my wife and he done so. When she died he looked after my kid because when a Chinaman gives you his word, it's as good as a banker's bond.

"Cage a wild cowpuncher in the pen and it's like cagin' a wild animal. I went in there young and reckless and full of life. I could laugh then. But prison done somethin' to me—inside where it won't never heal but keeps a-festerin'. It's like slow poison that won't kill a man but eats into his brain, killin' all that's decent

inside him. Stir-crazy, the convicts call it.

"I come out of that Yuma prison coughin' blood from the prison plague, weak and all skin and bones and my hair turned white. I still wake up of a night with the horrors and sweatin' and screamin' crazy-like. When the law turned me free to die out in the open, I was crawlin' on my hands and knees like a whipped dog, cringin' at a man's voice. It taken a tough man to come out o' there alive. When I wanted to lay down and die, I kept callin' on my hate for the Tipton tribe and that hate kept me alive.

"I came back. I came back Loco Jones. And when I came back, there was a gun in my hand and I was a ghost holdin' that gun. And, big and tough as them Tiptons was, they was scared of me when they looked into the muzzle of my gun.

"I made no threats. I just moved back in on them Tiptons up on the Rim. I shot down the Tipton who was livin' in my cabin. The clean air healed my lungs but the hate never healed.

"The Chinaman wouldn't tell me where he'd hid my daughter Tess. I was locoed and he was scared I'd harm the kid. I took his chock gee paper and threw the fear into him, so he finally told me. I went off alone and broke down. I'd never bawled as a kid but I bawled then. That kid of mine, I'm mighty proud of her. I wouldn't harm her. I've never claimed her fer my own fer fear she'd die of shame, for fear of what I'd see in her eyes when she looked at me because I'm enough to turn the stomach of a strong man. I don't want to see that look in the eyes of my kid.

"But I'll never die until the last of the Tipton tribe is dead. And I killed more than a few of 'em in that last range war. Shore I ribbed that range war. There was too damn many of 'em fer me to tackle the job lone-handed. But, as God is my judge, I never killed a Wagoner nor any Wagon Wheel cowhand.

"Let the sheep come in across the Rim like you said, Hub. But I'm a-ridin' back up on the Rim to bush-whack all the Tiptons I kin git in my gun sights. If I have to go up on the Rim lone-handed.

"You got two sons left. Clyde here, and Bart. I don't blame you none fer wantin' them two boys of yourn to be kept alive. They're good men. You got a right to be proud of them. But as long as there's a Tipton left alive, them two sons of yourn will never be free from danger. And the Tiptons are after you, Hub Wagoner.

"Even if I never ribbed that range war, you moved your Wagon Wheel cattle into the San Marcos Valley which they claimed. You wasn't the first to move your cattle into the Valley you thought was free range. The Tiptons left it open for a trap. Three other outfits moved into the Valley before your Wagon Wheel rolled in. They was murdered and their cattle stole. The Tipton tribe

claims this Valley and they'll claim it to the last Tipton that's left alive. Don't be too strong about blamin' the last war on Loco Jones. I just hurried it up. I've killed more Tiptons than all your Wagoner Wagon Wheel outfit put together. I'll keep on a-killin' 'em till the last one of that mongrel Tipton tribe is dead."

Loco Jones' pale eyes were bleak. He lifted his voice. "Sing Lee!"

The Chinaman came padding in on felt-soled slippers from the kitchen where he'd been listening to every word.

"Here." Loco Jones yanked up his shirt and unbuckled a money belt worn next to his hide. Its glove-leather pouches were glazed with sweaty dirt.

"Here's your chock gee paper. And all the money I have on earth. Take it. I've treated the only friend I had in the world almighty shabby. You must have hated my guts. But I had to git the job done in my own way. The chock gee paper is in one of them pouches."

Loco Jones stood up, throwing one leg across the bench and standing to his big rawboned height, tucking in his shirt tail.

Then he moved to the door with long strides, lifting his voice to a rasping shout.

"Hold on there, Bart!" he yelled at Bart Wagoner who had saddled a horse and was riding away. "Come back here!"

Bart Wagoner reined up. He saw Loco Jones step outside with Hub Wagoner and Clyde behind him. Bart rode up to where they stood, his black brows scowling and his face grim.

"Dude Tipton is in town," said Bart. "I'm goin' to town to kill him where I cut his sign."

His voice was defiant.

"You might give your old man and your brother Clyde here," suggested Hub Wagoner, "a chance to go along with you."

"Where Dude Tipton goes," said Loco Jones, "there's bound to be some of them Tiptons a-sidin' him. You ain't goin' nowheres alone, Bart. Now that Old Man Hub's changed his mind, we'll make us some warpath medicine. That right, Hub?"

"That's right, Jones," said Hub Wagoner.

V

There was a strong wind blowing down off the Rim and into the San Marcos Valley below. It was carrying with it the blatting of sheep and it was tainted with the pungent odor of sheep's wool.

"That's the blattin' sheep stink, Hub." Loco Jones unstrapped the shabby leather case from his saddle and handed the pair of field glasses to Hub Wagoner.

Loco Jones had talked Bart out of heading for town. He said that he had the latest news on Dude Tipton. The latest news, after Tess Tipton had written the note telling Bart that Dude was in town and had been

there a week and was getting to be worrisome.

"I ketched sight of the Dude and he was hightailin' it for the Rim with two-three shirt-tail kin. He was in town all right and on a big drunk there fer a week. But he'd bin sent for and told to git back up on the Rim because war was declared and the jackpot opened. Tess must've left that note at the blind post office yesterday. But sometime in the night while I started shootin' out them sheep lanterns, a messenger was sent to town to fetch back Dude to the Rim where he belonged."

Loco Jones had somehow slipped into the leadership here at the Wagon Wheel ranch and he was ramrodding the job.

"Stand your hand, Hub," Jones said now. "Set back and check the bet to 'em."

They waited at the ranch all that day—Old Man Hub and his two sons, Clyde and Bart, their crew of Wagon Wheel cowhands, and Loco Jones, restless and watching the Rim through the pair of field glasses. And then Jones forked his horse in the afternoon and rode off and did not return until almost sundown, the Wagon Wheel horse he had borrowed leg weary and its coat marked by dried sweat. There was a wolfish grin on his face and his pale eyes were bloodshot.

He was unsaddling when the blatting and stink of sheep was carried down wind off the Rim.

Old Hub's leathery face was grayish as he stood there on widespread bowed legs as if he stood braced against the blatting and stench of sheep, focusing the glasses with an unsteady hand.

Hub grunted as if he had been kicked in the guts. A string of cursing was torn from his dry throat. He'd picked up the sheep that were being herded down from the Rim to spill into the Valley.

"Hell almighty! It looks like all the sheep on earth are coming down! Thousands of them blattin', stinkin' woolies! Thousands!"

"Five bands of wethers," said Loco Jones. "Two thousand sheep to a band. Throwed together thataway, they look like considerable sheep. The bands got mixed up last night—looks like."

Sweat was glistening on Hub's face and he was shaking. He felt weak kneed as he handed the field glasses to Clyde.

"The cow country's no more," he told his son. "She's a-dyin' and before she's dead, them sheep yonder is like a swarming movin' mass of gray maggots a-crawlin' to fatten their guts on the cowman's grass and that grass is the life's blood of the cattle range. Where sheep graze across the range, cattle can't pick a livin'. Damn the sheep! Damn the man that fetches them sheep to ruin a cow country! Hangin's too easy for 'em! Clyde, Bart, you Wagon Wheel men—saddle your horses. Don't let up till we've killed the last damned Tipton. Don't let us come back till we've drove them blattin'

woolies back up on the Rim and far across the Rim and to hell and gone out of the cow country."

Hub Wagoner's voice croaked harshly. Never had any man seen him so worked up. He had taken the deaths of his other three sons with a stony, stoical calm. But this defiling of his cow country had shaken him to the very roots and core of his cowman's soul.

Clyde took a long look and handed over the field glasses to his brother.

Loco Jones licked his sun-cracked lips and grinned crookedly as he fixed Hub Wagoner with his pale eyes. He could not resist the temptation to rub salt into Hub Wagoner's raw, wounded pride.

"Did I hear you remark at breakfast, Hub, that the Rim would make good sheep country?"

"No cow country," growled Old Man Hub, his eyes blazing, "would ever make good sheep country!"

"Sorry cow country, stood on end, and the cattle hard to gather"—Loco Jones rubbed it in—"fit only fer a brush popper to fill a hungry loop . . ."

Old Man Hub forced a wry grin. "You win, Jones."

"Not worth a tinker's damn," continued Loco Jones, "that broken rough country up on the Rim. But fer my lonesome prowlin' ways, she's a better cow country than your gentle Annie valley range where even the hackberry and cottonwoods are gentle saplin's and have no thorns. I wouldn't swap the Rim fer what you got in the valley. Up yonder where every bush is spiked with thorns. Mesquite and cat's-claw bush. And cactus on the level parts where a man spreads his bed tarp. Where the slants come steep and the boulders are big, and the shale banks make a devil's toboggan slide. Up where the wolves prowl and the coyotes skulk in the black shadows, and the mountain lion screams like a woman at the moon. Where the cattle is all long horns and bushy-tailed and it takes a brush-popper cowhand to ketch 'em. That's my wild cow country. And by the eternal hell, it's mine to fight for. And damn the man who fetches in sheep."

Loco Jones' harsh wail broke off into a curse and he pointed at the sheep coming down off the Rim. His pale eyes glinted with hate. His lean face was twisted.

"I've got a jug in the manger," said Hub. "Let's me'n you wash the taste of sheep out of our mouths, Jones. I was half joshin' when I said the Rim was fit fer sheep. You make me ashamed."

Bart Wagoner had turned the field glasses on the sheep coming off the Rim. Then he lowered them to sweep the valley and the wagon trail down the valley to the town of San Marcos. The field glasses were focused now on a lone rider coming up the road from town. The rider was more than a mile away but the field glasses brought her into clear focus. It was Tess Tipton and she was headed up the valley towards the Wagoner

Wagon Wheel Ranch and coming at a steady road trot.

Without a word, Bart handed the glasses to Loco Jones and led his saddled horse from the barn. Nobody noticed him as he rode away, down the valley to meet the girl. Nobody but Loco Jones who cut him a quick look as he rode out of sight.

By the time they missed Bart, he showed up. Tess was riding alongside him.

Tess Tipton, daughter of Loco Jones, was a born rider. She handled her mount well because she had a natural savvy. She'd never known what it was to be afraid of a horse because she had that rare gift, called "a way with horses."

Dressed in boots, old leather chaps and a faded denim brush jacket with an old Stetson hat pulled down on her head, she looked like some slim-built cowhand. Her blue-black hair braided and coiled up under the hat crown, she was tanned, boyish-looking. Her blue-gray eyes were steady under almost heavy black brows, and character, rather than any beauty, marked her apart from other girls. Right now there was a defiant tilt to her chin and an angry flush stained her high cheek bones as she rode in silence.

Bart Wagoner was scowling blackly and there was a stubborn look about his jaw. He and Tess had been having one of their not infrequent quarrels.

"I'm gittin' shore weary of askin' you to marry me. Tess."

"No more weary, as you put it, than I am of telling you I won't marry you."

"Then there's somebody else?" Bart's voice was tense with an almost insane sort of jealousy. "Well, answer me. There's bound to be somebody else."

"All right, Bart." From under level black brows Tess' blue-gray eyes looked straight into his, meeting his anger without flinching. "There is somebody else."

"That damned Dude Tipton!"

Tess Tipton opened her lips to say something, either by way of flat denial, or to tell him defiantly that she was in love with her distant cousin, Dude Tipton.

But the hot-tempered Bart gave her no chance. His temper out of control, he was snarling his unjust, uncalled-for accusations at the girl.

"Leadin' a man on with your lies . . . pretendin' you was scared . . . writin' that note tellin' me Dude Tipton was in town a-botherin' you. Tryin' to bait me into a gun trap set by them damned Tiptons so's Dude Tipton could cut me down when he had his kinfolks backin' his play. And I was damn fool enough to let myself git baited into that bushwhacker trap. I started to pull out alone, hightail it to town to protect you against Dude Tipton and kill him where I found him. And all the time you and that damn Dude was lollygaggin' around and waitin' fer me to ride into it. I know all about Dude Tipton's big braggin' and how he'd make you his cattle queen. The two of you was a-plannin' out to-

gether how you'd git the job done. . . . You're a Tipton, ain't you? And all you Tiptons is alike.

"I'd've gone spurrin' right into your Tipton gun trap except fer that crazy Loco Jones. He called me back and told me that wherever I cut Dude Tipton's sign I'd find enough Tiptons to cut me down.

"But listen to me, and if you remember any of your convent prayers while you've bin a-leadin' me on with your lies, you'd better start sayin' a prayer fer Dude Tipton. I'm killin' him where I cut his sign."

Tess rode, straight-backed and high-chinned, anger and hurt smoldering in her eyes, and she rode in silence.

Bart, white-lipped, ran out of words at last. He was breathing hard and fighting to control his temper and silence his tongue as the two of them rode up.

VI

Loco Jones was inside the barn and out of sight. But Hub and Clyde stood outside the barn. They pulled off their hats.

"I'm shore proud to make you welcome, ma'am," said Wagoner, bowing stiffly, his hat in his hand. "Light and Clyde will take your horse."

Tess swung from her saddle so that she stood within arm's reach of where Clyde stood.

Clyde Wagoner feared no man or anything on earth. But he was bashful. Tongue-tied and awkward, he was painfully shy around women. At the dances he stood outside with other men and looked on. He'd never learned how to dance. He'd wanted to, but he was too bashful to try for fear of revealing his clumsiness. He stood there, stiffly, a dull flush spreading across his tanned face.

Then Tess smiled and reached for his hand. Taking it in hers, she held tightly onto it. Her face was flushed but her eyes looked straight into Clyde's.

"You're as hard to ketch, Clyde," Tess was smiling into his eyes and he felt all his awkwardness slipping away, "as one of those wild longhorns up on the Rim."

The grip of her hand was tight and desperate and trembling inside his. Clyde gripped it now and grinned and felt her hand grow warmer.

"You're the only man in the cow country who hasn't asked me to marry him, Clyde. I told them all no. I said that when the right man came along I'd know he was the man I could love and I would let him know that. My hand has been forced. But I am not ashamed of what I am saying. I can't keep it back any longer because you're so darned girlshy you'd never on earth get up enough courage . . . I love you, Clyde. Will you marry me?"

Tess Tipton's voice ended in a husky whisper and she had to force the words out. There were tears welling in her eyes when Clyde Wagoner pulled her roughly, clumsily, hungrily into his arms and kissed her on her mouth. She clung to him and his mouth bruised hers. He held her like

that and there, for a few moments, the two were alone and shut off from all the world.

Loco Jones, the jug in his hand. watched from the manger inside the barn, slack-jawed and shaking his grizzled head. Then he pulled the cork and drank deeply.

Old Man Hub stood staring, then turned quickly and went into the barn and when Loco held up the jug. Hub grabbed it and tilted it.

Bart sat his horse. the color drained from his face. Then he whirled his horse and rode away out of sight.

Over in the doorway of his kitchen Sing Lee stood watching Tess and Clyde in their lovers' embrace, with eyes that were no longer opaque but warm and soft brown. To him it came as all the fulfillment of his dreams and hopes. The man he had given all his friendship to. the girl he worshipped in his humble way —together, forever and ever and beyond this life.

"I rode here." said Tess, still in Clyde's arms, "to talk to Sing Lee. and to find the man called Loco Jones. To claim him for my father. He would never have come to me. So I came to him. As I've come to the only man on earth I have ever loved. Take me to them, Clyde."

Tess looked around her then, as if she just remembered Bart Wagoner and that Bart's false accusations had forced her into the arms of his brother.

"He's gone!" Tess voiced her alarm. "Bart's gone! You've got to stop him before he rides into the Tipton gun trap!"

The Wagon Wheel cowhands were at the corral where the horse wrangler had penned his remuda. and were roping out their top horses.

Hub and Loco Jones came out of the stable. and Old Man Wagoner had a tight grip on Loco's arm and was all but dragging him. Loco hung back, looking everywhere but at his daughter, all his wild bluster gone.

She took a couple of steps towards him and, reaching out both her hands. gripped his.

"I've known for a long time," she told him, "that you were my father. From now on we'll be together." She took his weathered face in her hands and kissed him.

Hub and Clyde turned their backs. Hub gripped his son's shoulder and grinned, and then Clyde got his saddled horse. Hub led out his and Loco Jones' horses.

Tess was explaining something to her father, pointing to the sheep that were spilling off the Rim into the valley.

"Dude Tipton has it figured you'll ride out there to stop the sheep invasion. There's enough Tiptons with the sheep to give you a running fight. While you're busy. Dude and some hand-picked gun-fighting Tiptons will flank you from behind and you'll be caught and trapped in the middle. I strung Dude along till he got to bragging, telling me how he'd work it. You've got to overtake Bart before he rides into it headlong."

"Yonder's the Chinaman, Tess.

You stay here with him. He'll never let anybody git near you. Let's git goin'!"

They rode away into the early twilight and out of sight and the Wagon Wheel cowboys behind them. There were no farewells but Clyde twisted in his saddle and waved his hat as they rode off and Tess blew him a kiss.

VII

Loco Jones split the Wagon Wheel cowhands in two. He told Hub to take one half, and Clyde was to take the other half. They were all to scatter out and go slow and keep their eyes peeled.

"No use in tryin' to overtake Bart." said Loco. "He's gone in there blind and a-blunderin'. But they don't dare fire a shot fer fear the sound of the gun will spring the trap. And the trap's set to ketch you and Clyde, Hub. The minute you ride in a-follerin' Bart. Dude Tipton will close in on you and it'll be a massacre. Take 'er plenty cautious. Don't play into Dude's hands."

"Where you goin', Jones?" asked Hub.

"Me? I'm ridin' roughshod where angels don't dare tread. Hell, I'm a-goin' right in behind Bart. Now there's a man to my likin'. Your favorite son is Clyde. He's heady and cautious like you. and Tess picked a shore winner if she wants a steady-goin' mate . . . My choice is Bart. Headlong and reckless. a-twistin' the devil's tail. Bart rode off in a huff and he's blind with a bitter hate. I'm goin' in after that boy because he's my own kind. So-long till you hear the sound of my gun. You'll know then that me'n Bart has opened the big jackpot. Come in a-gamblin' fer keeps!"

Loco Jones rode off. There was a long silence. Then from far ahead, came the sound of his song, shattering the evening silence.

"Come. all you cowboys, if you want to see
Loco Jones on a wild jamboree,
With a bullet for each Tipton that get's in his way.
When the last of 'em's dead I'll call 'er a day!"

Loud and long and dismal as a wolf howl, high-pitched as the scream of a mountain lion, it came back to them.

"Hold up, Wild Bart'" howled Jones. "Wait fer Loco Jones. I got blood in my eye and a bullet with every damn Tipton marked on it. A ca'tridge fer each Tipton. You gotta shoot fast if you hope to beat my tally. To hell with them sheep up yonder. The big band's sulled and balked and they're fixin' to bed down on the hillside. Nobody up a-tendin' them sheep but some harmless sheep-herder. Turn back and join me if you want some good Tipton huntin'. Come back here and I'll blaze the trail with dead Tiptons till you git your shot at Dude."

Loco Jones packed a long-barreled .30-40 rifle. The gun cracked. His

bullet hit the target and a thin, harsh scream was torn from the throat of some dying Tipton.

"I'm a-comin', Jones!" Bart shouted. "Saye that Dude fer Bart Wagoner!"

Now the gunfire sounded like a scattered volley. Through the sounds of the .30-30 saddle carbines there came the occasional louder explosion of Loco Jones' .30-40 rifle.

"Come on, you Hub. You Clyde!" shouted Loco Jones above the wild din of gunfire. "I've sprung the Tipton gun trap. Roll your big Wagon Wheel across the damn Tiptons!"

"Have at it, boys!" shouted Hub. "Good huntin'!"

Then he called to his son. "Clyde. Ride alongside me. We'll go in together."

Clyde rode along at his father's side, gray-faced, his eyes slivers of hard, bright-blue ice.

Scattered on either side of them rode the Wagon Wheel cowhands. They all rode in silence, guns ready, each man for himself, but deployed so that they fought as one, What the odds against them were, nobody knew nor cared. But none of them were discounting the fighting prowess of the Tipton tribe. Because the Tiptons were all trained bushwhack fighters, cold-blooded killers.

Now Dude Tipton's voice shouted his fighting orders from somewhere up ahead.

"Take it easy, men! Loco Jones and Bart Wagoner is up yonder in that nest of boulders. Leave Bart fer me. But it's open season on that Loco Jones and a bounty on his hide. And the man that cuts Old Man Hub Wagoner down claims the reward. Another bounty on Clyde. A gallon of whiskey for every Wagon Wheel scalp you tally. Now circle that nest of big rocks and close it in. Work in pairs, back to back, and one of you watch what's comin' up from behind you. Take your time but don't shoot to miss. Make sure your man's dead before you hunt another Wagon Wheel gent to stop a-rollin'."

Up in the big nest of granite boulders Loco Jones and Bart Wagoner were making a stand together, on foot and taking advantage of the shelter of the huge rocks. Bullets were splattering all around them, flattening their lead against the rocks, ricocheting off with a sharp, pinging whine. The two men had to duck and crouch. There must have been ten or twelve gunmen surrounding the rocks.

Loco Jones kept cautioning Bart to lay low and take no chance. But he was careless in risking his own life. He was taking a big risk to draw a man's fire, to spot him by the gun flash. He'd slip away and Bart would lose sight of him until the .30-40 rifle cracked. Then Loco Jones, his eyes wicked and pale, would slip back to where Bart was waiting.

"Tally another Tipton with his one-way ticket to hell punched by a Loco Jones bullet."

But when Bart would have slipped away for a try at the same game, Loco Jones shook his head.

"You'd only make a target, and

them Tiptons shoot to kill. You got to have Tipton blood in order to outfox a Tipton. Hell, I doubt if you got the cold-blooded bushwhackin' sort of guts it takes to shoot a man where his suspenders cross. . . . No?"

"I couldn't shoot a man in the back," admitted Bart.

"That's the only way to keep your hide bullet-proof. Never give a man any kind of a fightin' chance in this dirty bushwhackin' game. The gent who kills from behind will live to kill another Tipton. Not purty, not at all purty. You lay low. If some Tipton shows up, shoot fast."

Loco Jones would work all kinds of tricks to draw a man's gunfire, then slip off.

He had his gun sights lined on a Tipton's back when he heard Bart's carbine crack. He stiffened. Then the man in his gun sights moved a little and Loco put a bullet in his head and slipped back to where he'd left Bart.

There was no sign of Bart Wagoner. But there was a dead Tipton near the place where Loco had left Bart and the man had been shot between the eyes.

Even as Loco Jones stood there staring at the dead Tipton, he heard Bart's voice lifted in a snarling challenge.

"Show your toughness, Dude. If you want Tess Tipton, you're a rank coward if you ain't man enough to fight for her. She'd hate the guts of a coward. But she'll belong to me till you got the nerve to take her away in a fair fight."

"No man kin call Dude Tipton a coward. I'm a-comin' at you right now, Bart."

Loco Jones moved fast. He tried to shout a warning at Bart that Dude Tipton wouldn't fight fair. His shout was blotted out by Dude Tipton's shot.

Loco Jones took a quick snap shot at Dude as he dodged back among the boulders, but missed.

Then Jones stooped down and lifted Bart and carried him, mortally wounded, back to the shelter in the boulders.

"Dude shot me in the back," Bart gasped. "I was watchin' somebody in front of me move and I figured it was Dude. I was watchin' that feller when Dude shot me from behind. You tell Tess and Clyde I done my best by 'em both. I rode off in a huff. Later I kind o' cooled off. Clyde is the right man for Tess. Dependable. He's the finest man on earth and Tess is all that there is for aces in the deck. You tell 'em to take good care of each other. I'm handin' that Dude thing over to you, Jones. Tell Old Man Hub so long for me. All he's got left of his five boys is Clyde, the best of us."

Bart Wagoner died there. When death claimed him, Loco Jones closed his glazed eyes. Then he straightened up and his voice lifted in a wailing howl.

"I'm a-comin' after you, Dude! All hell can't stop me till I git to you. I'm a-comin', Dude!"

The granite boulders tossed back

the echoes of his grim, deadly threat. And then Loco Jones went wild. Heedless now of danger, with a headlong recklessness, he quit the shelter of the big boulders.

Whenever a Tipton showed, Loco pulled his gun trigger. Bullets whined all around him and not all of them missed. But he kept on.

Hub and Clyde and their Wagon Wheel cowhands closed in. They came in shooting and no odds could stop them. It was a bloody slaughter, a massacre, with no quarter asked and no mercy shown. The gun fight was short and deadly and when the Wagon Wheel men reached the boulders, there were no Tiptons left to shoot at them.

Old Man Hub stood, Clyde beside him, there above the dead body of Bart. They pulled off their hats and stood silent. The gunfire died in the gathering dusk and the silence was that of a granite monument in a graveyard.

"Dude Tipton got away!"

That was Loco Jones' voice and he had prowled through the sprawled bodies of the Tiptons. It came out of the gathering dusk like a madman's wail. Then Loco Jones, bleeding from half a dozen bullet wounds, staggered into sight.

Hub Wagoner had stopped a couple of bullets too and, though not serious, they were a bad handicap.

Clyde had come through the gun ruckus without a bullet nick. Now he turned and headed back to where he had left his horse.

"Dude shot Bart in the back," Loco Jones called after him. "It's up to you now to pick up his dead hand, Clyde. Take no chances with that killer. I'll be a-trailin' you."

"I'll need nobody's help!"

Clyde Wagoner was cold in his deadly hatred, cold and steady-nerved. He forked his horse and headed for the Wagon Wheel Ranch, playing a hunch that was the trail Dude Tipton would take.

VIII

Clyde rode hard, but he kept a sharp lookout ahead for anything that might be a bushwhacker trap. He topped a rise and saw a rider about a mile ahead of him barely visible in the gray dusk. It had to be Dude. And he was spurring his horse to the limit. Dude, ahead, was lost to sight in the brush.

Dude Tipton's bushwhacker bullet, meant for a gut shot, struck Clyde's horse square between the eyes as the big gelding, startled by a movement in the brush ahead, lifted its head. The cow horse lunged and stumbled and somersaulted and Clyde went down with it and lay there, shaken and a little stunned, his head having struck the ground. His foot caught in the stirrup and his leg was pinned down beneath the weight of the dead horse.

Dude had lain in behind the brush and the shot had been fired from a distance of about fifty yards. In the uncertain gray light, between dusk and dark, he couldn't be too certain of his having shot Clyde. But there

was no time to wait and he wasn't going to scout up closer for fear a bullet would tag him if Clyde was still alive.

Clyde Wagoner lay there, his gun jarred loose and flung off a ways. He clawed for his six-shooter and caught one brief split-second sight of Dude Tipton riding hell bent away, out of sight and gone.

Clyde had been set afoot about a mile from the ranch. When he got his leg pulled free he'd had to pull his foot from the boot that lay caught between the horse's dead weight and the ground. He had a twisted ankle that throbbed with pain and with his high-heeled boot on his other foot. he traveled at a lurching gait, his saddle carbine for a crutch. Sweating, blowing hard, teeth gritted against the pain and nausea, he kept on doggedly. He was up within a couple of hundred yards of the ranch, dripping with sweat and blowing like a spent runner, when he heard a shot.

"No tickee!" called the pidgin English of the Chinaman, "no washee!"

Dude Tipton was cussing. He had scouted the ranch and found no Wagon Wheel cowhands there. He changed to a fresh horse and discovered Tess's saddle in the barn so he knew she was there at the house. The moon had come up out of the dusk. A full moon that bathed the ranch in bright moonlight. Dude was riding from the barn towards the house when a .45 slug ripped the high crown of his Stetson hat.

"To be killed by a damn pigtailed Chinaman," was Dude's first thought. "A hell of an end for the swaggering spur-jingling Dude Tipton."

"Don't kill the Dude," Tess Tipton spoke to the Chinaman who stood back in the black shadow of the open doorway. She stepped outside into the moonlight. "You better high-tail it, Dude, while the going's good!"

"I figgered you'd be here," snarled Dude. "It was you gummed the cards. But I killed Bart back yonder and I cut down Clyde when he crowded my getaway. I lost the deal and lost the jackpot. I'm headin' acrost the border into Mexico and I'm takin' you along. I throwed your saddle on a fresh horse in the barn. My gun is in my hand and it's pointed at your purty little heart. Even if that Chink shoots me dead, I'll pull the trigger and I won't miss. If I can't have you, no man on earth's goin' to claim you. Git your horse, Tess."

Dude Tipton was playing for keeps. He wasn't bluffing. It was as he claimed it could happen. Sing Lee didn't dare shoot.

Hidden by the brush, Clyde flattened himself on his belly to steady his aim. He was breathing fast and the sweat trickled into his eyes as he fought back the waves of nausea that swept over him. He tried to get Dude's head in his gun sights, but could not hold his sight steady. He'd never shot a man from ambush but he was going to kill Dude Tipton that way, if ever Dude took his gun aim off Tess.

From behind Clyde and coming at

a headlong gait, his horse spurred to a run, came Loco Jones. His song was wild and incoherent and had no tune or rhyme.

"Come, all you cowboys, this is Loco Jones,

The Tiptons all killed but that big tough Dude.

I'll jerk his tough meat and bleach his bones

Then die happy . . . . I'm Loco Jones!"

Loco Jones had tied himself in the saddle with his ketch rope. He spurred into sight, weaving like a drunken man and all blood-smeared and hatless, his rifle gripped in his hand.

Clyde was on his feet now and out in the open. Loco Jones was a sight to appal any man. Dude Tipton's nerve broke and he whirled his horse and raked the gelding with both spurs.

He sighted Clyde and his gun cracked. His bullet whined past Clyde's ear.

Clyde stood hipshot with one high-heeled boot on one foot and the other foot with only a sock on, his legs braced. Horse and rider were coming straight at him to ride him down and under the hoofs. Clyde didn't untrack. He'd dropped his carbine and gripped his six-shooter. He was pulling the trigger and thumbing back the hammer and shooting again without aiming, pointing the gun from hip level at Dude Tipton's belly.

Dude kept shooting, his shots wild. He lurched and swayed in his saddle, his guts and belly punctured by .45 slugs.

Almost on top of Clyde, Dude's horse veered off sharply. Dude pitched off sideways and he was dead when he landed on the ground sprawled awkwardly at Clyde Wagoner's feet. Clyde's gun hammer snapped down on an exploded cartridge. He'd emptied his gun into Dude Tipton.

Loco Jones' horse stopped at the barn. He rode at a walk over to where the dead Dude Tipton lay sprawled on his back and stared down at the dead face. Then Loco slumped like an empty sack. His head lobbed and death glazed his eyes.

Clyde opened the big blade of his jackknife and cut the ketch rope that tied Loco in the saddle. Sing Lee came padding out. He lifted the dead man from his saddle, and he and Clyde carried the body into the house.

After a while Old Man Hub Wagoner rode up, leading the horse that had Bart's dead body roped on his bloodstained saddle.

Later on, it was the Chinaman Sing Lee who attended to everything. The burial of the dead came first. Loco Jones' grave was high up on the Rim with a granite boulder and lone pine to mark it.

Bart was buried beside his dead brothers in the valley. The Chinaman fetched a parson and when the burial was done, Clyde Wagoner and Tess Tipton stood side by side there at the ranchhouse and were married. Sing Lee gave the bride in marriage

and Hub stood up for his son, sadness and happiness strangely mingled in his misted sky-blue eyes.

There was no wedding trip. Neither Tess nor Clyde wanted it. They were content to stay here while Old Man Hub went to town to roundside until his bullet wounds healed.

It was Sing Lee who moved the sheep out of the valley and back across the Rim and sold them to some sheep outfit far beyond the sight and smell of Hub Wagoner.

Then Sing Lee moved to town to gamble and smoke and talk with Hub who liked his friendly game of poker. Only on occasional holidays did the Chinaman show up at the Wagon Wheel Ranch Hub had turned over to Clyde.

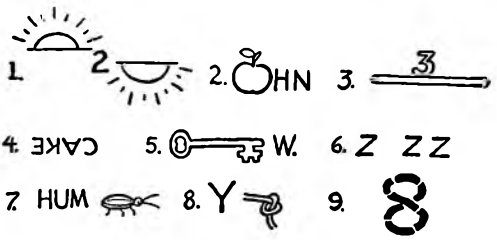
Later on when a son was born to Clyde and Tess, he was named Jones Wagoner. And by the time he was six years old and ready for school, Hub Wagoner taught him the song built up around the saga of Loco Jones.

"So that he can sing it," said Old Man Hub, "telling the legendary tale of his grandfather, the wildest brush-popper who ever pressed a pony off the Rim. . . . Loco Jones, the man who actually played his tough string out!"

THE END

WHAT'S IN A BRAND?

By JACK LUZZATTO



Sometimes excellent brands come in which cannot be used because they are sent in by so many different people—a situation that would be delicate, if one reader were awarded the prize. Another problem is the repetition of brands already used, though the contributor may be unaware of the fact. Originality, therefore, is your best bet. See our No. 1 winner—this contributor says he worked on many such a ranch. You may need some help on No. 6—it's a popular children's game song which also hit Tin Pan Alley some time ago. Think of "Treasure Island" for No. 9. Check your answers on page 154.

No. 1 sent in by John W. Welch, Mesa, Arizona.
No. 2 sent in by Richard Gearhart, Jerome, Idaho.

Can you work out an *original* brand? Mr. Luzzatto will pay $5 for each contribution suitable for use in this department. Address him in care of Street & Smith's Western Story, P. O. Box 489, Elizabeth, N. J. Be sure to enclose a three cent stamp for material which is not available.

FIGHTIN' FOOLS

By Johnston McCulley

Dan Maguire's men weren't laying track and they never would until he took that crew apart and put it back together again

DAN MAGUIRE stopped the fight with a railroad coupling pin. He knew he could not do it with a show of authority, nor with his fists against the two men, for each was almost his physical equal.

So he picked up the coupling pin he saw beside the new track and went to work. He plowed through the gang of track-layers who were cheering the belligerents, and tapped Bert Lapman on the back of his head, sending him sprawling in the dirt. As Sam Burke lurched forward, Dan Maguire tapped him in turn. Standing back, he looked at the two stunned track-layers and then spoke to one of the other men.

"Throw water on 'm and toss 'm on the flatcar," Maguire ordered. "Hurry it up! The work train's ready to start for end-of-steel."

Maguire, boss of the track-laying crew for the new railroad, was a man to be obeyed. Water was tossed on Lapman and Burke and they were put on different flatcars, so they could not renew their fight during the short

trip. Maguire jumped on the last car and sat on the side with his legs hanging over.

He was getting sick of Lapman and Burke, two of the best men in the track-laying gang, always battling. If it continued, one might be seriously injured. And Maguire needed every man of the gang to be at his best. He felt disgraced because his crew was far behind schedule.

The graders and roadbed crew had gained on the track layers steadily for several days. Reports wired back to construction headquarters each evening revealed that. To Maguire the situation was a disgrace.

The work train gathered speed, and the cars rocked and bumped over the new track. Maguire looked out across the prairie that had burned all day under the relentless sun shining from a cloudless sky. In the distance were mountains. The new railroad was headed for them, would bore through and go on toward the Coast, opening up new land for settlement.

Maguire was proud of his job. On several new western railroads, many miles of track had been laid under his supervision. Some day, when he had time, he would ride over every mile, he promised himself, sitting on the back platform of the last car in the train, and remembering what had happened when this stretch and that had been laid.

He would remember this stretch, all right! There had been trouble and delay from the day new men had arrived for the track-laying gang. Lapman and Burke among them. That first day, both of them had met Molly O'Hara, and the trouble had started.

Maguire didn't blame them for being attracted to Molly. He was himself. She was a pretty colleen of twenty-two, ten years younger than Maguire. Her father, Tim O'Hara, handled the telegraph car. Molly kept house for him and handled the camp mail, passing it out when the mail line formed after supper.

A screech of the locomotive whistle announced that the train was nearing the construction camp. The men began getting ready to jump off. Maguire glanced along the train. He saw both Lapman and Burke, on cars ahead, looking back and glaring at him.

"They hate my innards," Maguire muttered. "Let 'em!"

Maguire hopped off with the others as the train rolled to a stop, and started across to another track where the telegraph car had been spotted. It was his duty to wire construction headquarters the progress his track layers had made that day, and the report wouldn't be good. For a week, none of his reports had been good.

A frown on his face as he went up the steps and into the car. Tim O'Hara and Molly were both in the business end of the car, Tim working his telegraph key and Molly sorting mail.

Molly called a greeting and Maguire replied with a grunt. He dropped into a chair before the desk

and began scribbling his short and unsatisfactory report.

"Here you are," he told Tim, tossing the sheet of paper in front of him. "Not good! I'll be hearin' from Atkinson if this keeps up."

"He's on his way here now on a special," said O'Hara.

"He's comin' to cut my hide off, and I can't say I blame him," Maguire replied.

"What's wrong, Dan? Trouble in the gang?"

"That's it. Two of my best men are at each other's throats all the time. That bothers the others. They don't do team work. A track-layin' crew that can't pull together is as bad as none at all. How's the report ahead of us?"

"Graders and roadbed men a mile better than yesterday."

"That means I'm two miles farther behind. And we should be on their heels, with ties and rails ready to lay, jeerin' at the dirt-slingers for bein' slow." Maguire stuffed his pipe, lit it, and puffed smoke toward the car ceiling. He glanced at Molly, who was reading a postal card brazenly.

"Seems like these two men of mine are both crazy about the same girl," Maguire resumed. "So they fight instead of layin' track."

Molly flashed him a smile. "Meaning me, Dan?" she asked.

"It's you I mean. Why don't you make up your mind?"

"Oh, I have, Dan! I don't want either of them. I've told them so, but they won't listen, and they still come pestering around."

"You're just keepin' both of 'em danglin'," Maguire accused. "You're a witch. You're a cute little witch with honey hair and blue eyes—"

"Talk some more like that, Dan," Molly broke in.

"I'll fire both Lapman and Burke and run 'em both out of camp!"

"Now, now!" Molly reproved. "That'd be admitting you can't handle the situation. Any boss can fire a man. But to keep a good man on and make him do his work—that's being a real boss."

"Now she's preachin'," Maguire complained to Tim O'Hara.

A locomotive's whistle screeched, and a headlight flashed its yellow beam through the telegraph car's windows.

"Here comes Atkinson." O'Hara said.

"I'll stay here and wait for it," decided Maguire.

He recharged his pipe and waited. Boots ground the gravel outside the car and thumped up the steps. John Atkinson, the construction superintendent, entered the car followed by the young man who served him as secretary.

Atkinson was of the high-pressure executive type. He nodded to O'Hara, saluted Molly and glared at Maguire.

"Glad you're here, Maguire," he said. "Want to talk to you. O'Hara, have you Maguire's report?"

"Just put it on the wire, sir. Here it is."

Atkinson read the report and glared at Maguire again. "This is bad, Maguire," he said. "What's the matter with you? Can't you drive men any more? The roadbed gang is running ahead of you. That's a black disgrace for the boss of a track-laying crew."

"Yes, sir," Maguire gulped.

"Say something, man! Explain!"

"Trouble in the gang, sir. No team work."

"You're the boss, Maguire. Fire the troublemakers. I hold you responsible. We want this road to get into the mountains before snow flies. I get urgent telegrams every day from the home office. You have a reputation for being able to handle men. Handle 'em!"

"I'll do my best."

"I want better reports from you, Maguire, starting tomorrow. I want more life and kick out of your crew and this entire camp. You're not held up by a lack of supplies. You've got ties and rails and men. Lay track!"

The Irish in Maguire was welling up, and he was at the point of explosion. Atkinson nodded to his secretary and started for the car door. He stopped and turned. "I'd stay over until tomorrow and go out to the end of the track," he said, "but if the fire gets bad it might cut me off, and I have business back at headquarters."

"Fire?" O'Hara asked.

"Bad prairie fire running parallel to our tracks, about ten miles north. You probably can see it now, since it's growing dark. If the wind shifts, it may come in this direction. That'd be just fine! Burned ties and telegraph poles and piles of supplies! It's about the only thing that hasn't happened to delay us."

The secretary opened the door for him.

"Show me some action, Maguire!" were the superintendent's final words.

Maguire burned at that last remark. He noticed that Molly had run to a car window to look out.

"Sky's red toward the northeast," she reported. "I've seen three bad prairie fires at a distance. Don't care to see one any closer. The fire travels through the dry grass as fast as a race horse."

Maguire left the car without speaking again. He was hungry, and hurried to the eating shack. The men of the gang had finished their meal. When Maguire had eaten his supper, he left the shack and walked along the track toward his own tent. He wanted to sit in front of the tent and smoke and think things out.

A bright moon was shining, light came from the headlight of the work train's locomotive and from the shacks across the track. The northeastern sky was pink, and streaks of black smoke rolled through the pink at intervals. The prairie fire seemed to be traveling straight west, paralleling the track at a distance.

Boots crunched gravel and cinders along the right-of-way. Maguire

glanced up to see about a score of men marching toward him. He got to his feet quickly and put his pipe away when he saw Lapman and Burke leading the group.

Here was trouble coming! Well, if they wanted a fight, they could have it! It was no time to jump Dan Maguire after Atkinson's stinging rebukes had put a fighting edge on his rage.

The men stopped a few feet from him. Lapman spoke:

"Maguire, you used a couplin' pin on Burke and me!"

"I did that! I'm tired of your fightin'. The work's goin' to blazes. We're buildin' a railroad, and it's your job to lay track. The dirt-slingers are gainin' on us every day . . ."

"You used a couplin' pin on us," Lapman repeated.

"I did!"

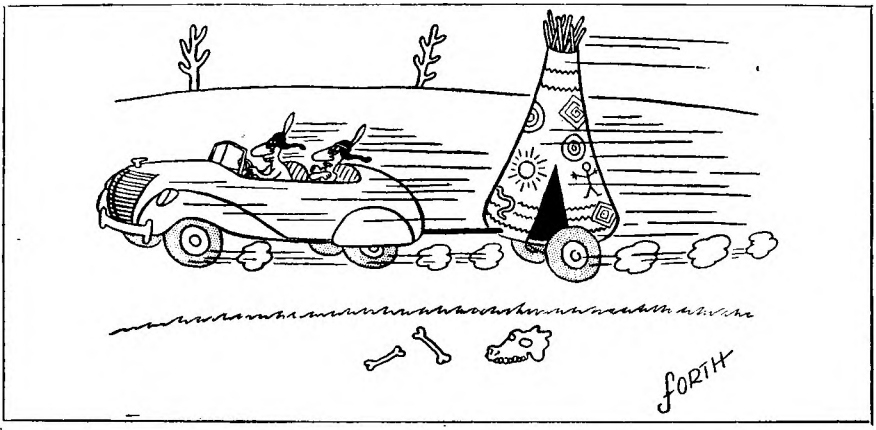
"The road to the south wants track-layers," Burke put in. "We're goin' to hammer the daylights out of you, Maguire, then we'll take our time and quit."

Maguire bent forward pugnaciously. "You'll not quit—you'll lay track!" he replied. "I used a couplin' pin on you because the train was waitin' to fetch us to end-of-steel. Well, let's not be wastin' time! My sleeves are rolled up and my fists are ready. Walk into 'em any time you like."

Burke rushed first. Lapman prepared to back him up. Either man was almost a match for Maguire under ordinary conditions, but not when his Irish was up.

Maguire knew railroad construction gangs. He knew that to maintain his prestige he would have to win this unfair battle. He would never again be able to handle the gang properly if he went down to defeat now. Track-layers would not be bossed by a man they did not respect.

Fists thudded as Maguire and Burke circled. Maguire got in a few



blows that hurt, and received some. Then Lapman rushed in. The other men were shouting. More members of the track-laying crew came running from their shacks and from the saloon and store tents on the other side of the tracks.

Lapman and Burke almost got Maguire down once. Both men kept coming at him. He felt his strength going. His face was cut and bruised. A body blow was causing him distress, and his breathing was becoming painful.

But with his last strength, he became the aggressor. He bored in ruthlessly, howling defiance as he fought. Almost spent physically, he was fighting on nerve alone. He sent Lapman reeling backward with a blow, and quickly turned to go after Burke.

Suddenly the staccato whistle of the work-train locomotive, which kept up steam all night, pierced the din made by the fighters and their yelling audience. The staccato signal all railroad yardmen know—the fire alarm! The fighters separated, and the men faced a new peril.

The wind had raised and shifted. The grass fire was racing now toward the railroad with its front not more than two miles away.

"We'll finish this . . . afterwards," Maguire gasped.

The camp boss was yelling orders, and Maguire lurched down the track toward him, fighting to get his breathing back to normal, shaking his head in an effort to clear it. Men came running from the various tents.

A long string of water-tank cars was on a siding. The camp boss shouted to Maguire to take charge of the water. Owners of store shacks and saloon tents were crowding around him, begging for water.

"Open the taps of the first two cars!" Maguire ordered. "The fire's comin' straight at the camp. But 'tween us and the tall grass is a couple of hundred yards of stony ground. Maybe the fire'll stop there, burn itself out and turn west again. The heat may fire the tents and shacks, though. Wet down the tents, but don't waste water. Get goin'! Shake your boots!"

His own track-layers were reporting to him, and he stationed some to guard the tank cars. Leaping flames came on toward the camp, fiery tongues darting high in the air and threatening destruction. The wind was high, and clouds of nauseous smoke rolled over the camp and on across the prairie.

Men were running back and forth between the water-tank cars and the shacks and tents along the track, carrying buckets of water to throw upon canvas and boards. Maguire saw that the men were doing what they could and left them to race to the telegraph car.

Tim O'Hara was feverishly working his telegraph key while Molly stuffed report books and unclaimed mail into the old safe.

"Get ready to clear out of here!" Maguire warned. "Come with me and get under one of the tank cars.

Bring somethin' you can soak and put over your heads. Smoke's almost as bad as the fire."

"I've told headquarters about it," O'Hara said, getting up from the telegraph board. "They'll start a train out but what good will it do? They can't get here in time with more water tanks. Can't fight a fire like this with a squirt gun."

"Come along! Shake your boots!" Maguire ordered.

They hurried out and O'Hara locked the car door. They went down the steps and ran to the line of water-tank cars. The heat was so intense that some of the tents were steaming. Maguire ordered the taps of another car opened.

"Fill everything with water, and hold it ready!" he shouted. "Be ready to put out fire wherever it starts. Keep your eyes open!"

He got Molly and O'Hara beneath one of the tank cars in the line and opened a small tap. Molly and her father began soaking blankets they had brought along.

Maguire glanced down the track. The fire was burning closer to the track down there. He saw a telegraph pole totter and fall as flames licked at it. The wires were broken. O'Hara had sent his last message for the present.

The heat was growing almost unbearable. Men were coughing and retching from the thick nauseous smoke. There was nothing more to be done now.

Maguire turned his head and glanced at the tents and shacks along the street. A tent burst into flames from the heat, and men ran toward it, tossed buckets of water on the blazing canvas and pulled the tent down and away from the others. Some of the other tents were smoking.

When the fire reached the edge of the stony stretch along the track opposite the camp, Molly and her father wrapped soaked blankets around their heads, allowing only a small breathing space. Maguire picked up a pail somebody had dropped, filled it at a tap, and tossed water over the heads of the other two.

A sudden shift of the wind blew the thick smoke away from them. The fire was dying out at the edge of the grass. Maguire sat on the track cinders beside Molly, and bathed his stinging eyes. He felt the girl clutch his arm.

"Afraid?" he asked.

"Not when you're here, Dan."

Scarcely realizing what he was doing, Maguire slipped his arm around her, and Molly snuggled up to him. He bent over her protectingly. As she lifted her head to say something, the blanket slipped off her face.

Maguire could not tell afterward how he happened to kiss her, but kiss her he did! Then he lifted his head quickly when he heard some of the men shouting, and Molly covered her head again.

Another tent was blazing, and men were throwing water on it and tearing it down. The smoke was thinner now. The wind had shifted again

and was driving the fire westward toward new fuel at great speed.

Down the track, the flames had reached the roadbed and burned themselves out, leaving only scorched and smoking earth and tumbled telegraph poles. The repair crew could fix that easily enough when the relief train got there.

The long line of fire passed, and as dawn came they could see only blackened ground running toward the horizon. Toward the west, the fire had veered away from the railroad to follow the high grass and stunted trees along a winding creek.

The camp was safe. Now that the danger was over, Maguire had the men shut off the taps of the water-tank cars.

Maguire helped Molly out from beneath the car, and O'Hara crawled out after them.

"Never touched the telegraph car," O'Hara pointed out. "Business as usual, soon as the repair crew gets here and fixes the wires." He started toward his car.

"Dan, come to the car, and I'll cook you some breakfast," Molly said. "And I'll fix your face. You look like you'd had a fight with a couple of wildcats."

He grinned at her. "I did."

"You showed you're the boss, and that's what you had to do. Maybe your gang will lay track now. Dan . . . you kissed me back there under the car."

"Don't get mad, Molly. Didn't know what I was doin'. You looked so sweet when you lifted your face . . ."

"Talk to me some more like that," she whispered.

Maguire stood like a man stricken by a sudden powerful thought. Why, he loved the girl! Had all along.

"Molly . . . you . . ." he asked.

"I reckon, Dan."

"Well, now! That reminds me. Wait a minute!"

He called up and down the track for Lapman and Burke, and somebody shouted that they were coming. When they stood before him, he faced them with his fists braced against his hips and looked them up and down.

"We were interrupted by the fire, remember?" he asked them. "We can finish it now, if you're hankerin' for it. But I want to tell you somethin' first. If you're fightin' over this little lady all the time, you're plain fools. 'Cause she's goin' to marry me. That's right, Molly?"

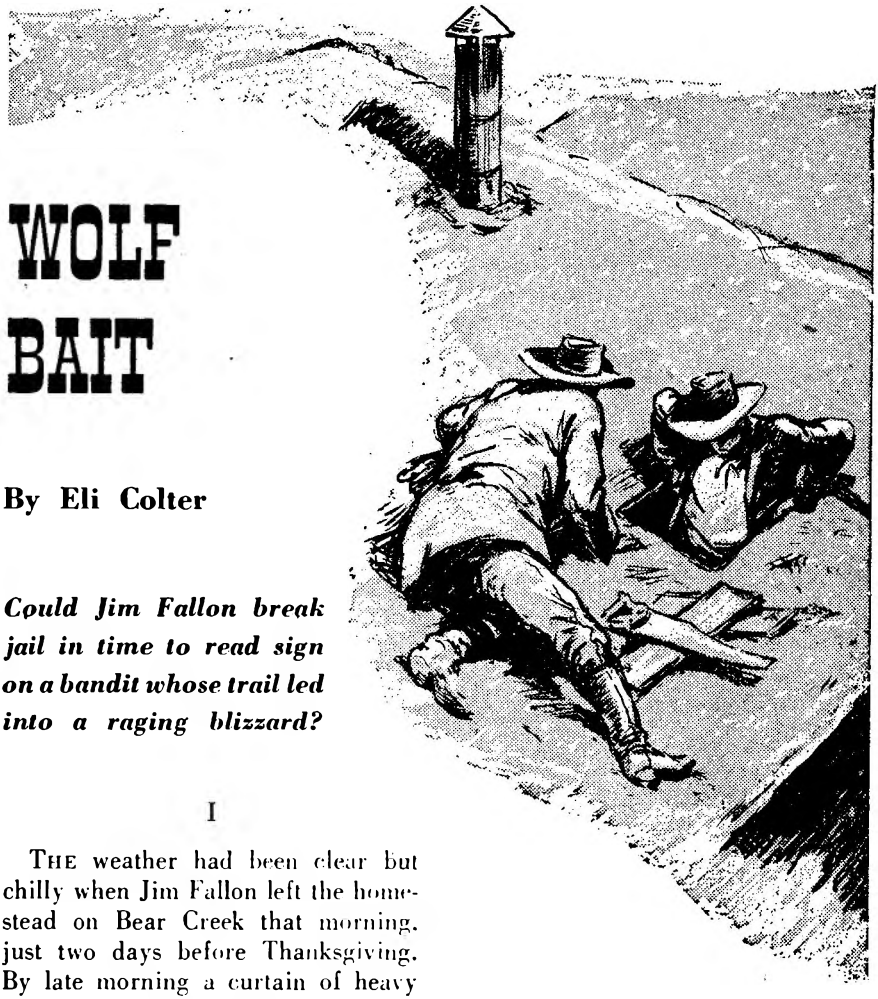
"It's right, Dan."

He grinned at her and faced the pair again. "So, if you pester her any more, you'll be pesterin' my future wife, and that'll get my Irish up more'n ever, and I'll show you what real fightin' is like! Startin' today, you're goin' to get your minds on layin' track so we can catch up with the dirt-slingers and make monkeys out of 'em. Well?"

"Sure, boss!" Lapman said meekly.

"Why . . . sure!" Burke agreed.

THE END



WOLF BAIT

By Eli Colter

Could Jim Fallon break jail in time to read sign on a bandit whose trail led into a raging blizzard?

I

THE weather had been clear but chilly when Jim Fallon left the homestead on Bear Creek that morning, just two days before Thanksgiving. By late morning a curtain of heavy gray clouds had crawled up above the mountains to the west and the threatening mass of scud had rapidly fanned out into a solid storm blanket overhead and begun spitting snow.

By the time Fallon rode into the little mining and cow town of Alpine, the day had become as dark as the inside of a blue mule, and the season's first snow was falling heavily.

Fallon's shoulders and his hat were

white when he pulled his lank roan gelding up in front of the cabin and barn owned by Jerkline Bill Bunker, the old freighter who ran the town's livery service, and let out a yell.

Jerkline burst out of the cabin like a grizzly bear on the prod, bellowed his salutation, cursed the weather, prophesied the coldest winter in fifty years, and invited Fallon inside for hot coffee, all in a single breath.

Then he caught his second wind and looked up at the tall young rider quizzically.

"Ain't you a mite forward, Jim?" he asked. "Comin' back to town so soon after the ruckus you had with them uncurried cowboys from out Blizzard Wells way at the Fourth o' July rodeo last summer?"

Jim Fallon laughed, amusement lighting up his sober gray eyes and the mildly saturnine cast of his lean, deeply tanned features. "Don't reckon I'll have any trouble, Jerkline. And if I do, it won't be anything to get steamed up about. Larry Olds and Ironbelly Mike Brannigan are too smart to build up a little scuffle into serious trouble."

Jerkline snorted. "Huh! If the way you wor' ed over Larry and Ironbelly is your idee of a little scuffle, I'd hate to be around when you was in a fightin' mood. What brung you to town, Jim?"

Fallon chuckled, and his eyes twinkled. Laughter seemed to come as easily to him as breathing, despite the austere expression of his face in repose. "Why, my sister-in-law Dora—my brother Karl's wife—got all upset when her baby girl took a case of the sniffles. Karl's got a busted rib that hurts him like hell when he rides, so I just saddled up and come to town for a bottle of colic medicine to keep Dora from havin' conniption fits."

"Women is bothersome critters," Jerkline sighed. "How's things out to the homestead?"

"Pretty fair. Karl and I have eighty acres planted to winter wheat, now." Fallon went on to explain that he wouldn't be in town more than a few minutes, that if Jerkline didn't mind he'd just leave his horse saddled and tied in a stall out of the snow.

Jerkline nodded assent; then, as he watched Fallon ride around the side of the house toward the barn, shouted after him: "All the same, Jim, if you should run into more trouble than you figured on, just holler for old Jerkline! I'm a-rootin' for your side, even if I don't take much stock in homesteaders as a gin'ral rule."

Fallon shouted his thanks back over his shoulder and rode on toward the barn.

By the time he had made the horse secure in its stall, and had started toward the huddle of buildings that comprised the town, the snow was falling in earnest. He strode past the saloon and the general store, and turned into the drugstore-confectionary that also housed the town post office.

Fallon bought a bottle of Deever's Colic Cure from the clerk at the drug counter, then turned toward the partition which segregated the post office from the rest of the store.

Inside the post office he saw the thin little figure of Russ Maloney pacing uneasily near the door, glancing every few seconds out the window and peering up the street. Maloney's shoulders were humped from eternally bending over his desk, his eyes behind their thick glasses nearsighted from constant poring over his employers' records and accounts. Russ Maloney, with his anxious narrow face and straggling mustache, looked exactly what he was—the bookkeeper for the Copper Bell Mine.

Maloney halted momentarily in his pacing, glanced about as Jim Fallon came into the post office from the

drugstore side, and spoke absently, his mind on other concerns. "Oh. Hello, Fallon. How's everything out your way?"

"So, so. Russ," Fallon said. "How's it by you?"

Maloney didn't answer. He hadn't even heard. He went on pacing, peering out the window, glancing at the big-faced clock on the wall.

Fallon went up to the grilled window. "Any mail, Joe?"

Joe Wheeler, the clerk, riffled through a stack of letters and scanned a jumbled heap of parcels. "Nope. Ain't a thing, Jim. Might be somethin' in today's batch later—stage is behind time. Didn't pass it on your way to town, did you?"

Fallon shook his head. "No, I didn't, Joe. But, then, I took a short cut. I might have passed it without knowing it. You reckon it might have been held up by the snow?"

"'Tain't likely. Snow ain't been fallin' long enough to clog the road. Seems to me Fred White would've driven all the harder when the weather began to threaten." Wheeler glanced up at the big clock, as Maloney had done, and leaned closer to the grill. He lowered his voice, for Fallon's ears alone. "It's got poor old Russ bad worried."

"Oh, yeah?" Fallon said. "Something important on the stage?"

Wheeler nodded. "You bet, for Russ. They're makin' a lot of expensive improvements up to the Copper Bell. Money for the extra costs and men is comin' in on the stage today. Russ is here to take it over and sign for it. Dutch Miller's to meet him here and escort him and the money to the mine. And Fred has to be late! He oughta been here ahead of schedule, instead of late." Wheeler added hastily, urgently, "Don't repeat that to nobody, Jim. About the cash comin' in. Ain't nobody knows it but me'n Russ and Dutch. Keep it under your hat, boy."

Jim nodded. "Sure. You bet. But Russ has got no cause for worry, Joe. A hundred things could have delayed the stage a few minutes." He turned his gaze to the clock, too. The time was four-twenty. "Hm. Might be some mail for us. Guess I'll wait till Fred White shows up." He turned away from the window and Joe Wheeler went back to fussing with the mail.

Fallon went into the drugstore section, bought a magazine and, hunkering down against the candy counter, began looking through the illustrations. He was still idly thumbing pages when Dutch Miller, the town marshal, came in, brushing a frost of snow from his mackinaw.

Dutch was short and broad, with a stiff bristle of sandy hair above his wide red face. He was a man who didn't waste many words, an honest officer, though he was known in Alpine to be as stubborn as a billy goat.

"Hello, Dutch," Fallon greeted him. "Mail's pretty late, ain't it?"

Miller regarded the long lean homesteader for several seconds without

saying anything. His gaze was colored with speculation and faint disapproval. Then he remarked tersely, "If I was you I'd get out of town, pronto, Fallon. The Blizzard Wells outfit is in town today. Most of 'em are over at the saloon hittin' the jug. If they set eyes on you, some of 'em is bound to remember the run-in they had with you the Fourth of July."

Fallon grinned, and went on with his perusal of the magazine.

The lawman surveyed him critically for a moment, then strode to the door, poked his head out, and stared through the swirling flakes in the direction from which the stage would arrive.

Russ Maloney walked up to the doorway in the partition dividing drugstore from post office. and stood there gazing at the marshal with open distress in his near-sighted eyes.

When Miller slammed the outer door shut and stamped back to the center of the floor, a worried frown clouded his blunt ruddy features. He glanced meaningly at Maloney, as if he would assure the bookkeeper that there was nothing to be disturbed about, but neither man said anything. Then the marshal scowled impatiently at Fallon.

Fallon lowered his magazine and gave his attention to the lawman. "What's eatin' you, Dutch? Can't I even come to town for the mail without you tryin' to give me the bum's rush?"

The marshal frowned down at him in faintly hostile silence. He started to say something, paused, evidently changed his mind and took a different tack. "If you get into any trouble with the Buzzard Wells cowboys, Fallon, I'll toss the kit and kaboodle of you into the jug. The cattlemen are beginnin' to get fed up with you homesteaders."

Fallon shrugged, and grinned again in undisguised amusement. "I'm not looking for trouble, Dutch; and you're not worried over the possibility of a few bloody noses. Now, what are you *really* worried about?"

Dutch Miller's truculent frown darkened, and again his gaze was tinged with that half-hostile speculation. But he turned away without answering Fallon's jocular query, moved up to the partition doorway where Maloney was still standing, and addressed the postal clerk.

"What time has the stage usually been pulling in, Joe?"

Joe Wheeler looked at him in surprise. "Why, shucks, marshal! You ought to know that. About four o'clock, give or take a few minutes."

" 'S what I thought. Just wonderin' if I could have been mistaken." The marshal pulled out a thick gold watch. "Hm. It's four twenty-five now, which makes Fred near thirty minutes late. He might've throwed a wheel, or run into a ditch. Well, I guess all we can do is wait. He's got to come pretty soon now."

The outer door opened. and Jake Harvey came in out of the blustery weather. He was a big burly man, dark, heavy-faced and bearded, built

like a range steer from his own wide acres of the Circle H, and about as tough as one.

The marshal and the bookkeeper backed away as Harvey came on toward the partition doorway.

Maloney said, with his absent-minded and abstracted air, "Hello, Jake. How's everything out your way?"

Harvey barely glanced at him, as he shouldered past. "Everything under control, Russ. This snow keeps on, won't have anything to do for the next six months but lay around and get fat." He said to the marshal in passing, "Hi, Dutch."

"Hi, Jake," Miller returned.

Harvey went on up to the grilled window. "Any mail for the Circle H, Joe?"

"Ain't in yet. Stage is late today, Jake."

Fallon returned his attention to his magazine. Two or three other customers drifted in and out of the store. Dutch Miller stood near the front windows, motionless, waiting. Russ Maloney paced the floor anxiously, and twice went to the door to peer uneasily down the road.

Another rancher came in, asked for mail, and went out, stuffing a couple of letters into his hip pocket. During the instant that the door was opened, the faint clatter of hoofs could be heard approaching from the outskirts of town.

"There's the stage, or I miss my guess," Fallon said.

Miller hurried to the outer door and stepped out. Fallon closed his magazine, got to his feet and followed the lawman. Maloney and Jake Harvey tagged along behind Fallon.

II

The four men stood there in the falling snow beside the building, as the stage horses came down the road at a smart trot, slowed, and from long habit, slewed to a halt in front of the drugstore-postoffice.

"What held you up, Fred?" Miller shouted to the dark figure on the high seat. "I was beginnin' to get worried."

There was no answer from the murky heights of the box.

The law officer muttered unintelligibly under his breath. He struck a match and held it overhead between his cupped hands. Then he whirled and spoke sharply to Fallon.

"Go round up Doc Beaver, quick, Jim. Fred's been hurt. And you come back here with Doc, too. I've got some questions to ask you."

Fallon found Dr. Phineas Beaver in the room back of the town's only law office, trying to sober up Alpine's lawyer and justice of the peace. He gave Beaver the marshal's message.

Beaver grunted. "Huh. 'Smatter with Fred?"

"I don't know. Too dark to see. Come on, Doc! You can leave his honor for a few minutes. I know from the way Dutch spoke, Fred's hurt bad. Dyin', maybe! Let's get over there to the post office."

Without another word, Beaver threw a blanket over the lawyer, and

followed Fallon out into the snow without pausing to put on coat or hat.

Fred White was stretched out on the counter, covered by a blanket, and half the men in town had answered the summons of the grapevine telegraph. Some of them had crowded around Dutch Miller and, some were gathered in angry little groups talking among themselves.

Beaver fought his way to the counter where the stage driver lay. He lifted a corner of the blanket, took one look at Fred White, then pulled the blanket up over the driver's face.

"Hell!" he said. "You don't need a doctor. Couldn't you damn fools see he was dead?"

"Yeah," said Marshal Miller quietly. "But you're the coroner, ain't you? Pick out your jury and go to work."

"What happened?" Miller demanded.

"How the devil do I know? The stage drove up with Fred sittin' on the box dead as a mackerel. And that ain't all. The strong box is gone, with all that money for the Copper Bell Mine."

One of the miners who worked at the big mine on the hill back of the town started to edge toward the door. "I better go get the boss," he said excitedly.

As the miner hurried on out, Fallon elbowed his way to Miller's side.

"Say, Dutch. Who all knew that money was coming in today?" He wondered whether Miller would have information differing from what the post office clerk had given him.

The marshal scowled at him. "Hell, nobody knew it. Nobody but me, and the mine superintendent, and Russ Maloney, who was here to receive it."

Fallon thought, *Joe Wheeler knew. Who told him? Maybe whoever told Joe could have told somebody else. And maybe it was Russ told him, when he began to worry about the stage being late. That's probably it.*

He heard the marshal's voice, adding slowly, "And one other. The skunk who beefed poor Fred."

"Great Scott!" Fallon said. "That makes it an inside job."

"Maybe," Dutch admitted. "Maybe. On the other hand, someone might have stumbled on the fact by chance. Fred White was always a windy old cuss. Or, maybe—you ain't told anybody, have you, Russ?"

Russ Maloney fidgeted a little, and a guilty flush tinged his thin face. "No. I ain't. Only Joe. I just mentioned it to him a little while ago, when I began to get so worried."

Dutch laughed shortly. "Well, I guess Joe ain't had no chance to go skinnin' out and hold up the stage. Maybe Fred was the one that spilled the beans, never dreamin' he was talkin' to a killer and holdup man."

"Look, Dutch," Fallon said, "that strong box would be heavy. It would take an extra horse just to pack the thing. We'd better get on down the road to where the killing happened.

Maybe we could pick up the trail before the snow gets too deep."

"You tryin' to tell me my business?" The marshal eyed him sharply. "There ain't no sense tryin' to stumble around in the woods tonight. Might not be necessary, anyhow. By the way, just why'd *you* happen to come to town today, Jim?"

"Me?" Fallon looked blankly amazed, then turned a little angry.

The hum of voices in the room ceased. Dutch Miller and the lanky homesteader became on the instant the focus of attention.

"Well, Fallon?" the lawman said dryly.

Fallon glared at him. "Why, hell, Dutch! I come to town for a bottle of colic medicine for my brother's baby."

Miller's dissecting gaze held on the homesteader's angry face. "Yeah? Hm. Well, maybe so, Jim. Maybe so. But why'd you know I was bothered about somethin' while we was here in the store waitin' for the stage?"

Angry scattered curses rose around the room. One of the Blizzard Wells cowboys, to the rear of the crowd near the wall, lifted his voice loudly.

"Listen, fellas. The homesteader comes to town for the first time in four months, and Alpine has its first stage robbery and killin' in twenty years! Colic medicine, hell! Let's get the coroner's inquest over with and string the homesteader up legal."

The marshal whirled about, confronting the entire gathering belligerently. "You shut up!" he bellowed. "Speak when you're spoken to. Otherwise, keep your traps closed."

"Twelve good men and true," sneered Jake Harvey. "How you suppose Doc's goin' to find 'em among this bunch of sore heads?"

"Yeah," drawled Beaver. "Fair-minded, just-hearted, and open to conviction. You show 'em to me, Dutch, and I'll pick 'em."

"Pick your jury!" Miller said shortly. "We're wastin' time."

Beaver subsided, grumbling, and hastily chose his men at random. One of them was the Blizzard Wells hand who wanted to "string the homesteader up legal."

The jury listened to the evidence, which wasn't much. Fred White had been killed by some holdup man who had known about the money being brought in for the Copper Bell. Neither the marshal nor Russ Maloney had told anyone about the expected cash—except for Maloney's mention of it to Joe Wheeler—and it was reasonable to suppose that the mine superintendent wouldn't have told. The leak must have come through Fred White himself.

It was known that Jim Fallon and Fred White had been pretty friendly. It was known that Jim Fallon and his brother Karl had been making a hard go of it on the little homestead, that money was a thing they had little of and needed badly. It sounded a bit thin that Jim Fallon had come all the way into town for a bottle of colic medicine for a baby. He would have had plenty of time to waylay the

stage, shoot White, hide the loot, and reach town before the late arrival of the stage.

There hadn't been any strangers around on the range for months. There hadn't been any trouble in Alpine for years. The knowledge of the presence of the money on the stage had been kept too secret for an outsider to have learned of it, anyway.

The jury decided that if Jim Fallon wasn't guilty, he ought to be, and they rather suspected he was. They thought the marshal should lock Fallon up, until he was either positively convicted or further evidence was unearthed to clear him.

Dutch Miller handcuffed Fallon, to prevent his making any unexpected attempt at escape, and started for the jail with him.

The gathering in the drugstore broke up and the men began to scatter. Jake Harvey stamped out, muttering in disgust. He had not been chosen as one of the jury, neither had he been at all backward about expressing his opinion. He got on his horse and started for the Circle H.

Miller and Fallon went on toward the small building that housed the jail, mere dim figures moving through the falling snow. Before they quite reached the jail building, another dim figure darted out into the road ahead of them, and Bill Bunker's voice assaulted the marshal's ears harshly.

"Let him go, Dutch. Take off them damn bracelets and let him go. That boy ain't no more guilty of holdin' Fred up than I am. You're prejudiced agin' him, like the fool cattlemen, and you're lettin' it warp your sense of justice."

Miller had come to an abrupt halt at the first sound of Bunker's voice, and held Fallon immobile beside him. He couldn't see the gun leveled in Jerkline's hand, but he knew it was there without being told. "You're obstructing justice, Jerkline," he said quietly. "The boy'll get a fair trial."

"Fair!" snorted Bunker, and his dim, snow-blanketed figure wavered a step closer. "About as fair as a newborn pup in a den of rattlesnakes. I said let him go. I'll shoot you if I have to, to see he gets a chance, marshal. I ain't hankerin' to. But I will."

"Then you'll have to shoot, Jerkline," Miller said. "And it ain't going to do you much good in this town."

The snow fell in silence for a minute then. Even Jerkline Bill Bunker knew the truth of that assertion. Men in Alpine liked Dutch Miller. They knew *he* was fair and just whether anything else was. They wouldn't grant much consideration to a man who'd shoot Dutch Miller down, in order to take his prisoner away from him. Especially when that prisoner was a man they considered an interloper in the cattle country, though the miners didn't uphold that view of the homesteaders with any degree of enthusiasm.

"Listen to reason, Jerkline," Fallon said. "You made a good try. I reckon I thank you a lot for it. But

nobody ever took a prisoner away from Dutch Miller yet. I reckon plenty has tried. I'd hate to see you put a slug in Dutch, Jerkline. You'd be done in this man's country if you did."

"You let him stick you in the pokey and it'll be the end of you!" Bunker snapped angrily. "You won't have a dog's chance from here out."

"Somebody beefed poor Fred, Jerkline," Miller said steadily. "I aim to find out who it was. If it was Jim here, I'm afraid he'll have to take the consequences."

"You think it was him?" challenged Jerkline.

"Looks powerful suspicious, Jerkline," Miller said. "It looks powerful suspicious. You goin' to drop that gun and let me put my prisoner in a good warm cell, or you want us all to stand here till we freeze to death?"

"I guess I'm licked," Bunker admitted helplessly, and they saw him move his arm, lowering it, through the thick-falling fine snow. "I cain't kill you, marshal. I thought I could bluff you, and git Jim free and give him a chance. But I cain't kill you. I'll take care of your horse, Jim. I'll see nothin' happens to him."

"Thanks," Fallon said.

Miller nudged him into a walk, and they went on toward the jail, past Jerkline Bill Bunker, who stood motionless, and watched them go.

Miller said, as he locked Jim Fallon into the one cell in the jail house, "If you ain't guilty, you got nothing to be afraid of."

Jim Fallon only laughed.

III

After Miller had gone and left him alone, Fallon began to examine the walls and window minutely, by the dim glow of the oil lamp Miller had lighted. No means of escape seemed very likely. The bars across the windows were good and stout, and they were set in the concrete that held the stone together.

The walls were roughly plastered, gouged and cracked and dug away in many places by former prisoners who had felt as urgent a desire to escape as did Jim Fallon. In these places the outer thick walls of stone showed through. Fallon swore and abandoned the idea. No prisoner had ever been known to escape from Dutch Miller. And no prisoner had ever been known to escape from Dutch Miller's stone cell, either.

Fallon sat down on the edge of the bunk and tried to think. If he stayed here until he went through a trial, he was as good as hanged right now; he felt certain of that. The Blizzard Wells outfit wasn't the only cattleman's group that would fight him to the last ditch and welcome any expedient to get rid of him and Karl. The only cattleman of high standing in the territory to offer him and Karl a friendly hand was Jake Harvey. Jake's friendliness toward the nesters hadn't lessened, but Harvey didn't run the range.

"Blast it!" Fallon muttered angrily, "It's an *inside* job! Why can't Dutch see that? Some one of the miners, likely, who found out about the

money shipment, got himself a pal or two right there in the mine, and pulled the holdup. This storm's played right into his hands. Come mornin', there won't be a trace of a track left. He's probably miles from here by now."

Or perhaps, on second thought, the fellow might not have skipped out. If he had sense enough to play it smart, he'd take full advantage of the storm and lie doggo. He'd ditch the loot, hightail it back to his cabin, go right on with his work in the mine, and let the snow cover his trail.

Then, after a little time had gone by, and the excitement had blown over, the fellow could calmly pick up his cached plunder and fade. After the chase had died down, or another man had been hanged for his crime.

Another man. The thought brought Fallon to his feet with a curse on his lips. He didn't propose to be that other man. There had to be some way out of this damned cell. He thought of the Blizzard Wells cowboy who wanted to see the homesteader hanged legal. The cowboy's name was Pardee, Kit Pardee. Fallon wasn't going to be hanged legal, or any other way, for the gratification of Kit Pardee and his kind. Not if he could help it.

Suddenly Fallon heard a voice calling his name, subdued, urgent. "Jim. Hi, Jim!" He turned quickly. The voice had come from the window. Behind the iron bars the lamplight glowed faintly on the bearded, dark face of Jake Harvey.

Fallon moved swiftly toward the barred opening. "Jake! I thought you'd gone home."

"So did everybody else," Harvey said grimly. "I wanted 'em to. I doubled back. You know you've got to get out of that cell, don't you?"

"You tell me how and I'll do it," Fallon suggested wryly.

Harvey gave a short, jeering laugh, and leaned so close that his black beard pushed between the bars. "When they make cells they cement bars over the windows. They build solid walls. They fit fool-proof locks on the doors. But the roof's just an ordinary roof."

Fallon looked up at the ceiling, sudden excitement shooting through him, narrowing his intent gaze.

Ten feet over his head, the rafters slanted to the ridgepole. The timbers were rough but stout. The heavy board sheathing supporting the shingles was dark with age. The ridge pole of the steep pitch was fourteen feet from the floor.

Fallon looked at Harvey, shrugged and spread his hands in an eloquent gesture inviting the rancher's inspection of the room. The cell was ten feet square. The walls were ten feet high. The iron bunk was bolted into the concrete floor. The only thing a man could stand on was the slop pail. It would raise him a bare foot from the floor he stood on.

"You talk in riddles, Jake," Fallon said. "A man couldn't batter and cut his way through that roof without

hammer and saw. And if he could get the hammer and saw, they wouldn't do him a bit of good without a ladder. And no man living could shove a ladder through the cross bars of that window."

"I've got the ladder," Harvey told him. "And the hammer. And the saw. Swiped 'em from Jerkline's barn. He was gone somewhere."

Fallon grinned. "He was trying to hold Dutch Miller up and turn me loose. It didn't work."

"This'll work," declared Harvey. "I'll climb up onto the roof. I'll cut a hole big enough for you to squeeze through, and drop you a rope."

Fallon pursed his lips dubiously. "You'll make enough rumpus to wake the dead. You'll bring Dutch Miller on the run."

Harvey made a grimace of derision. "Dutch is over at the saloon. Most of the town's there. Makin' enough racket to drown the noise of a dozen saws."

"What's goin' on at the saloon?"

"Oh, that fool Maloney; he's about off his chump tryin' to figure how anybody could have found out about the money comin' from Medford on the stage. He's raisin' hell and tryin' to shove a chunk under it. Accusin' half the men in town. Tryin' to drink the bar dry. Dutch and the Copper Bell supe are tryin' to calm him down. Everybody else is hangin' around to see the fun."

"That ought to do it," Fallon said.

"That *will* do it! Hold everything till I get up on the roof."

Harvey's face disappeared.

Fallon heard no other sound until Harvey started work on the shingles. The rancher ripped loose a part of the heavy tin collar around the stove pipe with his hammer. He started his sawing at that ready-made opening. He worked swiftly, and he made surprisingly little noise, though it sounded to Fallon in the cold, snow-filled night like the uproar of a boiler factory.

He stood back, watching in suspense, as the saw ate through the last board and the cut-out rectangle dropped to the cell floor.

Harvey's face, barely distinguishable in the dim light, appeared in the opening. "I'll tie the rope around the ladder below the top rung. Be ready to climb, boy."

The rope came slithering down. Fallon went up it hand over hand, and scrambled through the hole in the roof. Harvey hung onto the edge of the hole, making way, and Fallon went down the ladder. Then the rancher pulled up the rope and followed him.

For a few minutes Harvey worked in silence, while Fallon waited, not moving from the spot where he had stopped when he descended the ladder. Only a few feet away trees and brush grew thickly. Harvey carried the ladder to the copse and shoved it out of sight into the brush. He broke off a heavy branch, and backed toward Fallon, brushing out his tracks in the snow with a branch.

He said, as he reached Fallon, "What did Dutch do with your gun?"

"Shucks, don't you know I never

carry a gun?" Fallon demanded. "Not when I'm in town, anyway."

"Don't matter none," Harvey told him. "I've got a horse for you. With mine, over yonder in the trees. Nipped him from Jerkline's barn. Go ahead. I'll walk in your tracks and brush 'em all out as I come."

When they reached the trees where the horses waited, there was nothing to show what had happened there. The hole in the roof was invisible, save as a dark square in the snow. It wouldn't be discovered until morning. By that time a new snow would have covered completely the faint roughness made by the branch brush.

As the two men mounted the waiting horses, Harvey said, "If you've plumb got to make tracks, make 'em where there's already plenty others. The Blizzard Wells outfit has gone home, all ten of 'em. We'll go that way till we're safe out of town."

When they were well beyond the town, they turned from the trail, up a gulch, traveling north.

Fallon spoke for the first time since they'd left the jail behind. "You're heading for the old sawmill?"

Harvey turned in the saddle and peered back through the dark and the falling snow. "That's right, boy. Two of them old cabins ain't fit for a trade rat to nest in. But the third one's still in pretty good shape, roof intact, boards over the windows, puncheon floor. The thing for you to do is lay low where nobody'll think of lookin' for you, till this business is cleared up. The old cabin at the sawmill is about the best place I can think of for that purpose."

Fallon made no answer, and they rode on. Already, behind them, the fast-falling snow was blurring the horses' tracks.

The old sawmill was a long way from town, back of a logged-off section which was a litter of new brush growth, young trees, ancient rotting piles of sawdust, and scattered heaps of slab and down logs.

It took them two hours to reach it, and they rode in silence all the way. Even the thud of the horses' feet, muffled by the deepening snow, could be heard only a short distance away. The two riders passed through the night almost as soundlessly as phantoms.

IV

When they arrived at the old, boarded-up cabin, Harvey said to Fallon as they dismounted, "We'll get you set in here as quick as possible, and I'll be off. Turn Jerkline's horse loose to go home by himself. I want to get out of here fast, so the snow'll have plenty of time to cover my tracks."

He led the way into the cabin, Fallon close behind him, and shut the door.

"It's dark as the inside of a possum's pocket in here," Fallon remarked.

"Just a minute," Harvey said. "A light's safe. Them boards over the two windows is tight."

He struck a match, and moved into the cabin's one small room.

By the light of the match Fallon saw that nothing was in the room but discarded litter, the remnants of a rat-chewed blanket on the old bunk, a rickety plank table and a battered old brass lamp sitting on the table. To one side were a few rinds and bread crumbs the rats hadn't quite finished, the leavings of somebody's lunch.

Harvey lifted the chimney of the old lamp, touched flame to the wick, and replaced the chimney.

Before he could turn fully around, Fallon stepped close in one long, quick stride and knocked him down, then stood there with fists doubled as Harvey struggled to a sitting position.

The rancher looked up at him narrowly. "What the devil's that for, you damn fool?"

"You killed Fred White," Fallon charged. "You robbed the stage. You've probably got this cabin all fixed up for a hideout, in case you needed one. Oil in the lamp. Crumbs on the floor. Maybe you hid the loot here. You're tryin' to make a goat of me. I don't know how. But you're not gettin' away with it.

Harvey dropped all pretense of amiability. He got to his feet like a cat, an ugly leer on his face. "Not such a fool, after all, eh? How in thunder did you get wise?"

"I was wise almost from the first. You said the money came from Medford. Nobody else knew that. It could have come from half a dozen other towns. But only you knew it was from Medford."

Harvey's laugh was a taunting jeer. "Well, as long as you know so much, you might as well know the rest of it. Hell, you ain't no goat! You're it! I'm just makin' sure there'll never be no doubt that you held up the stage and did for White."

"That's what you think," Fallon said.

"That's what I know, bucko," Harvey assured him. "In the mornin', Dutch Miller is goin' to find that hole in the roof, the rope and the ladder in the brush. He's goin' to know you had to have help so he'll figure you had an accomplice all the way through. See? Sooner or later he'll think of investigatin' this cabin. He's goin' to find you dead, Fallon, with a handful of the Copper Bell bills on the floor by you. He'll think that your 'accomplice' plugged you to keep all the loot for himself, took the cash and skipped. Thanks to the snow, there'll never be any trace he can follow. He'll have the devil of a time ever runnin' down your accomplice, nester."

"You think you're slick, don't you?"

Harvey's eyes glittered with something like madness as he gloated over Fallon from across the table on which the heavy brass lamp flickered.

"Yeah. Slick as slippery elm. All th trails covered by snow. The evidence here in the cabin easy to read as an open book. You dead as an axed steer, and enough wreckage strewn around to show that you and your accomplice had a hell of a

fight over the money. The few banknotes I'll leave will sure make it official."

"Yeah," Fallon agreed. "You hold all the aces, don't you?" He looked at the sack of tobacco and the wheat-straw cigarette papers on the table near the oil lamp. "Even left the makin's here handy, didn't you? How about letting me have one last smoke before you finish the job off?"

"And the condemned man smoked his last cigarette," Harvey mocked. "Go ahead." He flipped out a gun and leveled it on Fallon. "But keep your hands above the table, or I might shoot you in the belly instead of between the eyes."

Fallon moved toward the table, his face devoid of expression. He held his hands high, as he took the last two steps, and reached slowly for the makings. The instant his hand touched the tobacco sack, he drove his right knee up against the plank table, twisted and threw his body aside.

Harvey uttered a startled grunt and blasted a quick shot at the homesteader's falling body, as the oil lamp teetered and overturned, then pitched to the floor. A flicker of blue flame flashed over the spilled kerosene and blinked out. The table toppled over onto its side.

"Damn you, Fallon!" Harvey snarled. "You get it in the belly for that."

Fallon crouched on the floor and felt wildly about for something to throw, but found nothing. For a moment the room held in dead silence, then the stillness was broken by the sound of a match being scratched against the wall.

As the match stick caught flame, Fallon dived for the scanty protection of the overturned table. In the same breath Harvey regained his bearing and sent two more roaring slugs at the swiftly moving man on the floor. The first bullet missed, but the second one ploughed through Fallon's thigh, sending him spinning endwise. The impact of the lead accomplished what Fallon might not have been able to do under his own power; it hurtled him into a prone position squarely behind the two-inch planking of the fallen rickety table. At that instant Harvey's match flickered out.

Fallon tried to gather his legs under him, only to find that the left leg refused to work. There was no pain, only a dead numbness where the live leg should have been.

Bitterly he reflected that Harvey was a cool customer. He heard the rancher utter a taunting chuckle and snarl, "So you want to play hide and seek. Fair enough. But don't think for a minute that you've got me rattled, nester. There are three more slugs in this gun, and one is all it takes."

That was all too true, Fallon told himself. So long as Harvey didn't lose his head, he, Fallon, was in a worse position than before, with one leg gone, to boot. In a sudden burst of desperate effort, he slithered forward from behind the protection of the table. Better to go out trying, than to take it lying down.

Harvey's second match rasped against the wall, just as Fallon's groping fingers slid through a pool of oil littered with hot shards from the shattered chimney, and touched something solid—the heavy brass base of the lamp.

The match flared and gleamed like a beacon light through the fog, and Fallon scrambled madly to regain the protection of the table. He barely made it, as Harvey's fourth slug burned into the floor beneath his stomach. The homesteader felt the sting of sharp splinters, gouged up by the bullet, pierce his shirt and dig into his skin.

He still clung to the base of the brass lamp. It would prove an effective weapon if he ever succeeded in bringing Harvey to close quarters.

If he could only get under Harvey's hide. He tried a little taunting himself. "You're wastin' your lead fast, Jake. Two more slugs in the floor, and we'll be even. All you did was crease my leg, and I'm the equal of you any day with one hand tied behind."

Most of that was all too true, also. The rancher could see himself wildly wasting those last two bullets, trying to get Fallon in a vital spot, and failing. He could vision Fallon getting hold of something for a bludgeon, sneaking up behind in the dark and braining him.

Then for the first time, Harvey lost his head. Mouthing a curse that was almost a scream, he sent another slug whining through the table top. The second match went out, and the cabin was again locked in dead quiet.

Fallon cocked his arm to throw the lamp through the blackness, then checked the impulse. He wouldn't have one chance in ten of hitting his mark. The futile attempt would leave him utterly at the furious rancher's mercy. He felt wildly about on the floor for a smaller missile.

Abruptly Harvey broke the silence, and it was evident that he had recovered his temper. He laughed, almost humorously. "You know, Fallon, this makes it more fun. There's one slug left, and one is still all it takes. I'll just have to play it more carefully. All the way around, I'm obliged to you. This cabin will show a bona fide struggle now, better'n any I could fake."

Savagely, Fallon grabbed a leg of the overturned table and gave it a violent wrench. The sound of splintering wood all but drowned the rasp on the wall as Harvey struck his third match. The table leg resisted stubbornly, and Fallon's frantic effort to tear it free pulled the table over on top of him, just as Harvey's match flickered weakly and went out before making enough flare to dispel the darkness.

Fallon wrenched again at the table leg, and it gave and pulled clear of the wrecked table. Grasping the leg in his right hand and the lamp base in his left, Fallon propelled the table top off himself with a violent thrust of his forearms. He struggled to his knees as the table skittered and crashed against the wall.

Again Harvey chuckled from the far end of the room. "I guess that does it, Fallon. From the sound, I'd say you'd thrown away that damned table. I've still got one shot left, and plenty more matches."

There was an instant of tense stillness, then another match scratched against the wall. Fallon watched the phosphorescent arc it made before it burst into flame, pulled back his right arm, and drove the table leg across the room in a violent horizontal spin at about chest height to a standing man.

He heard an almost soundless little thump, a crash and a grunt of gustily expelled breath. The glowing match wavered and pitched to the floor.

Fallon pulled up his one good leg and lurched forward transferring the heavy brass lamp base from his left to his right hand.

The glow of the match on the floor grew to a bright little blaze. Fallon catapulted himself ahead with a convulsive effort from his good leg, and slashed out with the brass lamp.

Harvey's six-gun belched an enormous flash of powder, and Fallon felt himself jarred off course in mid-air. But he felt, too, the blow of the lamp base crunching against flesh and bone.

In the last instant before he lost consciousness, Fallon was vaguely aware of growing light within the room. He snatched the fallen six-gun with a left hand that barely obeyed the command of his dizzy brain, and tossed it toward the other end of the room. He lifted the lamp base and tried to crash it down again onto Harvey's senseless head, but the effort was too much for him. The improvised weapon fell from his grasp. The room spun about, in what seemed to be growing light, and he pitched forward on his face across Harvey's inert body. The light went out.

Dizzily Fallon swam up out of blackness to smell the rank stench of oil smoke, to learn what caused the growing light. Harvey's last match had ignited the kerosene on the floor. But it was flickering to its last glow. There wasn't enough of it to keep flame alive for any length of time and the heavy old puncheon floor was too damp from absorbed moisture to catch fire.

Fallon drove himself to action, picked up the lamp base and set it upright. There was still oil in it.

The small screw cap—covering the hole by which the lamp was filled—had been knocked off when the lamp fell. That was where the oil had spilled out. More of it had spilled and splattered through the air when he had thrown it. But it had rolled to a stop with the hole on the top side. There was still enough oil in the bottom to keep the wick alight for a little while.

Fallon picked up a splinter of wood, lighted it by the dying blaze on the floor, and set the wick going. It sent up a weak, wavering flame and a streak of stinking smoke, but it revealed the inside of the cabin.

Harvey still huddled there, unconscious.

Fallon pulled off his belt, crawled painfully to the senseless rancher, rolled him onto his face, and strapped his wrists tight behind him, then rolled him back and propped him sitting against the wall. The movement brought Harvey out of his daze. He peered at Fallon drunkenly, tried to move, and discovered what Fallon had done to him.

"Who else was in this with you?" Fallon demanded.

Harvey sneered, and laughed groggily. "Won't do you a damn bit of good to know, but who cares if you do? You're done for. I ain't really hurt, just banged up a little. Pretty soon I'll get up and walk out, when I feel better. That smashed leg, that you called a scratch, ties you to the floor like a log chain. You'll lie right there and die, bucko. From the looks of the floor, you've lost some blood. All that threshin' around you done only made you bleed worse. Between that and the freezin' weather, you won't live forty-eight hours. You'll be stiff as an icicle before anyone ever finds you. I win, after all, nester."

"Who else was in it?" Fallon said steadily. "You killed Fred White. You held up the stage. Ain't that so?"

Harvey eyed him in contempt. "That's so, smart guy. You can tell it to the devil when you get to hell."

"Who else was in it? Who told you about the money comin'?" Then a flash of realization lighted Fallon's eyes. "Maloney! Russ Maloney! All that act he put on about bein' worried when the stage was late was to throw everybody else off the track. But there had to be others. You two never pulled it all by yourselves."

"The hell we didn't!" Harvey snapped. "How many ways you think we wanted to split that mazuma? The fewer know about a thing like that, the less chance you take of a slip-up. We didn't need nobody else. And everything's sure clear sailin' now. All me'n Russ got to do is keep still till spring. Then we divvy up the cache and blow." He stopped short, a look of dismay darkening his heavy face. "Damn you! How the hell am I goin' to get them bills out of that bunk with my hands tied?"

The cabin door swung open, and both men turned their heads to look. Dutch Miller stood there, smiling thinly at Jake Harvey. "I'll get 'em out for you, Jake. And take you right along with 'em."

Fallon drew a long breath of relief. "Dutch! How long you been there?"

"I got here just in time to hear you ask Jake who else was in it with him, and to hear Jake say it wouldn't do you a damned bit of good to know. I could tell from what he said that he wasn't holding a gun on you, so I stood still a minute and listened—until I heard all I needed to hear. You look a little stove up, Jim."

"I'm all right," answered Fallon. "How in thunder did you happen to come way out here, Dutch?"

Miller's red face wrinkled in a smile. "I didn't just happen, boy. I come on purpose. I never did believe you was guilty, and I owe you a damned big apology for riskin' your life that way. But, way I saw it, I had you safe in jail."

"I don't quite get it, Dutch," Fallon said.

"Why, I knew it was an inside job the same as you did, Jim. But there wasn't a clue nowhere. I kind of figured if the killer thought some other man was already convicted of the crime, he might get sort of careless and give himself away. I was just sort of usin' you for wolf bait, boy."

"That still doesn't tell me how you got here."

"Huh!" Miller snorted in disgust. "That sneaky little squirt Maloney. He put on a little too much of a show. I got suspicious. I suspected he was just makin' all that row to hold me there while somethin' was happenin' somewhere else. I locked him up in the back room at the saloon, and high-tailed it to the jail. You and Harvey was just leavin'. Harvey was brushin' out your tracks. I figured at first that Maloney and Harvey was just pullin' a smart one to help you escape. So I kept quiet and followed."

"Yeah," Jim Fallon said. "You almost didn't get here in time."

"Sorry, son. But I lost you a time or two, and got behind. You two wasn't makin' much noise to guide me, you know. I'd never have got here at all, maybe, if I hadn't heard them shots and turned my horse. Your tracks was drifted over; wind's been blowin' like hell the last thirty minutes or so. I was goin' in the opposite direction. Well, come on, you." He walked over to Harvey, gripped him by the arm and yanked him to his feet. "Got to get you into the lockup. Got to pick up your pal Maloney."

The day Russ Maloney and Jake Harvey were hanged, Jim Fallon rode into town, with a crutch strapped to his saddle. Karl's injured side was still too sore to permit him to ride, and the baby needed another bottle of colic medicine.

Fallon hobbled into the saloon for a drink, before he boarded his horse for the return journey.

A voice hailed him from the far end of the bar. "Hi, there, fella!"

Fallon turned his head, to see three men there smiling at him. Larry Olds, Ironbelly Mike Brannigan and Kit Pardee. It was Pardee who had called to him.

All three of them came toward him, Kit in the lead, holding out a friendly hand.

"I guess we got to admit that there's good homesteaders and skunk cattlemen," Kit said, grinning widely. What the marshal said had got around at the trial. "The drinks are on me, Wolf Bait."

In Alpine, sometimes, strangers are told the story of how Jim Fallon—of the W-Bar B—got his brand, and his nickname.

THE END

Nobody had to be taught that "crime doesn't pay" back in the days when

HANGIN'S WERE HOLIDAYS

By Harold Preece

FOUR big black horses pulled the big black hearse that carried Harry Blake to Bull Creek's buryin' ground. Eight stringy cayuses, hitched in pairs to four shabby hacks, brought up the rear with Harry's kinfolks and friends. And I stood at the door watching the funeral procession of that dead gambler whom Sheriff George Murray had marched to the gallows.

"Let that be a lesson to you, son," my mother warned me as I watched. "He was a little boy like you once. But he wouldn't listen to his folks. And now see what he's come to."

Then my dad put in. "How can he see what Harry Blake's come to

when you wouldn't let me take him to see Harry Blake hung? George Murray would've give me a ticket. The best way to teach a boy respect for law and order is to let him see what happens to them that don't respect it. Texas is sure goin' down since I was a boy. Then they hung a man in front of everybody to put the fear of God in them what might get off the trail."

The day of public hangings was long past in the West when the gravediggers took up with Henry Blake where Sheriff George Murray left off. I've always been glad in my gizzard that I didn't see Harry hung. But until the late 90's, the hangings were big doin's with big audiences.

Many a dad took his children to the hangings on the same principle that he sent them to Sunday School. His argument for letting his kids see a man die was simple. Didn't the Western preachers say for all the world to hear that "the wages of sin is death?" Didn't the Western sheriffs prove it for all the world to see? That, in his mind, clinched the argument.

As it was, the public hanging ranked on the same level with the Saturday night dance in the social life of the early West. No execution was ever private in a land where very few things *were* private. And people turned out to witness it for more than a morbid curiosity in death. Death was as common as ticks on yearlings, anyhow.

Maybe it was the respect paid by the majority of our people to law and order in that lawless, disorderly age. When a sheriff saw hundreds of people lined up before the gallows to watch him swing some trigger-mean killer, he knew he had plenty of backing from the folks who'd elected him. And so did the criminal.

One old officer had it figured out pretty well when he said to a murderer standing on the scaffold:

"Bill, see that crowd out there. They's all my deputies whether I ever swore 'em in or not. That's what you oughta remembered before you shot down Old Man Foster for his bull yearlin's. I'm right sorry for you, son, that the good Lord done give you such a poor memory."

On a hangin' day, everybody for fifty miles around would stop work and head for town. More than ten thousand people from half a dozen counties showed up at the last big public execution in Texas. Other noted hangings drew from five hundred people up, depending on how thickly the particular area was populated.

Most hangings were held at high noon after the prisoner had been given a smacking send-off dinner. Generally, the dinner was cooked by the sheriff's wife as a last courtesy to the hangee's womenfolks. As a rule, all hangings took place in the jail yard. And the yards of Western jails were laid out big to accommodate the big crowds that always turned out for the hangings.

At sunrise on the appointed day, the crowd would start gathering. Farmers and ranchers would drive up with their wives and young uns. Cowboys would jump off their saddles, tie their horses to hitching posts, and visit around the yard till hangin' time. Women would take advantage of the occasion to shop for their families in the general stores. And the storekeepers would be all primed for profits. They always had out their best bolts of calico, their fanciest hair ribbons, and plenty of free candy for the young uns on Hangin' Day.

But the stores generally closed an hour before hangin' time so that the merchants could make the affair. By the time the stores shut, all the women and young uns would be back in the jail yard. The yard itself would be a bedlam of people moving and people talking.

There would be plenty of comment about the man soon to die. But there were plenty of other subjects to season the hubbub of friendly conversation. Weather and the price of young steers on the hoof, the way that the county commissioners were letting the roads turn into mudholes, the coming box supper at the schoolhouse—all these they found time to talk about while waiting for the hanging.

Babies would be sleeping on pallets spread on the ground. Itinerant preachers would be talking powerful loud about the wages of sin to any sinners who'd listen. Always, they held up the condemned man's fate as a prize example of what might happen to any booze-guzzlin', card-cuttin' poor sinner. Most often, they found more listeners among the lady folks than the men folks.

If it was nearing election time, candidates for judge and surveyor and tax collector would move through the crowd, shaking hands and passing out campaign cards. If the sheriff had somebody running against him, it was sure defeat for his opponent to do any electioneering on Hangin' Day. That was taking unfair advantage of a man so tied up with the business of executing another man he couldn't get out and electioneer himself.

Relatives of the condemned man's victim were treated with special consideration and sympathy by everybody. Except that you never reminded them they were there for seeing the satisfaction of seeing a man die. You circled around the subject and turned the conversation yourself if they started gloating over what was coming.

You spoke politely and pleasantly toward any relatives or friends of the doomed man. But you didn't tax them with talk on their day of grief. And you did your part, if necessary, to see that those there to rejoice and those there to mourn kept away from each other.

For it was understood that there must be no shooting scrapes or cutting scrapes on a day whose climax would be death. If two men, with different ideas about the justice of the hanging, edged toward each

other, six or eight others would immediately form a crowd between them. Prudent sheriffs often required the friends and relatives on each side to check their weapons in his office a day or so before the hanging. If trouble was feared, the sheriff would commission special deputies for the day to keep an eye on the two factions and prevent them from clashing.

Generally, there was no trouble. The victim's clan felt too much self-respect to start anything and feared to lose the respect of their neighbors on their day of glory. The hangee's tribe was too downcast and shame-faced. Public opinion was against them. They knew it and that held them in more than did the guns and bracelets carried by the special deputies.

The scaffold, grim and ugly, always came in for much examination and comment. Men would finger its platform of stout pine, then pull their hands away quickly as if they had been touching forked lightning. They would stare long and earnestly at the noosed rope, noting its length and figuring whether the condemned would have a long, slow drop or a quick, short one. Opinion was divided as to which was the most merciful—the long or the short drop. My dad always favored the short. He said that it might pop off a man's neck like a berry stem, but that it sent him to meet his Maker the very next minute.

Spectators were never allowed to mount the thirteen traditional steps leading to the noose. Two or three deputies always stood guard in front of the scaffold to make sure that inspection was limited to seeing and touching. Otherwise, some curious cowboy or some friend of the hangee might monkey with the trap and thereby stop the execution. A separate scaffold had to be built for each man hung, with the old one being torn down right after the execution. You could no more hang a man on a secondhand scaffold than you could bury him in a secondhand coffin.

Often, men would saunter around the jail hoping to catch a glimpse of the condemned before he was led out of his cell. But the early sheriffs were merciful men even if they were stern. They'd try, if the jail was big enough, to move the prisoner to a cell where he wouldn't see the scaffold and the crowd that had come to watch him die. Sometimes, this was impossible in the squat, one-story jails with two or three cells, built by thinly populated counties. But most sheriffs with small jails would put up black oilcloth over the death cell so that the prisoner's last hours would not be seen by the curious.

That didn't always happen. There were hangings where the prisoner talked or sobbed to people outside his cell until he was led out to die. And even when the sheriff hoisted the oilcloth, the man's last words and his last prayers with the preacher could be heard by those standing close to the cell.

Half an hour or so before noon,

men would start pulling out their watches and looking at the time. The crowd would get tense and restless. Even the young uns would stop squalling and fighting and raising wholesale hell. Kinsmen and friends of the condemned man's victim would start edging up close to the scaffold. But the hangee's bunch would gather in a little circle to sum up, in low tones, their arrangements for claiming and burying the body.

The county doctor would break off his joshing with somebody. He would quietly move up to the scaffold and take his place beside the deputies guarding it. Then in the tight stillness, could be heard the creaking of the iron jail door—the crack of doom for the hangee. The door would swing open, and men would crane their necks to see the procession of death.

Six feet ahead, the sheriff would be walking. His face would be as solemn as the business he was about to finish.

Back of him would be the prisoner, most often walking arm in arm with the preacher. The preacher would be chanting prayers and, sometimes, the doomed man would be saying them with him. The people watching would incline their heads at the prayers. But they never closed their eyes. Not even God could get them to miss so much that was worth seeing. Bringing up the rear would be two or three stern-faced deputies, their guns as conspicuous as the preacher's Bible. The guns, newly oiled and cleaned, shone like the black leather cover of the Bible.

Whatever the prisoner might have done, he was always handsomely dressed in a new black or blue serge suit with a clean white shirt and a black string tie. Any Western county would have felt disgraced if it had let a man be hung in chaps or overalls. A prisoner's hanging clothes were also his burial clothes, and a man had a right to a good front when he stood in the presence of his Maker. If his family couldn't buy him a suit, the sheriff would select one for him at the general store and charge the cost to execution expenses. Similarly, a barber would be called in the day before the hanging to give the man a good haircut. Many an old-time Western barber kept as a souvenir a lock clipped from the head of some man who had died on the gallows.

Generally, the prisoner stared straight ahead as he was being led to the gallows. Generally, he walked erectly and firmly. If he did wobble a bit, it could have been from strong whiskey as well as fear. For it was understood, also, that the condemned man was entitled to the best whiskey that money could buy, and as much of it as he wanted, during his last few days of life. The booze, too, could be charged to the county. And few of the frontier preachers who belabored John Barleycorn from the pulpit would have anything to say when they saw a doomed man's cell full of empties.

The procession would reach the scaffold. The crowd would surge up

close to the scaffold, and you could feel their moving like a sudden wind stirring across the sand hills. The deputies would shout and move them back to a distance of fifty feet from the gallows.

Into the clearing made by the officers would walk the death parade. Some few in the crowd might jeer at the condemned man as he mounted the thirteen pine steps to the pine floor of the scaffold. But others would quiet them down. And as the prisoner marched to his doom, you could hear each slow, measured step sounding hard and heavy like the mournful beat of a funeral drum.

When the hanging party reached the scaffold floor, everybody in it would turn and face the crowd. The sheriff would inspect the simple execution machinery and finger the noose to see that it was properly tight. The parson would be muttering his prayers or reading from his Bible. And there was one thing the prisoner would always do.

He would always draw a deep, long breath. One old sheriff, who hung one man after another, told me that he had never known a prisoner who failed to take in a lot of air before swinging. The sheriff was being anything but funny when he said, "Guess the poor feller knowed he'd be chokin' for air before drawin' many more breaths."

Satisfied that everything was in working order, the sheriff would step to the front of the scaffold. He would raise his hand for quiet and read the death warrant. That was to make the hanging legal down to the last pen scratch. Sometimes he would add, "Folks, a man is gonna die. Let's not have any mean carryin' on while he's fixin' to die."

Then the preacher would step forward. He would raise his hand, and every head would again bow but every eye would still be open. The preacher would pray that the sins of the condemned be forgiven and that he be received in glory by his Maker. Always the prayer would wind up with an earnest request to the Lord that the awful example of this poor doomed sinner be a lesson to others—particularly the young folks.

Afterwards, the sheriff would ask the prisoner, "Have you any last word to say?" It was a queer, tongue-tied man who didn't nod yes.

Every ear would be strained, every eye would be on the condemned man while he said his last say. Contrary to the sob sisters of certain fiction tear jerkers, most men didn't meet death protesting their innocence to the last. Few innocent men were executed, anyhow.

If anything, the prisoner generally admitted his guilt. The preacher had generally encouraged to him to make a clean breast so that he could meet his Maker with a clean slate. After declaring he was guilty, the man on the gallows would ask the forgiveness of God and the forgiveness of his victim's kin. He'd vow that he was dying with no hard feelings against anybody. And he'd ask the crowd to pray for his soul.

If the prisoner was naturally a talkative man, he might go into a long harangue about the penalty of sin. He might beat his breast and plead, "I want you boys and girls to take a long look at me standing here on the scaffold. I want you to remember what you see here every day of your life. I want you to get next to Jesus and not next to the kind of people I cottoned up with."

Within reason, the sheriff always let the prisoner talk as long as he liked. For one thing, a man died easier, with less writhing and twisting, once he'd got everything out of his system. Moreover, the crowd looked forward to a long, dramatic outburst from the criminal. In that day of star-spangled speeches, folks would drop a plow or branding iron any time to listen to a flowery oration. If a condemned man made a fine last speech, you could hear people quoting and moralizing about it for months afterward.

When the prisoner finished his speech, he'd shake hands with the sheriff, the deputies on the scaffold, and the preacher. Then the sheriff would bind his hands behind him. That was to keep him from tearing with his hands at the noose during those last moments of agony. The officer would tie the black cap over the man's head and tuck its folds around his neck. He'd tie the rope tight around the folds. Then he'd spring the trigger.

Some men would swing high out in the air when the trigger was pulled. If their legs were not bound, too, they would kick and turn for maybe five minutes. Others died instantly when their necks popped. Often, their heads would snap clear of the rope, and the trunks would fall to the ground or to a pile of sand below.

You could hear a long, sharp sigh from the crowd when the trigger was sprung and the rope began its work. The sigh—a sharing of the man's agony—would continue till the doctor came forward to put his hand on the corpse's heart and say:

"I pronounce him dead according to the sentence of the law."

Then the tension would break. Some women would be hysterically laughing or crying. The children would be dazed and sad-eyed. Men would comment to other men in low tones on the game way the prisoner died. Some men would vow in their hearts never to attend another hanging. But they always came back for the next one.

Families would start collecting themselves for the trip home. It was inconsiderate to hang around the jail yard after the man was dead. For his folks would be wanting to carry away his body to the wagon or hearse that had been waiting just outside the yard.

And you let them bury him in private, too. Most often, the dead man would be laid in the ground that very day with only his closest friends and relatives attending the funeral. And others. when they passed his grave, looked the other way.

THE END

BOSS GUNMAN

By Wayne D. Overholser

Dave Blaine picked the wrong time to quit a trio of tough hands who were cashing in on his trouble-shooting rep

I

THEY reached the ford of the San Miguel with the sun hanging low above the canyon rim. "We'll water our horses here," Dave Blaine said. "High Mesa's about a couple more miles. We don't want to get there before dark."

He stepped down from the saddle, a boyishly slender man who looked less than his twenty-three years. Letting his horse drink, he took off his battered Stetson and wiped his face, curly brown hair sweat-pasted against his forehead. He stood there in the shade of the big pine, blue eyes smoldering with inward bitterness as his thoughts turned to the smoky years behind and swung ahead to the job that waited for him. It was like the others, another gun job. No better. No worse.

Shame rose in him as he thought about it. A man should do something in which he took pride, and Dave Blaine had no right to be proud. It was simply that nature had endowed him with a natural rhythm and speed that had made him the fastest gunman on Colorado's western slope, so he had drifted into using that gift to earn his living.

He looked at the others. Purty Fred Gordon, tall, graceful and fine-featured with a streak of black mustache and a weakness for fancy duds. Nick Read, a squat, bearded monster with stumpy legs and thick, hairy arms. Ace Thorn, medium tall with

thin, cruel lips, pale agate eyes, and a fishhook-shaped scar on his left cheek. Trail wolves. He had no respect for any of them. They hated him and they hated each other. There was only one reason for staying together; they could make more money under Dave's direction than by traveling alone.

"Who is this Hovey jasper?" Gordon asked.

Dave twisted a smoke, taking his time before answering. He said, "Just another big cattleman who wants to hire his fighting done. I'm getting mighty tired of doing it for them."

Ace Thorn's laugh was an insulting noise. "Hell, his pay's good, ain't it?"

"Better be," Nick Read grunted.

Dave swung to his horse. "Let's mosey."

"Hey, thought we was gonna stay here," Gordon cried. "You said you didn't want to get there afore dusk."

"This is no place to stay." Stepping up, Dave reined his horse. "Let's see what the burg looks like."

He didn't glance back. They'd follow. The four of them had thrown in together three years before, and Dave had bossed the outfit from the first. He was younger than any of the others by six years, but there had been no argument about who gave the orders. Dave was faster and smarter, and he had an education. He wrote the letters, got the jobs and made the decisions, but the earnings were always split equally four ways.

They rode single file up the narrow road that lifted steeply toward the mesa above the river, the saltiest outfit that could be hired west of the Continental Divide. Distance was no barrier to a good job, but usually Dave had found plenty of work between Rock Springs and Farmington and west into Utah as far as Greenriver and Price.

At the beginning Nick Read had said, "Anything goes long as we don't run into trouble with the law." Dave had worked on that basis, but actually it wasn't good enough. There had been too many jobs where the law didn't exist or was too weak to be a force, too many jobs where they would have been in a tight if they'd failed.

Every time a job had been finished, Dave had sworn it would be his last. But a man's habits become established and bind him and drive him on into the same groove of life he has been following. Still the restlessness had grown in Dave.

"You're getting too danged proddy," Nick Read had said bluntly the night before when they'd camped on the Uncompahgre. "What the devil's biting you?"

"Stomach trouble, I reckon," Dave had said.

"It ain't your stummick," Read grunted. "You just think too much."

Nick Read had been right. Money was their only consideration. Purty Fred Gordon wanted it to buy more fancy duds or a gold-plated .45, Nick Read to blow over a poker table; Ace Thorn to spend on women. They had their weaknesses and hiring their guns was the quickest way to support those weaknesses.

It was different with Dave. He wanted a ranch and he had saved his money—ten thousand dollars in a Grand Junction bank. But he couldn't quit. They wouldn't let him, so he'd go on and let the money pile up. There never would be a ranch. Sooner or later every man who followed this trade came to the same end. It was just a question of when a man's luck ran out.

They reached the rim, and the sun, far down in the west, threw its bright slanted rays at them. Dave pulled his Stetson lower over his eyes. It looked like a good country, cedar-dotted, with better than average gress, and a creek twisting down from the high sharp peak to the south. Ahead of them a huddle of buildings squatted on both sides of the road. High Mesa, Dave judged. Lafe Hovey would be waiting for them.

Nick Read swung a meaty hand toward the cattle to his left. "Bow and Arrow. That's Lafe Hovey's brand, ain't it, Dave?"

"Yeah." Dave hipped around in the saddle. "Hovey's a mite bashful. Doesn't want us talking to him in public. We'll get rooms in the hotel. He'll show up."

Read chewed on a thick lip. "I don't like the sound of that. If I ain't ashamed of the gent I'm working for, I don't know why'n hell he should be ashamed of me."

Ace Thorn turned pale eyes on him. "I still say his pay's good." Thorn was that way, his tongue his best weapon. "Quit belly-aching."

Some day it would come to a showdown between Read and Thorn, and Dave couldn't tell which way Purty Fred Gordon would jump.

"We'll have a talk with Hovey," Dave said, "but no pay's good enough if we're on the wrong side, Ace."

It was an old argument among them. Read nodded agreement. Thorn glowered, but held his silence, and Purty Fred stroked his mustache and looked ahead at High Mesa, his face an expressionless mask.

II

They rode into town with the sun half hidden behind the La Sals and left their horses in the Red Front Livery. They lingered for a moment in front of the stable, gun-hung, scowling men, feeling the eyes of the townsmen upon them. It was a trick they had learned long ago. They were tough and they looked tough and half the fighting was done in that first five minutes while they were being watched and mentally evaluated.

"You gents see what I see?" Read asked.

Dave turned his eyes to the west. There, in a slight dip with only their canvas tops showing, was a circle of covered wagons.

"A nester outfit," he said softly. "Maybe that's our job."

Read cursed bitterly. "Just as soon shoot a sheep as a granger. 'Bout as much fight in 'em."

They turned toward the Cattleman's Bar. Not much of a town, Dave thought. Half a dozen false-fronted buildings; a few houses, most of them built of logs; a wide street with ankle-deep dust. It was no different from a hundred other towns in which they had pulled their guns and smoked down somebody their employer had wanted out of the way. Or made their victims crawl out of the country, their pride broken, hating themselves the rest of their living days.

Dissatisfaction grew in Dave. A man lived only once. If he was worth a damn, he made a mark so that when he cashed in, there was something left to remember. But Dave Blaine's marks were in the boothills scattered along the Dolores, the Grand, the Green, and the Little Snake. If he cashed in tonight, no matter what he fought for or how he died, there would be no one to remember him. A hell of a way to live and a hell of a way to die.

They reached the Cattleman's Bar and Purty Fred Gordon had turned toward the batwings when a buckboard wheeled in from the west and pulled up across the street in front of

the Mercantile. There were two people in it, a pretty black-haired girl and a middle-aged man who had a sod-buster's look indelibly stamped upon him.

The instant the buckboard stopped, a pinch-faced rider came out of the store, his eyes narrowed and ugly. He said brutally, "Git out of town, Cole. You've been warned."

"We've got to have grub," the settler said wearily. "We'll get out as soon as we buy what we need."

"No grub. I'm giving you ten seconds. If you haven't turned that rig by then, I'm pulling my iron."

"Don't!" The girl picked up a Winchester and leveled it at the man. "If there's any shooting, I'll do it."

The pinch-faced man laughed. "You think I won't shoot a woman, don't you ma'am? You're right, but I'll sure give your old man a name that'll follow him as long as he stays on the Miguel."

Ace Thorn laughed shortly. "There's our trouble."

"Yeah, looks like it," Read grunted.

Gordon had swung back from the saloon. "We ought to give him a hand. Mebbe that's Hovey."

"I'll handle it," Dave said, and moved across the street.

Before Dave reached the buckboard, he heard Cole say, "I ain't a gunman, Hammer. What credit would you get plugging me?"

"No credit," the gunslick admitted, "but our troubles would be over. Your outfit would be rolling out afore morning. Now what will it be?"

"It'll be gunsmoke if you play it it that way," Dave called. "You Hammer, if that's your name—get away from that rig and pull out."

Hammer whirled, eyes raking Dave. "Who in blazes are you?" he demanded.

"Dave Blaine."

It was enough. Bravado went out of the man. His lips parted, his shoulders went slack. He muttered, "All right, Cole. Get your grub." He wheeled away, mounted a brown gelding racked up the street, and quit town.

"Thank you," the girl said gratefully. She stepped down and held out her hand to Dave. "I'm Garnet Cole. This is my father. If there's anything we can do for . . ." She blushed. "I guess it's crazy to say that. Men like you don't need help from people like us."

"Don't know about that, ma'am." Dave held his Stetson in his hand, squinting against the sun. "Sometimes a man like me needs help more'n you think."

The man extended his hand. "I'm Ira Cole, sir. I want to repeat my daughter's thanks. We're camped west of town. You're welcome there. Any time."

"Thanks." Dave looked at the girl again. He saw that her eyes were brown, that her hair was so black that it seemed to reach out and hold the last of the sunlight. "I'll be there."

He turned away as a bull-necked man stomped out of the store. He said, "So you're Dave Blaine."

"That's right," Dave answered.

"You made a mistake," the man said belligerently. "A bad mistake."

Dave hooked his thumbs in his gunbelt. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"I'm Lafe Hovey. In this country, kid, that's plenty of reason."

Wheeling, Dave strode back to the Cattleman's Bar. "Let's have that drink," he said curtly. "Then we'll rustle supper."

The four of them bellied up to the rough pine bar and called for whiskey. Dave didn't tell them who the bull-necked man was. Probably they'd guess. They didn't say anything but they would later. It was the first time Dave had stepped off on the wrong foot like this. He'd had no way of knowing that Hammer was Lafe Hovey's man.

He grinned sourly and took another drink. Shucks, it wouldn't have made any difference if he had. He pictured the black-haired girl, slim and lithe and attractive in her cheap calico dress, as fine and unspoiled as this high wide land to which she had come. Dave Blaine knew that he would have done exactly what he did whether he had known about Hammer or not.

They ate in Ma Digby's restaurant just past the hotel, a good meal, cheap enough, and they didn't have to wait, but their tempers were whetted to a fine edge. For once Read and Thorn didn't bicker. Dave sensed what was coming. This was the first time in three years they were dissatisfied, and he was going to hear about it.

They got hotel rooms and went upstairs. For a minute Dave was alone. He checked his guns and slid them back into holsters. He'd known of outfits like his that had broken up in a burst of gunfire. His own sour temper hadn't helped. Well, if they asked for trouble, they'd get it. He wouldn't get down on his knees to Lafe Hovey. He'd been wanting to quit, anyway. Maybe this was the only way he could quit. Time channeled and caught a man and washed him along in its swift current. That was the way it had been with him. Wanting to quit and never quite finding the right reason and opportunity.

Dave rolled a smoke and lighted it, a self-mocking smile touching his lips. This was the time and the opportunity and a hell of a thing it was. He wouldn't live to walk out of his room. He was the fastest of the four, but no man alive was fast enough to take the three others. So Dave Blaine would die because of a pretty girl who would never know anything about it.

They came in, all three of them, warily eying him, weather-darkened faces unusually somber.

"Who was the girl and the old gent?" Ace Thorn asked.

Thorn was the wicked one. After three years of riding with him, Dave never knew what lay behind those agate eyes, but he had seen Thorn shoot a man after he was down, he had seen him make love to women and then ride off and forget them.

He had heard Thorn needle Read and Purty Fred Gordon time after time because he envied Read his great strength and Gordon his looks, but Thorn had never bothered Dave because he was afraid.

Now, for all their past arguments and bitter feelings, the three were united against Dave. He sensed that, his eyes swinging from one to the other.

"The girl was Garnet Cole." Dave stepped away from the wall, hands at his sides. "The man with her was her father. They belong to the wagon train. The gent who thought he was tough till I braced him was named Hammer."

Nick Read eased his short-coupled body down on the bed. He said softly. "And mebbe the big gent was Lafe Hovey."

"Yeah, that's right. He figured I made a mistake, but I reckon I didn't. If we came up here to throw lead at a bunch of sodbusters just so Lafe Hovey's Bow and Arrow can keep on running the country, I reckon I'll pass up the job."

"The devil you will!" Thorn snarled. "You'll find Hovey and tell him you were all wrong. You'll get down and lick his boots if you have to. We want this job."

"I'll never lick any man's boots, Ace," Dave said sharply. "You know me well enough to know that."

Thorn's lips went white under the pressure he put upon them. "Dave, we've taken your orders and we've never augered. We've made a name for ourselves, and I'll give the devil his due. Most of the credit belongs to you, but by Satan, when you walk into a ruckus before we've been in town ten minutes and lose us the job we rode four hundred miles to get, you've pushed your luck too far."

Purty Fred Gordon took his expensive cream Stetson from his head and flicked off a particle of dust. "That's the way I see it, too, Dave," he said slowly. "You've got to fix it up with Hovey. I don't reckon it'll be any boot licking. Just tell him you didn't know how things stacked up."

Dave shook his head. Now that it was in the open, he'd play it out. "Boys, I'm done. You three go see Hovey. I'm out of it."

"You've saved your pile. That it?" Thorn challenged. "You're done with us, eh?"

Dave gestured wearily. "No. I'm just fed up on gunsmoke. We've been pretty lucky, but sooner or later a man runs his luck too far. We've all seen it. From now on any fighting I do will be my own fighting."

"You can't quit," Thorn said thinly. "Not after getting us up here and then kicking our jobs out from under us. We need you. You've used us to get what you want. If you pulled that stunt off just to get an excuse to quit, you're crazy."

Dave said, his hands close to gun butts, "You figger on making me string along, Ace?"

For once Nick Read had had little to say. Now he reared to his feet, a great block of a man, square head dropped forward. "Dave, we've al-

ways got along. Don't push this business. It just ain't bright."

Maybe it wasn't. They wouldn't back up. By their lines of thinking, they were right. Dave was walking out on them. He was a traitor. There was no bond of friendship between them, no loyalty. It was straight-out business. This was something they couldn't stand for.

They were all gamblers. A man had to be a gambler to follow their trade. They figured he'd get one of them before the other two got him, and each was betting he'd be one of the two to live.

"I'm not pushing, Nick," Dave said. "You boys are doing the pushing."

Read took a long, sighing breath. "You put it onto us, Dave. You know how it's got to be." He shook his head. "I can't figger you, Dave. We've done good, but you've been mighty proddy lately."

"I'm tired of doing other men's fighting," Dave said bluntly.

"We ain't settled nothing," Thorn grated. "Which way is it going to be?"

Thorn would be the one to push it to the lead-throwing place. Dave, eyes on the man's scarred face, understood something he had only vaguely felt before. Ace Thorn was afraid of him and because he was afraid, he hated him with a searing, terrible hatred.

III

A knock on the door diverted the stream of trouble. Dave waited a moment until Thorn relaxed and jerked a thumb at the door. Read nodded, and Purty Fred Gordon breathed, "I sure hope that's Hovey."

Dave, crossing the room, knew that Hovey's coming would settle nothing. He swung the door open to face a stranger. The man was in his late thirties, well-dressed in a brown broadcloth suit, and handsome, with piercing black eyes, a short black beard that was carefully trimmed, and a derby tipped forward on his head. He asked courteously, "Are you Dave Blaine?"

"Yeah, I'm Blaine."

The stranger held out a soft hand. "I'm Al Slade. If you and your boys are looking for work, I have a job for you."

Dave shook the hand and dropped it. He didn't like Al Slade. The hand was moist, the grip lax. These last smoky years had sharpened his judgment of a man, and his judgment now was that Slade was too smooth to be real.

"Come in." Dave stepped aside and closed the door after Slade. He introduced his partners and asked, "What's the job?"

"It'd better be good," Ace Thorn said sourly. "Dave's suffering from an attack of conscience."

Slade smiled. "No man's conscience need keep him from taking this job. I'm president of the San Miguel Water and Development Company. I have surveyed a ditch and have a crew of men now working on a dam between here and Lone Cone. The wagons west of town belong to a

group of settlers that came here in answer to my advertisement in a Kansas newspaper. The land is open to homesteading, of course, and I'll locate these people without charge. My purpose is to sell them water." He smiled again. "You boys see my problem. I have to have settlers to use water, or I don't make anything, and I'm not in business for my health."

"Sounds all right," was Dave's comment.

"It is, I assure you," Slade went on. "These people are sound, willing to work, and they like the country. Lafe Hovey and his tough hands are the cause of my worries. If it wasn't for them, I'd have had the settlers located before now and their cabins would be under construction. That's why I need some gun-fighters. I saw you break Jigs Hammer, Blaine. So I came up."

Nick Read grinned. "Mister, your job sounds like fun."

"Wait a minute, Nick." Dave held up a hand. "We have only one price, Slade, and we never take a job that throws us against the law."

"You don't need to worry about the law. The county seat is a long ways off. The law here has been Lafe Hovey's Colt law, and your job will be to bust it. Now what's your price?"

"One thousand dollars the first week and five hundred for each week thereafter." Dave saw disappointment strike at Slade and he added, "Usually a week is all we need."

Slade nodded reluctantly. "High, but if you're as good as you're supposed to be, you'll be worth it." His returning smile softened his face. "As a matter of fact, it was almost worth it to see Jigs Hammer get run out of town."

When Slade reached into his pocket Dave shook his head. "We take our pay when the job's finished. If our employer isn't satisfied, he doesn't have to pay. Likewise we have a chance to handle him if he's tried to double-cross us."

Slade dropped his hand. "I see. Don't you sometimes have trouble collecting?"

"Yeah, we missed once. Up Meeker way. This jasper was satisfied all right. He just said he wasn't paying because we couldn't bring the hombres back to life that we'd salivated."

"You never collected?"

"No, but he did. Hot lead in the belly."

Slade turned to the door. "You'll have no trouble with me, friend." He put a hand on the knob and then turned back to face Dave. "I don't know how you do these things, Blaine. Handle it in your own way. All I want is for the settlers to be located and be free of reprisals."

"Usually a few words do the job." Dave tapped his gun butt. "But if they don't, we'll use something stronger than words."

Slade pulled at his beard for a moment, uncertainty in him. He said, "This will take more than words. I don't want to pay you and have

Hovey start making trouble the minute you're out of sight."

"We don't work that way," Dave said crisply.

"All right." Slade nodded and stepped into the hall. "Take whatever measures you have to."

After the door was closed and the sound of Slade's steps had died, Dave asked bluntly, "You boys satisfied?"

"Yeah, I'm satisfied," Thorn said, his pale agate eyes half-closed, "but I thought you wasn't doing nobody else's fighting."

"This is different. I just didn't have any stomach for Hovey's job."

"That's the way I see it," Read put in. "I ain't no nester lover, but I was never no hand to slaughter sheep, neither."

"Oh, hell," Thorn said in disgust. "One man's pay is as good as another." He fixed his eyes on Dave. "What do we do first?"

"We'll see if Hovey's in town. If he is, we'll give him his orders."

Thorn gave his grating laugh. "Damned funny, us coming here to side Hovey and being hired now to run him out of the country. Kind of lucky for you it worked this way, Dave."

"Lucky for you, too, Ace," Dave breathed. "In case you want to try your luck . . ."

"Shucks, no," Thorn said quickly. "We're together now, ain't we?"

Dave nodded. They stepped into the hall, Dave closing the door behind them. For the first time in the years that the four of them had been together, he knew he had to watch his back against Ace Thorn's lead.

IV

They paused outside the hotel, again feeling eyes upon them. This was their game, and they knew how it was played. Later there might be times when it wasn't safe to stand in the patch of light washing out through the hotel door. Tonight it was.

They rolled cigarettes, taking their time, four salty men who looked their part. Fear, Dave had learned long ago, was one of the most compelling forces in any human. Now that the townsmen knew who they were and Jigs Hammer had fled, this moment of show was like the last blow of a hammer driving a nail down. If Lafe Hovey was in town, the fight was won before a shot was fired, providing Hovey ran true to form.

Cigarettes lit, they tramped along the boardwalk to the Cattlemen's Bar, Dave and Ace Thorn in front, Nick Read and Purty Fred Gordon behind. A dozen horses were racked in front of the hotel. Dave, knowing the pattern, said, "Looks like Hovey's here, all right."

"Yeah, and his outfit, to boot," Thorn grunted.

They pushed the batwings apart and went in. Hovey stood at the bar, Jigs Hammer beside him, his riders strung along the pine plank. They swung to see who had come in. Hammer cursed.

"It's him, boss. I ain't—"

Hovey rammed an elbow into Hammer's side. "Shut up." He laid a hamlike fist on the bar and made a half turn to face Dave, an arrogant driving man. He said, "Blaine, I thought you'd be out of town before now."

"You sent for us," reminded Dave. "We rode four hundred miles on the basis of your letter."

"I ain't taking on no hard-case outfit that pitches into my man the first night they hit town."

"You sent for us," Dave repeated. "We're here and we aim to collect."

Hovey squirmed uneasily. "I told you that you made a mistake when you jumped Jigs."

"All right. I made a mistake. Now what was the job you wanted us to do?"

Hovey's big hand opened and closed. He pushed at Dave with his eyes, and there was silence that ran into seconds. He said then, "No job, Blaine. I'll pay you your thousand and you and your boys can slope out of town."

Dave had been working for that. He shook his head. "We don't do business that way, Hovey. We make it a rule to earn our wages. What was the job?"

A curse rumbled in Hovey's throat. "Hang it, Blaine, can't you get it through your bone head that there ain't no job?"

"My head isn't all bone, Hovey. I've got sense enough to see that this business doesn't add up. I'll tell you what the job was since you can't remember. It goes against a man's grain to fight a bunch of stubborn sodbusters who can't really fight back. They've got women and kids and, chances are, some of 'em will get hurt, which same won't do you any good in the long run. So you figured you'd talk to us private-like and we'd do your dirty work without folks knowing it was you. Now you've changed your mind. I'd like to know why, Hovey."

Hovey swallowed. Jaw muscles corded under the flesh of his cheeks like twin marbles. It had been Hammer's idea, Dave guessed, to bring the crew into town, and now that the men were here, Hovey didn't know what to do with them. Apparently he was sure now that he'd get rid of the settlers without trouble, so he searched for a way to avoid the fight Dave was pressing on him.

"What's the matter with you, Blaine?" Hovey demanded at last. "I've offered to pay you. Ain't that enough?"

This was as far as Dave needed to push it. He said. "No, Hovey. We've got talk to make. Private. Got a back room here?"

Hovey hesitated, his gaze swinging to Hammer. The ramrod said, "Don't go, boss. Don't smell right to me."

"Afraid, Hovey?" Dave breathed.

Hovey jerked his head at a door in the back. "Come on."

Blaine fell into step with Hovey. Thorn hesitated and decided to follow. Then Gordon and Read fell in behind and when Hovey closed the door to the back room, the four of them were

there, further proof of the distrust they had for him. It was the first time they had not been willing for him to handle a situation like this by himself.

Hovey's gaze moved from one to the other and came to settle on Dave. "Looks like you're the one who's afraid or you wouldn't bring your bunch in with you."

"It was their idea," Dave said with forced carelessness. "We'd rather earn our money without fighting. That's why I wanted to talk to you where your boys couldn't hear. Al Slade came over awhile ago and hired us."

Hovey dropped into a chair. He gripped the arms, his face going white. "So that's it. Damned funny. Blaine, Slade hiring men I'd sent for."

"We were open to an offer, Hovey," Dave reminded him. "Our job is to run you out of the country or kill you unless you're willing to let these settlers locate here."

"I can't do that, Blaine."

Dave shrugged. "We've never missed on a job yet. Now this might be a good time to tell us why you decided you didn't want us. I've got a hunch there's more behind it than me jumping your man Hammer."

Hovey fumbled with a cigar, put it into his mouth, and bit off the end. He took it out again and pinned his eyes on Dave. "I didn't need you. The wagon train would have moved on sooner or later. This ain't good farming country. Too high. Winters too tough. If they were smart, they'd go on to Paradox Valley."

"How did you know they'd go on?" Dave asked.

Hovey rolled the cigar between his fingers, taking his time before he answered. He said finally, ignoring Dave's question, "I can't understand Slade hiring you."

"You made a deal with him, didn't you, Hovey?" Dave demanded. "If the settlers don't get water, you know damned well they'll go on. That it?"

Hovey stood up, the cigar gripped tightly against the left side of his mouth. "You can't just kill a man if he won't fight, Blaine. Even in this country. I don't need you. Neither does Slade. He'll never pay you. I will. If you're smart you'll take the money and get out. If you ain't, you'll have a hell of a fight on your hands."

"Having a hell of a fight is our business," Dave said. "I'm interested in the settlers getting a square deal. Slade claims that you and your riders won't let 'em alone. It's our business to see that you do."

Hovey stepped to the door. He swung back to face them, a suddenly angry man, his fear of Dave and the others shadowed by that anger. "I told you Slade won't pay you, Blaine. He's a slick-tongued lying crook. If you've got anything else to say, you can find me at the hotel in the morning, but I'll tell you this: You'll never drive me out of the country."

Hovey opened the door and walked back to the bar. Dave, watching him, sensed that he had accomplished very little. Hovey did not run true to

form. He'd fight, and with the kind of crew he had, he'd be tough to lick.

"You sure played that like a fool," muttered Thorn. "Just who are you working for?"

"Slade," Dave said. "Maybe you've got a better idea about how to play it?"

"I'd bend a gun barrel over Hovey's head," Thorn answered coolly. "We've busted better men than him."

"But maybe we haven't worked for worse skunks than Slade. I think Slade and Hovey had a deal worked out. That was why Hovey found out he didn't need us. Slade, knowing us by reputation, figured we'd smoke Hovey down first thing."

"Yeah," Read said, as if he hadn't thought of it before. "You're smarter'n hell, Dave. I couldn't figger it out."

"It's my guess Hovey's going to visit Slade," Dave went on, "and he'll start the fireworks. He's a fighting man."

Thorn rubbed a finger tip along the scar on his face. "Then what'd he want us for in the first place?"

"To shove the grangers on." Dave said impatiently. "If there was a woman or kid killed, Hovey could claim he had nothing to do with it. We'd have our heads in a loop. Not him."

"Well, I'm sure as hell not walking out through there." Thorn wheeled to the window and raised it. "You boys going with me?"

"Not me," Dave said. "I never saw you duck a fight before, Ace."

"I ain't ducking one now," Thorn grunted. "I just ain't ready to commit suicide."

Thorn slid through the window and disappeared into the darkness. Read and Gordon stayed with Dave in the back room until Hovey finished talking to Hammer and left the saloon. The Bow and Arrow crew had drinks around. Then they filed out, mounted, and quit town.

"I don't like it," Dave said. "This is my last job, if I live through it."

"Be your last one if you don't," Nick Read said. "Let's have a drink."

"Better go easy," Dave advised. "This burg's full of dynamite. The shooting may start before we're looking for it."

"You mean what you said, Dave?" Purty Fred Gordon asked. "'Bout this being your last job?"

"I never meant anything more in my life. I've always figured we'd do one too many. If this isn't it, I'm quitting."

Purty Fred Gordon never showed his feelings, but Nick Read did. He said belligerently, "I never figgered you that way, Dave. You've got your pile saved in Grand Junction. We haven't. It ain't right for you to walk out on us."

"We've made the same," Dave said. "It's your fault if you're broke. If you three want to go ahead, it's your business."

"It's your name that gets jobs for us," Gordon said ominously. "We wouldn't be worth our salt without you. We won't let you quit, Dave."

"It's a free country, Fred," Dave said, and swung out of the saloon.

They had been close to a shoot-out in Dave's room an hour ago. Dave, thinking about it now, realized that the other three had some reason for their anger. They had ridden four hundred miles to a job and Dave had kicked it away. He knew now that Hovey had not intended to hire them. The trouble with Hammer was just an excuse, but Thorn and the others wouldn't believe it.

For months Dave had looked for a chance to break away. Now he'd made his chance and he felt like a free man. He'd stick until the job for Slade was done, they'd split the pay, and they'd ride their own ways.

The other three wouldn't stick together long. There was too much feeling between Read and Thorn. They'd wind up by having a gun ruckus of their own or riding their separate ways. But what happened to them was their business. Dave Blaine was planning his own life from here on out.

He had let old habits bind him too long. He'd followed the same groove of living and he'd let his dissatisfaction with himself give him its own particular brand of hell. That was past. For the first time in months he felt an inward peace. There was plenty of time left for him to live a life in which he could take pride. He'd make the name Blaine stand for something besides a gun-swift who bossed a pack of lead-slinging trail wolves.

He turned into the hotel and climbed the stairs, thinking of a dozen ranches he had seen that he had liked. Some of them could be bought for ten thousand dollars, stocked and ready to move onto. He opened the door and stepped into his room. There was a place up Escalante Creek. . . . Dave closed the door, the knowledge that there was someone in the room squeezing his stomach. Cursing his carelessness, he was reaching for his gun when Garnet Cole's voice sounded. "Don't light the lamp, Mr. Blaine. I want to talk to you, but I don't want anyone else to know."

V

Breath came out of Dave in a long sigh. "That was a fool thing to do, ma'am," he said. "I might have started shooting."

"It was a chance I had to take. One of the boys from the wagon train got the clerk away from the desk for me. I looked at the register and got your room number and came up to wait. I didn't know how else to see you."

"How'd the boy get the clerk out?" Dave asked curiously.

She laughed. "A kid trick, but it worked. He stood in the doorway and called the clerk names until the man chased him."

There was no key to the lock, but Dave slid a chair under the knob and crossed the room to where the girl stood.

"Why so much secrecy?" he asked.

"I didn't want Slade or Hovey to know I'd seen you again. They knew

we didn't have time to tell you anything when you chased Hammer out of town."

"I thought Slade was on your side."

Her laugh was a bitter denial. "Slade's on Slade's side. Mr. Blaine, everybody's heard about you. They say you hire your gun to anyone who pays you the wage you set. Is that true?"

Dave hesitated, not certain whether she was condemning him or not. "It has been true," he admitted.

"Do you have to have cash?" she hurried on. "I mean, would you take double wages to do a dangerous job if we couldn't give you your money until it was over?"

"Sure. What kind of a job?"

"We wouldn't have the money for you if you didn't win."

"If I didn't win, I wouldn't have any use for the money."

Garnet stood looking up at him, her face an oval blur in the thin light washing through the window from the street. She spoke at last. "They say hard things about you, Mr. Blaine, but I don't believe them. If you were the man they say you are, you wouldn't have interfered in our troubles this evening."

That was it. They said hard things about him. People who had never seen him, people who knew nothing about him except what they'd heard someone else say. It wasn't what Dave Blaine wanted said about him. It would make no difference to Thorn or Read or Gordon. They were older; their lives had been molded in a cast of their own choosing.

"Thanks, ma'am," Dave said huskily. "I guess a lot of wrong things are said about a man like me."

"I talked to dad and the others, but they said I was crazy," Garnet continued. "They thought you had come to run us out. But if that were true I didn't think you would have handled Hammer the way you did."

"What kind of a job do you have for us?"

She took a long breath. "Mr. Blaine, we're farmers. We came from Kansas where law is more than a word. We didn't understand how things were here or we wouldn't have come."

"Why did you come?"

"We answered Slade's ad. He wrote us several long letters telling us how wonderful the country was and how he was building a ditch that would furnish us with all the water we could use. There have been some dry years in Kansas and the grasshoppers have been bad, so this sounded like Paradise. But when we got here we found out that almost nothing had been done on the ditch or dam. Slade said he was broke, so we loaned him ten thousand dollars to buy materials and our men went to work on the ditch. It's almost finished now, but Slade hasn't located any of us, and he hasn't bought what we need for the dam. We haven't got our cabins started and we can't live through a winter in our wagons."

"Why hasn't Slade located you?"

"He says Hovey would kill him and us, too. He said we had to break Bow and Arrow before we could hope to live here."

It had been a crazy thing for the settlers to loan Slade money, but it was no more crazy than a dozen other things Dave had seen grangers do who knew nothing about the land they were settling on or the methods that promoters like Slade used.

"You want me to get your ten thousand back?"

"Yes. If we had it, we'd go on to Paradox Valley."

Dave stood thinking about it, the sourness in him growing. He had hired out to Slade, and he would not break an agreement, but he remembered Hovey saying that Slade wouldn't pay, that Slade was a slick-tongued lying crook. Dave didn't know what the promoter's game was unless he wanted Dave and his men to wipe Hovey's crew out and hoped that the hired gunmen would be destroyed in the process.

"I'd like to help you, ma'am," Dave said finally. "Maybe I can before it's over, but Slade hired us to keep Hovey from running you out of the country. I reckon he's selling us both out, but until I know that, I've got to string along with him."

"We've thought for a long time that Slade and Hovey were working together," Garnet said bitterly. "If Hovey drove us out, Slade could bring in another colony and cheat them like he has us. But I can't understand why Slade would want you to fight Hovey if that were true." She turned toward the door. "I'm sorry. I guess it was foolish, but I couldn't help counting on you."

"Wait." He caught her arm. "Give me a few days. Maybe it'll be different when I find out what Slade's got up his sleeve."

She jerked free. "I don't believe it. You're what they say you are. You want your money and we haven't any to give you unless you get ours back from Slade."

Anger flamed in Dave, then died. He couldn't blame her. She would be justified in believing anything about a man who had Dave Blaine's reputation.

"Maybe I'll get a chance to change your opinion of me," he said dully.

He let her go then. Standing at the window, he looked into the dimly lighted street, and he knew he had reached his testing place. He was ashamed of what he had been. This was his chance to go in a different direction, to do something that should be done regardless of what pay he would receive.

Ace Thorn and the others would call him crazy. Slade had the money, they'd say. To the devil with the settlers. If they'd thrown their money away, they could get it back themselves. Chances were, Slade had it fixed so there would never be any proof that it wasn't his. If Dave tried to take it, he'd make an outlaw out of himself. Still—and the knowledge brought a feeling of satisfaction to him—he knew he was going to get the money back for the settlers before he pulled out of High Mesa.

A burst of gunfire broke into the night stillness. Two shots close together. Then three more. They came from the other end of town.

Dave left the room on the run, went down the stairs and into the street. He stood there a moment, seeing no one, hearing nothing that hinted at violence. He plunged along the street then, hugging the shadows. Maybe Hovey had jumped Slade. Or Thorn had gone wild. Thorn was a killer, the only one of the four who seemed to enjoy taking a man's life. More than once Dave had had to hold him back until the sign was right. Now, with things the way they were, the chances were that Thorn had let go.

Dave had reached the end of the business block when he heard another salvo. He placed it then, the big house across the street and ahead of him another block. He kept on, still holding to the shadows, noting that no one was coming to see about the trouble. It was safer to lie in bed.

Again there was silence. Dave could not guess what had set the second bursts of shots off. He angled across the street to the big house, moving swiftly and keeping low. He reached a cottonwood tree in front of the house, and stopped to get his breath. The front windows were lighted, but the shades were down. He waited, listening and hearing nothing except the usual sounds of a sleeping town. Then the front door burst open and slammed shut. In that one brief instant Dave glimpsed the squat figure of Nick Read lurching out, one hand clutching his shirt front, the other holding a gun.

Dave ran toward the porch as Read drove a shot through the door. Dave guessed what had happened. The long-delayed break had come between Nick Read and Ace Thorn, but he couldn't guess what had brought it on.

Read lumbered away from the porch and took a dozen steps across the yard before he fell. The front door swung open. Thorn stood there, and fired once, then ducked back when Dave threw a shot his way.

Read was still alive when Dave knelt beside him. "It's me, Nick. Dave. What happened?"

Read groaned. Dave could tell from his breathing the man was hard hit, and he sensed that Read knew it, too.

"Ace got me," Read whispered. "I always thought I was faster'n him, but I was just fooling myself. He plugged Hovey. Then Ace figgered we'd better get you. I couldn't see it that way."

Nick Read wouldn't lie. There was no reason for it. Dave had always liked him better than the other two, but still he hadn't thought there was a sense of loyalty or fair play in the squat man.

"Thanks, Nick," he said quietly. "I'll square it for you."

"Hovey went in there to get Slade," Read whispered thickly. "That's Slade's house. They had a deal. Slade was to sell the water. They got a cash advance from the farmers

who figgered it was a loan to the water company, but Slade tricked 'em into signing the wrong paper. They can't never get their money back except in water which he ain't gonna deliver."

"What was Hovey's part in the deal?"

"To run 'em off the mesa so Slade could rob another bunch. Slade decided he didn't need Hovey like he figgered he would. It was cheaper to hire his own gun-fighters. He wanted us to wipe Hovey and his boys out. Hovey guessed that. He aimed to drill Slade, but Ace got him."

That was the way Ace Thorn would play it. Knowing that Dave was stepping out, he'd gone ahead on his own, but he had figured Nick Read wrong. Dave said again, "I'll square it, Nick."

Read's great fist clutched Dave's arm. "You were right, Dave. Get out of it. Keep playing the game and you'll wind up like I am. In hell."

Nick Read died that way, one thick hand clutching Dave's arm. Then the hand went slack, and the heavy breathing stopped. Dave rose, pulling his gun. He didn't know what he'd find in the house. Purty Fred Gordon was an uncertain quantity, and there was no outguessing Ace Thorn.

VI

Dave bellied across the yard to the porch, working his way around the spots of light. He reached the corner and climbed over the railing. Standing there a moment, he thought about it. Thorn didn't know how hard Read had been hit, so he would probably be waiting. Dave took his time. He knew what waiting did to a man. Thorn would be wondering if Read was dead, or if not, whether he had the strength to come back.

The minutes dragged out. There was no sound from inside the house. Dave slipped along the porch to the door and paused again to listen. Still no sound. He went in, fast. The big living room was empty.

There was a lighted lamp on the oak table in the center of the room. For a moment fear struck at Dave. A door opened into another room. It was dark there. Dave stepped to the wall and catfooted along it to the other room. Again he waited, tense, ears keened for the slightest noise, but there was none except his own breathing. He plunged through the door, gun cocked, and stood with the wall to his back. Then, in the faint light washing in from the other room, he saw the body on the floor. It was Al Slade.

Dave went back into the front room for the lamp. Ace Thorn would not leave town without getting him. Three years of riding with the man had taught Dave the depths of Thorn's passion. Thorn would be waiting along the street. Or in the hotel. Honor was not a part of him. There would be no fair fight if Thorn could work around it.

Kneeling beside Slade, Dave saw that the man was dead. His skull had been caved in. Dave rose, and

holding the lamp high, looked around the room. The little safe in the corner was open. It was empty. Dave could guess the story. Ace Thorn had turned murderer and thief. He had killed Hovey. Then Read. Finally he had turned against Slade and murdered him to get the settler's gold.

Dave blew out the lamp and left the house. He crossed the street swiftly, knowing that he was playing with death in showing himself. but there was no flash of gun flame from the darkness, no scream of lead. Dave went on, keeping in the shadows as he had before, reached the business block, and stepped into the hotel. That was it. The clerk was not in sight. Purty Fred Gordon stood behind the desk, a cocked gun in his hand.

"So you came back," Gordon said as if this were a casual matter. "It was a mistake, Dave. I told you we wouldn't let you quit."

"You let Nick quit," Dave said passionately. "For good. He was the best man in the bunch of us."

"He wasn't as smart as me and Ace," Gordon declared. "We've got Slade's gold and that's more'n we'd make playing your game. We would have gone on, but we figgered since you'd gone so high and mighty, you'd get a fool notion about following us. So we waited to get you."

Dave had a gun in his hand, but it was at his side, for he had expected to find Thorn and Gordon in his room. His first move to lift it would bring a slug from Gordon. For some reason, Gordon was waiting, but there was no question of his intent.

"No use of us having trouble," Dave said. "It's Ace I'm after."

Gordon's fine-featured face showed amusement. "It's me and Ace from now on, mister. Maybe you were smart, at that, when you said there would be no more fighting for somebody else. Ace and me will do our own from now on. Plenty of money in banks waiting for us to take."

It had been Nick Read who had said to stay out of trouble with the law. Now, whatever scruples Read had held to, whatever code of honor and honesty that Dave had followed, would not handicap these two. In this moment as he faced eternity, Dave Blaine saw that his three years had not been wasted. Without his influence, Thorn and Gordon would have been as thoroughly evil as they meant to be in the future.

Dave heard horses; he saw Gordon come around the desk. "That's Ace. We're leaving, Dave. Got anything to say?"

Thorn stood in the doorway. "We've killed enough time. Let him have it."

Dave plunged sideways to the floor. He heard the blast of Gordon's gun, saw the flash of flame and felt the smashing hot blow of the slug along his side. For a moment he seemed paralyzed. He heard Gordon say, "I guess that did it, Ace." Then he saw through startled eyes that Thorn had gone completely mad. Without any change in his expression, Thorn

turned his gun on Purty Fred Gordon and shot the gun-slinger through the head.

Thorn looked at Dave and, apparently satisfied that he was dead, swung out of the hotel. Dave thought he had lost the power of movement. He had tried to move, and failed. He tried again, thinking of what it meant for a man like Ace Thorn to be let loose in a world helpless before him. He did move. On his belly, a trail of blood behind him. Part of his body seemed without feeling, but he could see and he could think and he could use his hands.

Dave reached the door as Thorn swung into the saddle. Even then he could not shoot the man in the back. He called, his voice so thin it barely reached Thorn, "Ace." Thorn wheeled his horse and fired, but it was the reflex of death. Dave's first bullet slammed through his chest, taking him out of the saddle in a rolling fall. Dave fired at him again. This time Ace Thorn did not even stir.

Dave was still conscious when people slowly filtered into the street. Garnet Cole was among them, and she was the one who heard him whisper, "Look in Thorn's saddlebags." Then the lights died for Dave Blaine.

There is no explaining why some men live and some die. In the best judgment of the colony doctor, Dave should have died, but he didn't, and the medico, at a loss for an adequate explanation, declared that it was a miracle. Dave, his mind distorted by fever, had only vague memories of the long hours while Garnet sat beside his bed. When the fever had passed, Dave knew why he was alive. It was a miracle, but the miracle was one of Garnet Cole's doing.

He told her that when he could, his bony hand holding hers. Then he said, "I owe you my life, so it's yours to use. Maybe I can do something for you."

"Dave, Dave," she breathed. "Don't you know what you've done? You've freed us. The wagon train has gone to Paradox Valley. When you're well, I'll go, too. The doctor has been there and come back. He said it's way out beyond, but the soil's good and it's beautiful. I guess our kind of life would be monotonous for a man who's lived like you have, but if you ever want to come . . ." She broke off and smiled, and Dave saw that was all she could say. The rest was up to him.

He thought of what lay behind and of the job he had done here in High Mesa. He had promised himself it would be the last one. The mark he left behind when it came time for him to die would not be made with a gun.

"Of course I want to come," he told her, and let it go at that. He would tell her the rest, later, when it was dusk and the sky was alive with the dying sun's promise.

THE END

Sometimes miracles are performed with only

A QUART OF WATER

By Jim Kjelgaard

NIGHT blotted out the sun, but the dry, furnacelike heat of the desert remained. John Swajey relaxed with his head pillowed on his shoulder pack, and looked questioningly at his companion.

"This is the life," he said.

Arthur Retjen laughed, but there was a nervousness, a trembling uncertainty, in the sound. The fear and doubt under which both men labored was too near, too real, to be completely suppressed.

"When I get back to New York," he declared, "the first person who tells me how cold the desert gets at night is likely to find himself pushed out of a fortieth-story window."

"Well, it's cooler than day time," murmured Swajey.

He lay with his hands between the pack and the back of his head, staring at the sky. He was a desert guide, and he had been glad to take Arthur Retjen into the desert where the other wished to photograph wild burros and desert sheep. They had photographed them at one of the waterholes the animals used. Then they had started back.

They had started with enough water to see them through to the desert town of Unicorn. This morning, halfway between Unicorn and the nearest waterhole John Swajey knew, they were suddenly without water. There was a hole in their big canteen and not even a moist spot where four gallons of water had dribbled into the sand.

Arthur Retjen had not worried, because Swajey had said there was nothing to worry about. They might be thirsty when they got there, but they'd get to Unicorn. Retjen believed that because John Swajey had told him so.

Before he dropped into a slumber

as sound as can be enjoyed by any man whose throat is parched and whose lips are dry, John Swajey wished he could believe it himself.

It was not yet morning when Swajey awoke. He sat up, opening and closing his lips for the slightest moisture that afforded, and looked at the still-bright stars. He did not make any plans for this day because the only possible plan had been made yesterday. Arthur Retjen's husky voice floated to him:

"Another bright day approaches."

Swajey looked at him, a little surprised that he was awake. "Get any sleep?" he inquired mildly.

"I dozed off and on. Sure could use a drink."

"Can you eat?"

"I'm not exactly ravenous."

"Better eat anyhow," advised Swajey.

He opened his pack, took a loaf of bread from it, cut two slices and spread them thickly with beans. The two men forced food into dry mouths. For a moment, after they'd finished, Swajey stared reflectively into the darkness. He rose and shouldered his pack. Retjen caught up his own pack and they started towards Unicorn.

John Swajey walked briskly, but not too fast. Retjen was a city man and unaccustomed to fast walking. Still, Retjen was made of good stuff.

The sun rose, climbing over the horizon like a great ball of fire and sending its slanting rays across the parched desert. Arthur Retjen laughed, a mirthless sound.

"It looks like a monstrous jack-o'-lantern," he said.

"It does?"

"Yeah! It looks like one my kid held on a stick! Just like it!"

"How are you doing?" Swajey asked irrelevently.

"All right!" the other said with unnecessary fervor. "I'm doing all right!"

Four hours later John Swajey knew that Arthur Retjen was not doing all right. Retjen fell behind; his step faltered. Without appearing to notice, Swajey slowed his own pace.

"Let's rest a while," he said over his shoulder.

They rested, and the terrible heat closed solidly about them. Then they went on, but Swajey knew that they weren't going on for long. Still without appearing to notice, he kept his ears attuned to the other's step. When that step no longer sounded, Swajey turned around.

Arthur Retjen was on his knees. His head slumped forward. Swajey walked back, and with an effort the other raised his head.

"I can't go on without water!" he gasped.

John Swajey was suddenly harsh. "You can go on! You can go until you have to stop! When it comes to that . . . I've got water!"

The city man looked at him beseechingly, and John Swajey slipped the pack from his shoulders. He opened the flap, thrust his hand inside, and brought out a one-quart canteen. He held it aloft.

"This is it! A whole quart of water! One quart of water between death and us, and I'll know when we'll need it. Get up!"

Slowly, almost sheepishly, Retjen got to his feet. He swayed, then caught himself and planted both feet firmly. A faint embarrassed smile flitted across his lips.

"Lead on, MacDuff," he said.

"All right."

With an ostentatious flourish, Swajey hung the canteen at his belt. The sun swung farther around, sent its blazing rays from the west instead of the east. The first evening shadows flickered across the sand and were banished by the sun. Night came and Swajey stopped.

"Can you eat?"

"Nope," Retjen croaked.

John Swajey lifted the canteen at his belt, and let it fall back. Retjen extended a hand towards it. John Swajey turned so the canteen was hidden, and looked towards Unicorn.

"Can you go on?" he asked.

"You're going to give me a drink when we must have it? You promise?"

"I promise."

"Then I can go on."

They went into the night, and the pale stars cast their eerie glow on the desert. Twice Swajey stopped, deliberately turning so Arthur Retjen could see the canteen, and continued. Once more like a great jack-o'-lantern, the sun lifted over the horizon. John Swajey brushed a hand across his eyes.

He had never seen the desert dance, but it was dancing now. The sparse cactus and bits of brush were rising and falling. The earth lifted and dropped in undulating waves.

"We'll have a drink soon," Swajey promised.

"Good," Retjen whispered.

He moved up beside John Swajey, and the desert man lifted the other's arm across his shoulder. The sun came down more hotly, fiercely determined to burn everything up. Arthur Retjen stumbled, and almost fell. His voice came vaguely to John Swajey:

"I . . . I can't go on . . . without . . . water."

"You can!"

Ten minutes later Swajey saw the other men. They seemed to be hurrying towards him, but they were far away, unreal. They could not possibly be men. Suddenly a firm and steady hand was on his shoulder. Swajey fought back to reality. He saw the men now, and recognized them. A canteen was pressed to his lips. Then:

"Holy mackerel!" joked Bill Thomas, who had unbuckled Swajey's canteen and was holding it, "don't you know an empty canteen never got anybody out of the desert, Johnny?"

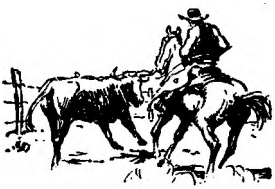
John Swajey laughed, a rising note of triumph that seemed directed at the death he had cheated.

"That's where you're wrong, Bill," he said wearily, "dead wrong."

THE END

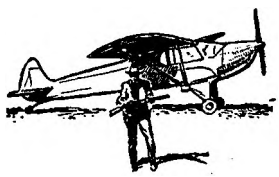
RANGE SAVVY

By Gene King



Since the start of the West's great cattle industry good cutting horses have been essential to cowmen. These animals were specially trained to go into a herd, cut out some particular calf or steer and keep it apart from the others at their cowboy rider's direction. But as Herefords, Angus and shorthorn beef stock replaced the wilder longhorns, and as fences, cross-fences and frequent corrals came to dot the former open-range country, the need for cutting horses, while never completely eliminated, dwindled. Of late, however, the cutting horse has been coming into his own again both as a useful range animal and as a spectacular performer at rodeos.

Cowboy camp meetings held in tents or huge wooden sheds on some rancher's property were always an interesting, though not greatly publicized, side of cow-country life, particularly in the Southwest. The meeting, usually lasting the better part of a week, always drew a large crowd of cattlemen, cowboys and their families from miles around. Most of them brought their own tents and bedrolls along and camped out for the duration of the meet. Bible classes, Sunday school, and lusty-lunged "preachin'" featured the serious side. But there was a lighter, social aspect too. Outdoor barbeques, with all the trimmings and plenty of seconds for everybody, always played a prominent part at the camp meetings.



Shades of the galloping days when posses rode horseback after outlaws! Cal Boies, sheriff of Maricopa County, Arizona, has organized a "flying posse" that means business and is just what the name implies. His nine flying deputies, all veteran airmen, are on call at all times. Local lawbreakers, or just plain lost prospectors, can be hunted down by air throughout the extensive semi-arid stretches of the sheriff's bailiwick. Boies' flying posse is fast, efficient, and strictly up-to-date.

OLD BALDY, THE KILLER

By Michael Oblinger

Chug Manners' untiring search for a treacherous murderer always led in one direction —up the steep slopes of a mystery mountain

I

NIGHTS are cold in the Hacapo Mountains even late in spring, but the birchwood fire blazing brightly in the grate in the large barracks room had routed the chill inside. In here it was pleasant to sit watching the flames in the stone fireplace cast their lights on the rough floor and feel again, hope again, that this year the whole grisly business would be settled and the secret come out.

Young Chug Manners sighed, holding that thought. Although it was a hopeful thought, his grim, lined face and black-fringed eyes gave it the lie, while beyond the thought loomed up the implacable knowledge that in three years now neither he nor the smart, alert Mounty, facing him in the high-backed chair just beyond the fire, had been able, together or singly, to turn up a worthwhile lead.

Through it all, though, Chug considered, he had had the moral support and encouragement in a certain quarter that had been of great help to him. But now that support was gone. The shock of losing Bonnie, breaking up with her after a long engagement, piled on top of the old trouble, made a mighty heavy load.

Constable Allen clicked teeth on his pipe. "I've always had a feeling," he said, "that the person guilty of that attack on your parents is some local man. Yet no one around here quite fits the description you gave me. So I'm wondering . . ."

"You think it was an outsider then, maybe a chechahco visiting here?" Chug broke in eagerly.

"Well . . . possibly."

Chug straightened in his chair. "Dang it!" he said. "If only someone had seen him go to the house in my absence, but no one did. So I had only what I found there that night to

help me get a sort of picture of him: The enormous prints his shoepacs made in the drift outside the door as he put his snowshoes on, and the wrecked table inside—why, he must have torn it apart with his hands to get one of the table legs to use as a weapon to club my folks to death. I built that table myself and I know how strong it was."

"Big feet, powerful man," Allen mused. "He might be either tall or thick-set, a white man or a native. My guess is he's white, for that torture business, pouring red-hot coals from the fireplace over your father in an effort to make him confess, somehow reminds me of the old gangster trick of burning a man's bare feet with lighted matches."

Chug gritted his teeth and sweat beaded his forehead. Then he said, "In the old days the Indians used to torture their victims."

The Mounty nodded. "True. But torture to them was a kind of symbol, or perhaps I should say, rite, with no motive of gain involved."

"Dad had those gold samples hidden in the house," Chug recalled. "The killer took them. But I'm positive that wasn't why he tortured my father. I'm sure he tortured him because he wanted to find out where that gold came from, the location of my father's claim."

"And rightfully your claim now, Chug. If you knew where it was."

Chug looked deep into the fire. He had suddenly brought back to mind a certain cold, blustery day just a week before the death of his parents, when he and his dad, old Tom Manners were returning from the trading post here in town to the roomy, thick-walled log cabin they called home. Though living scarcely a mile from the settlement, they had grubstaked for a month ahead in order to be prepared for a new storm wa e they felt was coming with its white-blurred fury of snow and crackling sixty below. Dad drove the husky team, a string of five good dogs, Wolf Boy in the lead and Chug trailing behind on snowshoes. After breaking down the long hill to Drunken Creek, old Tom had stopped the team on the lea side of a small shelter of spruce to light his pipe and rest a bit.

Abruptly he said, "Chug, in the spring you an' me is going to partner up. You can quit your job packing freight for the stores an' we'll work my claim together."

"Your claim!" Chug gasped. "Didn't know you had one, dad. Thought you were still working the bars on the Big Hacapo River."

"Not any more, Chug."

"Then what's up?"

Close-mouthed, cautious, that was the way his father had always been, not often springing surprises like this. As a prospector, he was one of the best and instinctively Chug knew that if his father had finally staked out a claim it must be a good one.

Old Tom had grinned. "I'll show you the samples when we get home, lad," he said. "I found a virgin lode. There'll be a fortune in it for us both."

"Fortune!" Chug said, staring.

"You wait an' see."

"Where's the claim located?" Chug asked his father.

A shadow crept over old Tom's face and the blue eyes puckered cautiously. "I'd like to tell you but I won't," he said. "Ain't that I don't trust you, Chug, but you might forget an' drop a hint to Bonnie or mebbe to a friend. Then some dang claim jumper . . ."

"Yes, dad, I understand."

"So I'll take you up there in the spring. We'll start workin' her an' make our stake."

A week later Chug's father and mother were murdered, over three hundred ounces of gold from the claim were stolen and, ten to one, it was safe to bet that the killer had also wrung from old Tom the secret location of the claim. Three years had passed but Chug still was as determined as ever to track the killer down and recover his father's claim.

Constable Allen had taken a great interest in the case. In the past year he had made Chug his deputy, calling on him from time to time when he needed another strong back, another steady pair of eyes or another observing mind.

They had got pretty friendly. Next to Bonnie Walsh, Chug's girl, there had been no one quite so close to him. Now, Chug recalled bitterly, Constable Allen alone stood up like a retaining wall to shut out the flood of despair that often assailed him.

"Some day, Chug, we'll break this case, I'm confident," said Allen.

Chug stirred and glanced over at the figure in the high-backed chair. "I hope so," he said.

"And stop worrying about Bonnie."

"She won't even see me," Chug growled. "I've just come from there. Tim Shane has got the inside track. His hanging around her all the time made me mad. If it had been anyone else but him with his big talk and money, and those damn lies, maybe I wouldn't have quarreled with Bonnie and she wouldn't have broken our engagement."

"What lies did Shane tell Bonnie?" Allen asked.

Chug flushed. "About how I go around behind her back, taking up secretly with other women. He hired one of the dance-hall girls to show Bonnie a ring and swear I'd given it to her. But the ring was one that Shane had bought himself. I got proof of that, a signed note from the man he bought it from. I gave the note to Bonnie but she tore it up in front of me without reading it."

"Hard luck!" Allen commented. "But I'd write her a letter, if I were you. Maybe the next time she won't tear it up."

Chug brightened. "Maybe not."

Slowly Constable Allen lit his pipe. His eyes studied the glowing end of the burnt match. "Shane is a much older man than you are," he said. "Fifteen or twenty years older than Bonnie, I should judge."

"He's never told his age."

"He sure throws his money around."

Chug nodded glumly. "That's just to make an impression on Bonnie."

Allen blew a smoke ring. "No one seems to know much about him," he said. "I have an idea he's a prospector who struck it rich somewhere else and has come here, hoping, perhaps, to buy a few undeveloped claims in the Hacapo."

"I never thought of that."

Allen stood up, smiling. "Now go home and pound your ear, fella. You look as if you hadn't slept for weeks."

II

Next morning at home, sitting on an up-ended section of lodgepole pine, one elbow resting on the drainboard of the kitchen sink, chin in hand, pencil between his teeth, gray eyes smoldering with thoughts that were hard to put down, young Manners tried to concentrate.

On the paper before him Chug had written three words, which in his grammar school days his teacher had referred to as a salutation, but the body or context of the letter he wanted to write in order to throw light on that anguishing business in his personal life, was still blank. It was so blank and white, in fact, and there was so much of it, it reminded Chug of wide, barren reaches of snow in the upper Arctic. Now that green spring and tender love had sprouted hereabouts, Chug didn't want anything as cold as that to influence him. Besides, this letter had to accomplish a purpose.

He stared again at the salutation. "My dearest Bonnie," it read.

Behind him Pierre Dupre, a messenger and man-of-all-work employed by Constable Allen, stepped up in the open doorway, scratched one cheek and then strode in.

"Chug, ze Mounty heem wan' see you."

Chug had to remove the pencil. "What did you say, Pierre?"

"Ze Mounty say come."

Chug placed one hand over the salutation and hitched around on his stool. "Listen," he said, "you shag back to barracks like a good fellow, Pierre, and tell the constable I'll drop in right after lunch."

"Heem say now."

Sighing, Chug folded the paper carefully and tucked it away in his pocket. He reached up and put the pencil on a shelf. Frowning, he got off the stool.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Some more man heem get hurt on Killer Mountain."

"No!" Chug exclaimed.

"But, yes."

"Holy smoke!" Chug cried, grabbing his hat and heading for the door. "Maybe Allen wants me to help him bring in the corpses."

Outside, walking swiftly, he went down along Drunken Creek, crossed the log footbridge spanning it, then followed a path through dense spruce to town, what little town there was—trading post, lands office, restaurants,

dance hall, police barracks, a small mill for grinding wheat, and a government telegraph office that squatted on a hill.

Chug turned in at the barracks. Constable Allen, very trim in his service khaki, opened the door for him.

"'Lo, Chug, I need your help again," Allen said. "Another accident on the lower slope of Baldy. Two men badly crushed, dead. The Indian who found them told me."

"Old Killer Mountain!" Chug shivered. "Two more. Great Scott, constable, that makes . . ."

"Four in the last three years," Allen supplied.

"Everybody says it's like there's a curse on it," Chug went on. "A hoodoo. Otherwise, how can you explain all those deaths?"

Allen frowned. Chug knew that Allen didn't take much stock in hoodoos or curses. He couldn't believe, as most of the natives did, that Baldy—often called Killer Mountain—had a mind, personality and emotions just like a human. Those beliefs he put down as ignorance or superstition.

Allen maintained that the reason so many persons had lost their lives on Baldy was because of the steady flow of prospectors and gold miners into Hacapo Valley, which could be reached only by crossing Baldy along the mountain's west slope. Because of the danger of that crossing, often made even more perilous by spring and summer slides, it was only natural, he said, that a small percentage of those making the trip should meet with disaster.

Now Allen stared disapprovingly at Chug. "You sound as if you half believe in that nonsense yourself."

Chug didn't answer him. As they went out the back way toward the barracks stable, where a Chinook stableman stood waiting with two riding horses and a pair of pack ponies to lead along, he had to acknowledge to himself that there were times when he did half believe it. Maybe even more than half. Especially when he looked at the mountain, as he did now, and saw the swirling, wraithlike fogs around its peak, and the black, frightening chasms and gulches roughing up its steep slopes.

In any kind of weather Baldy never seemed to change that appearance of sinister brooding, that look of death on it. Other mountains you might admire, and some you could love, but all that Baldy inspired in a man was a kind of smothering fear and the strange feeling it was actually scheming to murder him.

To Allen Chug said, "I hardly know what to think. And I don't blame anyone else for what they think either."

Allen grinned. "Apparently Mr. Walsh doesn't have any fears. Someone told me he headed for the Hacapo two days ago."

"Great Scott!" Chug said.

The Mounty glanced back at Chug. "No," he said, "Walsh doesn't fit the description of either victim."

Chug breathed more freely. "Well, I'm sure glad to hear that."

They mounted and started out of town on a trail that dipped and dived for a mile, then straightened out on a pokey, slow corduroy track over muskeg and marsh, where mud oozed between the logs and water often flowed over them. Ten miles to Baldy, though it scarcely looked like four—bad going all the way. The gold that promised well in the Hacapo, and which might materialize almost any day in a strike as big as that at Yellowknife or the Bridge, had brought this trail into being.

Close on noon, Chug and Allen halted at the foot of the mountain. "We'll rest here for a spell," the Mounty said. "Oats for the horses. and a snack for us, Chug. Tired?"

"No."

After they had eaten, Allen drew on an underslung pipe, grinning at Chug. "You write that letter to Bonnie yet?"

Chug flushed. "I was starting to when you called me."

"You don't look too hopeful, Chug."

Chug stared at the ground. "I don't feel too hopeful, either."

"Bonnie's father doesn't like Shane any too well," Allen observed. "So you have an ally on your side. Maybe that will help."

Chug shook his head. "Bonnie doesn't like to be managed," he said. "The same day she broke our engagement she also had a tiff with her dad. Mr. Walsh had ordered Shane never to come to their house again. Shane defied him and Bonnie took Shane's part. Later, at the trading post, Shane met Mr. Walsh and threatened him."

Allen's expression became very serious. He sat, clicking teeth on his pipe. He looked at Chug but didn't say anything. Presently, he rose.

"Now for the tussle up Baldy, Chug."

The scarred face of Baldy might have interested an alpine climber or brought joy to the heart of a mountain goat. Moraines piled up along old glacier tracks were shifty underfoot. Ravines were deep and precipitous. Boulder-choked gullies often lay almost side by side. Below timberline, deadfall jackpine that had been hurled and piled together by slides had to be avoided or hacked through. When the path was clear, it clung to great shoulders of granite and peered down into mighty fissures or panted up inclines of smooth, slippery rock.

Chug had been over the trail before and knew what to expect. He had no love for Baldy and thought the word "Killer" better described it. By the time they had reached the ravine, where Allen said the two bodies were, he could have sworn that the folks who declared that the mountain lived and breathed like a human weren't far wrong. Hate lurked there, and the high, bare peak above threw down a glare as glittering and ruthless as the eyes of a madman.

Chug looked down along the wall of the ravine. "I can see 'em," he said, wiping sweat from his face.

"Right near that clump of devil's-club."

"The trail is fairly wide here," the Mounty remarked. "I don't see how they could have fallen over the edge."

"Me either," said Chug.

"Unless they were traveling at night."

"Could be," Chug agreed.

Allen walked up along the trail. "I don't like it," he declared.

Chug started. "Then you think that . . ."

"No, I don't. If they're Ed Crossen and Jim Lewis, which I gather from the description the Chinook gave me, there would be no motive for murder. No enemies, no money. Two most popular miners in the country."

Chug agreed with Allen on that point. "They might have been traveling by moonlight and the sky clouded over," he suggested. "Walked right over the edge."

Allen crooked his neck to look straight up the side of the cliff. "Ah, now I have it!" he exclaimed. "That projecting shale near the top is crumble rock. A chunk or slab fell and hit them."

Chug's gaze swept the surface of the hard rock trail, then he wallked over and picked up several pieces of broken shale. He returned to the Mounty.

"Yes, you're right. You can chalk down two more victims for the killer. Baldy has done his stuff again."

Chug was glad when the job was over. He had had to slide down in the ravine on a rope, carry the bodies of Crossen and Lewis over to the gully wall and then help Allen hoist them up, one at a time, to the trail by means of rope, block and tackle. Next he had to clamber up himself hand-over-hand and assist Allen in placing the two bodies on the ponies and tying them there. It was nearly dark when they rode into town.

III

Instead of returning directly home, Chug went to the store for bacon and tobacco and some fancier paper on which to write the letter to Bonnie. Tonight, he thought, he'd write to Bonnie and tell her he wanted to come back even if he must eat humble from her hand.

The thought of eating from Bonnie's hand figuratively, or any other way, made pleasant company. It went along with him in the dark through the spruce bush and across

"Stay here and keep an eye out!"

Drunken Creek right up to his own front door. It looked mighty bleak in there. He thought of his mother and father and the welcoming lights that used to greet him when he came home late.

He went in, struck a match and touched its flame to a candle. Then he kindled a fire in the kitchen stove. Abruptly there was a quick, brisk knock and the door opened. Chug gave one look at the person entering and gasped:

"Why, constable, I hardly expected to see you so soon!"

Allen's face was grim. "A settler went bushed at Twenty Mile Creek and I'm on my way there now."

"I'm sorry to hear that, constable. Something you want me to do?"

"Yes. I've just talked to Bonnie."

Chug turned pale. "You saw Bonnie tonight! There's trouble—I can tell by your face."

"I don't know yet," the Mounty said. "But you'd better eat your supper and get over there. I've just learned from Bonnie that her father, Crossen and Lewis were together when they left here two days ago bound for the Hacapo. Mr. Walsh supplied the pack train. Two ponies. Bonnie is sure that something has happened to her father. She thinks he and the ponies might have gone down into another ravine this side of where the bodies of Lewis and Crossen were found. I don't know. I hope not. I'll get on the case as soon as I can bring in that settler from Twenty Mile Creek." Allen paused. "And, Chug . . ."

"Yes, sir?" Chug prompted.

"In my absence I want you to try to locate Walsh. Return to Baldy, make a thorough search, then go on to Hacapo. Get a horse from my stableman and be sure to go armed."

"I'll do everything you say." Then Chug frowned. "Is Tim Shane with Bonnie now?"

"He wasn't with her when I talked to her, and she didn't mention him. Now get on the job as quickly as you can, Chug."

"Yes, sir."

Allen opened the door and went out. In dead silence Chug washed up, changed his shirt, sat down and bolted his supper. The alarming news that Allen had brought stirred him deeply. What had happened to Bill Walsh? Had he too become a victim of old Baldy?

Chug rose from the table, flung on his coat and struck off on the trail into town. He had to pound on the door of Bonnie's house, which was silent and dark. He pounded some more, called, then went around to the back in hopes that she might hear him better there.

Suddenly a figure loomed out of the shadow. "Is that you, Manners?"

Chug started. The voice was Shane's. "Well! Well!" he said.

"If you're looking for Bonnie," Shane growled, "she doesn't want to see you, and she isn't here."

"Where is she?"

Shane came close to Chug bristling. "Beat it!" he said. "Bonnie is upset and needs rest and you're not

going to see her tonight. Her orders, is that clear?"

"Not from you, it isn't."

"Well, what do you want to do about it?"

Chug said, "This!" and struck Shane hard on the jaw.

Shane reeled backwards and would have fallen, but the wall of the summer kitchen, against which he slammed, saved his balance. He got set on his feet and charged at Chug, not striking but grappling, trying to upset Chug. In the tussle, both fell down. Chug tore himself away, sprang to his feet, quick as a cat and waited for Shane to rise.

Shane rose, clutching a knife.

"We'll settle this right now, Manners," his voice gritted. "You started it."

To save himself from being stabbed, Chug struck out with one leg savagely like a wild, cornered bronc. Shane groaned, dropped the knife. He sprawled out on the ground, holding his belly. Chug went around to the front of the house, stepped up on the walk and headed toward the only light he could see on the street, down at Ronald's Cafe.

Ronald, a little man who knew Chug well, answered his question. "Bonnie? Sure. Upstairs with my wife, Chug. She was worried about something and didn't want to stay alone, so my old lady suggested . . ."

"Fine!" Chug said. "Important I should see her right away, Ronald. Has she gone to bed?"

"No, she an' the wife are both up."

Bonnie and Mrs. Ronald were sitting in the living room of the Ronald apartment. Chug stopped at sight of Bonnie, his heart pounding hard.

"Hello, Bonnie," he said.

Bonnie stood up. "Chug!"

"Allen thought I ought to talk things over with you," Chug began. "I'm his deputy, you know. I'm starting for Baldy in the morning and I thought . . ."

Bonnie's expression stopped him. It was defiant and it struck cold in him. Yet as she stood near her chair, straight and fair and slim, lamplight falling on her hair, touching up her face, her beauty was something out of this world, Chug thought despairingly.

"Bonnie," he said, forgetting Mrs. Ronald, "please overlook the things I said. I'm sorry and I've come to help you."

"I won't need your help," Bonnie answered stiffly. "Tim has offered to take a search party himself. I can trust *him*."

The emphasis she put on the word *him* implied that there were others she wouldn't trust. Chug got her meaning instantly.

"I'm going anyway," he said stubbornly. "Allen's orders. Shane can do as he pleases." The resentment left him. "You're worried, Bonnie, and I know how you feel. Your dad means a lot to me, too."

Bonnie walked over to the chair beside Mrs. Ronald and sank down on it. Mrs. Ronald reached over and patted her hand to comfort her. Chug turned toward the door.

At home Chug sat up, waiting for morning. A night bird squawked outside. Under the floor a pack rat ground his teeth on something that rattled. The fire spat and the logs in the old cabin creaked. At half past four Chug ate breakfast, finishing off with several cups of black coffee, and started for barracks. By eight, he had reached the place where, on the previous day, he and Allen had hoisted Crossen and Lewis up over the ravine wall.

He dismounted, tied his horse in a spot that was sheltered from falling rock, and began a thorough search on foot for some trace of Bill Walsh or the ponies. He was going on the theory that if Walsh had suffered the fate of his two companions, the accident must have occurred before, not after, theirs. That seemed reasonable because Walsh would not have pressed on toward Hacapo after the death of his friends, but would have returned toward town for help.

"All I got to do is look down over the side of the trail and walk back," Chug told himself. "I'll be sure to find him."

Something roared above his head, smashed down on the trail so close that flying pieces of talus spattered him. His hand shook as it went to the stinging spot on his cheek, where gravel had punctured the skin.

The mountain was trying to murder him! Everything folks said about Baldy was true. In the silence, following his near escape from death, Chug breathed heavily, convinced at last that somewhere in that great, towering mass were the black soul and scheming brain of a killer.

He had just had proof of it himself. Let Allen jeer, let common sense tell you it wasn't true. It was true. Every minute you stayed here you were in peril of your life.

Staring at the broken pieces littering the trail, Chug moved cautiously along the cliff wall, clamped his jaws and resumed the search. He had gone less than fifty yards when, above him on the slope, a figure suddenly slipped out in the clear, where sun lazed across the rocks.

A creepy feeling swept over Chug. That slope was steep. A single small rock, bounding down over the talus and boulder-strewn surface, could start a very considerable slide, at least big enough to take him in a hurtling ride over the trail and into the deep gulch at its side.

Chug leaped under a ledge of granite just in time. As the slide roared over the trail, fell thundering into the gulch, his lips were stiff and bloodless.

"Close!" he muttered aloud.

From one to another of the rocks now littering the trail, he crawled on hands and knees back toward where he'd hid the pony. Mixing together on his face, dust and sweat formed streaks of mud. Sharp stones bruised his legs. Somehow he'd lost his hat. The torrid heat of the sun on his uncovered head made it feel as if it had split wide open. But the pain, the dizziness, the sudden strange panic in him were forgotten in the mounting tension of excitement

over his discovery that it wasn't old Baldy doing all that killing up here but—a man.

Perhaps that very same man was guilty of all those murders and Bill Walsh's disappearance, too.

Chug wriggled on. It seemed miles back to the pony. At every torturing turn in the trail he raised steaming eyes and stared hopefully through sun glare and dust, feeling his chest flutter with heart stabs of weariness.

Now why would that devil want to kill innocent humans unless he was a bush-crazed maniac, he wondered.

That might explain it—the killer was bushed, lived up here on the mountain all alone, a tragic figure, obsessed by the hellish belief that every living human being was his deadly enemy.

The solitude and awful silence of these mountains made men go mad. Even now Constable Allen was on his way to Twenty Mile Creek to fetch in another poor devil who'd gone off his nut.

"But supposing"—Chug's whispering voice fell on the stillness, making a flat, thin crackle like dry fireweeds —"supposing he isn't mad? Supposing . . ."

The words stuck in his teeth. Inside something tore at him. In one swift mental leap he had bridged three years. Another voice, a warm, friendly voice, that of his father, rang through his consciousness:

"I'll take you up there in the spring, Chug . . ."

Up! To the rich new claim. The highest up one could get anywhere around here was on old Baldy. Not realizing it, Chug's father might unwittingly have revealed the location of his claim in that one word—up. Of course, there were other mountains farther away but, in all likelihood, old Tom, unlike scores of other prospectors searching for the true source of the gold washed down into the Hacapo River Valley, had climbed high up Baldy and there had found the master lode itself. In order to keep that lode secret and prevent others from staking claims up there, the killer had started those deadly slides and had already murdered four or more prospectors.

Chug's lips twitched. "He must be the man who tortured my father."

In order to rest and plan his next move, Chug drew into the shade of a large boulder. What he had been thinking might be pure conjecture, the wildest kind of reasoning, and yet a certain fact could not be denied —that not a single prospector had lost his life on Baldy prior to old Tom's murder.

And if the killer up there should turn out to be a powerful man with big feet, Chug thought, then there would be still more evidence to go on.

Suddenly Chug came to a decision. "I'll feed and water the pony, keep hid until dark and then climb up there. That will be the only way to prove whether or not I'm right."

IV

Night had no darkness at this time of year. What passed for darkness

was a copper dusk with the sky glowing red and the mixed colors of the rocks and trees blending into mysterious shades of gray and tan. A little chief hare scampered along the slopes, his bright eyes gleaming like those of a swamp cat. and the voice of the whistler, a shaggy-coated mountain woodchuck infesting these parts, startled Chug often as he crept higher, trying to keep under cover and be as quiet as possible.

Talus rattled down in spite of him and a handful of brush would snap in his fingers with a noise like tiny pistol shots. He had to scramble and tug and twist and squirm every step of the way. When he paused for rest, his breath came out like a blast from a furnace. Then he could hear his heart boom the way it does at high altitudes and the blood pound in his head.

After hours of climbing, crawling, shinnying up rock walls, Chug reached the side of a split in the mountain and looked down at a wide, rushing creek. Spume and spray lay over it like a writhing snake. It was a sort of valley down there, though steeply pitched. Tracing its course to the upper end, Chug saw a stone hutch or house. A few rods beyond, at the top of the split, was a small tunnel hacked out of solid rock.

The mine, the house and the man—everything added up. Chug crouched in the shadow, measuring with thin-slit eyes the distance down there. Elation first had thundered in him, then a surge of excitement, but now he was cold and bitter, the blood in him like ice. Nothing could ever bring old Tom and his mother back, and nothing could wipe out the marks of grief and horror upon his mind, yet—unless he was badly mistaken—the cause of it all. the monster himself, was gloating in that hutch.

Chug hesitated. He might or might not make his way down there and surprise the man, but whether he did or not, he had to stop the killer, overpower him somehow and turn him over to Allen.

Upon Chug's forehead beads of sweat gathered suddenly and he felt them break and spatter warm on his cheeks. The door had opened and the killer stepped out.

He was a big man, broad of shoulder and huge of feet. Not very tall, just medium height, with black, kinky hair, blunt, ugly face and nose dubbed in like a battered chunk of metal.

He turned ponderously but swiftly and lumbered off toward the tunnel. Hand on his service Webly, Chug slid down the rock wall to the bottom of the slit, then ran forward, trying to keep the hutch between him and the retreating figure.

Chug opened the door of the hutch shakily and popped in. He had his plan ready, to stand near the door and, when the killer reentered, Chug hit him over the skull with the Webly.

Outside lurked that copper twilight but in here it was murky and black. The chill in the room was the chill of stone, the silence that of a tomb, and through it there were the ghosts of evil thoughts, not seen

but felt. Somehow Chug could not throw off his shakiness or control a sudden unreasoning fear that never, single-handed, could he cope with such a brute. Also, though he tried to reassure himself that it was only a bad case of the jitters, he began to sense a forewarning of disaster, perhaps of death.

He should have waited for Allen, not come alone like this, he told himself.

Chug stood rigid near the wall, facing the doorway. When he heard the heavy thud of approaching steps, momentary weakness belted his stomach like a foul blow. Nausea rode him. To save his soul, he could neither raise his arm to strike nor hold his Webly tight in his fingers with that locked, hard-handed grip of the fighter he had meant to be.

From out of his quaking brain a light shone like revealing fire, shaming him.

Then he said to his inner self in the quiet voice of conviction, "By Satan, I can stand up to him as big as he is."

The door leaped open as if sprung by a wind. The killer came in fast and Chug struck a grazing blow, then jumped behind him and let go with all he had—a down-streaking, overhead bludgeoning smash. He tried to strike again, realizing that he had missed the head completely. The man's bellow made accompaniment to a mad scurry of rightabout feet, and suddenly he was towering black over Chug, slamming out fists at him, one of which sent Chug reeling backwards.

Sent spinning and lurching clean off balance, Chug tottered. He grabbed for a chair, took the chair along with him, bit his lip till the blood ran, and fell in a great clatter on top of the stove, skidded off it and landed flat in a prone position between a table and the stove.

Chug dived under the table as the killer roared down on him. He crawled through, stood up, and fanned his gun, resolved now to settle it the safer way with lead. The Webly clicked. But louder than the click was the gnash of teeth across the table and the swish of a long arm, and then the pain of a hand ripping down Chug's cheek like a grizzly tearing out shreds of meat. Instantly Chug felt cool air on exposed bone and a sensation of both cold and heat in his deep-furrowed cheek.

He was raging, no longer weak but all fire and fury. Through the open door light streamed, making a strange copper cast of the room and everything in it. It fell upon the blunt face and black head of the killer, upon his dubbed nose and broken-off chin. Outside the sun must be coming up again, for the copper was turning red slowly and just now its covering smear resembled old blood. All that Chug saw that gleamed white and clean were the killer's bared teeth.

The man had whipped out a knife and was holding it high, the long blade slanting downward and the

thick hilt completely hid in his enormous hand. The knife held Chug's eye with a kind of fatal fascination. It was just a blade attached to a gnarled fist with both upper and lower cutting edges and a fine, sharp needle point.

"I'm going to blow you straight into Kingdom Come!" Chug said in a rasping voice. "You stole the claim and murdered my father and mother. You've been hurtling slides down on unsuspecting prospectors, giving this mountain an evil name. Death is too good for you."

The killer reached way out as though to lay Chug open from chin to navel, horribly, but it was only a feint to cover the upward swing of a stocky leg. Before Chug realized what was happening, the table smashed up into his face. His Webly exploded harmlessly, one bullet tearing through the wood, the other flattening on the wall of stone near the door.

Once more the killer was at him, and the blade made streaks, swipes, Chug dodging and ducking. Suddenly in a blaze of fury Chug hurled the Webly with all his strength. The barrel struck under the left eye socket, gouging out the killer's eye. He screamed in agony, wholly off-guard. Then Chug followed through, whaling at the killer's great body until the man sagged at the hips, folded up like a hinge and heaped down on the floor. Chug found some rope and trussed the man tight. He sat down on a bench to rest, staring about him curiously. Suddenly he heard a sound coming from another part of the house. It might be pack rats, he thought, but he decided to investigate, anyway.

He entered a room that had built-in bunks, a small table and stool.

Abruptly his eyes snapped open. "Mr. Walsh!" he gasped.

Bill Walsh lay in the lower bunk, blinking up at him, breathing the way men breathe when gagged. Chug took out the gag, cut the ropes binding arms and legs and helped Bonnie's father to a sitting position.

"Are you all right?"

"Ye-yes, thanks, Chug."

"Thank God!" Chug said. "I was sure you were one of his victims too. That big brute in there is the man who murdered my folks, Mr. Walsh."

"One of them," said Walsh. "There's two, Chug. One of 'em furnished the brawn an' the other the brains. I know because Jake Brun—that's the name of the killer—had a visitor late last night, his partner. I heard them talking, caught something of what they said."

"What did they say?" Chug asked.

"Brun got his orders to finish me off some time today, take my body an' throw it into a gulch so it would

What's In A Brand Answers (page 81)

1. Sunup to Sundown; 2. Apple-H-N: Appalachian; 3. Three on a Match; 4. Upside-down Cake; 5. Key West; 6. Onezy-Twozy; 7. Humbug; 8. Why Not; 9. Pieces of Eight.

look like another accident. They've already finished off the ponies after stealing our grubstake that was packed on them."

Chug was puzzled. "But how come they spared you longer than the others?"

"Some of the others were brought here, too," Walsh told him, rubbing his jaws, "an' disposed of later. But mebbe mine was sort of a special problem since the partner is a friend of Bonnie's."

Chug jerked his head in amazement. "No!"

Walsh nodded gravely, his face lined and worn. "Tim Shane," he said. "He's the real boss. Brun is just a big ignorant ox, half bushed, I think, and putty in Shane's hands. By listening in while that pair was a-talkin' there in the front room last night, I found out lots of things. They didn't guard their talk because I was due for a trip into the gulch and was as good as dead already."

Walsh paused and rubbed his wrists to restore the circulation. He continued, "One piece o' news will be of interest to you, Chug, because it clears up the puzzle of how Brun, who killed your folks, come to know that your paw had struck a rich claim and had samples of gold hidden in your house."

"How could Brun know?" Chug asked eagerly. "Dad was never much of a talker."

"It's like this," explained Walsh. "That winter afternoon you an' your paw stopped at Drunken Creek, when he first told you about the claim, Shane was returnin' to town on snowshoes after a trip out to Brun's cabin, near Portage Arm. They had some other deviltry afoot at that time. Shane was climbin' up the creek bank when he heard voices, yours an' your paw's, so he hid in a scrub thicket an' took in all that was said. That's why he later sent Brun to steal the samples an' torture your paw out of the location of the claim."

Chug pressed his lips. "I see."

Walsh stood up unsteadily. "What we both better be thinkin' about right sharp is Shane. He's due here again tonight to pack some more of your father's gold down to the settlement."

Chug grunted his satisfaction while he reloaded his Webly. He smiled grimly. "It will be a pleasure," he said.

An hour later when Shane climbed down into the slit, he walked into Chug's trap, and into Chug's gun, startled by the figure that had stepped from behind a bush right in front of him. Beyond Chug, he saw Bill Walsh and his face went white.

Chug looked at him grimly. "This time it's my turn to talk," he said. "It's all over, Shane. We're going to put a noose on you. Murder, robbery—and the devil only knows what else. You're in deeper than hell. I've got Brun tied up inside. I've got evidence to prove this is my father's claim. And as for Bonnie, when she learns what a filthy skunk you are, what a dirty crook, she won't even feel sorry for you."

Shane tried to bluster. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, no? Well, Mr. Walsh can tell you. He heard you and Brun get confidential last night. He heard your orders to kill him and a lot of other stuff."

"He lies!" Shane snarled.

"Constable Allen will let a jury decide who's lying. You haven't a chance, Shane."

Shane didn't answer. He stood in the glow of the day-night sun, his handsome eyes dark with the shadow thrown down from his wide hat brim. Chug could see he was thinking hard —desperately.

Suddenly Shane turned and bolted. Chug's first shot brought him down. Walsh joined Chug, then walked over to the body, frowning darkly, and stirred it with his foot.

"He's powerful dead, Chug," Walsh said briefly.

Chug holstered his Webly and looked up toward the bright, shining peak of old Baldy. What a change had come over that mountain, he thought. Its hating glitter had entirely disappeared.

"To think I believed an honest mountain with a heart of gold could ever be a killer," he said.

On the following morning Chug and Bill Walsh took Brun to the Mounty's barracks in town. Allen had returned late the night before from Twenty Mile Creek with his hushed settler and had locked him up. After hearing Chug's story, he said:

"I'm not altogether surprised to learn that Shane was the man responsible for all your trouble, Chug. You see, I've been investigating him privately myself. In today's mail on my desk I have a report on him from Inspector Rand, of Edmonton. Rand has dug up some pertinent facts about Shane. He has a long record as smuggler and claim jumper. Twice indicted and imprisoned once. Also suspected of murdering a prospector at Athabaska five years ago. Shane skipped the Edmonton district and came directly here, where he made the acquaintance of Brun. Brun has no criminal record but he's always been mean and troublesome. In the hands of a man like Shane, you can imagine . . ."

"I don't need to," Chug cut in. "I know. I've seen Brun in action."

The Mounty nodded understandingly. Then he smiled. "One more thing I almost forgot . . . Bonnie. We had an interesting talk this morning. You'll be glad to learn that your note about the ring Shane bought for the dance-hall girl, though torn up in front of you, was later pieced together, woman fashion, and read."

"She read it!" Chug gasped.

"Read it and was convinced," Allen told him.

"Then she . . . then she really knows now that all that business was a frame?" Chug grinned. "Shucks, now I won't have to write that letter."

"And that's a lucky thing for you," Allen grinned, "because, as a letter writer, you're a much better deputy."

THE END

MINES AND MINING

By John A. Thompson

SMALL-SCALE gold placer mining is a business that has its ups and downs. But it seems here to stay for a long time to come. In the aggregate, the individual placer miners and the small-scale operators are an important part of the gold-mining industry.

Moreover, old-fashioned as it is, the simply constructed, easily built sluice box still plays a prominent role in the economical recovery of small-scale placer gold. Man or boy, virtually anyone at all handy with tools can build a sluice box. And though there is a certain knack or skill in operating it efficiently according to the condition of the gold-bearing gravels being treated, it is a knack that can readily be learned.

There is no magic in the age-old process of shoveling gravel into an open trough containing a flow of water and saving the very tiniest particles of gold while sand and even larger pebbles are carried through onto the dump or tailing pile at the end of the sluice. An immutable law of physics does the trick.

The whole principle of sluice-box operation is based on the wide difference in specific gravity between particles of gold and bits of common rock or sand. That is, size for size, a gold fragment is many times heavier than a similar fragment of ordinary gravel. Thus, a water flow strong enough to propel sand through a sluice won't budge the much heavier particles of gold. The inert, heavy gold, instead of being carried in suspension by the water, simply drops to the bottom of the sluice box where it is caught and saved by devices known as riffles.

Riffles are nothing more than obstacles to the progress of the gold, set in the sluice box to increase its efficiency. They do, however, serve a double purpose. In the first place they create a physical barrier against which the gold particle can lodge and be firmly held against any further movement down the sluice. In addition, riffles set up eddies and slack currents in the flow of water through the boxes. This still further reduces the water's capacity to hold the gold and aids in its deposition on the bed of the box—from which it can be later recovered.

Admitting he is a new hand at placer mining, Reader J. W. wrote us recently from Grants Pass, Oregon, for details on building sluice boxes.

The usual setup is a set of three boxes joined together to form a

single sluice. The longer length of sluice is more efficient because it allows the sand and gravel to become more thorougly disintegrated and gives the gold, particularly the smaller particles, a better chance to free themselves from any adhering material and more opportunity to drop to the bottom of the sluice and be saved.

To make the boxes, you need nine 12-foot boards, 12 inches wide, of rough, heavy 2-inch planking. That allows three boards to a box. One for each side, and one for the bottom. The result is a long open trough designed to carry a regulated flow of water through it from one end to the other.

The individual boxes can be made square—that is, the width of the bottom board throughout—and butted tightly together, the joined ends being held in place by wooden cleats. Natural swelling of the wood when water is run through will help seal the joints.

On the other hand, some prefer to make the first two boxes tapered, with one end slightly narrower than the other so that when they are set up each box will fit or telescope into the succeeding one. Telescope-type boxes can be made to fit tightly more easily than the butt-joined style. They can also be more readily taken down and set up again somewhere else.

Offsetting these advantages, tapered boxes are harder to build, and if you use wooden cross riffles, the riffle lattice will also have to be built to fit the taper of the sluice box bottom.

Both types of boxes have their good points and bad. In any individual case, the type preferred is largely a matter of personal choice and opinion.

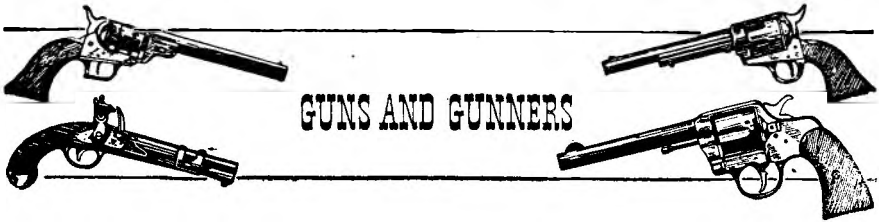
Both types will save placer gold. Both should have the sides of the boxes well braced against strain by wooden cleats nailed across the top every few feet.

The usual working grade for sluice boxes runs from a half inch to an inch drop per running foot of box. A little experimenting is frequently needed to find out the best grade—and also the best water flow for any particular operation. A good general rule to follow—or at least start with—regarding water flow is to have about five times as much water as gravel in the sluice. In any event there must be sufficient water to move the sand and gravel and keep it from packing in front of the riffles, yet not enough water to carry away the gold or keep it from settling to the bottom of the boxes and being saved.

The efficacy of the boxes is determined by the grade of the boxes, the water flow, the type of gravel being handled and the kind of placer gold in the deposit. Coarse gold is more easily and more efficiently saved than fine gold.

Okay, J. W., and lots of luck to you.

If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter enclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, P.O. Box 489, Elizabeth, N. J., will bring a prompt, authoritative, personal reply.



By Captain Philip B. Sharpe

ONE of the most common forms of inquiry concerns the art of converting a souvenir military rifle into a good sporter. This can be done with a minimum or even no expense—or you can invest almost any desired sum. The service rifles of all nations are scattered around this country, but not all of them are desirable for conversion, for many reasons.

First of all comes the ammunition problem. Many European, Asiatic and South American nations use the 7.92 mm. Mauser cartridge. It is made here as the 8 mm. Mauser. Others use the 7 mm. Mauser, also made here. Russia uses the 7.62 mm. Russian. France (older models) the 8 mm. Lebel, England and Canada the .303 British. All are made here. That's the story. If you have a French 7.5 mm. MAS, Jap rifles in either the 6.5 mm. or the 7.7 mm. Norwegian, Danish, Belgian, Dutch. Austrian, Hungarian, or almost any of the others, better forget them. No ammunition. Jap rifles, in particular, are also of amazingly low quality.

Perhaps the best bet is the Mauser 7.92 mm. in its various versions—the G-98, K-98, Vz 24, 33-40, etc. These make excellent sporters, and the American ammunition is adequate for any American big game. It is advisable to forget the semi-automatic rifles. First, they make clumsy sporters; and second, many States do not permit semi-automatic rifles for hunting.

Suppose you have a K-98. Earlier makes of these German rifles had walnut stocks. During the early part of the war, Germany developed laminated wood—1/16th inch sheets of wood bonded together with a bakelite-type plastic. These are ugly to look at, but stronger than most plain woods. Due to the plastic content, they will not take stains very well, but if you do not object to the light color, a little effort with fine sandpaper makes them look very neat.

You can use these military rifles just as they are for hunting. They are unnecessarily heavy and clumsy, and sights are very poor, so you may want to do a minimum of alteration work to make a better-looking and handling gun.

Step No. 1 is to discard the side sling strap. Step No. 2 includes removal of the heavy metal fore-end cap with its bayonette lug. Remove the first sling loop and fore-end band

and grind away the side loop for the sling. Polish this with a file where you ground it down, wrap a piece of bare copper or other wire around it so you can hold the wire with pliers, hold it in a gas flame and heat it to a dull red. Then dunk it in a can of ordinary engine oil. This process will give a reasonable blue finish.

Replace the top hand guard with a knife, file, and sandpaper, dress off the stock wood to match the front of the hand guard, and slip your band back in position. Since there is nothing to hold it, drill a 1/16th hole through both band and stock *below* barrel level and make a pin from a nail with the head cut off. Drill the hole through both sides so you may remove this pin and band, if later desired.

If you want to do more work, the first thing would be to install improved sights. Commercial bead front sights are made to fit the standard Mauser front sight base dovetail. You should also get a good receiver-type rear sight, also available in most makers' lines to fit the Mauser receiver. If, after installing new sights, you want to leave the stock as you made it above, just knock out the standard rear barrel sight leaf pin and discard the leaf.

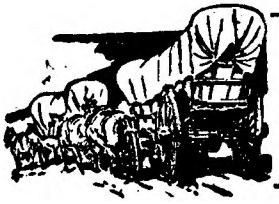
If you really want to dress up the gun, you will make a new sporting-type stock. First remove the trigger guard. Polish the guard and streamline the trigger guard portion slightly with files, making it a bit narrower and neater. It should be then refinished with one of the many blueing solutions on the market. Gunsmithing books from your public library will help. You will probably have to polish and reblue the barrel and action.

How about a stock? You can buy a blank and do the work from scratch, but this is no job for a beginner. The best bet is to get one of these machine-inletted or semi-inletted blanks, rough shaped outside. There are literally dozens of firms offering these. Their cost ranges from about $7.50 up, depending on the quality of the wood—plain and fancy.

Even this job is not for the careless man. All of the wood is cut out for the action, but it is purposely left undersize to allow for slight variations in actions and differences in barrels. A good home wood-working hobbyist will have no trouble.

The best plan is first to read a good gunsmithing book and then decide how much of the work you want to tackle. Then do not try to rush the job. You will enjoy the shaping and polishing of the metal and watching your stock take form. Then, when the job is all finished, you will get a great deal of sport out of showing it to your friends as well as actually shooting it.

Address all letters concerning firearms to Captain Philip B. Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Dept., Street & Smith's Western Story, P.O. Box 489, Elizabeth, N. J. Be sure you print your name clearly and enclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.



WHERE TO GO

By John North

For an address from which data, literature, etc., concerning game and game hunting in Mexico can be obtained, write to John North, enclosing a self-addressed, stamped envelope with your request, and the information will gladly be sent to you.

MEXICO, today's land of *mañana*, is excellent hunting country. Its widespread jungle-covered mountains abound in such varied game as black bear, deer, puma, wild boar, Mexican tiger (jaguar) and a smaller variety known as tigrillo.

There are wildcat, wolf, coyote, mountain lion and tapir to swing your sights on. The best alligator and crocodile country is in the States of Tabasco, Campeche, Chiapas and Veracruz.

For smaller game there are badger, 'possum, hare, rabbit and even monkey, if you want to try a monkey meat stew. The bird fancier can bag a generous limit of wild turkey, quail, doves, ducks, geese and pheasant.

Reader D.C., who says in his letter from Denver, Colorado, that he has done considerable game hunting in the Rocky Mountain States, is keen to tackle Mexico's jungle fastness on his next back-country gun-and-game excursion. "I always believe in planning such trips well in advance," he wrote, "so that I can have a pretty good idea what to expect. I have found it pays. Besides, long planning is half the fun. Can you give me a brief idea of Mexico's hunting regulations for outsiders? And where to find what types of game?"

That's a big order, D.C., but we'll do our best. Quite a few American nimrods are turning towards Mexico's exotic, mountain country for their annual hunting trips. There is some red tape involved in obtaining a hunting permit, but the regulations are not onerous. All you need to enter Mexico is a tourist card, valid for six months, and obtainable at the nearest Mexican Consulate or at the border.

However a person should specify when he gets his card that he wishes to hunt. Then, when he takes firearms into the country for hunting purposes, a special hunting permit must be applied for. To obtain the latter, it is necessary to have with you a letter of recommendation from some bank official, Chamber of Commerce, Police Department or other recog-

nized institution stating that the applicant is a respectable, law-abiding citizen. Two passport-size pictures are also required.

The permit—which is not a hunting license—entitles a person to take four guns, each of a different caliber into Mexico. One gun is admitted duty free. The others must be bonded, the bond money being refunded when you leave the country.

Actual hunting licenses can be applied for on blanks provided for the purpose at the border port of entry in to Mexico. The visiting hunter must also be prepared to furnish a bond, or a card showing he is a member of an officially licensed Mexican hunting club or association of sport hunters. Membership in such clubs and associations (similarly required to obtain a fishing license) is not hard to attain.

So much for the red tape. For a partial game summary by Mexican States, the following suggestions are offered:

Sonora (south of Arizona via Nogales): Bear, cougar, lynx, wildcat, Mexican leopard, wolf, coyote, puma, boar, deer, fox, opossum and wild turkey.

Chihuahua (south of west Texas via El Paso and Ciudad Juarez): bear, deer, wild turkey, jaguar, cougar, Mexican panther, wolf, coyote, boar, duck and wild geese.

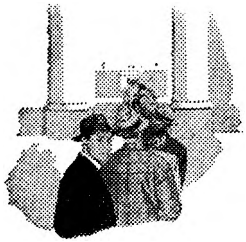
Nueva Leon (south of Laredo, Texas, Pan-American Highway to Mexico City): Deer, boar, bear, cougar, puma, hare, rabbit, wild turkey, quail and Mexican dove

Further down, the jungle country of Oaxaca, about 300 miles south of Mexico City, affords real tropical hunting country for tapir, monkeys, alligator, mountain lion, puma, jaguar, cougar, deer, wild turkey, quail and aquatic fowl. The State of Michoacan, west of and closer to Mexico City offers much the same type of hunting including jackals.

In Sinaloa, the western foothills of the Sierra Madre range and the Sierras Madres themselves furnish jaguar, Mexican leopard, puma, deer and bear. Campeche, Yucatan and Quintana Roo on the Yucatan Peninsula are good spots for hunting jungle tiger, tigrillo, puma, boar, swamp fowl and, in the sluggish, vine-colored muddy lowland rivers, alligators. Chiapas and Tabasco offer similar hunting.

Most of Mexico's other States are pretty much a repetition of the hunting areas already listed. The wide variety of game Mexico affords is due both to the wildness still existing in much of the country and to its general climate and geography. The jungle country is one of the main reasons why Mexico affords gun enthusiasts from north of the border such good—and different—tropical big-game hunting.

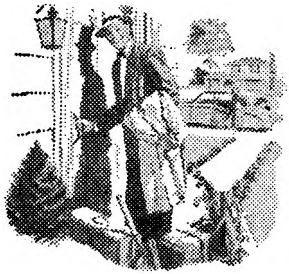
Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. Be sure to enclose a stamped envelope for your reply. Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, P.O. Box 489, Elizabeth, N. J.



THIS IS HARD

BUT THIS IS EASY

AND THIS IS MIGHTY WONDERFUL



SURE, you believe in saving.

But it's mighty hard to make yourself take cash out of your pocket, and time out of your day, to do it *regularly*.

The sure way, the *easy* way to do your saving is to get started on an *automatic* savings plan with U. S. Savings Bonds. Like this . . .

1. If you're on a payroll, sign up in the Payroll Savings Plan, then forget it. From then on the money saves itself—so much per week, or so much per month.

2. If you're not on a payroll, sign up at your bank for the Bond-A-Month Plan. Equally easy. You decide how much you want to put into bonds every month, your bank does the rest.

In just ten years after you start buying bonds, your money starts coming back to you—well-fattened!

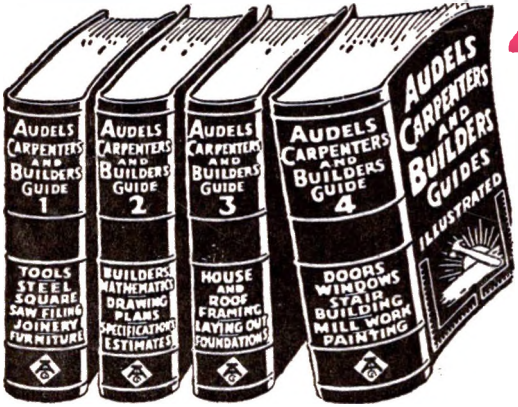
Every $3 you invest today brings you back $4 to make possible all the wonderful things you dream of doing.

And remember— any time you need your money for emergencies, you can get it back *in minutes* without losing interest.

Automatic saving is sure saving—U.S. Savings Bonds

Contributed by this magazine in co-operation with the Magazine Publishers of America as a public service.

AUDELS Carpenters and Builders Guides 4 vols. $6



Inside Trade Information for Carpenters, Builders, Joiners, Building Mechanics and all Woodworkers. These Guides give you the short-cut instructions that you want—including new methods, ideas, solutions, plans, systems and money saving suggestions. An easy progressive course for the apprentice and student. A practical daily helper and Quick Reference for the master worker. Carpenters everywhere are using these Guides as a Helping Hand to Easier Work, Better Work and Better Pay. To get this assistance for yourself, simply fill in and mail FREE COUPON below.

Inside Trade Information On:

How to use the steel square—How to file and set saws—How to build furniture—How to use a mitre box—How to use the chalk line—How to use rules and scales—How to make joints—Carpenters arithmetic—Solving mensuration problems—Estimating strength of timbers—How to set girders and sills—How to frame houses and roofs—How to estimate costs—How to build houses, barns, garages, bungalows, etc.—How to read and draw plans—Drawing up specifications—How to excavate—How to use settings 12, 13 and 17 on the steel square—How to build hoists and scaffolds—skylights—How to build stairs—How to put on interior trim—How to hang doors—How to lath—lay floors—How to paint.

AUDEL, Publishers, 49 W. 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

Mail Audels Carpenters and Builders Guides, 4 vols., on 7 days' free trial. If OK I will remit $1 in 7 days and $1 monthly until $6 is paid. —Otherwise I will return them. No obligation unless I am satisfied.

Name_____

Address_____

Occupation_____

Employed by_____ JACK