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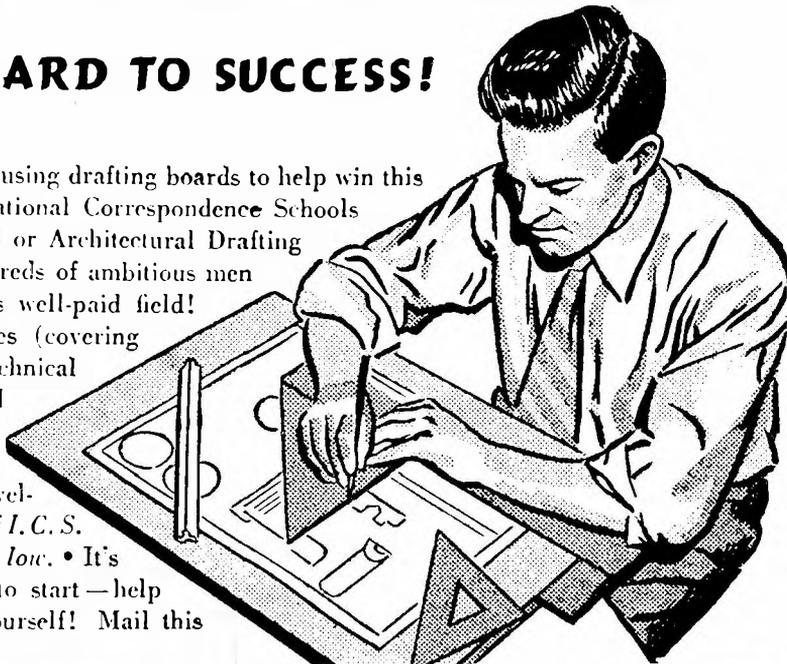
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STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST

FOUNDED 1902

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VOL. 162, No. 6

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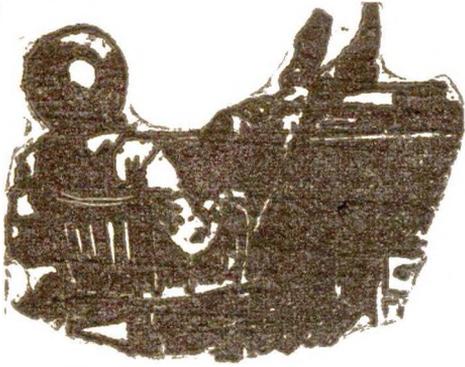
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A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

SEÑOR RED MASK is a familiar character to many Wild West old-timers, having appeared on these pages for lo, these many moons. You'll make his acquaintance—if you haven't before—in this issue, in the lead novel.

All this is by way of leading up to the letter we just received from Guy L. Maynard, whose prolific typewriter brings the señor to you every few issues or so. In the letter, Guy tells us that such a person as the señor was inspired by a real live hombre who lived down Mexico way. But enough of our babbling, here's the letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: It might interest you to know that the prototype of Señor Red Mask, who has appeared in the pages of Wild West for many years, was a black-mustached young *capitan* of rurales whom I knew down in the Sinaloa country of Mexico.

At the fiestas, the *capitan* always appeared dressed in a picturesque *charro* costume of black velvet trimmed with silver buttons and braid. His high-peaked black felt sombrero was richly decorated with silver cord and filigree. He carried a pearl-stocked *pistola*, stuck in his red silk sash, and wore belled silver spurs on his soft black boots.

Yes, the *capitan* also rode a spirited black stallion. And not only that, but I've seen him ride through the wide-arched entrance

to a cantina and toss down his drink while still in the saddle—with a crowd of *paisanos* looked on in starry-eyed admiration.

Hasta otra vez!

GUY L. MAYNARD.

We'd sure like to have met up with a gent like that, Guy. But we'll bet you a double dose of white tequila that he wasn't as popular as the fiction character you patterned after him.

And if you don't like tequila, we'll make it frijoles and beans.

—THE RANGE BOSS.

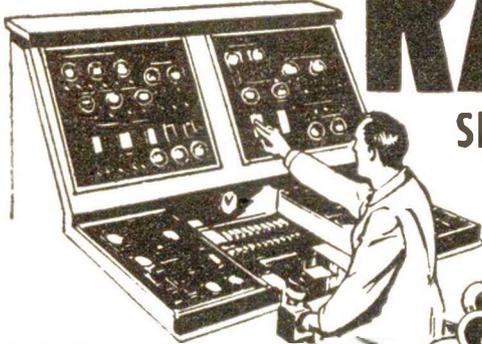
There was only one way for Kid Wolf to help those struggling placer miners buck gold-hungry Lance Redholt and his murderous crew—trigger fast and let his "Texas Guns Roar!" You'll want to be sidin' the Kid when he takes up the fight against that tough hydraulic-mining outfit, so don't miss Ward M. Stevens' complete novel in the October issue of Wild West.

Blacky Solone, ace trouble-shooter for Wells Fargo, competes with Kid Wolf for six-gun honors when he takes a "Danger-blazed Trail" through treacherous cross-currents of intrigue and mystery on the hunt for cached loot in James P. Webb's latest hair-raising adventure.

And Dapper Donnelly takes lead chips in a cutthroat game of range poker and makes a "Hot-lead Decision" in the same suspense-packed issue. Follow Clay Starr's pint-sized pitchman in another dramatic episode in his colorful career and watch him prove the hand is quicker than the eye in a powder-smoke payoff.

There'll be a full line-up of other fast-moving shorts and features on the tally book for October you won't want to miss, so order your copy early.

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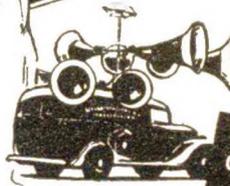


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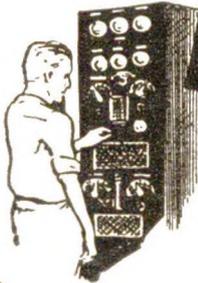
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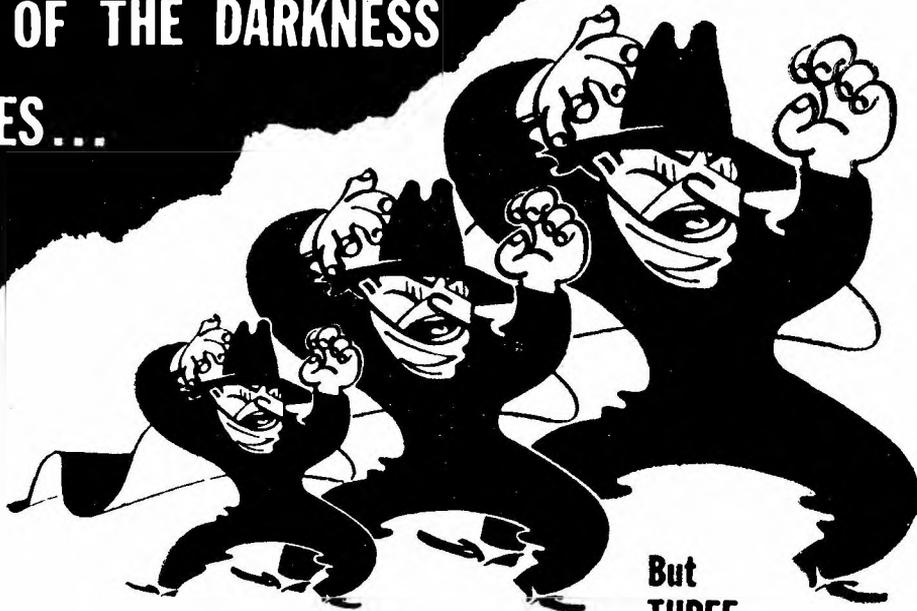
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*Without warning the murder shot
thundered from the deadfall.*

**Just when Flash Moran was finally closing in on
Three-finger Jack's ruthless owlhoot gang, the venge-
ance trail led him into a weird crossfire of sinister**

WEETIGO GHOST GUNS

by WILLIAM F. BRAGG

CHAPTER I MURDER TRAIL

BROWN dust of the bald-headed Saskatchewan prairies lay thickly upon the bullhide chaps and riding gear of Flash Moran as his patient buckskin pony carried him down a twisting narrow trail into a gloomy valley where a small stream ran in the shadows of poplar-cloaked bluffs.

In this alien land far north of Piute in old Wyoming, the red-haired deputy rode the vengeance trail alone. Even his Indian guide, a young Sarcee called Gray Goose, had deserted Flash at dawn, professing fear of any camp which might be set on Weetigo Creek.

"Long time ago, maybe twenty winters," Gray Goose had explained, counting on his fingers, "two pale-

faces, two Injuns—one my father Crow Foot—they make camp on dat creek. White mans find sand that sparkles in gravel bars. Heap plenty. 'Long 'bout dis time when ducks build nests, dey have wan beeg fight. One white man keel de udder. He also chop off wan Injun's head, too. He try for keel my father but my father know 'bout sand in creek and get away. Bad white mans try for follow heem. He not know 'bout sand without botton. Git stuck. He carryin' wan beeg load—buckskin pouches filled with dis stuff what sparkles. My father hear him yell once before sand covers his eyes. One beeg yell like wild cat caught in trap. Since den, no Injun go 'round dat creek. Too much weetigo—what you callum? 'Too much spook.' And with that, the Sarcee turned his pinto pony on the trail that led back to Fort Calgary.

So, as the long white northern twilight came on, the Piute County deputy sheriff rode slowly down into the ghostly shadows along Weetigo Creek. Vainly he had tried to persuade Gray Goose to accompany him, for he was a stranger in a land far distant from familiar Wyoming hills. He required a guide who knew landmarks in this flat country where streams were hidden in deep narrow valleys. The Sarcee had been highly recommended in Calgary as intelligent, brave, and with no black marks against him on the books of the Northwest Mounted Police. But when Moran disclosed that his mission would end that night on a certain stream known as Weetigo Creek, Gray Goose had turned his pony. Even doubled pay and the new gun promised him by Flash failed to dent his superstitious fear of the screaming weetigo of the white murderer whose gold had dragged him to his death in the quicksands.

Slouched over the saddlehorn, Moran squinted his blue eyes, studying the grassy bottom land that flanked the stream. His buckskin proceeded without rein guidance for it had carried its master all the hard way up from Wyoming, through Montana and the Sweetgrass Hills along the border, and into Canada. But the bay pack horse bought at Calgary the week before when Flash had halted to grub up for the last lap of his journey, continually pulled back on its lead rope. Nothing irritates a man toward the shank of a hard ride more than a stubborn pack horse.

"Now listen, you slab-sided hunk of dog meat," Flash said, halting his buckskin and swinging his lean, broad-shouldered frame in the saddle, "you better quit tryin' to jerk my arm out o' the socket. If you don't, I'll throw a war bridle around that ugly barrel that passes for yore head and jest naturally jerk off your lower jaw."

But on the next turn of the trail, a hundred paces above the stream, the bay dug its forefeet into the earth, flung back its head and almost pulled Moran from his seat. Angry to the core, Flash swung to the ground, yanked his lariat coil from saddle fork and fashioned the head loop of a war bridle.

But as he stumped angrily up the trail on high-heeled boots toward the balky horse, he saw that the animal was not watching him. With ears pricked it was staring at something down there in the dim shadows of Weetigo Valley. And the glary white of the bay's eyes, the quiver of its neck muscles, indicated to Flash that whatever it saw was a frightening something.

MMORAN turned slowly, jerking down the brim of his dusty slouch hat. But though he stood alert and watchful, nothing moved

in the shadows of the poplar and cottonwood trees. The last rays of the dying sun beyond the western Rockies, glinted on the shallows of the creek where it ran between the whispering trees. It was a peaceful scene, promising a comfortable night camp for man and beast. There seemed nothing there below to frighten a horse.

"Boy," Flash whispered, slapping the bay on its tense neck, "you listened this mornin' to that tall spook yarn told by Gray Goose. You got nothin' to fear down there. No such thing as weetigos. Nothin' but good grass and clear water for your supper. Come on now. Be a good hoss. Don't try no more to bust my arm."

Coaxingly, Moran sought to take up slack in the taut lead rope. He hated to put a war bridle on a tired horse's head. The cruel jaw loop cut and tore flesh when the animal jerked back. But the bay would not be coaxed. It defied all Moran's coaxing. It stood there in the trail, head thrown back, white-rimmed eyes staring down into the shadowy valley, muscles all aquiver.

"Shucks," growled Moran, "you'll get me riled, hoss. You know what happens when a redhead gets riled? Something pops. I ain't a bit scared of spooks or weetigos, red or white. But I hope to cut the trail of Three-finger Jack down in the valley. And no hoss or man or weetigo will keep me from it. I've ridden over a thousand miles from ol' Piute since winter broke up, just to find Three-finger and his gang. So come along, hoss, or I'll bust off your jaw."

When the deputy professed no fear of weetigos, such as haunted the northland with its miles of prairie, its bush country, its forests that reached to arctic barrens where vast herds of caribou wintered, he spoke the truth. He rode the vengeance trail. On the finding of Three-

finger Jack, and the taking of that man, dead or alive, Flash Moran had staked his life and his honor. For in Piute, the outlaw stood accused of the cold murder of Dave Hale, as brave a guard as ever rode a treasure coach, the robbery of a small fortune in bank notes consigned to the Stockman's National Bank in Piute, and the showing up of Flash Moran as a man who had allowed a gallant comrade-in-arms to fight alone and die when the odds of murder ran against him.

Three-finger Jack, always masked during forays along the Piute trail, but easily identified because he lacked the middle, ring, and little finger of his left hand, had killed Dave Hale as the guard sat atop the canvas top of the treasure coach. He killed, without warning from a deadfall erected at the top of a grade in the mountains where the stage teams had slowed to a walk for the slow haul.

Moran, riding inside—for the law had set a trap to catch Jack—was given no time to clear a gun when the murder shot thundered outside. A lean dark passenger with a scar on his right cheek, supposedly an employee of the stage company, had leaned forward and knocked out Moran with a sidewise slash of his Colt barrel.

By the time Moran had recovered, Jack and his gang had vanished. The stage-company traitor had fled with them. They had taken the packet of bank notes. And posses, riding in all directions to cut trail, had finally reported the outlaws as heading northward through the Big Horn Mountains toward Pryor Gap and Montana. So, nettled by the Piute gossipers who whispered that he had been lucky to get knocked out instead of killed, Moran had asked for leave from Sheriff Hank Horn, saddled his buckskin and hit the trail to the north.

Standing there in the trail, staring down upon Weetigo Creek, Moran prayed that the hopes he had held for the past week of encountering Three-finger Jack here would not prove false. One clue had brought him here as it had aided him all during the trail up from Wyoming.

CHAPTER II

GHOSTLY LAUGHTER

THE bank notes, stolen by Three-finger Jack and his gang, had not yet been signed by officials of the Stockman's National Bank. Requiring funds here and there as they fled toward the Canadian line, the outlaws had clumsily forged the signatures. Their trail, marked by ink, had been faint but always uncovered by the patient vengeful young officer who followed. He knew they had crossed into Canada when he picked up a ten-dollar bill with a forged signature in a Fort Benton gambling house. But his greatest find had been a similar bill in a dead-fall on the outskirts of Fort Calgary where outlawed men gathered for cards and drinks. A friendly bar-keeper had informed Flash that the bill had been spent some days before by one of a trio of prospectors working the gravel bars along Weetigo Creek, four days' ride toward the north. And this leader, the chatty barkeep went on, could not have been expert with a pick or shovel since he lacked three fingers on his left hand.

Not understanding the Indian meaning of the name of the creek, Flash had hired young Gray Goose as a guide up the trail toward Fort Edmonton. With his usual caution he had not explained his errand. It had amazed him when the guide, through fear of unholy spirits, deserted him. Flash had hoped to use Gray Goose's scouting skill in over-

coming Three-finger Jack and his two companions.

Moran might easily have secured aid from the nearby post of the Northwest Mounted Police, commanded by efficient Corporal Baillie, for that sagacious Scot's fame as an officer ran throughout the North. But Flash was young and proud and stung by the jeers of Piuters who had accused him of taking the easy way out of a fight. He had vowed to take Three-finger Jack single-handed or go out of Canada himself in a wooden box. So he stood alone on the side of the steep bluff overlooking the ghostly creek.

Something down there in the timber laughed. Not a hearty, jocular laugh, but an indescribable sort of laugh such as one emitted by a crazed shepherdder Moran had once met on the range.

The bay flung up its head, rolled its eyes, snorted loudly. Even the tired buckskin tossed its dusty mane and showed signs of life. Moran stood tense, rawboned body taut as wire. His right hand slipped slowly downward toward the stock of his low-slung belt gun.

Then, above the tops of the tall cottonwoods, flapped a large bird. The tenseness departed from Moran's frame. He let his gun slip back into its oiled holster. He laughed heartily.

"It's nothin' but a loon," he said to the horses, speaking as though they were humans that required reassuring. "Just a fool laughin' loon. Gray Goose showed me one yesterday when we crossed that fork of the Red Deer over across the divide. Just a laughin' loon." He winked at the bay. "Now I reckon you'll quit actin' the fool," he drawled lazily, "and be a good little hoss for the rest of the night."

But the bay stood its ground.

"Come on," threatened Moran, "or I'll sure put on that war bridle."

From the timber there rose a wail, a fearful scream that could not be mistaken for the call of a bird. It was the voice of a man crying for help, a man in the grip of stark terror.

With a snort, the bay jerked free, whirled on its hind quarters before Moran could tighten his grasp on the lead rope. It stamped up the trail, carrying with it Moran's bedroll that contained all his official credentials, his food and his spare ammunition. The bedroll also held a packet of placards giving the descriptions of the killers of Dave Hale, the account of the theft of the unsigned bank notes, and the forged specimens that Moran had secured as he rode north.

SHAKEN by the eerie scream, Moran stood uncertainly for a moment. The clatter of the bay's hoofs on the upward trail died away to a dull drumming as it topped the ridge and thundered off across the prairie. The buckskin, too, had come to life and stood alert, shaking its head, and eying the fearful shadows along Weetigo Creek.

Hastily, Flash ran down the trail to seize his bridle reins before the buckskin, too, bolted. But before he could reach the pony a rifle shot rang out in the depths of the timber along the creek. Again there arose that wailing scream, a sound like that of a man or dumb brute in deepest agony.

Out of the shadows stumbled something that dimly resembled a man. The buckskin trembled like a leaf, bolted away from the trail before Flash could reach it. Quivering sharply down the grassy slope, it plunged into a thicket up the valley where the creek made a bend and disappeared.

The sunlight had fled, but the strange clear twilight of the northland persisted. Objects were clearly

enough outlined for Moran to make out that the screaming human who stumbled toward the foot of the trail was an Indian. For he saw bobbing braids of black hair and the hood of a blue capote such as the Hudson's Bay Co. issued for winter wear to its Indian trappers and hunters.

As Flash dropped to his knees and cleared his hand gun, he recalled Gray Goose's account of the murderous white miner who had killed one of his Indian packers in an attempt to seize all the gold the party had taken from the gravel bars of Weetigo Creek.

Gray Goose had declared that Indians never camped on this stream, yet here was an Indian staggering from the timber. Moran held no belief in ghosts and weetigos and banshees. But this was *something* to put fear into any man's heart.

Uncertainly, Flash raised his Colt. His hand shook and inwardly he cursed himself for his weakness. The thought came to him that perhaps envious Piuters might have spoken the truth, that he had welcomed the pistol whipping over the head that had saved his life. Was he losing his nerve, going soft?

The Indian swung about at the foot of the trail. He moved soundlessly for he wore knee-high moccasins on his skinny bowed legs. Then he did a strange thing. Sinking to his knees, he raised his hands as though in prayer.

As he knelt there, a dark, sinister figure padded from the thicket, silently as a lynx cat.

The Indian screamed. "No! Do not keel old Crow Foot!"

Moran started. Crow Foot was the name of the father of young Gray Goose.

THE black figure laughed, a harsh and throaty laugh. That woke remembrance in Moran's brain. For the lean man, who had played false

to his trust and knocked out Moran in the stagecoach, a man known to the stage company as Scar Cragen, had so laughed as his gun barrel fell crushingly on the deputy's head. That taunting, murderous laugh had been Moran's last memory before his senses faded.

Now here, on the ghostly banks of Weetigo Creek, the murderer's laugh again awoke the echoes, shattered the peace of the quiet valley.

"Cragen!" thundered Moran, springing forward. "You're under arrest!"

Hearing the deputy's shout, the old Indian turned and started up the trail. It was clear that he hoped Moran would save him. But Cragen's gun cracked. Crow Foot fell flat on his face and lay there, a huddled figure in his shapeless blue capote and wrinkled leather leggings.

Moran whipped a bullet toward Scar Cragen. But the renegade faded back into the shadows like a wolf gorged with meat and quitting the prey it had dragged down.

CHAPTER III

THE DEAD AWAKE

THE lengthening shadows, cast by the western side of the valley, gave cover to Flash as he made his way down the trail to where the old Indian lay. At any moment there might come a second bullet from the concealed gun of Scar Cragen. The cold-blooded murder of an old man, as he knelt praying for mercy, might have been but an act designed to lure Flash Moran into a murder trap.

Halfway down to where the gun victim lay so silently, it struck Flash that perhaps the clever outlaws might well have been aware that he had taken their trail. Three-finger Jack was not a fool and he had friends among the underworld denizens of Piute. He had shown

craft in placing his man, Scar Cragen, among the trusted employees of the stage company before staging the successful theft of over forty thousand dollars in unsigned ten-dollar bank notes. Perhaps that barkeep outside Calgary, who had so willingly given information to Flash, had been bribed to send the young officer to his death on this gloomy creek.

If Cragen's gun blotted out Moran's life here on this lonely hillside, Piuters would never know how near the deputy had come to the end of the vengeance trail. Quick-sands along the shores of the stream had already accounted for one white man before this, according to Gray Goose's story. Other bodies could be as easily disposed of.

Moran flung himself flat in the thick grass, grass that by its rankness indicated the depth of this northland's winter snowfall. He longed now for the reliable .44-caliber rifle slung on the saddle of the runaway buckskin. With it he could have combed out the thicket where Scar Cragen had taken cover.

But with only a six-gun and not a large supply of spare ammunition, Flash wasted no bullets. He reflected also—and rather sheepishly as he crouched there—that he had shown extreme youthfulness and foolish pride in not notifying the nearest Northwest Mounted Police post of his errand into the redcoats' domain. From all trail accounts he had heard, Corporal Baillie was a tower of strength in this lonely bush country.

But Flash had followed his own desire to capture the killer of Dave Hale single-handed. So he lay here this night, almost out of ammunition, stripped of supplies and legal credentials by a runaway horse, afoot also because his usually trusty buckskin had fled in terror.

Only Cragen had appeared.

Where were the other two members of the gang? Or had the barkeeper told a lie? Perhaps Three-finger Jack had forged signatures on many thousands of dollars in bank notes and had lured many reckless outlaws along the Canadian border into his gang.

But greatest mystery to Flash was the presence of an Indian on this stream which was feared by all superstitious red men. If this dead man were Crow Foot, father of young Gray Goose, then he had shown disregard of the Indian fear of the dead in returning to this camping place where once he had fled from murder.

Flash groaned and whispered to himself. "Shucks, I'm gittin' as worked up as that fool bay. I keep on thinkin' and first thing you know I'll get up on my hind legs and stam-pede, too."

But he couldn't do that. He had pledged his word in Piute to follow the trail to its bitter end, to bring back Three-finger Jack, dead or alive.

"Scar Cragen's a tough hombre," he muttered, "but small potatoes alongside Jack. Strange that nobody who was on the right side of the law ever saw the face of Jack. All we know him by is the three fingers missin' from his left hand. A glove with fingers stuffed would easy hide such stumps."

It was Three-finger Jack's custom to lie in ambush while his aids drew victims under his guns. Scar Cragen had acted with superb skill in drawing Moran down to where a deadly rifleman could throw a bullet through his brisket if he exposed himself.

"I'll wait until dark comes on," mused Moran. "Then I can crawl down easy to where that ol' Injun's sprawled out."

Caution wasn't cowardice. It required as much cold nerve to hide

in this grass while the wary foemen perhaps circled to get on his flanks as to leap out boldly and risk bullets during a wild lunge down the hill.

THE gloom thickened and now quiet reigned in Weetigo Valley. All Flash could hear was the murmur of water and the whisper of the northern wind in the tops of tall cottonwoods. Far down the valley an owl began to hoot and the eerie sound added to the mystery that slowly gripped the spot where white men and red had fought to the death for northland gold.

Then Flash tensed as he heard stealthy movements down in the brush along the creek. Sounds as though a horse was being led through the thicket and stirrups were scraping against saplings. By this time Scar Cragen had undoubtedly broken the news to the remainder of the gang that Moran had appeared, so Flash decided to waste one soft-nosed bullet. Often a slug thrown into the middle of a gang conference revealed the location of guards.

His Colt thundered, and the clattering echoes chased themselves down the narrow valley. The muzzle burst flared redly in the growing darkness. The moment Flash fired he moved from his position. With a shove of his left elbow into the earth, he sent his body hurtling down the slope through the grass and brought up several yards nearer the spot where the Indian lay.

This frontier gun fighter's trick saved Moran's life. For on the heels of the snap of his gun, a rifle hammered from the thicket. Flash heard the thud of a heavy bullet behind him, pitching into the earth near the spot where he had lain but a split second before.

There came an instant of silence. Then followed another crashing rifle report. A slug screamed over his

head and he heard it tear into the earth nearer his present position. He marked the flash of light in the timber below that marked the position of the rifleman.

He was tempted to raise his Colt and fire on that rifle flare. But he restrained the impulse. For there came the saving knowledge that the rifleman was firing boldly in the hope that Flash would answer and thus reveal his own position.

For more than a half-hour, the marksman below sought to draw Moran's fire with bold revelations of his own position on the edge of the timber along Weetigo Creek. But Moran was keyed up now and filled with a warrior's caution. He had stripped off his chaps and spurs to prevent any rustle of leather or clink of steel that might reveal his hiding place to the enemy. Several times he moved cautiously a few feet farther down the hill, inching his lean body through the grass, squinting his eyes as he vigilantly watched the black shadow that marked the stand of timber.

Engrossed in his battle of wits with the rifleman, he forgot momentarily that he was approaching closer and closer to Scar Cragen's victim. It was not until he extended a left hand in the darkness, and jerked it back when it fell upon clammy flesh, that he remembered Crow Foot.

The Indian lay not a yard from where Flash now crouched. The red-headed deputy had at last reached the bottom land along Weetigo Creek. He had come to that spot, marked with the blood of two murdered men, where an Indian legend had been born.

FLASH discovered that it was not pleasant to crouch there in the darkness with only a dead Indian for company. He pondered his next move, blaming himself anew because

he had sought to take this crafty gang unaided. Doubtless the rifleman had been stationed in the timber to hold off Flash, or kill him, while Three-finger Jack and his other men made good their escape. North ran a wild country to Fort Edmonton on the Saskatchewan, and beyond that was primitive wilderness that stretched to the mighty Peace River and the forest land inhabited by Indian trappers and the few Hudson Bay posts held down by white traders. Men like Three-finger Jack could hide in that north-land for years without a white man setting eyes on their trail. From its solitude they could come forth again to kill other brave men of the stripe of young Dave Hale.

"There is such a thing," Flash muttered disgustedly, and he referred to himself "as a man bein' too danged full of foolish pride and thus goin' down hard on his head like a fool calf at the end of a forty-foot rope."

It was about then, as he was reproaching himself, that Flash received his greatest nerve shock of the evening. And there had been many.

The dead Indian came to life. Old Crow Foot moaned.

Flash rose up on his hands and knees. His hair bristled and he knew now just how that frightened bay had felt the moment before it stampeded. At that moment he would have given much to be safe home in old Piute in the familiar calaboose office with the lights on and Sheriff Hank Horn snoring on his bunk in the far corner.

But he was hundreds of miles from the Piute jug. He was trapped in a primitive wilderness, beside a creek that had been named for ghosts. And his nearest companion was a dead Indian who moaned.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat," Flash

whispered huskily, "you're dead. Quit groanin'."

"There came an answer in a hoarse low whisper.

"Me no dead. Heap sick. You help poor old Crow Foot."

"Talk low," Moran cautioned, and he strove to steady his voice. "They may be down there in the trees, all set to fire if they think I've reached you."

"They gone by this time. Me lay here, makeum think Crow Foot dead. I hear go 'cross crick while you comin' down hill. Heap sick but ears good like rabbit's."

"We better wait longer to make sure, Crow Foot."

"Heap sick, I tell you. Legs all sick, too. No can walk. Burnin' up for drink of water. You no help, I go to creek for drink."

A white man couldn't lie here and let a poor wounded Indian crawl toward the murky waters of Weetigo Creek. An act of mercy might bring about disaster to Moran and his mission, but he must take that chance.

"If you can hang to my shoulders," the deputy whispered to Crow Foot, "I'll pack you down to water."

WITH Crow Foot clinging to his shoulders, Flash arose and trudged slowly across the bottom land toward the stream. The gloom concealed him, but he knew that the thrashing of his boots through the rank grass could easily be heard by any outlaw who remained on guard. But the keen ears of the wounded Indian had not proved false. The outlaws had fled. So Moran at last reached the edge of the stream and crouched on guard while old Crow Foot drank his fill, gurgling like a thirst-tortured trail dog.

"What do we do now?" Flash asked after the Indian had filled his

stomach with water. Flash washed the deep wound which Cragen's bullet had creased along Crow Foot's ribs.

"My hosses are all gone. Mebbe bad man find them. No grub, no gun that talks long ways, no bullets. We have plenty bad luck," he explained carefully.

Old Crow Foot squatted on his lean haunches. He shook his head sorrowfully. "Plenty heap bad luck here on Weetigo Creek," he groaned. "I run into some, too. But for you, mebbe, I be up there on hill dyin' for drink of water. You good man, heap brave warrior."

"Shucks," said Flash, and he grinned in the darkness, "you're a pretty good warrior yourself not to be afraid of weetigos. One young Injun who was guidin' me—Sarcee named Gray Goose—he got plumb scairt this mornin' and turned back to Calgary. Wouldn't come to Weetigo with me."

"He my boy," explained Crow Foot. "Heap good hunter but scared of weetigo. I try for get him come with me when I ride up here two-three sleeps back. But he no wanna come. Not even for stuff that sparkles. Stuff that buy heap ponies, blankets, traps—all t'ings Injun needs and not got. Gray Goose, he say he got all he need without botherin' weetigo. Mebbe he heap right. But me—I come."

"You showed nerve to risk meetin' a weetigo. You must've figured on findin' some of that gold that was dug up here just before that white man ran amuck and killed two men and tried to get you."

"I no want to find gold. I *know* where gold is hid," whispered Crow Foot. "That why man with scar on his face shoot me. He try for find out where gold is hid. Him and his two friends. I no show them. But I show you. You my friend."

CHAPTER IV

THE WEETIGO STRIKES

I DIDN'T come here to hunt for the stuff that sparkles," Moran said gently to the old man. "I had a good friend far away to the south. Bad men killed him. It is more to me to find those men than that which sparkles."

Old Crow Foot nodded his head. "Injun think same. Stuff which sparkles was found long time ago here on Weetigo Creek. Make white man all same as drunk. He go what you call it—loco. First kill his white friend. Then use ax and kill my good friend, Injun named Squirrel Tooth. He wan' for kill me so I not tell Corporal Baillie of redcoats about it. Chase me like wolf run caribou. But I know about sand in this creek. I go 'cross. He try for follow. It get dark. He miss trail. Throw up hands. Howl like sick wolf. See him no more. Sand cover him. But he no take all the stuff that sparkles. No have time. Some hidden around here in buckskin pokes. Stuff white men take out of creek sand and gravel. That stuff plenty bad luck. Blood on it. White men hear 'bout it now and then. They come for look. Young Injuns, they come, too. But I know gold brings heap bad luck. So me—when they come—I hide in timber, howl like wolf. They pull out right away."

Moran grinned. "So *you're* the weetigo of Weetigo Creek. You even scared your son."

"He good boy. But findum stuff that sparkles, he go to tradin' post, buy this and that, forget about trappin' line, get too fat like sled dog in summer. Too much stuff that sparkles no good for Injun."

"Nor a white man," agreed Flash. Then he added: "But how come Cragen, the man with the scar on his face, to shoot you?"

"I hear this bad man and two friends come to Weetigo Creek. Like lots of others since big killin' here. No want 'em find this stuff. But when I ride out two-three days ago they have found cache. Luck—same what give you good cards in poker game. Plenty folks look for that cache. Only Scar and his friends find it. I'm hangin' around to howl like weetigo. Scare 'em off. They not scare easy. I watch. They no take out stuff that sparkles. They puttum in bundles of pretty paper."

Flash frowned. "Pretty paper. What do you mean, Crow Foot?"

"Pretty paper. All gold green and big chiefs' pictures on it. Bundles of it like stack of beaver pelts. Three men they sit around cache countin' before they put it in with buckskin pokes filled with stuff that sparkles. I hear one man laugh and say: 'We got interest on our money.' I no understand that. What this thing—interest?"

"Plenty of white men don't understand this thing, interest, either," said Flash dryly. "Now my good friend, you tell me where this cache is, I find pretty paper. Then mighty quick we round up bad men. Put in stone corral or hang until they die. Where is this cache?"

"I get tired playum weetigo," explained Crow Foot. "Sneak up for look. Two white men go away. This man with scarred face, he hang around. Hide. I come to look at cache and pretty paper. Man with scarred face jump me. I run out of timber. I not bad man. Got no gun. But he follow me. He try for shoot me."

"He believed he had killed you. Otherwise he would have put another bullet into you."

"I think so. I lay quiet. All same like sled dog after three-day trip without fish."

If the cache of unsigned bank notes could be unearthed, then

Moran would hold certain legal evidence against the killers of Dave Hale. The old Indian knew where Three-finger Jack and his mates had hidden the loot from the Piute stage. Flash leaned forward. His voice was hoarse, for this clue meant that if he succeeded in capturing Three-finger Jack he could take the outlaw to a court with legal evidence to tie him up with the murder of Dave Hale.

"Where is this cache?" Flash asked eagerly.

CROW FOOT leaned forward. He whispered: "Hard for me to talk white man's tongue. But I show you. I walk pretty good now since you brought me to water. I show you. Come with me. We clean out that cache. Then no more weetigos around here. After that I show you trail across this creek so you dodge quicksands."

Now was the hour and the time. Here on the gloomy bank of Weetigo Creek, Moran would receive information which would send a murderer and his gang to the gallows. Mistakes had been made in following the vengeance trail, but an act of kindness had canceled them. With information given by Crow Foot, Moran would seek out Corporal Baillie at the Northwest Mounted Police Post, a few miles east of Weetigo Creek, and get his aid in rounding up the outlaw gang.

"Where is that cache?" Flash asked.

Crow Foot leaned forward. They sat on the edge of the stream and the light of the rising moon glimmered on its shallows, its treacherous banks of quicksands. One of those banks had swallowed a white killer, crazed by the sight and touch of raw gold.

Something moved in the shadows of the thicket, a ghostly *something* as light-footed as a grazing mule

deer. There was but the barest imperceptible sound of tree branches brushing together, of something furtive crawling lithely toward this gloomy place where a red man and a white held rendezvous.

Whatever that something might be, it effectually quieted old Crow Foot. He hissed, "Bad man come," and before Flash could halt him he had vanished into the shadows, carrying with him the secret of where the outlaws had hidden bank loot along with cursed weetigo gold dust.

The warning of the Indian put all thought of finding the cache and the safe trail across Weetigo Creek out of Moran's mind for the moment. An attack might be launched at any point from the gloomy thicket. Springing to his feet, Flash reached for his gun. He stood outlined by reflected light from the surface of the stream while he himself faced the blackness of the brush and timber. Not a sound came from it, not even the sleepy call of a night bird.

Then a gun roared near at hand. The spurt of fire dazzled Moran for a moment. He dropped to his knees as a bullet whined past his head. Bringing up his Colt, he returned the fire.

Knowing that he was exposed to his foe's weapon, Flash dropped flat on the earth after he had fired. He rolled along the bank of the creek, hoping to reach the cover of brush a few yards away. The crash of the hidden ambusher's gun and a second singing bullet speeded him to frantic efforts to escape.

He believed that Scar Cragen had returned to kill him. The outlaw was crafty and had thus caught old Crow Foot earlier in the day.

In his haste to get out of gun range, Moran rolled nearer the bank than he had intended. The earth had been undercut by spring floods.

He felt the bank give way beneath his weight. There came into his mind the terrifying thought of being trapped by the same choking quicksands that had stifled the life of a white killer.

Desperately, Flash flung out his arms, dropped his gun and grasped for a bunch of tough rank grass to haul himself out of danger.

As he lay there, with the bank crumbling beneath him, and gun almost out of his reach, a bulky figure leaped like a wild cat from the brush. Straight toward Moran the attacker rushed, coming from a point opposite to that lately occupied by the gunman who had been firing.

Taking a hold on the grass, Moran pulled himself out of danger from quicksand. But he was caught off guard and unarmed. The man who emerged from the thicket flung his weight upon the red-headed deputy. A gun barrel flashed in the moonlight. It crashed downward.

As his senses faded, Flash heard again the mocking laughter of Scar Cragen.

CHAPTER V

FINISH FIGHT

WHEN Flash opened his eyes, he found himself lying on the dirt floor of a rude cabin built of cottonwood logs. There was one window, but it lacked glass panes. A strip of half-rotted leather served as a windbreak. Across the room a small fire blazed in a stone-and-mud fireplace. Light from the flames cast eerie reflections on the ceiling.

Moran's head felt big as a pumpkin from the pistol whipping he had received. His body ached in every muscle and he was sure his captors had kicked and mauled him after knocking him out. But he was bound hand and foot and could not move to ease his injuries. His eyes stung with dirt and his lips were swollen from a punch that had been

put there by some outlaw's fist.

Flash could see two men who sat near the fire drinking coffee from battered tin cups. One was Scar Cragen; the second, from his muscular build, was the man who had jumped Flash after Cragen had drawn the deputy's fire.

So this was the end of the trail. Moran wondered why they had spared his life. They could have trussed him up, tied a rock to his neck and pitched him into Weetigo Creek. It was not likely that such a murder would be discovered soon in this wilderness.

Moran spoke up hoarsely for he knew Three-finger Jack's reputation as a crafty plotter and was sure that the outlaw would not allow a lawman to escape unscathed.

"I could stand a drink of that coffee," he suggested. "That is, if you got enough for us all."

Scar Cragen arose, kicking back the wooden packing case on which he had been seated. The other man turned slowly. He wore a broad-brimmed black hat that shaded his hard, square-jawed face and deeply set dark eyes. The lower part of his face was covered by a heavy, dark beard, and he had a long, crooked nose.

"So you finally woke up," Cragen laughed. "Well, I guess I can spare you some coffee."

He refilled his cup with the steaming liquid, strolled over to where Flash lay—and threw the coffee in the deputy's face.

Moran flinched as the coffee scalded his face. But he set his teeth and bore the punishment silently while Cragen laughed until the rotted cabin walls seemed to shake. The outlaw's mirth appeared to irritate his muscular companion.

"Cut out the kid tricks," growled the bearded man in a husky voice. "We don't want to spoil this jay-bird's looks. We wanta send him

home lookin' as handsome as usual so Piute can admire him."

Flash looked up into the speaker's dark, mocking eyes.

"So you're sendin' me home," he said. Then he added: "In a wooden box, I reckon."

The dark man raised his gloved right hand and stroked his beard. He answered slowly. "No, you'll not go home in a box. You'll go in handcuffs."

"Handcuffs?"

"Handcuffs of the Mounted Police. Of course they'll take 'em off when they find we've made fools out of the law again. But I reckon, Moran, you'll be laughed out of your job. You know, while I'd take pleasure in killin' you, after all, you'd soon be out of all your misery. But all your life you'll have to stand the laughter of men who were once your friends. And they'll call you a fool for lettin' it happen and they'll think that you got into the mess through bein' headstrong."

With unerring words, the outlaw had exposed what Moran knew to be his greatest weakness. He had cursed himself since arriving here on Weetigo Creek because he had not notified the Mounted Police. But he had burned with a desire to take vengeance alone upon the Three-finger Jack gang. And they had outwitted him.

TURN loose his right hand," the bearded man said to Scar. "Loosen the ropes some on his ankles so he can get over to the fire. We'll let him have a drink of coffee. Not because we like him, but so's the Mounty won't think we've been abusin' a prisoner. We got to make this play look right."

"He's all beat up," Scar pointed out. "How about that?"

"We can explain that we had a tough fight to take him. But don't try any more tricks like throwin' hot

coffee, Scar. It's gettin' nigh day-break and Bill oughta be here soon."

"You're takin' chances in even lettin' Moran have one hand free," Scar protested. "He's dangerous."

The other man laughed shortly. "Dangerous to some men, Scar. But not to us. He's just a fool-headed mule. Lettin' his hosses get away. Almost fallin' in the creek. Losin' his gun. Do what I tell you."

Grumbling, Scar shoved Flash toward the fireplace. The dark man, seated again on a stool, bent and placed a tin cup on the stone floor in front of the fireplace. He steadied the cup with his left hand while with his right he tilted the pot.

Moran blinked his eyes as he watched. It had struck him as strange that the dark man wore gloves while sitting at his ease by a fire and drinking coffee. He understood the reason now. For three fingers of the man's left glove extended stiffly as he used that hand to steady the cup. Here then sat Three-finger Jack, the killer of Dave Hale. And he wore a glove to hide his maimed left hand and stuffed the fingers to conceal the injury which would identify him to any officer on his trail.

"So you're Three-finger Jack," said Moran.

The dark man looked up with a scowl. "How did you guess it?" he demanded brusquely.

Moran raised his free hand intending to point toward the stuffed fingers of the man's left-hand glove. Just in time, he caught himself. If he hoped to get out of this tight corner he must use all his wits and courage. The less he told these clever outlaws the better.

"Guessed it from the way you ordered Scar around," Flash explained. "Scar ain't the sort of man that likes to take orders. But he took *yours*. So I figured you must be that noted

outlaw chief, Three-finger himself."

"We all make mistakes, even the best of us," growled Three-finger. "I shouldn't have bossed Scar around. But you're wrong about me bein' Jack." He raised the cup and extended it to Flash. "I'm really Joe Doyle, an honest prospector from the States. And Scar over there is my brother, Ed, and the third member of our bunch is Bill Smith. We were wiser than you. We reported our business on this creek to the police post over on Red Deer as we rode in. If you'd done the same, maybe you wouldn't be in the fix you're in just now."

"Yeah," drawled Flash and he took the cup. "Even the best of us make mistakes now and then. You just made one, Jack."

And with a flip of his wrist, Flash flung the hot coffee into Three-finger Jack's eyes. The outlaw fell backward off his seat, clawing at his eyes and cursing in agony.

WITH a yell, Scar Cragen leaped across the cabin, jerking his gun as he ran in. But he moved too slowly to break up Moran's attack on Three-finger.

The deputy flung himself upon the outlaw chief. He had but one hand to fight with, and his ankles were still loosely bound together, allowing him but a small stretch of rope between so that he could take short steps.

Flash's free hand closed on the handle of the big tin coffeepot and he crashed the pot down on the head of Three-finger Jack. The top clattered off and a cascade of steaming coffee and hot grounds showered the outlaw who cursed and yelled as the scalding stuff stung his skin.

"Get him off me!" Jack roared to Cragen. "I'm plumb blind. I can't see."

"I'll shoot him through the back!" Cragen yelled.

Flash countered that threat by twisting off Jack's lurching body so that it lay between him and Cragen's gun. He saw Cragen circling for a new position from which to pump a bullet.

The moment that Jack regained his sight he could easily overcome Flash. Moran knew he had to move now—and fast.

Boldly, Flash hooked his right arm around Jack's neck. He staggered to his feet with Jack's muscular body threatening to drag him down to the floor. Using all his strength he swung the outlaw about so that again Jack offered a barricade against Cragen's gun. And half dragging and half pushing the cursing coffee-blinded outlaw, Flash stumbled straight toward Cragen.

"Turn loose that man or I'll kill you!" the lean gunman yelled, and snapped a warning bullet over Moran's red head.

With a laugh, Flash poised Jack on his feet briefly. His arm darted back. As Jack stood wavering, still clawing at his eyes, Moran's fist snapped out in a straight punch that cracked off the point of the outlaw's long nose.

"You'll have another mark now so men will know you," Moran panted, and as the outlaw fell backward almost into the arms of Scar Cragen, Flash followed up the blow with another swinging punch that split open Jack's cheek.

The backward fall of his renegade partner threw Cragen off balance. Flash side-stepped past the outlaw chief and landed a smashing blow on Cragen's lean face. Cragen allowed his chief to fall to the floor and whipped up his gun to fire. But Moran grasped the warm barrel.

CURSING, Cragen sought to free his weapon. But Moran hung doggedly to the gun. The two circled the room. With difficulty,

Moran kept his feet for his bound ankles hampered him. Cragen, using his left hand, was now landing cruel blows in an attempt to beat his opponent down and regain control of the gun.

Now Moran and Cragen were struggling in front of the fireplace. Cragen tripped over the battered coffeepot and went to his knees. With a yell, Flash jerked away the outlaw's gun.

Battered and bloody, he stood triumphantly over his two captives. "We'll see who goes back to Piute in handcuffs," he said.

A quiet voice spoke from the direction of the window.

"Put down that gun," it commanded. "You're under arrest."

And from the door at the far end of the room a second man spoke. "I've got you covered, too."

So Bill had returned and the game was over. And he had apparently brought along a comrade. Flash saw the barrel of a rifle resting across the window sill. Since this was the end of the trail, the deputy decided to go out fighting. He swung his gun, intending to fire on the rifleman outside.

Just in time he held his fire. For the growing light and the tilting of the curtain by the rifle barrel revealed that the man who had first spoken wore the red coat of the Mounted Police.

Flash Moran had come within a split hair of killing a Northwest Mounted Policeman. With a bitter laugh he lowered the gun.

Bill, who stood by the door, now stalked in and took Moran's gun and searched him for other weapons. Then he covered Flash while the Mounty quit the window and entered the cabin.

"My name's Baillie," the officer announced. "This prospector, Bill Smith, came in last night and re-

ported that you had been caught by his friends while hidin' out on Weetigo Creek. He also brought in your horses which he said got away in the fight. There was sufficient stuff in your bedroll to bring me here to arrest you. Anything you say will be used against you. I arrest you for the murder of Dave Hale and the robbery of American currency from a stage in Piute County, Wyoming. We'll hold you here until extradition papers can be arranged for your return across the border."

The corporal was a stocky, red-faced man, with a crisp gray mustache above his unsmiling mouth, and keen gray eyes that seemed to pierce straight through Flash.

"Officer, you're makin' a big mistake," said Moran. "Who do you think I am?"

"Not Three-finger Jack. Your hands don't lack any fingers. But you're one of Jack's men. In your bedroll we found a large bundle of that unsigned currency which was stolen from the stage. We had been warned earlier by a barkeeper in Calgary that you were passing forged notes and heading north toward Weetigo Creek. So—"

FLASH turned and pointed toward Jack who had staggered to his feet. The outlaw was rubbing his coffee-seared eyes. He was using both hands and the three stained fingers of his left glove that were stuffed to hide his injury, protruded stiffly.

"There stands the man I came after," said Moran. "You can easy see that he wears a glove to hide the stumps of the middle, ring and little fingers on his left hand. That's Three-finger Jack, officer. He killed my friend, Dave Hale. Me—I'm Flash Moran, a deputy sheriff from Piute. They framed me by plantin' part of that bank loot in my bedroll

after they had caught my runaway horses—”

Suddenly, Bill Smith flipped up his gun. He lined it on the Mounted Policeman. With a lurch, Flash flung himself against Baillie and knocked the officer out of range as Smith's gun thundered.

The policeman, although off balance, whipped a pistol from its leather holster. He fired with lightning speed and Bill went down with a crash.

But before Baillie could throw a gun on Three-finger, the latter leaped across Bill's twitching body and rushed from the cabin.

Scar Cragen rushed forward, intending to disarm the officer. He bent and retrieved his gun which Bill had dropped on the floor after taking it from Flash.

Moran's body hampered Baillie, for Flash was trapped between the two men. As Flash tried desperately to get out of line in order that Baillie could fire, a rifle cracked from the direction of the window.

And high above the ringing crash there sounded a wolflike screech.

“Weetigo come for bad men!” the rifleman squalled. “Heap big weetigo with gun!”

Scar Cragen slid to the floor and lay motionless.

Baillie, followed by Flash, rushed from the cabin. Old Crow Foot met them. The old Indian carried a rifle and beside him stood his son, Gray Goose.

“My boy, he plenty scared of weetigos,” Crow Foot said proudly. “But he more scairt 'bout what happen to his father. So he come back and bring me gun. Now he know weetigos all gone from this place.”

The old cabin stood hidden in brush on the edge of Weetigo Creek. A trail led down to the water and the crossing had been marked with white willow stakes.

“Get out of the way,” said the

Mounty. “We've got to go after Three-finger Jack.”

Crow Foot's seamed old face grinned. “You no find him now.”

“Where did he go?”

Crow Foot pointed toward the middle of the stream. The water there was murky. A white stake stood upright beside the murky spot.

“Three-finger Jack, he go down in sand that chokes. Same place where other bad man went.”

“But the trail's marked, with those stakes.”

The old Indian nodded. “But before me and Gray Goose come to cabin, I move middle stake so it stand right over bed of quicksand. Three-finger, he run that far. Then his legs go in. He yelled once but you no hear. You too busy.”

In the cabin, the old Indian revealed buckskin pokes filled with a small fortune in coarse gold, and bundles of unsigned currency from the looted stagecoach. The cache was under one of the flat stones in front of the fireplace.

“This gold is cursed,” Crow Foot said solemnly. “I t'ink I throw back in Weetigo Creek.”

“No,” said Baillie, “I'll take care of it for you. And we'll fix you up with a dandy trapping outfit.”

Moran said, as he shook Crow Foot's hand, “And when I get back to the police post where my hosses are, I'll make you a present of a fine .44-caliber Winchester, and a darned bay hoss that runs fast and likes to pull back on a tough trail where he knows there's danger. If I'd shown as much wisdom as that hoss, I might be takin' this gang back alive instead of in boxes. As it is, Piute will have to take my word that Weetigo Creek got Three-finger Jack.”

Don't miss Flash Moran's next tangle with the owlhoot clan—in an early issue of Wild West.

GUILE FOR A GUNMAN

by SHOSHONE GWINN

It's a bad thing to wake up night after night with a cold sweat and making a grab for the six-gun by your pillow, thinking vengeance is about to catch you at last.

Saul Saxon knew how bad it could be: he'd been doing it for the past month, every time he heard a sound in his restless sleep.

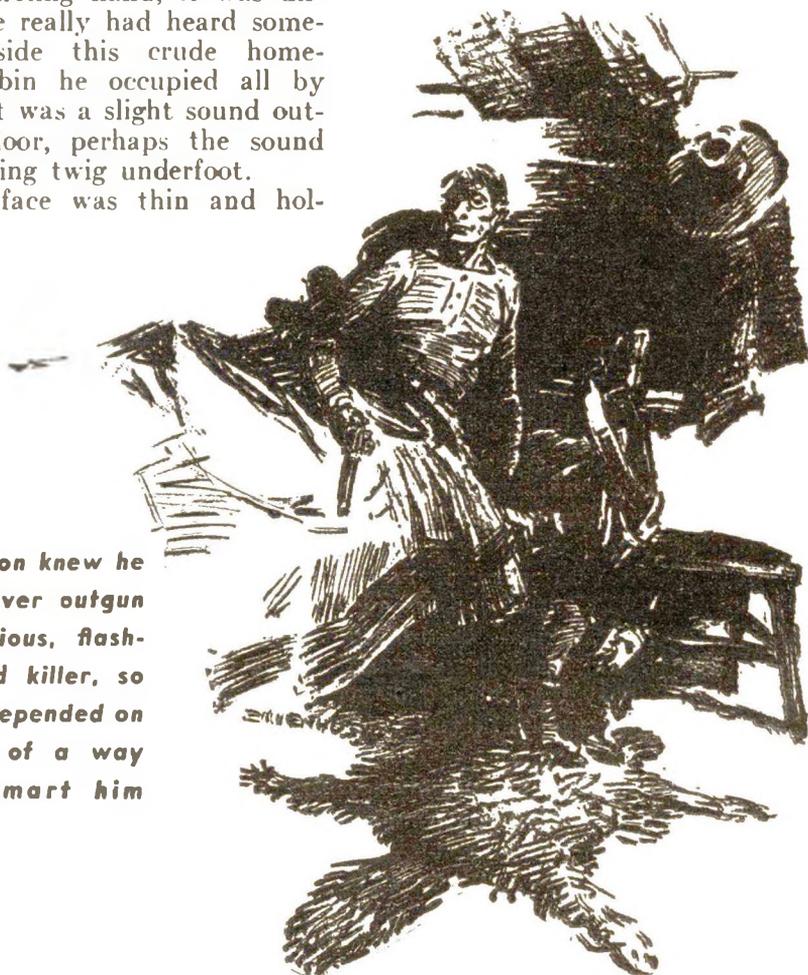
But now tonight, as he sat up in bed with the old single-action .44 in his trembling hand, it was different. He really had heard something outside this crude homesteader cabin he occupied all by himself. It was a slight sound outside the door, perhaps the sound of a snapping twig underfoot.

Saxon's face was thin and hol-

low, his cheekbones protruding, his arms skinny like those of a man half starved. But it was not lack of food which gave him his gaunt look. Largely it was stark fear, the endless suspense of never knowing what hour might be his last.

Quietly now, Saxon pushed back the bedcovers, stepped down onto the coyote-skin rug, put on his

Saul Saxon knew he could never outgun that vicious, flash-triggered killer, so his life depended on thinking of a way to outsmart him



trousers and tiptoed to the door. He started to crouch, to listen, and at that moment there was a series of heavy knocks on the door.

Saxon lighted a lantern. For a moment he hesitated, hand trembling. Then:

"Who's there?" he asked, disguising his thin voice as best he could.

"Deputy sheriff," stated the man outside. "Open up."

Saxon took a deep breath of relief. The law wouldn't be wanting him. Often he had wished it were the law, so he'd know what to expect and could get it over with one way or the other and free this constant tension inside him.

"All right; just a second," Saxon called. He moved back both heavy slide bars which locked the door—he had added a second one the day he had settled in this Idaho cabin—and pulled the door open.

A HARD-FACED young deputy sheriff came in, stared at Saxon for a moment and gave a searching glance around the cabin. Gun in hand, the lawman strode over to the bed, looked at the cartridge belt hung over the crude, rough-hewn posts that were thonged together to make a bed head. He even knelt and, lifting the down-hanging bed-covers with the barrel of his gun, looked under the bed.

"Wh-what're you looking for?" inquired Saxon.

"Not lookin' for a what," the deputy retorted. "I'm lookin' for a who—a killer."

"A . . . a killer?"

"Yes. A gunman rode into town tonight. He got half drunk in a saloon, argued with the bartender and knocked him cold, then challenged the whole saloon to fight. The sheriff went around to haul him off to jail to sleep it off."

"What then?" Saxon asked.

"He shot the sheriff, killed him without even giving him an even break on the draw. Then the dirty polecat ran out of the saloon, jumped on his horse and headed off in this direction, east from town. I got together a small posse and we're combin' this section as thoroughly as we can on a dark night like this."

Saxon's mouth and throat felt dry. "You . . . you don't think I'd hide a killer here?"

"You might," said the deputy. He looked at the skinny man piercingly. "After all, you've been in this neck of the woods only a little more than a month. We don't know much about you. And you acted pretty nervous when you opened the door just now."

"You never can . . . can tell what a night visitor's up to," Saxon said weakly. "After all, I live out here alone several miles from town and it . . . it's natural for me to be careful."

"Maybe you'd hide an hombre who was holding a gun on you," the deputy sheriff added. "Most anybody would, especially a sickly-lookin' galoot like you."

"Well, there's been no sign of anybody around here," Saxon pointed out. "You ought to know there's nobody in here, certainly—you listened outside for about five minutes before you knocked."

The lawman looked at him piercingly. "How do you know I listened?"

"You made a noise," Saxon said. "Stepped on a twig or something. You wanted to find out if there was anybody talking in here. Wasn't that it?"

The deputy nodded tersely. "Well, I'll take a look in the closet there and then I'll go out and look around for fresh hoofprints. We lost the gunman's trail about a half

mile this side of town. He took his horse onto a wide stretch of lava rock."

"Wh-what did the gunman look like?" Saxon asked.

Hand on the closet's crude door-knob, the lawman turned around. "Why do you want to know?"

"Why, just so . . . so if I see anybody I'll have an idea if it's the killer. I don't like outlaws any better than you do."

The lawman jerked open the door, peered in, inspected the closet thoroughly and turned around. He said: "The killer was a big hombre, about six two with his boots on. Weighed over two hundred. Red hair, thin red eyebrows, slight scar down the left side of his jaw. Gray shirt, gray sombrero, pair of Levis worn outside his boots. Can you remember that?"

"I reckon." Saxon nodded slowly.

INSIDE him, a feeling of relief flooded through Saxon. Though Arizona Orden was a big man, he didn't have red hair or thin eyebrows or a scar along his jaw. Orden's hair was brown, his brows bushy. Of course, in two years any man might pick up a scar, but still it didn't sound too much like Orden.

As far as Saxon was concerned, Arizona Orden was vengeance itself. It was to escape the ruthless and relentless gunman's merciless wrath that Saxon was hiding out up here in the wilds of Idaho. It had seemed as good a hide-out as any, and Saxon was tired of running away. He'd never been very healthy, he'd always been somewhat thin and consumptive-looking. That was the reason why, a few years ago, Saxon had left Chicago and gone out to Arizona to work as a railroad telegrapher. Though he hadn't had consumption, a Chicago doctor had told him there was a strong chance

he'd contract it unless he got out to a good dry climate.

In several years down there in the Southwest, Saxon's health had improved and he had put on a few pounds.

Then he had had the misfortune to have that encounter with Arizona Orden, which had sent Orden to the pen for a twenty-year term—a term interrupted nearly three months ago by Orden's escape. Learning of the outlaw's escape, Saxon had left Arizona Territory immediately, knowing that Orden would be after that vengeance he had sworn to get, vengeance on the man who had been responsible for his going to the pen.

But regardless of his fear of the man, Saxon had grown weary of fleeing. He was tired in body and spirit. If he kept on running away, his health would break down completely. Already the nervous tension was making him look almost like a gaunt skeleton. So a month ago Saxon had bought this old homestead with part of the savings he'd brought with him and had told himself he would remain here and run no more. It was now autumn and before long the trapping season would open. He knew something about trapping and could make a living through the winter that way.

Now the deputy sheriff was at the door, about to leave, looking at Saxon, looking at him peculiarly, with mistrust.

"If you see an hombre of that description, let us know," the lawman said. "We're not wealthy around these parts, but we've promised two hundred bucks' reward to anybody who can give us a tip that leads us to a payoff on that polecat. Keep it in mind."

"Depend on it," Saxon told him. "Good luck."

The deputy sheriff nodded and left.

Saxon sat down on the edge of

his bed, trembling a little from a mixture of relief and fear. The fear had returned the instant the lawman had stepped out the door.

What if that killer actually were Arizona Orden and had headed this way? Despite his guile, it was quite possible that Orden, half drunk, had shot a sheriff, for sometimes Orden's reckless courage, especially if it were bolstered by liquor, overbalanced his cunning.

There was one small window, curtained with a gunny sack, at the northwest corner of the cabin beyond the foot of the bed. Saxon turned the lantern wick down, moved to the window and peered out. He saw the deputy and several possemen with a shielded lantern searching for hoofprints. But they weren't discovering any fresh ones aside from those made by their own horses.

Presently the posse mounted and set off to the north and east, fanning out, to take in as much territory as feasible.

SAXON thought about it briefly and decided to play it safe as best he could. If that killer gunman somehow did happen to be Orden—well, Saxon had planned several possible courses of action. They were by no means cinches; rather, they were the work of a nervous and frightened man. But if handled right they might work out.

First of all, Saxon slid back the coyote-skin rug. He pulled up the trapdoor concealed under it and gazed down into the black depths. Rickety stairs led down about eight feet to the musty old cellar which extended under this rear half of the crude cabin. Thinking it over, Saxon decided to alter his plan.

The man who had built the cabin, some years ago, had evidently been pretty much of a tenderfoot. For the cellar was so located that water

had seeped into it underground and spoiled his first year's supply of winter vegetables stored there. The original owner thus had never used the cellar again and had built another one back in a grove, on a hillside. This outside cellar was padlocked and Saxon had seen the deputy sheriff glance at the lock briefly a few moments ago, at the same time he had glanced into the lean-to stable which contained Saxon's one bony horse.

Saxon tested the inside cellar's steps now. They would hold his weight, but it was doubtful that they would sustain a man who weighed in excess of two hundred pounds. He had tried them before, but this time he was even more careful about it.

For a few minutes Saxon worked rapidly. When he was all finished, with the coyote-skin rug back over the trapdoor, he reached for the lantern. He was going to blow it out and return to bed. After all, he was probably safe enough. Fear had been grinding at him so long it had worn him thin in spirit as much as in body.

But now, just as he was about to blow out the lantern light, he heard the muted whicker of a horse somewhere out in the yard.

Who was it?

Saxon's pulse began to pound. Could it possibly be Orden out there, Orden come to get his revenge? Saxon tried to laugh at his fear, but no sound came from his dry throat.

But a few moments' meditation convinced him, or partly convinced him at least, that it was probably that deputy sheriff returned for a surprise visit. That lawman had looked at Saxon peculiarly, with suspicion, just before going out to rejoin the posse. Likely the deputy had supposed that Saxon, because of his nervous, hesitant and slightly

furtive manner, knew more than he had told.

Yes, that must be it.

Saxon turned the lantern wick down very low, so that even around the lantern, sitting there on the crude four-legged stool near the head of the bed now, the light was extremely dim.

For two or three minutes that seemed like decades, Saxon sat there on the edge of his bed, waiting, his hands empty, no gun in sight. Silently he berated himself for having done what he had done with the old .44 single-action. Maybe the lawman would notice it was missing and ask questions about it.

The knock came then—strong and with authority.

Saxon half arose. "Who's there?" he asked sharply.

"Posse," said a slightly muffled and indistinct voice. "Open 'er up."

Saxon breathed a quiet sigh of relief. With the posse around he was at least protected in a way, even if they should continue to be suspicious of the way he acted.

"Be right there," Saxon called.

Barefooted, he stepped onto the rug and, moving to the door, pulled back the two slide bars that acted as locks.

HE opened the door and stepped back. A man stepped in swiftly, closed the door firmly behind him, slipped the slides into place with his left hand.

And jammed the barrel of a six-gun against Saxon's thin belly, making him recoil several steps instinctively.

"All right, homesteader," the newcomer snarled. He had red hair, thin eyebrows, a scar along one jaw.

Saxon, eyes wide, was staring at him. Staring, and trembling inside his gaunt body.

"I'm hot on the owlhoot," the gunman continued, blinking his eyes to

accustom them to the dim light. "I need grub and time to—"

Suddenly he broke off, staring hard. An electric, vicious tension seemed to grip him, to fire him with savage triumph. He breathed deeply several times and then he rasped:

"Well, by the faint blue ghost of— If it ain't old Skeleton-face Saxon! The upright, law-abidin', pen-sendin' son of a polecat who tripped me when I was gettin' away on that Arizona holdup! I remember it mighty clear! I bumped my head when you tripped me and while I was out cold you tied me up and sent for the law!"

Saxon tried to wet his lips and speak, but his mouth was so dry by now that all that emanated was a thin, hoarse sound. His gaunt face pale in the dim light, he backed away several steps more, one foot on the tail of the coyote-skin rug.

Arizona Orden continued: "It's me, all right, and you got plenty reason to look scared! I guess you're not forgettin' that promise I made you kind of quietlike in the courtroom, eh? I told you I'd get you sooner or later for that! Remember?"

Saxon nodded, dazed and still almost paralyzed.

"Sure you remember it—or you wouldn't have quit your job and run this far away!" Orden's tone was gloating. "Bein' a telegrapher, you likely got the news of my jail-break right pronto after it happen, so you hightailed from that town and job within an hour after you heard I was loose! Eh?"

Again Saxon nodded. He managed to find enough voice to ask thinly: "You . . . you trailed me clear up here?"

Arizona Orden guffawed. "In a manner o' speakin', yes. Mostly I was bent on gettin' out o' the Southwest, where my face features're too well-knowned. But I sort o' figgered

you might've headed north too, bein' as you ain't a type that'd do well in Mexico."

Saxon took another step backward.

"I kind o' inquired ever' town I come to on the way up," Orden continued. "Asked if a scrawny, consumptive-lookin' hombre about five seven in his boots, and with one green eye and one blue eye, had been through town. It's just your tough luck that you're a polecat easy to remember on account of them odd eyes and the protrudin' cheekbones and scrawny arms an' legs. They didn't remember you in ever' town, o' course, but they did in one out o' ever' eight or ten. I got a line on the general trail you were taken'. That suited me fine. I'm smart enough to figger things as I go along." The gunman paused and glanced at the old cookstove in the southwest corner, away from the head of the bed. The stove was set back in a partially built-out alcove. "You got any hot or warm water?"

Saxon glanced at the stove. "I g-guess it's lukewarm." This was the truth. It was chilly here in the autumn nights and Saxon always banked a slight fire in the stove and left a filled tea kettle sitting on the lids. "What do you want it for?"

"Dye," Orden stated.

"I wondered about the color of your hair and eyebrows."

Orden snorted. "I've had two other colors o' hair since I busted out of the pen. Ten minutes from now I'll have black hair and eyebrows and a black mustache."

"That won't conceal your face," Saxon stated.

"You're a fool—a scrawny washed-out fool!" Orden's face twisted in a contemptuous sneer. "I don't have to hide my features from anybody who's seen me only once or twice and not very long at

a time. All that posse'll really remember'll be my *red* hair and *red* eyebrows and the scar. The scar comes off easy while the red turns to black. O' course with this hair-dyein' business I have to shave twice a day or dye or dirty my face, but that's not too much trouble. Matter of fact, I don't expect to meet this posse face to face."

"Why not?" Saxon asked.

"Because I aim to hightail clear out of this country. After I've had to salivate that sheriff, I'm in what you might call some haste. Point is, that posse'll send on a description o' me to nearby places and States. But mostly it'll be about the red hair and eyebrows and the scar. And my size. There're plenty of hombres my size. And I'll have all black hair and eyebrows, and a new mustache, because I'm smart." He paused. "Then: 'Fill that wash pan with warm water and bring it here.'"

Saxon turned, did as ordered.

"I'm watchin' ever' move you make," Orden warned. "Act right and maybe I won't do more than tie you up."

Saxon knew this was a lie. Arizona Orden hated Saxon and Saxon knew it. Orden had plenty reason, from his viewpoint, to hate Saxon. Not only had Saxon foiled that holdup down in Arizona and got Orden sent to prison for a long term but he also was indirectly responsible for Orden's present predicament. Yes, Orden would kill Saxon cold-bloodedly as soon as he felt the time was right, which would no doubt be as soon as the gunman no longer needed any help.

"That posse was here, I reckon?" Orden said.

FOR a moment Saxon hesitated to answer. He didn't know which would be best, the truth or a lie that would allay the killer's suspicions.

Orden snorted. "It was here all right, lookin'. I know, because I followed it out from town."

"You *what*?"

"Followed the posse." Orden guffawed. "That's somethin' I learned early as an owlhooter. Never let a posse follow you; always hang back and follow it, then you know where it is and you don't leave any hoofprints for them to pick up."

"Plenty of guile for a gunman," observed Saxon. "I guess you threw them off the trail."

"Easy." Orden said boastfully. "Rode my hoss over some lava land, hid out not too far off and heard 'em crossin' the lava and comin' this way. Then I followed 'em, at a safe distance. Now I'll angle off in a different direction, bein' that my hoss' hoofprints're all mixed in with the prints of the posse hosses."

The gunman set the washbasin, half full of lukewarm water, on the foot of the bed so that he could continue to face toward Saxon in the lean-to kitchen. From his pocket Orden took a small bottle and dumped the contents into the basin. "This kind o' dye takes some dilutin'," he said. And to Saxon: "Fix me up a third of a gunny sackful o' grub, Skeleton-face. I may have to hide out in the sticks for days till I get long gone from this country."

Saxon nodded.

The gunman was stirring the dye mixture with a finger. It was a heavy black fluid and would take a while to dry after being applied to the hair and eyebrows.

Saxon started to gather up food. Arizona watched him intently. Orden looked around the room, his eyes coming to rest on the gun belt and empty holster hanging from the head of the bed.

"Where's your six-gun?" the outlaw rasped suddenly.

"I . . . I left it in town to have it fixed," Saxon told him, looking around nervously. "Trigger mechanism was haywire."

"Yeah?" Arizona Orden thrust his jaw out truculently. "Well, you better not have made a mistake and hid it in the bread box or the cupboard. Before you can whirl around and shoot me, I'll blast you to hunks!"

"It . . . it's not hid in here," Saxon said truthfully.

"I reckon I better make sure," Orden snarled. He strode to the kitchen, shoved Saxon brusquely aside, inspected everything. "All right," the outlaw growled. "And don't try slippin' no rat poison into my grub. Just remember I'm watchin' you. I'll be watchin' you even while I'm dyein' my hair and eyebrows."

The outlaw backed out of the lean-to and out to the washbasin on the foot of the bed.

SAXON suddenly ceased to gather the food. He paused, listening. From the sound he'd heard out there, it seemed the thing he'd been expecting and hoping for was happening!

Arizona Orden, about to dip his head into the dye, stared at the scrawny man.

"What you listenin' at?" the outlaw snarled.

Saxon didn't answer. He merely continued to listen.

Then Orden listened too. And his owlhoot-trained ears couldn't miss hearing it: the sound of men's voices, some distance off to the east. Not distinct voices, but audible, carrying well through the trees and the still night.

"It's the posse coming back," Saxon said in a low tone. "Probably when they didn't find any fresh hoofprints out that way, they decided you gave 'em the slip and are

heading back toward town to start a fresh hunt for sign."

Orden raised his gun slowly, pointed it at Saxon's heart. The outlaw's eyes narrowed viciously.

"If you shoot me they'll hear the shot and they'll burn you out of here," Saxon told him. "There are six or eight of them."

"I don't intend to shoot you unless you let out a yip," the gunman said. "Do that and I'll let you have it fast."

Saxon hesitated a moment. Then he said: "I'll swap you my life for yours, Orden."

"How do you mean?" the outlaw asked suspiciously.

"The deputy leading that posse is suspicious of me because I acted nervous when he was here searching the cabin. He'll come back in. You better not let him find you here. Probably you could kill him, but the other seven or so will sure smoke you down. Guarantee me my life and I'll hide you."

"Where?" The outlaw's low voice was still suspicious.

For answer Saxon moved out to the coyote-skin rug, kicked it aside, knelt, opened the trapdoor and pointed down into the darkness of the cellar.

"The possemen and the deputy don't know about this," Saxon said. "I'll put the skin back over the door when I close it. You'll be safe." He backed away several steps.

The gunman came nearer, peered down into the black depths for several moments. Then he looked over at his quarry with a glitter of animal cunning and savagery in his eyes.

"What kind of a knot head do you take me for, anyway?" he demanded. "You'd like that, wouldn't you—get me down there and lock me in and starve me to death!"

"There's no lock on the trapdoor," Saxon pointed out.

"No, but you could put weights on top of the trapdoor, or put a bed leg on it and sit on the bed till the possemen came in!" There was heavy viciousness in Orden's low snarl.

Saxon shrugged. "Then stand here. It's your own skin."

Arizona Orden looked around swiftly. He spotted the built-in closet there in the southwest corner. The closet was about eight feet high, three feet deep and four feet long. It had double doors, closing together in the middle.

"That closet'll be about right," Orden said, with a triumphant look at Saxon. "I can leave the doors open a crack to see out and watch you and all that goes on, while I stand back out of sight among the hangin' clothes. If you let on I'm there, I'll shoot you first and the lawman second—and then bust out into the open for a getaway before the possemen outside can get organized."

Saxon shrugged again.

The outlaw quickly thrust the basin of dye under the foot of the bed out of sight. Then he started to back toward the closet. In a low tone he snapped an order at Saxon: "Close that trapdoor and put the skin back over it. And don't act nervous. Remember, I'll be watchin' you."

Outside, the sound of the possemen's voices, arguing among themselves, was plainer. They were pretty close to the cabin now.

Saxon knelt, with the trapdoor still open, and reached for the coyote skin as leisurely as he dared.

Orden snapped back the metal catch which closed the double closet doors. He glanced briefly behind him into the dark closet, seeing the clothes hanging there from a lengthwise rod across the back of the closet. Keeping his eyes on Saxon, he said hoarsely, "Hurry it up with

that trapdoor!" and backed into the closet. He started to pull the two doors together so that only a small central crack would be left for him to gaze through and, if need be, shoot through.

AND then, so suddenly that even Saxon was startled, there was a harsh metal clang inside the closet and a hideous yell of pain from Arizona Orden. His gun went off, the bullet plowing through one of the closet doors.

The outlaw lunged violently and there was another loud metallic clang, followed by an even stronger yell of startled pain. Again the gun went off.

But the bullet didn't hit Saxon. Even before the outlaw's first wild shot had roared out, the scrawny man had scurried through the small trapdoor aperture, down the cellar steps. Quickly he snatched the old single-action .44 from the nail where he'd hung it while making his preparations after the lawman's recent visit.

Now, gun in hand, Saxon crept cautiously back up the steps.

Inside the closet the outlaw was threshing about like an insanely infuriated grizzly bear. Again his gun went off and he roared:

"You dirtly little polecat! I'll blast you to a million bits!"

Crouched there with his head just out of sight beneath the top of the stairs, Saxon listened for a moment. He could hear the possemen outside yelling questions, dismounting, running toward the cabin. And he could hear Orden's frantic cussing as the outlaw threshed about, kicking the closet doors. It was this latter sound that Saxon craved most to hear. He wanted those closet doors open.

From his pocket, Saxon took a wad of old newspaper. Cupping his hands, he struck a match and

applied the flame to the ball of paper. When the flame got going good he threw the blazing paper up and out, straight toward the now-open closet doors.

Orden yelled anew, startled afresh by the flaming missile.

Grimly, Saul Saxon peered up over the top of the stairs and carefully aimed the .44. The flaming paper outlined Orden's threshing, trapped figure. The outlaw was trying frantically to stomp out the flaming ball of paper which had hit him and fallen to the floor.

"Here I am, Orden!" Saxon said—and as the outlaw looked his way and started to fire, the scrawny man cut loose with his gun.

He hit Orden through each shoulder and through the right arm. The outlaw screamed in berserk pain and rage and dropped the .45 to the closet floor.

The deputy sheriff was pounding on the door, yelling irately.

Saxon strode to the door, threw back the double slide bars, opened the door.

"What's goin' on in here?" the lawman roared.

"Take a look in the closet, but be careful; he might kick you in the belly with his one free foot," Saxon said mildly.

Gun in hand, the lawman headed for the closet. Orden *did* try to kick him in the belly, so the lawman clipped the outlaw alongside the head with the barrel of his gun. Orden slumped forward, hanging grotesquely by one arm, dazed.

"What the devil!" The deputy stared. "His left hand's caught in a bear trap wired to the clothes rod! And his right foot's in a bear trap, too, wired to a staple in the floor!"

"Yes," said Saxon. "I figured the bounty on this skunk's hide would be heavier than on any bear I'd ever catch in those traps—and

would bring me a heap more peace of mind!"

THE other possemen had crowded into the cabin. The deputy said: "Give me a hand, some of you. It'll take a few men to pry open the jaws of this bear trap without a trapper's clamp. I'll snap the cuffs on this killer. And I reckon skin-and-bones here rates that reward."

"I reckon," said a posseman, looking at Saxon with respect. "How'd you manage it, thin man?"

"Well," explained Saxon, "this hombre has more history than you know about. I've been running from him for three months. When I arrived here a month ago, I decided to quit running. But if he ever happened to catch up with me I wanted a fighting chance at least, because I'm no gun hand compared to him."

"So?"

"Well, I bought this homestead. And when I tore up the old piece of linoleum, I found that trapdoor. I got to thinking how I might use it if ever Orden trapped me here. I decided I'd tell him I had some money hid down there. Being greedy, he might go down to look and I could trap him there. Or if he was too smart to go down, he might send me down. I'd go down and get my gun—which I'd hide there before I'd let him into the cabin—and then I could blast up at him from the dark."

"But—"

Saxon nodded. "I didn't, no. Tonight I changed my plan and added to it. I got to thinking maybe that killer you were looking for was Orden, possibly disguised. And I got to thinking about his guile. He'd be too smart to go down into the cellar."

"So?"

"Well, I figured how to play it

two ways, so it'd be almost fool-proof if he did happen to come here and find me. I figured you"—Saxon nodded his head at the deputy sheriff—"didn't trust me, because I acted nervous. I figured you might be back. If you came back . . . well, if Orden happened to be here still, he'd be too foxy to go down cellar to hide. He'd pick the closet—if I didn't urge him to. And if you *didn't* return while he was here, and scare him into the closet, I could still tell him I had money hid downstairs. I'd go down to get it and I'd get my .44 and blast him from down there in the dark."

"Foolproof double plan." The deputy nodded. "Foxy."

At that moment Arizona Orden came to. Glaring at Saxon, he cursed him with vicious, baleful fervor.

Saxon smiled at him mockingly and said: "I'm not really so foxy. I repeat—it's Orden who has the guile! He was so smart he smarted himself right into those bear traps. I had 'em fixed so when he stepped in the one he'd fling out his hand and likely catch it in the other that was hanging down from the clothes rod. But I fixed it, Orden, so you'd have your gun hand free and I wouldn't have to shoot you like a sitting duck." Saxon took the makings from his pocket and started to roll a cigarette.

"Well, he'll hang this time," the deputy promised grimly. And to Saxon: "For a skinny little guy, you showed plenty of courage."

Saxon only laughed. "Courage my eye, pardner!" he said. "Look at my hands! Look at me! I trapped this killer galoot not because I was especially cunning or brave. I trapped him because I was scared to death and overcautious. It was *fear* that prodded me to triumph!"

*"Drop that gun, Venter!"
the outlaw commanded.*



LEAD RECKONING FOR A LOBO

by JAMES P. WEBB

That was a gun-fogged trail Rowdy Lang followed to Saucer Springs, and the hard-bitten outlaw wasn't wasting any lead—he needed plenty to take powder-smoke toll of those bushwhacking range grabbers!

CHAPTER I

BUSHWHACK LEAD

ROWDY LANG, riding toward Saucer Springs to meet his old friend, Steve Renner, heard the flat sound of a shot some distance ahead. The outlaw drew rein and listened for a moment, but when the sound was not repeated he rode on. The

trail climbed a long slope and topped a rise. Star, the outlaw's tall bay horse, came to an abrupt halt on the moonlit trail.

Lang, a hard, lean man in gray hat, open vest and batwing chaps, was instantly alert in the saddle. Instinct, sharpened by his danger-ridden years as an outcast of the turbulent Arizona desert, told Lang

at once that the long dark shape on the trail below was the sprawled figure of a man.

Lang turned his head to stare down at the willows along the creek fifty yards to his left. There was a wolfish alertness in his almost motionless frame. His gloved left hand held the reins at the saddlehorn; his ungloved right hand hung down at his side, near the long, cedar-stocked Frontier Model Colt in the worn holster. The stock of a carbine, slung in a sheath under one leg, jutted up near the pommel of the saddle.

Lang studied the line of willows intently. In the moonlight, his lean, brown face looked as if it had been carved in granite; and his eyes, peering out of the deep shadow of his hat brim, were gray and bleak. The hawkish face and cold, flinty eyes were those of a desperate man to whom panic was merely a word.

Lang touched his horse lightly with his spurs and the tall bay moved forward. Ten feet from the sprawled body of the man who lay face downward on the trail, the outlaw drew rein. His bleak eyes had never wavered from the line of willows, but if an ambusher lurked here Lang had detected nothing to indicate his presence.

The outlaw dismounted, letting the reins trail in the dust, and moved forward to stand beside the recumbent figure. The man was not dead, for his racked and irregular breathing was plainly audible. Lang squatted on his heels and turned the body over.

Moonlight showed a dark splotch of blood, marking the spot where a bullet had struck high in the right side of the man's chest. Moonlight flooded the half-bald, white-fringed head and seamed face; a leathery face with closed eyes and a bushy white mustache.

An involuntary oath slipped past

Lang's thin lips. This oldster was the only man, with the exception of his brother-in-law, who Rowdy Lang called friend. Lying here wounded in the trail was Steve Renner, one-time foreman of the now-abandoned Lang ranch. Steve had done what he could to make Lang's outcast existence easier and was the only one who knew at all times where Lang could be reached.

The outlaw stood erect and spoke to his waiting horse. The bay moved up, dragging the reins. Steve Renner's breathing seemed easier now, but Lang knew that the ride to town would be hard on the wounded man. He was thankful that Saucer Springs was only about three miles away. Lang was a stranger there, but he might be recognized. That was something he would have to risk, for old Steve needed a doctor right away.

With desert-hardened muscles, the tall outlaw lifted the unconscious oldster as gently as possible, setting Steve astride the saddle. Holding reins and saddlehorn with his left hand, the wounded man with his right, Lang found a dangling stirrup with his toe and swung up behind the saddle. The horse moved forward slowly.

A RIFLE cracked sharply in the line of willows and Lang felt the wind lash of a bullet past his face. Because he was holding the wounded man with his right arm, Lang's position was too awkward for effective shooting toward the left, so he dug in his spurs and the horse lunged along the trail in a dead run.

Two more rifle shots struck sharply into the thunder of hoofs. Lang's bleak eyes caught the red streaks of flame which marked the position of the shooters, but he was too much occupied with staying on the rump of the running horse and holding Steve's limp body upright

in the saddle to think of trying to fight.

Star was running at breakneck speed despite the unaccustomed double burden. Lang let the horse keep this terrific pace, hoping to outdistance any pursuit, until they topped the rising ground about a mile from Saucer Springs. Then he slowed the animal down and listened.

No sound of horses behind him reached Lang's acute ears. He reined Star to a halt and slid over sidewise to look back. The outlaw's bleak eyes watched the back trail while he allowed the horse to blow, but there was no sign of pursuers.

Steve Renner was still unconscious. Lang let Star go forward at an easy trail pace which soon ate up the remaining mile to town.

Saucer Springs was an unpretentious cow town. Houses and the two saloons on the main street showed lights. The stores and other places of business were dark. Few people were in sight on the street, but several horses stood hitched to the racks in front of each of the saloons.

Lang's gaze ranged along the moonlit street. A man stood on the sidewalk in front of the darkened sheriff's office and jail a few doors beyond the Forty-five Saloon. Lang, his eyes watchful, drew rein in front of the sheriff's office and spoke to the man standing in the shadow of the wall.

"Where can I find a doctor?" he asked.

The man on the sidewalk was big, taller and heavier than Lang. He moved to the edge of the sidewalk and the moonlight struck a faint gleam from his badge.

"Doctor?" he asked, his voice sharp. "You lookin' for a doctor?"

"Got a wounded man here," Lang said impatiently.

The sheriff leaned forward and

peered. "How'd he get wounded?"

Lang's voice was bleak. "That can be talked about later. You goin' to tell me where I can find a doctor?"

The sheriff straightened, pointing. "You turn left at the corner. Doc Shipley lives in the fourth house on the right. Stranger here, ain't you?"

Lang ignored the question, said "Thanks" and urged his horse forward. Turning at the corner, he counted the houses. The fourth house was a white frame building with a picket fence in front. The outlaw reined up close to the gate and stared at the house. There was a light burning in one of the rooms.

Lang called out. He waited a moment then called again. The front door opened and a short, stout, middle-aged man in a dark suit appeared in the oblong of dim light.

"Doc Shipley?" Lang asked.

"Yes."

"I need help here," Lang said.

Shipley crossed the yard with short, quick steps and came through the gate. "What is it?"

"Wounded man," Lang said. "Hurt bad, I reckon."

Doc Shipley came close to the horse. "Ease him down," he said brusquely. "Then help me carry him into the house. Who is he?"

"Name's Steve Renner," Lang said, easing Steve's inert body down into the stout doctor's arms.

Doc Shipley lowered the wounded man to the ground and Lang dismounted. The two men carried Steve across the yard and onto the porch. Inside the house, a short hallway brought them to a bedroom.

The doctor's wife, a stout, motherly woman, appeared as if from nowhere with a lighted lamp, which she put on a bureau in a corner of the room. She gave quick, brief instructions to Lang and the doctor.

Under her directions they soon had Steve in bed.

THE doctor examined the wound, then hurried out of the room, returning with his black medicine bag, which he placed on a chair beside the bed. Lang stood against the wall and watched grim faced until the doctor had finished treating the wound.

Shipley looked up. "I can't tell," he said in answer to Lang's unspoken question. "It might turn out bad. Who shot him?"

Lang's voice was low and ominous: "I don't know yet, but I'll find out."

The doctor eyed Lang steadily. "Friend of yours?"

Lang nodded, his eyes on Steve's pale face. "Any idea who *might* have shot him?"

Shipley looked at the wounded man again, then shook his head slowly. "He's been around here a month or two, I think. But I don't know much about him."

Lang was still looking at Steve's pale face. "When do you reckon he'll come to, doc?"

The doctor hesitated. "If everything goes favorably, he may regain consciousness tomorrow. Possibly not for two or three days."

Lang's gaze came around to Shipley's face. "I don't know yet what all this means, doc." He paused, his flinty eyes staring bleakly at the doctor's round face. When he spoke again his voice was soft and ominous. "I'm expectin' you to pull him through, doc."

Shipley flushed. "Of course I will, if I can. I'm a doctor." His eyes, bright with indignation, swept over the outlaw's lean frame, noting that the bottom of Lang's holster was tied through two small holes in the right wing of his chaps, so that the gun-weighted scabbard lay flat and solid against the leather.

"I don't know your name."

"Clay Flint." Lang thrust his left hand into a pants pocket and drew out a small roll of bills. Stripping one of the bills off, he dropped it on the foot of the bed. "That's for Steve. If you need more, you'll get it."

Lang usually had sufficient funds, supplied by his brother-in-law, Jack Morris, from their joint mining and cattle interests. This fortunate state of affairs made it unnecessary for Lang to commit robbery, though he had been accused of dozens of holdups since a cattle war had put him on the owlhoot trail.

The doctor's bright eyes narrowed. "I didn't ask you for money, Flint. Possibly Renner, if he survives, will wish to pay his own bills."

Lang said, in a soft, menace-threaded voice: "I'm payin' Steve Renner's bills for the present, mister. All of 'em!"

A furtive step sounded on the porch; then a knock at the door. Mrs. Shipley turned out of the room and went forward along the hall. Lang moved across to a corner, near the door. Shipley went back to the bed and bent over his patient.

Mrs. Shipley spoke sharply in the hallway, her words indistinct. A man's voice, short and gruff, replied. Footsteps moved along the hallway; and then the sheriff appeared in the doorway of the bedroom. Behind him, Mrs. Shipley spoke:

"Listen, Henley Venter, that badge doesn't give you a right to burst into a sick room!"

SHERIFF Henley Venter's eyes struck around, located Lang in the corner. Then he moved a few paces into the room, watching the outlaw keenly the whole time.

Another man, short, stocky and hard-eyed, came in behind the sheriff. This man wore a badge

which indicated that he was a deputy sheriff. Behind the deputy, a third man appeared.

The third man was a tall, wide-shouldered man in his late thirties. He had blond hair and very pale eyes, and he wore a short mustache which was slightly darker than his hair. His clothing was neat and expensive and he wore a holstered gun under the tail of his broadcloth coat.

"There's the wounded man, Ben," Sheriff Venter said, addressing the blond man.

The blond man had been studying the figure on the bed; his pale eyes came around to Lang, who stood apparently relaxed, arms hanging loose at his sides.

"Yes," Ben snapped, "and here's the man who shot him!"

Lang's hard face and bleak eyes did not change expression. He was watching Ray Klene, the deputy sheriff, waiting for the instant when Klene would recognize him. Klene had once been a hired gunman, and Lang had crossed his trail a year before.

Mrs. Shipley cut in sharply: "Ben Holton, how do you know who shot this man?"

"It looks suspicious," the blond man said. "He brought him to the doctor. Sheriff, arrest that man!"

Klene was staring at Lang now, and the deputy's face had lost color. Sheriff Venter put his hand on his gun.

"Put the cuffs on him, Ray," Venter said softly. "Get his gun."

Ray Klene moistened his lips. "We don't know he done it," he said in an oddly strained voice.

Ben Holton shot a keen glance at the deputy. "What're you afraid of, Ray?" he demanded harshly. "You've got plenty of help. If he starts anything we'll finish it."

Klene moistened his lips again. "Maybe," he said.

Sheriff Venter snapped: "What's your name, mister?"

Lang began moving out of the corner, slowly and watchfully. His bleak eyes missed no move of the three men.

"Ask Klene," he replied and moved on, waiting for the instant when the announcement of his name would strike Ben Holton and the sheriff into momentary frozen surprise.

Venter glanced at his deputy. "You know this man?" he asked sharply.

Klene nodded. "I know him. If you want him arrested, do it yourself. I'm throwin' in my hand."

"Who is he?" Holton snapped.

Klene's dark, staring eyes held on Lang's harsh face. "I ain't sayin'."

The sheriff's voice was angry. "You'll turn in your badge, then. You're a coward!"

"Coward!" Klene snarled. "I'm just bein' sensible!"

Lang was close to the sheriff now. "Venter," he said, "there's a sick man in this room. Get out!"

The lawman scowled. His hand was hugging his gun. "Why, you danged—"

"I said get out!" Lang repeated. "Now!" His glance shifted to the tall man in the doorway and went on to Ray Klene. "You hombres, too."

Klene backed away. "I'm goin', Lang," he said.

The sheriff jerked as if stung by a bee.

Ben Holton said hoarsely: "*Lang!*"

THE outlaw had been waiting for this moment. He jumped at the sheriff, driving a fist against the big man's chin. Then, wheeling, he lunged for the door, the long-barreled Colt in his ungloved right hand.

Belatedly, Ben Holton reached

for the gun under the tail of his coat. Lang struck with his gun barrel and Holton tumbled backward into the hall.

The outlaw turned, his gun tilted up, and looked at Ray Klene bleakly. Klene, pale-faced and shaky, thrust his empty hands out from his body.

"Don't trail me," Lang said, and backed to the front door.

He opened the door with his left hand, backed out, closed the door and ran down off the porch. Thrusting his gun into the holster, he ran through the open gateway.

Star was standing where Lang had left him. There were no other horses in sight; the two officers and Ben Holton had come to the doctor's house afoot. Lang picked up his reins, swung into the saddle and put the tall bay into a fast gallop.

CHAPTER II

WHO SHOT STEVE RENNER?

ROWDY LANG made camp in a fold of the low-lying hills west of the Saucer Springs Basin. For more than an hour he sat cross-legged on the ground and stared thoughtfully into the dying campfire.

Who had shot Steve Renner? And why? These were the questions which were in the outlaw's mind, but he could devise no answer to them.

Because of his deadly speed and accuracy with a six-gun, Rowdy Lang had grown into a legend along the frontier. Steve Renner had always been Lang's friend, and nothing could bring the outlaw out of hiding more quickly than a call from Steve, who usually knew how to get in touch with the gunman.

Lang had received a letter from Steve, addressed to "Clay Flint," at Tombstone. In the letter Steve had asked Rowdy to meet him at

Saucer Springs, or at the Ames ranch, ten miles southwest of the town. Steve needed Lang's advice at once, the letter had stated. And now Steve had been shot from ambush—why?

Cold anger gripped the outlaw when he thought of old Steve lying unconscious. He wanted to know why the old man had been attacked. Yet he knew that the reason made little difference in itself. Learning that would be merely a means to an end. What Lang really wished to know was *who* had shot his old friend.

It was very late when Lang rolled himself in his blankets to sleep but, despite this, he was in the saddle again before sunrise next morning. He rode in a southerly direction, keeping a sharp watch to prevent a surprise by a sheriff's posse in case Sheriff Henley Venter had decided to trail him.

The outlaw had made up his mind to visit the Ames ranch. Steve Renner's letter had said that the old man could be found either at Saucer Springs or at the Ames ranch. Lang thought he might learn something at the ranch.

The outlaw saw many cattle branded A, and he judged that this was the Ames brand. Knowing the general location of the spread, Lang did not have much difficulty in locating the outfit.

It was still early in the morning when Lang rode over a hill and saw the ranch buildings standing in the middle of an open plain. He drew rein and studied the layout from a distance.

The ranchhouse was large and beyond the house was a barn. There was no fence in sight. Viewed from the slope of the hill, the place seemed deserted, except for a few saddle horses in the corral.

Lang rode in boldly, but his bleak eyes were restless and watchful. He

was still some distance from the house when the front door opened and a young woman came out on the porch. Lang frowned.

The girl caught sight of the approaching horseman and paused at the edge of the porch. She was a tall, strongly slender girl. She was dressed in a riding habit, with a man's hat on the thick mass of her brown hair. The fact that she wore a small-caliber revolver in a holster led Lang to think that she intended to ride somewhere. He was sure of this when he saw a man come out of the barn with saddle and bridle and go to the corral.

LANG stopped twenty feet from the porch and stared at the girl. "This the Ames ranch?" he said briefly.

The girl nodded, her dark eyes returning his unfriendly stare. "I'm Norene Ames. This is my ranch."

"I'm lookin' for an old hombre named Steve Renner," Lang said. "Know him?"

Norene Ames' eyes widened. "Yes. He's been working here a few weeks. He went to town last night and hasn't—"

"And hasn't come back yet," Lang finished.

She nodded and Lang saw a shadow of worry in her brown eyes. "I'm going to Saucer Springs to see about him now. He said he'd be back last night, and—"

"What did he go to town for?"

Norene Ames started to speak; then closed her lips hard and looked at Lang with sudden suspicion. "Who are you?" she demanded. "Why are you looking for Steve Renner?"

"Steve's my friend," Lang said. "Know who might have wanted to shoot him?"

Norene Ames gasped and her face paled. One slender hand moved up

to her throat. "S-shoot him? What do you mean?"

"I mean," Lang said, his voice suddenly harsh, "that somebody shot him from ambush about three miles this side of town last night. I found him and took him in to Doc Shipley. Now I want to know who done it."

The girl seemed faint. She swayed a little, then sat down on the edge of the porch. The man who had been saddling her a horse had finished. Lang saw the man mount and ride toward the house.

"I don't know," Norene said weakly. "I don't know." She looked up suddenly. "Had . . . had he been to town, or was he just going?"

"I don't know that," Lang said. "Does it matter?"

She nodded mutely.

"Why?" he asked, the harshness creeping back into his voice. "He got shot. That's all that matters to me."

The man who had saddled the girl's horse drew near and dismounted. He dropped the reins and looked at Lang sharply. He was a rawboned, rough-featured man, and his holstered gun was low on his right thigh. Lang turned his eyes without turning his head and caught the man's intent stare.

"It—" The girl started to speak, then stopped and looked at the man with her horse. "Thank you, Bill."

The man nodded, but did not look at the girl, and he made no move to withdraw to the barn. Lang, sensing Bill's hostility, swung down from the saddle and moved to one side.

The girl said: "This is Bill Silvers, my foreman. I don't know your name."

Bill Silvers spoke softly: "I know his name."

"Back off, Silvers," Lang said bleakly.

"You got no business to talk to this hombre," Silvers said to the girl. He watched Lang with narrowed eyes, his rawboned body half crouched, his muscles tense. "He's Rowdy Lang."

Surprisingly, the girl replied: "I thought he was. Steve said—"

"Steve said he'd sent me word to come here?" Lang asked, watching Silvers.

"Yes." Norene Ames stood up. "And I'll tell you about it. Will you ride to town with me?"

Lang nodded, his bleak eyes still watching Silvers.

Silvers said sharply: "You ain't goin' nowhere with this lobo."

"You aimin' to stop us, Silvers?" Lang inquired.

SILVERS moistened his lips with his tongue. "You may's well know, Miss Ames, that you ain't got anything to say about this ranch. It belongs to Ben Holton now."

The girl wheeled to face the foreman. "What do you mean?"

"Holton sent me word early this mornin' that you didn't pay off the mortgage, and he's takin' over the ranch. Yesterday was last chance." Silvers did not look at the girl. "It may not be transferred legal yet, but Holton owns the ranch, and I'm workin' for him."

"Then Steve didn't get to town," the girl said in a discouraged, lifeless voice. Her shoulders sagged.

"It ain't legal till the law makes the transfer," Lang said encouragingly. "Did you send Steve to town with money?"

"Steve," Norene Ames explained listlessly, "sold a mining claim he had. When he came here he had several thousand dollars. Had it hid somewhere. So at the last minute he offered to buy a half interest in the ranch and pay off the mortgage. I sent word to Holton that Steve

would take up the mortgage about dark yesterday. He left here late in the afternoon with the money. He never got there."

Lang's lips thinned; his eyes became bleaker. He said softly: "I think he did. I think I'm beginnin' to see what happened. I heard the shot that knocked him down, and I know when it was. Steve had been to town and turned over the money to Holton, but he was shot on the way back. I rode up before the dry-gulchers had time to see whether they'd killed him or not."

He paused, his unwinking eyes watching Silvers. His voice was still soft when he spoke again. "Holton didn't send any word this mornin', Silvers. Maybe you was in that back-shootin' gang last night and fetched the word to yourself!"

Silvers' teeth gleamed in a mirthless grin. His hand hovered close to his gun and his legs were braced and tense. He snarled: "Rowdy Lang, eh? I've always knowed I could beat you, hombre."

He went for his gun with savage speed. As his gun nosed up from the holster, Lang's deadly Colt spurted smoke in a single shattering blast which lifted Silvers to his toes, doubled him up and flung him sprawling face downward in the dust.

Norene Ames uttered a low, anguished cry.

"You didn't *know* he was one of the—"

Lang said grimly: "I knew he was pullin' his gun."

CHAPTER III

THE FORTY-FIVE SALOON

SHORTLY before noon, Lang and Norene Ames halted their horses about a mile from Saucer Springs. Lang's face was grim, his eyes bleak and narrow.

"Yore dad had a five-thousand-

dollar mortgage on the ranch. He died and left the ranch to you. Ben Holton held the mortgage. Yesterday Steve started to town to pay off the mortgage. After he paid it off and started back to the ranch, Holton and some other hombres shot him and took the paid-off mortgage."

The girl nodded. "It seems that way. But Steve had about fifteen thousand dollars in his pocket, all he had left from the sale of his mining claim."

Lang's thin lips tightened.

"If you're right about it," Norene went on, "Holton can't afford to let Steve talk. Holton knows Steve wasn't killed. I'm afraid—"

"I thought of that this mornin'," Lang said grimly.

"Won't Holton try to—"

"You ride straight into town," Lang interrupted. "I'm goin' to come in from the east."

They separated, the girl following the trail into Saucer Springs, Lang swinging off toward the south. After an hour of studying the lay of the land, the outlaw drifted into the eastern outskirts of town. He was as wary as a wolf, alert for signs of hostility, but apparently his approach had not been noticed.

The outlaw turned into the street on which the doctor's house was located, and rode warily toward Main Street. He saw Norene's horse hitched to the fence in front of Doc Shipley's, but he saw nobody along the street. He dismounted at the gate, paused for a slow study of the neighboring houses, and started toward the doctor's porch.

Mrs. Shipley answered his knock on the door. "Mr. Renner's asleep now," she said. "The doctor isn't here, but he told me not to let anyone talk to the patient."

"Maybe I can see him later," Lang said, and touched his hat.

Mounted again, he held the horse

motionless while he scanned the surroundings. Then he turned south and rode into an alley. Presently he drew rein in the narrow littered space behind the Forty-five Saloon. Lang had learned from Norene Ames that Ben Holton owned the saloon and used a back room as an office.

There were two doors in the rear wall. The one on the right led into the saloon; the one on the left opened direct into the office. Lang dismounted and moved softly to the left-hand door, tried the knob and found it locked. There was no window in the rear wall.

Lang slipped around the corner and found a window. He peered cautiously through the glass and saw Ben Holton sitting at a desk. Lang glanced toward the street, saw nobody except a passing rider, and drew his gun. In the office, Ben Holton was alone.

Grimly, the outlaw lifted his gun and slapped the muzzle against the glass. One pane shattered and fell out with a sharp tinkle.

Ben Holton jerked up his head, staring. Lang's gun was leveled at him through the jagged hole in the window. Holton's pale eyes flicked a glance at the door which led into the saloon.

"Don't yell," Lang warned bleakly, "if you want to keep on breathin'!"

"I'm not yellin'," Holton said a trifle shakily.

"Get up and unlock the back door," Lang ordered sharply.

Holton hesitated.

Lang's unwinking eyes watched the man, and the six-gun bore steadily on Holton's chest. The outlaw did not need to repeat his order. Holton pushed back his chair and stood up.

He glared at Lang for a moment, then moved to the door and unlocked it.

"Pull it open," Lang ordered.

Holton opened the door. His coat was off and his bone-handled gun was visible, but he was careful not to put his hand too close to it.

"Unbuckle that gun belt and throw it out the door," Lang commanded.

Holton drew his lips back from his teeth. He spoke harshly. "What kind of sandy are you tryin' to run on me?"

Lang's bleak, unwinking eyes bore into the man. He did not answer. After a moment Holton slowly unbuckled his gun belt and tossed it through the doorway.

"Get over there in that corner," Lang said, motioning with his gun.

Holton backed into the corner farthest from the desk. A lock of blond hair slid down toward his right eyebrow, and perspiration gleamed on his pale face. His mustache twitched.

"Stand there till I come around," Lang said. "Don't try to get another gun out of that desk."

THE outlaw ducked away from the window and went around the corner fast. He sprang into the open doorway, gun up, eyes alert. Holton had moved two or three steps forward, but he was standing still when Lang appeared. The outlaw caught the edge of the door with his left hand and pushed it shut as he moved forward. He holstered his gun and eyed Holton grimly.

"Mister," he said softly, "when you shot Steve Renner, you made yoreself a bad bargain."

Holton's eyes widened. "I didn't shoot Renner. Why would I—"

"You or some of the hombres you had with you shot him," Lang snapped. "You had a mortgage on the Ames ranch. Steve had some money. For a partnership, he was aimin' to pay off the mortgage. I reckon he *did* pay it off. You bushwhacked him afterward and took the

paper out of his pocket, so you'd get the money and the ranch, too."

Holton moistened his lips; his pale glance shifted around the room. "I didn't hold the mortgage, Lang," he said. "I sold it three days ago."

Lang said harshly, "It won't do you any good to lie."

"I'm not lying. I sold the mortgage," Holton repeated.

Lang moved a step closer and his face hardened. "The Ames girl sent a man to tell you Steve would pay off the mortgage."

Holton nodded. "She did, yes. The man who had bought the mortgage was in the saloon and I passed the word on to him. I tell you, I don't own the mortgage any more, and I didn't shoot Renner. I didn't have anything to do with it."

"Who bought the mortgage from you?" Lang asked. "I reckon that mortgage is back of the shootin', and the one who holds it is the man I'm lookin' for!"

Ben Holton grinned and a gleam came into his eyes, but he said nothing.

Lang said sharply: "Who is it?"

"I'd better not tell you," Holton parried the question, his voice cool again.

"I reckon you better," Lang replied harshly. "What's his name?"

"Well," Holton drawled, "if you must know, I sold the mortgage to Sheriff Venter. You goin' to see him, Lang?"

Lang uttered an oath. Holton's words had the ring of truth. If the saloonman sold the mortgage to the sheriff, then the sheriff was responsible for the shooting of Steve Renner.

Without warning, the rear door whipped open. Lang leaped sideways, drawing his gun as the latch clicked. He landed facing the doorway and glimpsed a small man jumping in.

"Get him, Brack!" Holton yelled,

and sprang toward the desk.

The man called Brack fired almost before his feet hit the floor, but Lang was still moving. Lang's own gun roared. Brack coughed, dropped his gun and, clutching at his chest, he pitched to the floor.

Rowdy Lang's gun muzzle swept around to cover Ben Holton, who had jerked open a desk drawer.

"Shut it, Holton!" Lang ordered bleakly, and backed to the open doorway.

Excited voices from the saloon sounded through the wall. Ben Holton slammed shut the open drawer. Lang turned and plunged outside, jerking the door shut, and made a dash for his horse.

He was in the saddle when the rear door of the office burst open and men poured out. Lang's gun broke into shattering thunder as the tall bay lunged for the alley, and the men from the saloon scrambled back into the office.

CHAPTER IV

BRANDED MONEY

ROWDY LANG went out of town fast, cursing the fact that he was seriously handicapped in his attempt to discover what lay behind the shooting of his old friend. The ten-thousand-dollar reward which was offered for the capture, dead or alive, of Rowdy Lang, made it risky in the extreme for the outlaw to prowl about town.

The outlaw headed westward. A mile from town he halted and looked back. No pursuit, apparently, was coming after him. Lang frowned. A worry nagged at the outlaw's mind. If Steve knew who had shot him, the bushwhacker probably would try to make sure that the old man did not talk. Lang had learned that no attempt had been made last night to silence Steve. But what about tonight?

Rowdy turned off the trail and headed south, intending to visit the Ames ranch. He did not expect to find anything of interest there, but it would be foolhardy to return to Saucer Springs before nightfall, and the outlaw was hungry. Maybe he could get food for himself and his horse at the ranch and stay there out of sight until evening.

Lang approached the ranchhouse from the southeast and drifted up past the horse corral. His wary eyes watched the door of the bunkhouse and the barn. But none of the cowhands seemed to be around; nobody was within sight.

The outlaw dismounted in front of the house, dropped the reins and climbed to the porch. He knocked and waited, his bleak eyes ranging around. The door opened and Norene Ames was smiling at him.

"Come in," the girl said. "Steve's going to get well, the doctor thinks."

Lang removed his hat as the girl shut the door.

"I was getting ready to eat," Norene said. "You must be hungry."

"I'll feed my hoss first," Lang answered, and went out again.

When he returned to the house, after taking care of Star, he went directly to the kitchen. Norene was putting food on the table. She said brightly: "The cook isn't here. The hands are out with the wagon." Her cheerful expression faded as if she had suddenly remembered the financial state of the ranch. "I suppose I ought to move out, but Sheriff Venter said he'd give me a few more days. He doesn't want to throw me off the ranch, he says."

Lang and the girl sat down, facing each other. Before he started to eat, the outlaw asked:

"How come Sheriff Venter holds the mortgage?"

"He told me," Norene said, frown-

ing thoughtfully, "that he bought it from Ben Holton because he thought Holton would be too hard on me. Venter was a friend of my father."

Lang's thin lips tightened. Maybe the girl thought the sheriff was a friend, but to the outlaw it didn't look that way. The idea was firmly planted in his mind that Steve had been shot by somebody who wanted to prevent the payment of the debt. If Venter held the mortgage, then Venter must be the guilty man.

"Two of the hands," Norene said, changing the subject at the end of a short silence, "buried Bill Silvers this morning. When I came home, they gave me what he'd had in his pockets." She paused, frowned prettily and fumbled in a pocket of the riding habit which she was still wearing. She laid a treasury note on the table. "I can't imagine how he came by this."

LANG picked the bill up and looked at it. It was a fifty-dollar bill. Something in the upper right-hand corner caught the outlaw's attention, and he brought the bill closer to his bleak eyes. Somebody had drawn a circle in ink and placed a heavy black dot in the center of the circle.

This could mean something—or it might mean nothing! The reason it caught and held Lang's attention was the fact that this was a drawing of the Circle Dot brand, the brand Lang's father had used. Odd that it should appear on the fifty-dollar bill found in Bill Silvers' pocket.

They had finished eating and Lang, tilted back in his chair, was rolling a cigarette when his acute ears caught the thud of hoofs near the front of the house. The outlaw was out of his chair in an instant, his wary eyes watching the north window. He crossed quickly to the window and peered out. He could see nobody, but he knew that a horse

had come to a halt around at the front of the house.

Boots sounded on the porch. Somebody rapped sharply on the door. Norene Ames looked quickly at the outlaw, and he nodded. She went into the hallway and opened the front door.

"Is Bill Silvers about the ranch?" Lang recognized the voice of Ray Klene, Venter's deputy.

"No," the girl replied.

A silence. Then the deputy said: "Where'll I find him?"

"I suppose he's out with the hands," Norene answered promptly.

Lang, in the kitchen, touched a match to his cigarette. His thin lips drew back in a bleak smile. Norene Ames was protecting him because Steve had recommended him. Lang wondered why Klene wanted to see the foreman.

Klene rode away and the girl came back to the kitchen. Lang smoked in silence, his eyes thoughtful. He was barely aware of the girl's presence. Klene had come to see the foreman. Lang was inclined to think that Silvers was mixed up in the plot which had resulted in the wounding of Steve Renner. Maybe Silvers had drawn on Lang merely in the hope of collecting the bounty on the outlaw's head, but Lang did not think so.

Silvers may have recognized Rowdy as the man who had carried Steve Renner to town last night. Perhaps Klene wanted to see the foreman on business connected with the shooting of Steve. If so, the sheriff was probably in it, too—and it all came back to the fact that Venter was the holder of the mortgage on the Ames ranch.

Lang had a definite feeling now that Venter, Klene and Silvers had been the bushwhackers. Probably they had shot Steve and taken the paid-off mortgage from his pocket. Then, when they heard Rowdy ap-

proaching, they had hidden themselves in the willows.

The outlaw clamped his teeth together and the muscles stood out along his lean jaws. He was impatient to get back to town and resume his attempt to unearth the plot which had nearly resulted in the death of Steve Renner. But he knew he must curb his impatience and wait for darkness.

It was sunset and Lang was saddling his horse when an idea popped into his head. That mark on the fifty-dollar bill *did* mean something! Steve Renner had been foreman of the elder Lang's Circle Dot Ranch, a loyal foreman. What more natural, if Steve wanted an identifying mark—a mark for hidden money—than that he should first think of the Circle Dot brand? That fifty-dollar bill which had been found on the body of Bill Silvers may have been a part of Steve's fifteen thousand dollars.

Lang mounted and rode eastward, a strange excitement stirring his blood.

He entered the town well after dark by the south road which led past the doctor's house. The street was deserted, but the outlaw could see people passing along Main Street. The outlaw did not know definitely how he would proceed. He wished to make sure that Steve had not been harmed again, and he wanted to find some more money marked with the Circle Dot brand.

Drawing rein in front of Dr. Shipley's house, Lang stared hard at the shadows at each side of the building. Seeing no movement, he dismounted and passed through the gateway. He mounted the steps lightly, paused on the porch to peer around again, and thumped his knuckles on the door.

When the door opened, Lang was standing close against the wall at

one side. Dr. Shipley peered out, moved up to the threshold.

Lang said softly: "Anybody here, doc?"

Shipley grunted. "Oh, it's you?" He looked around cautiously and added, low-voiced: "Nobody but my wife and I, and Renner."

"How is he?"

"I think he'll pull through."

"Can I talk to him a minute?"

"He's sleeping," Shipley answered. "Maybe when he wakes up."

Lang moved sidewise to the edge of the porch. "Don't tell anybody I've been here," he said softly.

The doctor did not answer. Lang waited at the porch edge, a lean, dark shape in the moonlight, till the doctor had gone in and closed the door. Then he moved swiftly across the yard, out at the gate, and into the saddle. He swung the horse around, rode into the nearby alley and dismounted in the black shadow of a dark adobe.

Leaving Star there, Lang walked toward Main Street. His hat was pulled low over his bleak eyes and lean face, and he moved along casually, but under that unhurried and careless manner his nerves were strung and tense.

CHAPTER V

A SEARCH FOR EVIDENCE

THE sheriff's office was not only deserted but it was locked. The outlaw paused, staring at the dark front window. Somebody probably would return to the office presently, but Lang was in no mood for waiting. He passed the jail and went on.

A man emerged from the Double Eagle Saloon as Rowdy Lang approached, a townsman on his way home. The outlaw hugged the shadows and called in a low voice: "Where's Ray Klene hang out?"

The man stopped, peering at Lang. "He sleeps in the sheriff's

office. Now, you might find him at the Forty-five Saloon."

Lang thanked the man and waited for him to continue on his way before he moved on. The Forty-five, which was owned by Ben Holton, was farther along the street and on the opposite side.

Lang paused in the shadow of a building directly across the street from the Forty-five. His face was grim, his thoughts unpleasant. He did not like the idea of stalking a sheriff and a deputy, but the thought of Steve Renner lying wounded filled him with a cold anger. If a sheriff and a deputy were guilty of that attempted murder, Lang aimed to make them pay for it.

The outlaw waited an hour before Ray Klene came out of the Forty-five Saloon and walked along toward the sheriff's office. Lang followed, keeping to his own side of the street. A short distance from the jail, Klene cut diagonally across, his thick body throwing a black shadow along the dust. Lang drew up at the corner of a building and waited.

Klene stepped up on the sidewalk, drew a key from his pocket and unlocked the office door. It was at that moment that Lang moved forward again. "Wait, Klene," he called out.

The deputy turned. Recognition came and his head jerked up, his right hand making a convulsive start toward his gun.

"Keep yore hand off that gun!" the outlaw warned.

"What you want, Lang?" Klene said defiantly.

"Turn yore face to that wall and stick up yore hands," Rowdy drawled.

"What you want? You got a nerve—"

"Turn around, pronto!" Lang snapped. He stopped three feet from Klene. Lang was empty-

handed. He had made no move to draw his gun.

Klene shot a quick glance at the outlaw's holster. He started to turn, but something in the deputy's manner warned Lang of trickery. The outlaw's gun came out and lifted. When Klene struck his right hand down to his holster and spun on his heel, Lang jumped forward.

"You fool!" Lang said harshly, and snapped his gun barrel down on Klene's head. Klene grunted. His knees buckled and he staggered forward, falling in a heap, with his head and shoulders hanging over the edge of the sidewalk in the dusty street.

The outlaw holstered his gun, glanced quickly along the street, and squatted beside Klene. He knew that the light slap of his gun barrel had been barely enough to knock Klene out. The deputy was not seriously hurt.

Working quickly, Lang searched the pockets of the unconscious man. He found a small roll of bills and grunted with satisfaction. Leaving Ray Klene where he lay, Lang opened the office door and stepped inside.

Unrolling the bills and snapping them straight in his hands, Lang thumbed a match and looked at the money.

There were only six bills—five ones and a twenty. Lang spread them apart with the fingers of his left hand. The twenty-dollar bill bore the Circle Dot design drawn in ink in the upper right-hand corner.

Lang let the match fall and stepped on it. He rolled the bills into a tight, thin cylinder again. The men who had shot and robbed Steve Renner wouldn't have had a chance to spend much of the money today. The outlaw was convinced that Bill Silvers and Ray Klene had been mixed up in the shooting. Owner-

ship of the mortgage pointed to Sheriff Venter as the ringleader.

POWDY LANG opened the office door and stepped outside. The deputy was showing signs of returning consciousness. Nobody else was near, and the brief fight had attracted no attention. The outlaw crossed the sidewalk, stooped over the deputy and thrust the bills back into the pocket from which he had taken them.

"Get 'em up, Lang! Get 'em up, quick!"

Lang straightened slowly, lifting his hands. He recognized the sheriff's voice and knew that he was caught at a disadvantage. At Lang's feet, Deputy Ray Klene groaned and rolled over. He sat up uncertainly.

Lang said softly: "Where'd you come from, Venter?"

"I saw the light your match made," the sheriff replied. "I'm watchin' you, Lang, and I'm takin' no chances. Stand right still!"

Venter moved forward and Rowdy felt his six-gun being lifted from the holster. The sheriff chuckled. "I reckon this'll get me re-elected. Keep your hands high and get over in front of the door!"

Ray Klene had pushed himself up and swayed unsteadily on his feet.

Suddenly Lang's arms swept down and he jumped forward. He caught the groggy deputy, swung him around and lifted Klene's gun from the holster. "Drop that gun, Venter!" the outlaw commanded.

The sheriff was taken completely by surprise. He couldn't fire at Lang without hitting Klene. The outlaw held a menacing gun in his hand and Venter had no desire to trade shots with Lang, even on an equal footing. The half-conscious, blundering movements of Ray Klene had enabled the desperate outlaw to turn the tables.

Visibly shaken, Venter let his weapon clatter to the sidewalk and started to back away.

"Hold it!" Lang ordered.

The sheriff stopped, his hands up. Lang hurled Ray Klene aside and the deputy sprawled headlong in the dusty street. Then the outlaw leaped forward and jerked his own Colt from under Venter's belt.

"Turn around!" Lang snapped.

The sheriff turned. Lang flung Klene's gun into the street, shifted his own weapon to his right hand and began a hurried search of the sheriff's pockets. He found a few bills.

Ray Klene had staggered to his feet and raised a lusty shout for help. Heads began to appear in doorways along the street and men boiled out of both the saloons.

Lang saw Klene going around in circles in the street, looking for his gun. The outlaw kicked the sheriff's gun off the sidewalk and lunged for the corner of the office. "Hope this don't lose you any votes, sheriff," he called tauntingly as he disappeared into the shadows.

POWDY stayed as close as possible to the walls of the buildings as he ran along the alley. Plenty of men were in the street now and it wouldn't take the sheriff long to explain the trouble and start a search for the outlaw.

Lang passed the adobe and saw that Star was still in the black shadow at the side of the building. The outlaw paused to look back. He saw the dim, night-blurred figures of men behind him, but they were not close.

Rowdy turned and ran on till he was in the space behind Holton's Forty-five Saloon. He tried the back door and found it locked. He moved around to the window and tried to look in but the office was dark.

Leaning against the wall, the outlaw tried to figure out his best move. Probably most of the revelers in the saloon had run out in answer to Ray Klene's shouts for help. Possibly Ben Holton, himself, was among them. Men swarmed in the street, and others were creeping along the alley.

Lang turned and thrust his hand through the opening in the window which he had made earlier by breaking a pane. He was able to unlock the catch and slide the window up. He stood for a moment before easing himself over the ledge, listening intently.

There was a faint mutter of voices in the alley, nearby, but no sound came from inside the office. Thrusting a leg over the window sill, Rowdy climbed in. He put his back to the wall and listened, straining his eyes at the darkness. Then he reached out his left hand and quietly slid the window down.

Furtive footsteps went creeping past along the alley. Then silence, except for the far, faint voices in the street. Moving back into a corner away from the window, the outlaw thumbed a match. A quick glance showed him that he was alone in the room.

By the light of another match, Rowdy examined the money which he had taken from the sheriff. Then he stuffed the bills into his pocket and moved softly to the door which opened into the saloon. He tried it gently and found it locked, as he had expected.

Crossing to the heavy iron safe, Lang examined it in the darkness. The outlaw knew little about safes, but he knew that this one had no combination. It was the old-fashioned type which locked with a key, and Ben Holton had the key.

The outlaw went to the desk and touched the glass lamp chimney. It was hot and he jerked his hand back

with a soft oath. Holton had been in the office very recently, the lamp had been blown out mere minutes ago! Maybe after the first excitement in the street had subsided, Holton would come back—alone.

Lang went back to the door which led into the saloon and leaned against the wall beside it to wait for the owner to return.

Five minutes passed, and then Lang's straining ears caught the faint murmur of voices in the saloon. Abruptly, a key rattled in the lock to Holton's office and the door at Rowdy's side swung open and concealed him.

The door closed and a dark figure moved across to the desk. A match flared and Ben Holton lit the lamp. The saloonman's back was toward Lang.

Holton straightened with a jerk when Lang's voice cut into the silence: "Keep still, Holton!"

The owner of the Forty-five Saloon wore his vest but no coat. The long frock coat was hanging on the wall. Apparently Holton had rushed out into the street without bothering to put it on. His holstered gun jutted at his hip, but he made no move to reach for it.

Holton twisted around, his lips drawn back from his teeth. "What're you doin' here? What do you want now?"

Lang, gun in hand, moved out from the wall. "I got nothing against you Holton, far's I know," he drawled softly. "Maybe I ought to go easy on you, but nobody around here means anything to me except Steve Renner. Maybe you shot him."

"Why would I shoot him?" Holton said hoarsely.

"To get his money, maybe," Lang said. "But the sheriff holds the mortgage on the Ames ranch, so I'm not sure where you fit in, yet."

With that the outlaw moved sud-

denly, striking out and down so fast that Holton hardly realized what was happening before the gun barrel crashed against his black hat. Then it was too late. The hat was knocked off the saloonman's head, and his big body sagged. His hands clutched convulsively at the edge of the desk.

Lang whipped his left fist to Holton's jaw, hurling the man backward and down. Holstering his gun, the outlaw squatted down and went through the saloonman's pockets hurriedly. He found some paper money, glanced at it and dropped it. Then he fished a big key out of one of the man's waistcoat pockets, unhooked the chain to which it was attached, and moved softly to the safe.

THE key worked smoothly and the outlaw pulled the massive door open and began sorting through the contents of the safe. He found some money, unmarked, and left it there. Inside a little drawer he found a thick brown envelope, sealed, and with a name written across the face of it.

Quickly the outlaw ripped one end off the envelope and drew a thick packet of large-denomination currency halfway out. He thumbed the ends of the bills apart and looked at three or four of them. Each of those he examined bore the Circle Dot design in the upper left-hand corner. Quickly he counted the money.

Lang drew a long breath. Pushing the bills into the envelope he put it in one of his hip pockets and stood up. He had reached the conclusion that the sheriff had been sincere about not wishing to take the ranch from the Ames girl. The sheriff's money had borne no markings. This money in Holton's safe did.

In a flash Lang thought he under-

stood the situation at last. Norene Ames had sent word to Holton that Steve Renner would pay off the mortgage. Holton, having sold the mortgage to the sheriff, passed the information on to Henley Venter. *But Steve had never reached town with the money!* Holton, Ray Klene and Bill Silvers had laid for the old man on the trail, bushwhacked him and stolen the money—all of it.

If Steve had paid off the mortgage, Sheriff Venter would have received only five thousand of Steve's fifteen thousand dollars, and the robbers would have obtained only about ten thousand. But this envelope contained more than fourteen thousand dollars of marked money!

Lang glanced at Holton. The man was coming to. The outlaw, remembering that he hadn't bothered to read the name on the envelope, drew it out and glanced at it again. He frowned and murmured a low oath.

Holton's eyelids flickered and he groaned. Lang moved to the rear door, a puzzled frown between his eyebrows, and slid back the bolt. He paused as Holton sat up. "Keep still!" the outlaw warned, low-voiced. "I'll be seein' you again."

He pulled the door open and stepped out backward. Suddenly, something heavy struck his head. Spangles of light, like sparks from an emery wheel, flew in all directions, and waves of blackness overcame him. Lang knew that he was falling. Then he was unconscious.

CHAPTER VI

MANACLED HANDS

LANG became aware of a murmur of voices and realized that he was lying on the ground behind the saloon. His head ached dully from the blow which had knocked him

down, but his brain cleared rapidly. He realized bitterly that he had made the mistake of stepping out of a doorway without first making sure that the coast was clear. Somebody—he thought it was Deputy Ray Klene—had slammed him on the head with a gun barrel.

The outlaw was lying on his stomach. He tried to move his hands and found that they were manacled behind his back. Cautiously he worked his fingers to the hip pocket in which he had stowed the marked money. The envelope was gone.

Lang heard the voices of Henley Venter, Ben Holton and Ray Klene, and other voices he did not recognize. The men seemed to be having an argument of some kind, and the outlaw listened.

"We got no business holdin' that lobo," Klene was saying angrily. "He oughta be strung up right now."

Henley Venter snapped: "We're lawmen, Ray. We got a jail. He'll be handled accordin' to law!"

"You're right, sheriff," Ben Holton said.

"I oughta shot him," the deputy snarled. "If I'd knowed—"

"Shut up, Ray," the sheriff ordered. "Let's get him into a cell."

Lang rolled over on his left side. He discovered that his captors had found the little .32 hide-out weapon he wore in the shoulder holster under his shirt. The gun had saved his life a few times when he had not been searched carefully, but this time the weapon had been found and taken. The outlaw knew a moment of bitter despair.

"He's comin' to now," he heard Ben Holton say.

"I got my money back," the sheriff said with heavy humor, "but I reckon we'll hold him, anyhow. He won't be tried for robbery, I guess."

Ben Holton laughed. "I reckon not."

Ray Klene made an unintelligible noise in his throat, and then strong hands laid hold of Lang and hoisted him to his feet. The sheriff and Ray Klene, one on either side of the outlaw, started him walking toward the street. Ben Holton and some of the other men followed.

They crossed Main Street and moved on toward the jail. Rowdy pretended to be weaker and groggier than he was. His eyes, peering between slitted lids, shuttled around in desperate search of a means of escape. Once in jail he might not get out before a hang noose broke his neck, and the man who had shot Steve Renner and stolen his money might never be caught.

Halfway to the jail, Lang saw Norene Ames standing beside her horse near the opposite sidewalk. The girl was staring at him, her face a pale blur in the moonlight. She stood motionless while the officers hurried their prisoner along.

The deputy unlocked the door of the sheriff's office. "What if he gets away?" he demanded sourly.

"He won't get away," Venter said confidently. "Rowdy Lang's finished. We'll leave the cuffs on him. I don't reckon anybody outside'll try to help him, but just to make sure you're goin' to stay here and watch him."

They hustled Lang through the office into a short corridor by means of a heavy door and pushed him into a cell. He heard the key turn in the lock.

THE outlaw sat down on a cot which stood against the rear wall. He wished that he could smoke, but he could not even get at the sack of tobacco in his vest pocket. They had not removed the manacles which clamped his wrists. Lang felt a surge of hopelessness. In a

low, harsh voice he cursed his own carelessness, which had been induced by his hurry to get out of Holton's office.

The outlaw looked around his cell. It was small and unfurnished except for the cot. There was a small barred window above the cot. The wall between cell and corridor was built of heavy timbers. The cell door was formed by vertical bars and iron cross braces. A bracket lamp in the corridor was burning and some of the light filtered through the barred door, keeping the cell from being pitch dark.

There was nothing in the cell to encourage Lang to think he might escape. After a few minutes the outlaw stood up. He found that by forcing his handcuffed hands as far to one side as possible and pulling the wing of his open vest around, he might be able to extract the bag of tobacco from the pocket, but he gave up the attempt almost before it was started. What good would a smoke do him? Even if he managed to roll a cigarette, he couldn't put it in his mouth and light it. He shrugged hopelessly and began pacing about the cell, thinking grim and bitter thoughts.

A faint sound from beyond the small barred window presently brought him to an abrupt halt. His head came up quickly and his lean body became tense and still.

The sound was repeated—a faint, scuffling sound. The outlaw wheeled quickly and moved over close to the rear wall. He stood under and to one side of the barred window, peering tensely up at it. He caught a glimpse of something, like a shadow, against the bars.

A cautious whisper came to his straining ears: "Mr. Lang."

Rowdy waited. The whisper came again: "Mr. Lang."

Norene Ames! The outlaw moved closer to the window, until his knees

struck the foot of the cot. "What you want?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

The girl whispered: "I've been talking with Steve. He says I must help you get away. Can you use a gun?"

Lang had a moment of grim, bitter humor. Could he use a gun? Still, with his hands fastened behind him—

"I can try," he said softly. "You got one?"

"Steve's," she answered. "Can you reach up and get it?"

Lang couldn't. "Drop it through," he said. "It'll fall on the cot. You sure it's loaded?"

"Yes." She paused, and then Steve's heavy six-gun dropped through the window and fell on the cot in front of the outlaw. "What else can I do?"

"Klene's in the office, I reckon," Lang said softly. "Maybe you could hang around till you hear shootin', and then run in and see what's happened. If I have any luck, I'll need some keys."

"All right."

"What did Steve say?" Lang whispered.

"He said his horse threw a shoe and he got delayed," the girl whispered back hurriedly. "He never got to town. He says two men rushed at him and one of them shot him. He thought they wore masks, but—"

"Two men," Lang murmured. "All right. You better get away from here now."

He heard the girl's boots strike the ground. Apparently she had been standing on a box or something like that.

Lang sat down on the cot and reached behind him for the gun. The feel of the gun gave him new courage, but he wished his hands were free, or even fastened in front of him. Steve's gun was a Peacemaker

with a long barrel, and Lang got a good grip on the stock with his right hand. Then he waited patiently an opportunity to try his luck.

Presently, Sheriff Venter opened the office door and entered the corridor. He peered through the barred door and saw Lang sitting on the cot.

"Take it easy, Lang," Venter said. "You might as well try to sleep." There was nothing gloating or taunting in the sheriff's voice. "Me and Ben are going down to Doc Shipley's to see Renner. They say he can talk now and maybe I can find out who shot him. I hope it wasn't you."

Rowdy did not answer; his bleak eyes watched the sheriff with an unwinking stare. Venter shrugged and turned away. He went back into the office and shut the corridor door.

AFTER a long time, or what seemed a long time to Rowdy, the heavy door opened again. This time the short, stocky frame of Ray Klene appeared in the corridor. The deputy stopped in front of the barred door and peered through at the outlaw.

Lang stood up, gripping the heavy gun behind him in his right hand. He pushed his manacled hands as far to the right as he could. The long barrel of the gun slid past his ribs, but Lang knew that the deputy could not see the weapon in the dim light.

"Too bad, Lang," Klene said. "But I've owed you somethin' for a year now, and anyhow I want the reward. I reckon if you try to escape and I have to plug you—"

"Who's tryin' to escape?" Lang growled. As he spoke, the outlaw eased back the hammer of Steve's .45 and his harsh voice concealed the faint click.

Klene's blocky face looked strained. "That's how it'll look," he said. "I can shoot you and then have time enough to get the handcuffs off and drag you out into the office before anybody else gets here. I'll tell 'em you got out and I had to shoot."

"Think they'll believe it?" Lang asked harshly. "They'll know you're lyin'." The strain of holding the cocked gun up along his side was beginning to put an ache in the outlaw's arms. He tipped his left shoulder down to ease the strain. "You're afraid I figured out somethin' about why Steve was shot, ain't you, Ray?"

The deputy scowled. "What you mean?"

"You're afraid I know you and Silvers did it," Lang said softly. "The sheriff told you Steve was coming in with the money. You and Silvers laid for him, shot him, and took the fifteen thousand. You let Silvers have a fifty-dollar bill and promised to divvy the whole roll later. Then you put the money in an envelope, wrote your name on the envelope and asked Ben Holton to put it in his safe. Ben couldn't be sure the envelope had money in it."

Klene's eyes were narrowed and gleaming now and his breathing was audible. His blocky frame seemed to settle and grow shorter.

Lang went on, his voice still soft: "Steve marked that money, Ray. I thought Holton was in the deal when I found the bills in the safe—till I saw your name on the envelope. That's why you aim to kill me, mister."

Ray Klene made a growling noise in his throat. His right shoulder drooped sharply and his hand made a quick grab for his gun.

Lang turned suddenly to the left, bringing the barrel of Steve's Peacemaker clear of his ribs. Ray

Klene's gun was nosing up when Lang pulled the trigger. The Peacemaker kicked against the outlaw's aching wrist, and the single shot roared like a blast of dynamite between the heavy walls.

Ray Klene's falling body crashed against the barred door and made it rattle. The deputy slid down and lay still.

Lang moved close to the door. He had made his first step toward freedom. He could go no farther without help. If Norene Ames had not waited around—

Quick footsteps raced across the office and the heavy door jerked open. Lang twisted sidewise and aimed the heavy Peacemaker.

Norene Ames ran into the corridor. Her face was pale and she was breathing fast. Lang grunted and his gun hand went lax. The girl stared down at the body of Ray Klene.

"He shot Steve and stole the money," Lang said. "Him and Silvers. Get his keys and unlock the door. Then get these handcuffs loose. You'll have to hurry."

Obviously reluctant, the girl approached the dead deputy. She forced herself to lean over and search for the keys. She was trembling.

"The sheriff may be here any minute now," Lang said.

The girl found the keys and turned to fumble with the lock. Lang watched her impatiently, his keen ears tuned to catch any sound which might come from the office. He wheeled, backed up to the barred door and said quickly: "Find the handcuff key and unlock these. I'll unlock the door myself."

He heard the keys rattle and felt the girl's trembling hands touch his wrist. Then the handcuffs came open and Lang shook them off. He shoved Steve's gun into his empty holster, reached through the bars for the bunch of keys.

"Run! Get out of here pronto!" he ordered.

The girl gave him a troubled, wide-eyed stare. "I—"

"You've done enough," Lang said harshly. "Get out." He was busy with the keys, trying to find the one which would fit the lock on the cell door, reaching between the bars to try one after another. "If Sheriff Venter finds out you helped me, he'll be—"

Norene Ames turned then and ran out into the office. Lang found the right key, twisted it in the lock, pushed the body of Ray Klene to one side and dashed across the corridor and out into the office. Jerking open a drawer of the desk, he found his own gun and started on toward the street.

HALFWAY across the office, the outlaw stopped suddenly and muttered a soft oath. He wheeled and darted back into the corridor. Bending over the body of Ray Klene, he searched the dead man's pockets. He found the brown envelope, folded once, in Klene's hip pocket. Thrusting the bulky package into his own pocket, the outlaw ran out again. The office was still deserted, and there were no sounds from the street to indicate an alarm.

Lang plunged out into the street and ran straight across to the opposite sidewalk. He paused there in the shadow of a building. He thought it likely that if anyone had seen his horse, the animal had not been recognized as his. In that case, Star probably would be where he had been left earlier in the evening. Lang hoped so and started toward the old adobe to find out.

Star was still there. Lang breathed a sigh of relief. He mounted and rode out of the alley. Two men, almost running, were turning into Main Street. They looked like Ben Holton and the

sheriff. Lang grinned bleakly and reined his horse toward Dr. Shipley's house. He rode through the open gateway and around to the dark side of the house where he dismounted.

Moving swiftly, the outlaw reached the porch, opened the door softly and entered the hallway. The door to Steve's room was half open and a streak of light filtered out into the hall. Lang went forward silently, seeing nobody, and stepped into the room.

Steve lay on his back, his head and shoulders propped up, his washed-out blue eyes staring straight at Lang. The old man smiled behind his ragged mustache.

Norene Ames, still pale, sat in a chair near the foot of the bed.

"Come in, Rowdy," Steve said. "Shore glad to see you, son."

A gleam touched the hard surface of Lang's gray eyes. "You nearly didn't, this time." He moved forward and put Steve's gun and the brown envelope on the table beside the bed. "Here's your money, Steve. Most of it."

"Henley Venter said he wasn't aimin' to foreclose, anyhow," Steve said. "I'm payin' the mortgage off, though, and takin' a partnership. Norene needs an old head like me to help run the ranch, and—"

"And you been wantin' to own a ranch ever since my dad's outfit went under," Lang said. "Well, I'm movin' on, Steve. Venter's goin' to be mighty sore about me gettin' away. I reckon you can convince him his deputy stole yore money." He glanced briefly at Norene, said: "Thanks" in a gruff voice, and turned toward the door. "See you some time, Steve."

"Wait a minute," Steve called.

Lang paused at the door.

"How'd you get it figured out about my money, anyhow?" the oldster asked.

Lang's fingers were busy rolling a cigarette. His wide thin lips curved in a faint smile. "Circle Dot, you danged old fool!" he chuckled.

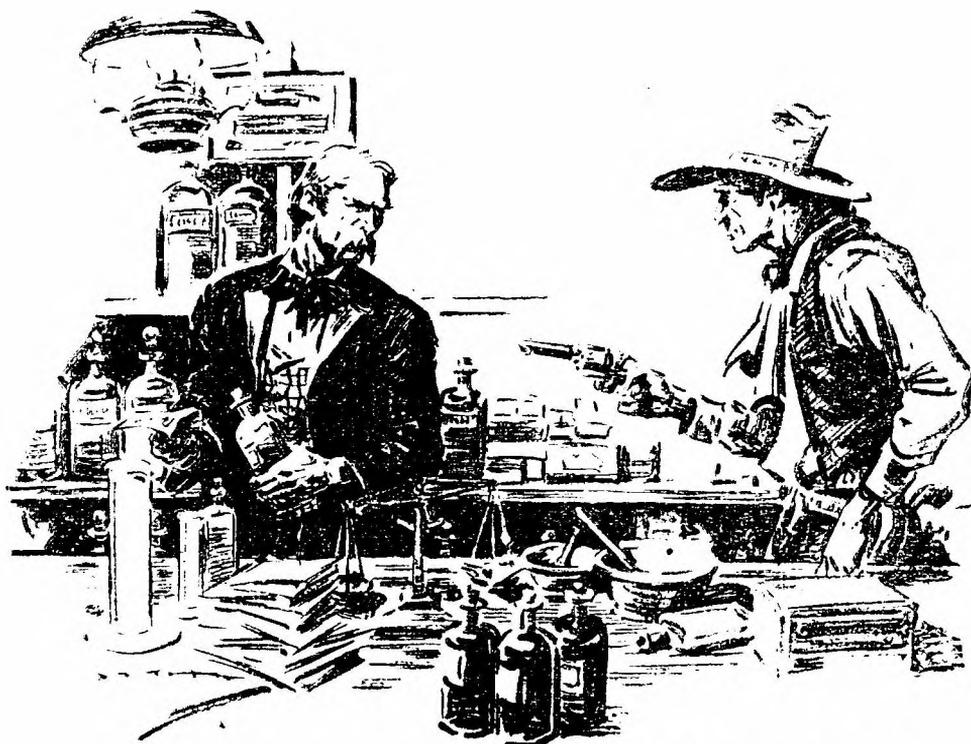
Rowdy Lang appears only in Street & Smith's Wild West. Follow this fearless outlaw's next encounter with the law in a future issue.

¿QUIEN SABE?

Who Knows?

- When and what was the Council of San Antonio?*
- Were the Spaniards on the Great Plains successful explorers and colonists?*
- What were the civilizing forces of the Western cattle kingdom?*
- Are sheep ticks insects or animals?*
- What are the meanings of the word "cattle"?*
- What was the Timber Culture Act of 1873?*
- What conditions are necessary for successful artesian wells?*
- Were artesian wells successful in the West?*
- Why were cattle buyers reluctant to purchase cattle in 1871?*
- Does the cattle industry lead farming as a Western occupation?*

Answers on page 145



Doc, startled, peered into the business end of a leveled .45.

POWDER-SMOKE PRESCRIPTION by ARCHIE JOSCELYN

Packy Morts wouldn't let anyone else administer that medicine to his ailing old uncle—he wanted to be sure it had fatal results!

It was near closing time for Doc Peters' drugstore, though the moon was just coming up, forming a nebulous halo through a misty half-haze of clouds. Doc, so called by courtesy, because most men insisted that he knew as much about medicine as any medico, scowled at the lazy moon. There was a twinge in the wooden peg, which was where his leg was supposed to be, and that

was a pretty sure sign of a storm building up.

Doc turned back from the window, his scowl deepening, as hoofs clattered to a stop on the hard-packed street outside, and a moment later Packy Morts stomped in, spurs jingling with an air of false gaiety. If Packy was coming to a drugstore, there was trouble somewhere. Doc hoped it would be Packy who needed

the medicine, but that hard-bitten ranny never got sick. It would take a lead pill to cure what ailed him, anyway.

"Hello, Doc!" Packy greeted, and he reminded Doc Peters more than ever of a smirking pack rat, bringing a gift in exchange—some worthless thing that he'd swiped to begin with. "Got a prescription here for you to put up. The medico just wrote it out."

Doc accepted the scribble without comment and peered at it under the light from the lamp. He grunted, and started hobbling toward the screened-off rear of the store. Packy followed. Doc turned, scowling again.

"This part's private," he said testily. "I can put the prescription up, 'thout you watching me."

Packy pushed ahead, with what passed for a grin on his face. "You just think you can," he gibed. "You'll do to keep an eye on, Doc. That medicine's for Cal Tucker himself. Cal's right sick—flat on his back. I aim to see this's done right."

"Cal sick?" Doc repeated. "Serious?"

"Might be." Again that leer creased Packy's face, and Doc, startled, found himself peering into the business end of a leveled .45. "After you got that medicine mixed up the way it says, Doc, just add a little arsenic. You do like I say, and if the medicine don't work right I'll swear it wan't through no mistake of yours."

Doc stood in silence for a long moment. He'd halfway guessed at something like this for quite a spell now, and finally his suspicions were being put into tangible form. Cal Tucker owned the 74, one of the best ranches in this whole section of country. Cal had been ailing lately, according to reports, but folks hadn't

got to see him lately since Packy Morts had moved in on Cal and taken over the running of the 74.

Packy claimed to be a nephew or something, and maybe he was. Such things were possible, and Cal had tolerated him. But new faces had appeared one by one in the 74's crew, and the old hands had drifted. And now Doc had the picture, clear and easy to read.

Cal was to be poisoned and Packy aimed to take over the 74 by inheritance, using Doc for his tool in this business of murder. If anybody got suspicious, the blame would come back on him, but it wasn't that angle of it that Doc was thinking about.

"I don't do things that way," he growled.

"This time you do," Packy assured him. "Don't make any mistake, Doc. There's a bottle with arsenic in it, right there on the shelf. I can mix it in myself, if I have to, and say you did it. Be a lot better for you if I swear you *didn't* do it."

BEFORE the cold, unwavering muzzle of the gun, Doc gave in. Packy wasn't bluffing. Doc had seen enough of his work in the past few months to know that he was as relentless as he was unscrupulous. To refuse now would mean an accident before the night was out—some accident that would have a fatal result, and that wouldn't help Cal any.

With a steady hand, Doc reached for the bottle of arsenic and added a spoonful to the mixture, inwardly cursing his own short-sightedness in having the bottle of poison there on the shelf so plainly labeled, though he couldn't have foreseen a situation like this.

Packy chuckled as he took the bottle of poisoned medicine. "That's bein' sensible, Doc," he approved, "and I'll sure see to it that this bottle gets lost soon's the medicine takes

effect, just so the medico won't do no pryin'. And I pay good for service that I like." Laying two fifty-dollar bills on the counter, the ruthless hard case thrust the bottle into his pocket and strode out into the night.

Doc Peters stood for a moment listening to the pound of hoofs as Packy rode away. Then, without a glance toward the money, he hurriedly shrugged into his coat, and, Doc, did a strange thing. His darting fingers selected one or two objects, including an old-style, single-action Colt's .45 which he took from a drawer.

The gun had a strange feel in his hand. It was twenty years since Doc had carried that gun regularly; almost that long since he had last had occasion to take it out of the drawer. It was twenty years since Doc had ridden the range as a cowboy and had bunked out under the stars, sharing his blanket with Cal Tucker.

That was before he'd lost his leg and had to resort to a wooden peg. It had been well understood since then that he couldn't sit a saddle, and Doc, himself, had believed it up to night. But tonight he *had* to ride again.

It would be possible, of course, to tell someone else of what was impending, and let them take the re-

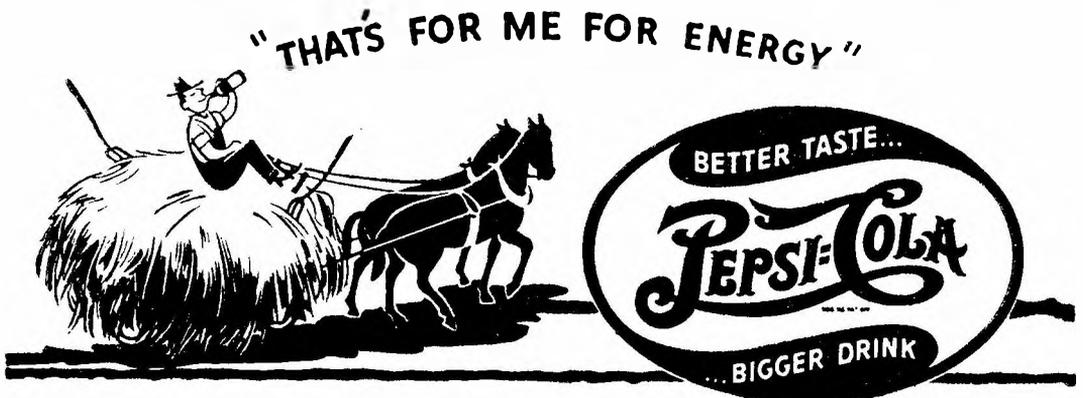
sponsibility. But Doc had already considered and rejected the possibilities. It would take time, and even seconds were vital and it would take something even more important—the right sort of a man to do the job.

There was Sheriff Bill Bledsoe, but Packy Morts had campaigned for Bill the fall before, and surprised everybody by getting him elected. Bledsoe was Packy's man, body and britches. The reasons for Packy's interest in the sheriff were beginning to be apparent, now. Packy was ambitious.

And there wasn't anybody else that Doc cared to trust with a job like this. It was a job that he had to do himself. Besides, most of the town was asleep, by now.

Saddling a horse down at the livery stable wasn't difficult; Doc Peters had lost none of that knack during his years among mortar and pestle. But getting into the saddle was something else again. It was his left leg that ended in a peg and it made mounting difficult. Doc had to resort to climbing on a box and hoisting himself into the saddle, which sent a twinge through his left side.

Once he was settled in the saddle it wasn't so bad. He'd almost have enjoyed the ride, under normal conditions, but tonight there was no time to waste. Doc rode hard and



felt the effects of it before the twelve miles to the 74 was covered. He had to get there before Packy gave any of that poisonous potion to Cal Tucker.

PACKY'S horse was standing with dropped reins near the barn. The murderous-minded ranny hadn't even taken time to table it. Doc slid to the ground with a jar, then hobbled swiftly around the side of the house toward where a beam of yellow lamp light flooded out through an unshaded window. Doc's eyes widened as he looked through the window.

Packy certainly wasn't wasting any time. He was supporting Cal in bed with one hand, while the other held the glass of poisoned medicine. He had just reached the glass off a stand as Doc came in sight to see him do it, and in another moment it would be at Cal's lips.

There wasn't time to shout a warning, no time for any of the half-formed plans that had been in Doc's mind while he rode. If Cal swallowed that liquid, he was a goner! Doc dragged at the old gun riding heavy on his hip.

There'd been a time when he was known as one of the best shots in the country, both for plain and fancy shooting. But that was a long time ago. Doc knew a sudden moment of panic now. He couldn't afford to miss, and there wasn't much leeway to hit his target and not send lead into the rancher, either.

Doc steadied himself and squeezed the trigger, and what happened then was well worth his ride. To see that glass, only a few inches away from Cal's mouth, go to pieces in Packy's hand, and to see the startled look that washed over Packy's face as it did so!

But that was just the beginning—and a hot one. Doc Peters knew

his gunshot wouldn't merely make Packy mad, it would be a bugle call to all the new crew of tough hands that Packy had been importing. Already they were swarming out of the bunkhouse to investigate the shot.

Doc was right in the middle of it now, like it or not. There wasn't time for the laborious process of getting back on his horse again, but even if he could manage that, they'd overtake him before he could get very far. In any case, running wouldn't do—not while that bottle of poisoned medicine was still intact, so that Cal could be given another dose of it.

For the moment, of course, the shock of what had happened and Packy's resultant wrath had driven all thought of giving another dose to Cal out of the killer's mind. Packy came out of the house with a shout, and Doc, painfully dragging himself into a clump of deeper shadows, tried to figure things out.

IF the crew didn't already know that Doc was the man who had fired that shot, they'd soon figure it out. Suddenly a shout went up, testifying that they had. Someone had found Doc's familiar track—the mark of one shoe, and his peg-point close beside it. Now, the tough hands knew just who they were looking for, and knew, too, that Doc couldn't run fast or far.

Bleakly, Doc faced just what would happen when the crew hunted him down. When a man like Packy made up his mind to murder, and was thwarted—well, he'd have an increasing fury for killing that would require a lot of blood to satisfy. Doc couldn't hope to dodge those gun hands of Packy's for long.

But he might fool them for a while. Hastily, Doc tied the ends of the bridle reins together and slipped

them over the saddlehorn. Then he gave the cayuse a slap on the rump, and watched it snort and gallop away.

For a minute, the crew thought their quarry was escaping, and took off after the riderless horse. But the ruse was soon discovered.

However, it gained Doc enough time to reach the bedroom window. He painfully climbed through into the now-darkened room, and hobbled across the floor to the table on which he had last seen the bottle of poisoned medicine.

Doc's fingers were still reaching out when a light flashed on suddenly as the door was opened behind him.

"Don't try bustin' that bottle, Doc, 'less you want to take a pill that'll be a lot more indigestible than anything you ever mixed up back in yore drugstore!" Packy's voice rasped venomously.

Doc Peters turned slowly to stare into the muzzle of Packy's big gun for the second time that night. Cal, lying there on the bed, white and thin, was staring, too, big-eyed and uncomprehending. Packy shoved the door shut behind him with his foot, the gun unwavering, and set the lamp, which was in his other hand, on the stand.

"You boys can go back to bed," he called, as a clamor came from out in the hallway. "I got everything under control now. And what you don't see, you can't talk about!"

A coarse chuckle sounded in response. "Reckon that's right, Packy. But if you want us again, just yell."

"I sure will," Packy agreed, and stood immovable while the tramp of boots receded. Then he advanced a slow pace or two, and his grin was like that of a cat with a squeaking mouse between its paws.

"I gave you a chance to make a nice profit and keep yore mouth

shut, Doc," he said. "Seems like you don't have any sense. But if you want it this way, it don't make much difference. You'll take a dose of yore own medicine, same as Cal, and if it kills both of you, you're the one that'll be to blame."

The rancher was staring, understanding coming to his eyes now. He had the look of a man who has been very sick, and evidently Packy had carefully refrained from calling the doctor until he saw that Cal was likely to recover. Given half a chance, with medicine like the medico had prescribed, Cal would have pulled through all right.

"Reckon I've been a plumb fool, trustin' a skunk like you, Packy," the rancher rasped.

"Reckon you have," Packy agreed unemotionally. "I aimed to finish you off without no rumpus, but this way'll be better. I've had to put up with plenty, tryin' to act the dutiful nephew lately. I figured for a spell you was so sick you'd kick off on me without any outside help, but you was too cussed to do that.

"But now"—the killer's grin was mocking—"now I'm going to give you the medicine the doctor ordered, and that yore old friend put up for you tonight. Only fair that Doc take a dose of his own medicine, too, to make sure that it's all right, 'fore we give it to a sick man."

STILL menacing Doc with the big gun, Packy helped himself to the druggist's old single-action. Then, from a cupboard, he lifted down a couple of glasses and, working swiftly and dextrously with his free hand, the killer filled both glasses from a bucket of water on the table. He poured a spoonful from the bottle into each glass, guessing at the amount and making it a liberal dose. Then, hitting the cork back into the bottle, he motioned to the glasses.

"You two old rannihans that used

to ride the range together can have a last drink together," Packy chuckled. "Just what the doctor ordered. And drink it down, both of you, or I'll find a sight more unpleasant way to finish you than this!"

Under the cold menace of his gun, there was nothing else to do. Doc hesitated. Cal, looking at his friend, nodded his head, and lifted his glass.

"I couldn't ask to drink with a better man, Doc," he said. "Here's to greener pastures—somewhere."

"Bottoms up," Doc nodded, and they drank.

Packy watched them, his beady eyes bright with triumph. Slowly, Doc set his glass down, leaned heavily for a moment. Then he looked at Packy.

"Mind if I have a drink of water, sort of a chaser?" he asked.

"Don't mind if you do," Packy chortled. "Guess you've got it comin'."

Slowly, his movements heavy and a little strained, Doc filled his glass again, noting how white Cal's face had become. He reached for his friend's glass and filled it.

"Reckon you need a chaser, too," he said. "And how about you, Packy? Ain't you drinkin' this one with us? Last chance you'll ever have to drink with good men like us."

Doc filled a third glass with water from the bucket. He handed a glass to Cal and another to Packy. The gunman hesitated a moment, then grinned thinly again.

"Guess I can drink to yore green pastures, if it'll make you feel any better," he agreed, and swallowed his potion along with Cal and Doc. Then he settled himself in a chair to wait for the poison to take effect on the two men.

Doc sat down on the edge of the bed. His peg-leg was aching and

he felt tired. The seconds dragged into minutes. Abruptly, Packy came to his feet. His face was suddenly chalky.

"My . . . my stomach!" he gasped. "It's on fire! What . . . what you done to me?"

"Fed you some of yore own prescription," Doc said calmly. "It only took a little twist of the wrist. I've mixed medicine long enough to manage that right easy."

Packy lifted his gun, his face desperate. "Damn you," he gasped. "I . . . I'll kill you!"

"You shoot me or Cal, and you'll be cold turkey before morning," Doc assured him calmly. "If you don't, I can fix up an antidote and keep you alive till we get to town, then the medico can pull you through—so you can enjoy a long time livin' in jail. If you want it that way."

"I don't want to die," Packy gasped. "I'll do whatever you say—only save me! This is burnin' my stomach up."

He was just a rat, when it came to a pinch, as Doc had known all along. Doc fumbled in his pocket for a powder which he mixed in a glass. As he did so, he set another bottle on the table, and Packy's eyes bulged at sight of it.

"How'd you do it?" the killer demanded. "Them two bottles look just alike—"

"They are—on the outside," Doc agreed. "I brought along an identical bottle filled with plain water, and when you caught me in this room I'd just finished shiftin' bottles. Cal and me, now, we just had a nice dose of plain water. But I gave *you* some of yore own prescription. Drink that antidote I just gave you now or you'll be bait for boothill come morning. Which wouldn't be any great loss for, as a doctor, even yore own medicine don't seem to agree with you."



CANNED TERMATERS

by S. OMAR BARKER

Them old-time Western cowboys mostly ate what they could git,
 An' drank what turned up handy, but I've heard them all admit
 They sometimes got so tired of beans, of beef an' even 'taters,
 They'd purt near swap their saddles for a bait of canned termaters.
 About the only stuff in cans them days was pork an' beans,
 Termaters, Eagle milk, an' corn, an' maybe some sardines.
 An' none of these was plentiful out where the cow trails ran,
 For grub come mighty costly when you bought it in the can.

But sometimes in the wagon bed of big ranch operators
 You'd maybe find a case or two of stuff called canned termaters.
 Them old-time cowhands never heard of vitamins an' such;
 They never craved no fancy foods—at least not very much—
 But, comin' in from cow work where the dust was thick an' hot,
 Them juicy, cool termaters—well, they sure did hit the spot.
 You even liked them better than you did dried apple pie.
 An' when your outfit furnished them, you sure was livin' high.
 Why, even when you et in town, you shocked them restrunt waiters
 By turnin' fancy vittles down an' eatin' canned termaters!

A-batchin' in the boar's nest, as the line camps then was called,
 You often tired of cookin', an' your appetite got stalled,
 But if up there upon the shelf some canned termaters stood,
 You'd "cut a can" for supper, an' it sure did savor good.
 Some days inside your slicker you would pack a can or two
 Tied on behind your saddle an', if the waterholes was few,
 You'd "cut a can" an' drink it as you jogged along the road,
 An' swear that canned termaters was the best fruit ever growed.

In town, the morning after you had helped the hoot owl hoot,
 Your tongue would taste like leather from the top of some ol' boot,
 Until you found a grocer that would trust you for a can,
 An' when you'd cut an' drunk it, you was sure a diff'rent man.
 That's how them oldsters tell it of the days when life was rough,
 When ridin' men was rawhide men, an' nothin' else but tough.
 When men with hides an' stummicks like an ol' bull alligator's,
 Was still like kids for candy—when it come to canned termaters!



*A dozen renegade hands streaked
to six-gun butts!*

If Sangre Duval and the other plundering renegades who haunted Tecolote Trail cut sign on Señor Red Mask, flaming bushwhack lead would blast him before he delivered that

GOLD FOR THE TRIPLE

CHAPTER I

TRAIL OF DEATH

MURKY storm clouds hung low over Ladron Mesa. The stillness, oppressive as the heat itself, was broken by the shrill screech of a *paisano* bird.

Tom Goodwin, famous justice rider, who was known to the border buscajeros as Señor Red Mask, rode warily along the Tecolote Trail that wound across the rough, sotol-studded mesa. If the cry of the chaparral bird held a warning for

him he gave no sign. But as he entered the mouth of a brushy draw he pulled up his magnificent black stallion, scanning the brushy rims of the draw with eyes that gleamed coldly through the slits of his scarlet silk mask.

"Reckon that bird call was the real thing, Thunder," the *charro*-clad caballero muttered uncertainly. "For a minute I thought it might be—"

Quick as the spring of a cougar, Red Mask went out of his big silver-mounted Spanish saddle. A sharp



CROSS

by GUY L. MAYNARD

word sent the black stallion bounding into a clump of mesquite.

The flat crack of a carbine ripped the silence, echoing up the curving draw. Its bullet zipped spitefully through the space that horse and rider had occupied a moment before.

Crouching in the buck brush, Red Mask searched the left rim of the draw for another glimpse of a peaked sombrero that had warned him barely in time. In its place he saw a grayish smudge of powder smoke. From its holster under the crimson silk sash encircling his waist,

Red Mask whipped up a pearl-stocked Colt. Its crash blended with the echoes.

The range was a bit long for a six-gun, but on the brush-furred lip of the draw an ignota bush was clipped off. It dropped down the steep wall. Where it had stood a smoke puff instantly mushroomed. A slug dusted the wide brim of Red Mask's big silver-cruised black sombrero.

Then for the second time the caballero's long Colt boomed sullenly. Far across the draw there

was a sudden thrashing of the brush that overhung the rim.

His lips set in hard lines below his jaunty, spike-pointed mustache, his dark eyes narrowed behind the holes in his mask, Señor Red Mask watched the writhing figure of the bushwhacker pitch from the brush, clear the rim and drop downward, arms and legs spread grotesquely, until it disappeared in a tangled growth of chaparral on the floor of the draw. As if hurled in a dying gesture, the carbine flew off into space.

Straightening in his tracks, Red Mask gave the strident cry of a road runner, the bird called *paisano* by the Mexican peons. It was a signal that the caballero and his Mexican Indian aid used to inform each other when one was near at hand. In a moment an answering call came ringing down the draw, so perfect that Red Mask could not be sure whether bird or man had responded. Then a grim smile broke the stern set of his lips.

"It's the chief," he murmured as a horseman on a rangy roan, leading a buckskin pack pony, rounded a bend of the draw.

It was a lithe, powerfully built Indian of middle age who rode up to meet Señor Red Mask. He was garbed in the white cotton shirt and *pantalones* of his people, and his long black hair was bound with a red bandeau. Dignified of manner, as became one whose ancestors were the ancient Aztec chieftains who once ruled Mexico, Gray Eagle nodded gravely as he halted at Red Mask's side.

"The *patrón* was lucky," he said gloomily. "Does the danger call of the *paisano* bird mean nothing to you?"

Red Mask smiled as he reached for one of his black-paper Mexican cigarettes. The plain-spoken Gray

Eagle frequently admonished the daring young justice rider.

"You made that call so perfect you fooled me, Eagle," Red Mask explained. "But I was on the alert. Why didn't you drill him?"

"I saw only his horse," Gray Eagle replied. "The hombre was hidden from me until he fired."

Red Mask whistled an oddly trilled note that brought his great black stallion trotting to his side.

"Let's ride over and have a look at the dry-gulcher," he said as he swung into the saddle.

Threading their way through the heavy growth of chaparral, they came to the spot where the bushwhacker had fallen. Red Mask dismounted, staring grimly at the body. The dead man was an unpleasant sight. A slug had caught him full in the face, going clear through his skull. He was a swarthy, pock-marked man in rough range clothes, evidently a half-breed.

Kneeling, Red Mask went through the dead bushwhacker's pockets but found nothing of interest nor of identification.

"What do you make of it, Eagle?" he asked, rising to his feet. "This hombre didn't try to kill me just for sport. I think he knew something."

Gray Eagle nodded, his bronzed face somber. "The owlhooters who follow the Tecolote Trail are killers," he muttered. "But I think the *patrón* is right; this *hombre malo* knew the *patrón* carries much gold in his saddlebags. And there are others who know about the gold."

"You mean," said Red Mask, "that the bushwhacker was sent here by someone higher up?"

"I think Sangre Duval sent him," the Indian replied, "and that we have been spied on since we crossed the Rio at dawn."

Red Mask drew deeply on his cigarette, the smoke trickling

through his little dark, pointed mustache while he considered this angle of the situation.

Sangre Duval, he knew, was a notorious half-breed bandit leader who ruled the riders of the Tecolote Trail. Tecolote—Owl! A trail that was named for the owlhoot gentry who favored its snaky course through forbidding *malpais* and over the sinister boulder-strewn, gulch-riven Ladrón Mesa. The towns it touched were *malo*—tough outlaw hang-outs.

Señor Red Mask pinched out the coal of his half-smoked cigarette.

"I don't doubt that Sangre Duval was back of this dry-gulching job," he said in the Mexican tongue. "But I'm not so sure that he knew about the gold I carry to the *Tres Cruces Rancho*. It may be that Sangre was warned of my coming by an owlhoot spy who watched the Rio crossing. Perhaps Sangre feared I was riding the justice trail for him, personally."

"*Quién sabe?*" Gray Eagle shrugged. "Duval, the Bloody One, fears neither man nor devil. And, either way, he will kill you if he can."

"I will send him a little reminder that his first attempt has failed," the caballero muttered grimly. "Fetch the dead one's horse, chief."

While the Indian was gone up the draw, Red Mask leaned against his horse's shoulder, studying the situation that confronted him.

He well knew the danger he was in. His saddlebags held ten thousand dollars in gold which Long John Greer, whose ranch adjoined Tom Goodwin's Bar G in Texas, was sending to Cherry Clayton in payment for a thousand head of prime *Tres Cruces* steers. It was one half the purchase price, the other half to be paid when the cattle crossed the Rio onto Long John's range.

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Because his elderly neighbor had suffered a broken leg when thrown by a horse, Red Mask had offered to carry the money to its destination below the border. Cherry Clayton, orphaned girl owner of the *Tres Cruces*, or Triple Cross Ranch, was depending on that money to pay off a heavy indebtedness left by her father upon his recent death.

"It sure looks like Sangre Duval found out that I'm carrying the gold for the Triple Cross," Red Mask told himself as he turned to Gray Eagle, who rode up leading a dun horse. "Tie the *muerto* across his saddle," said the caballero.

WHILE Gray Eagle dismounted and picked up the dead bushwhacker as easily as he would have handled a child, Red Mask plucked two green sprigs from a sagebrush. After fastening them, crossed, on the outlaw's body, he headed the dun down the trail and gave it a slap on the rump.

That cross of green sagebrush was the "bad man's brand" of old border days, but now it signified the famous mark of Señor Red Mask. His death brand!

"When Sangre Duval sees that," the caballero said grimly, "he will understand that it is a challenge to the death. Either he will quit the owlhoot trail or I will never again ride the justice trail."

Gray Eagle glanced at the lowering clouds that darkened Ladrón Mesa.

"A storm comes and you will ride with Death as a stirrup companion," he said gloomily, and crossed himself. "When that *diablo*, Sangre Duval, strikes at you, he will not be alone. You will die!"

Red Mask swung into the saddle and turned impatiently to Gray Eagle. "That is my risk," he clipped. "Mount and follow the dead man's horse at a safe distance.

It may happen that he will lead you to Sangre's hide-out."

"And you?" the Indian asked as he stepped up lithely into his leggy roan's saddle.

"I will scout the mesa for sign of other owlhooters," Red Mask replied. "If the dead one was sent here to kill me for the gold, then it is likely that others will be waiting nearby to receive it."

"It will be dark inside the hour," rejoined the Indian dubiously. "And the storm—where will we meet?"

"In Malquisto," Red Mask answered. "Take cover at the edge of town and watch for me."

"*Valgame!*" Gray Eagle exclaimed with an apprehensive glance at the caballero. "You go to that devil's den carrying the gold?"

"I have a little scheme I want to try out on Sangre Duval," Red Mask explained. "*Hasta luego!*"

CHAPTER II

A WILD NIGHT

WITH the Spanish words of parting, the *charro*-clad caballero rolled his silver spurs and swung his great black stallion into a dim path that angled across the draw, galloping away at a reckless pace into the heart of the breaks that slashed the mesa's western slope.

An uncanny instinct for trails seemed to guide Señor Red Mask unerringly. He swerved to right or left into obscure bypaths without slackening pace. It was difficult to believe that he was riding the dim outlaw trails of the Ladron Mesa country for the first time. But hunting outlaws in wild country was second nature to the young justice rider.

As he rode, Red Mask's thoughts kept pace with the flying hoofs of his mount. The bushwhacking incident had suddenly changed the situation regarding his mission to Mex-

ico, complicating what had been a simple errand of kindness. True, he could furtively ride to his destination, the Triple Cross Ranch, deliver the gold and wash his hands of the affair. But that was not the masked caballero's way.

"If Sangre Duval got word about the dinero, he'll never quit till he gets it or gets stopped by a hot slug," mused Red Mask. "He'd kill Cherry Clayton if necessary. Another angle is that he'll more'n likely rustle the herd if he can't grab the gold. Mebbe do both, *quién sabe?* I've got to stop him. 'Steard of deliverin' that dinero straight off, I'll use it for a bait to trap Duval."

A rumble of thunder seemed to mutter a threatening objection to Señor Red Mask's dangerous scheme. Yellow darkness from the clouds settled like folding wings over the rough terrain. A sudden wind whipped the piñon pines, lashing their limbs furiously. Again the thunder rolled its monstrous drum. Abruptly, the gloom was rent by a zigzagging blade of lightning. Its weird light played for an instant on the rich silver trimmings of Red Mask's handsome black velvet *charro* costume.

Swiveling in his saddle, the caballero unstrapped the roll behind his cante and secured a black rubber poncho. Removing his black sombrero, he slipped his head through the slit in the middle of the poncho and draped the voluminous covering over his clothes and saddle. Then replacing the massive felt sombrero, he was protected from the sheets of rain that suddenly slanted down.

Lightning again whipped a red-hot streak of crackling menace across the mesa. The fiery bolt struck a dead tree, rooted precariously on the slope of a gaunt ridge, splitting it from top to bottom. Half a dozen buzzards which had been roosting on a high limb flapped away

with dismal croaks of protest.

The great black stallion, Thunder, snorted and rolled his eyes.

"Easy, old-timer," Red Mask soothed the black. "We've ridden out many a storm. Reckon this one ain't goin' to harm us."

Briefly, the rain ceased. But lashing wind and lowering clouds were evidence that the storm had not spent its fury. Night was coming on swiftly with its deepening gloom.

PUSHING his sombrero back from his head, to hang by the silken cord, the caballero let the wind toss his thick, crisply waving dark hair. His bold spirit seemed tuned to the wild music of the storm. Lifting his scarlet-masked face to the sullen sky, he sang in a rich tenor voice the fierce, fighting song of the Mexican rurales:

"Death strikes my foes,
Where the Rio flows,
Vengeance is my battle cry!"

Singing as he rode, the masked caballero topped a low ridge and pulled up his mount. For a long moment he sat silent, his dark eyes

smoldering behind the slits in his mask, as he studied the rugged landscape that was already blanketed with sodden gray gloom.

Then a great sizzling bolt of forked lightning seemed to rend heaven and earth asunder. In its unearthly glare, Señor Red Mask glimpsed several dark figures riding along the foot of the slope. Clad in black slickers that covered them from head to feet, they were a sinister cavalcade as they sped through the night.

The glare of light snapped off and ebon blackness momentarily blotted out the earth. When gray dusk again made objects visible at no great distance, the ominous band of horsemen had vanished.

"They rode around the shoulder of that ridge yonder, Thunder," Red Mask muttered in the stallion's pricked ears. "Do you reckon they could've been some of Sangre Duval's hellions? Come on, let's meander, old-timer. Mebbe we can cut their trail again an' find out who they are an' where they're goin'."

Whirling his mount back into the

MY! THIS
SUBWAY STRAP
IS SMOOTH!

LADY, THAT'S MY
FACE! I SHAVE WITH
STAR BLADES!



4 for 10¢



dim trail, Red Mask angled down a short slope, crossed a wash that was already running a trickle of rain water over its greedy sand bed, and started up a narrow, twisting ledge that clung to the sheer side of a cliff. With the wind billowing his poncho, the black-clad caballero and his raven-hued mount resembled some errie monster of the night.

The storm burst forth with renewed fury; a wind-lashing, rain-sheeting hurricane that blotted out everything. Lightning flashed incessantly, playing about a low butte that loomed like a great, crouching beast in the gray sheets of wind-driven rain. And rising above the roar of the cloudburst was another roar even louder and more menacing, advancing with fearful speed.

"Hail!" grunted Red Mask. "It's lucky for me an' Thunder that we got a little shelter from the overhang of this cliff."

Then the full force of the hail-storm struck with an uproar that was deafening. The icy balls struck the rocks like blows from a hammer.

Snorting and plunging, the great black stallion lunged around the turns of the narrow ledge trail at a dangerous pace. And Red Mask gritted his teeth against the merciless battering while with bowed head he trusted his life to the sure-footed black. Numbed and half dazed, Red Mask was clinging to his saddle, hoping for a cessation of the storm, when a new peril suddenly chilled his veins with its terrible menace. Fragments of rock, loosened by the rain and wind, began thudding on the ledge around the struggling black horse.

"Steady, Thunder!" the caballero called out as his mount squealed and plunged from a blow on the rump.

The next moment Red Mask reeled in his saddle when a chunk of sandstone bounced off his head. Only the high crown of his massive

sombrero saved him from being brained. But the blow paralyzed his senses. The swelling roar of blood in his ears drowned out all sounds of the storm. While his clutching fingers twined themselves in a death grip on the black stallion's heavy mane, the caballero felt himself slump limply over the saddlehorn, into a black sea of silence.

THE pungent scent of wood smoke and the fiery sting of raw tequila in his throat spurred Señor Red Mask back to consciousness. But the instinctive caution which is bred in men who ride with deadly danger as a saddle companion kept him motionless while he made a quick survey of his surroundings.

He was in a low-ceilinged, rocky cavern, with a fire of juniper wood smoldering in the center and filling the cavern with choking smoke. The dried pelt of a cougar had been spread on the rough floor near the fire, and on this hard couch Red Mask was sprawled. For a moment he thought he was alone, but the feeling that he was being watched caused him to swivel his gaze till he made out a dim figure seated just beyond the circle of firelight. The coal of a cigarette glowed redly in the gloom and above it a pair of eyes were fixed on him with a strange intentness.

Red Mask stifled a groan as he raised his aching body on one elbow. Instinctively he felt for the twin Colts that nested in silver-studded holsters under the crimson silk sash round his slim waist—and found them. His black sombrero and poncho lay beside him on the rocky floor. Swiftly his thoughts went back to his ride on the storm-lashed ledge—the hailstones and the falling fragments of rock. After the blow on the head he remembered nothing. How did he get to the shelter of this cavern, and who—

"The señor is feeling better, no?" a throaty voice speaking in the Mexican tongue broke in on his thoughts.

Red Mask started. It was the voice of a girl. "Better," he replied. "But as if I'd been beaten with a club from head to foot. What happened?"

"Have you no recollection of it?"

"I can't seem to figure it out," said the caballero, staring through the slits in his mask, which was still securely in place. There was no sign of Gray Eagle, although Red Mask could hear the sounds of horses somewhere near the mouth of the cavern. The roar of the storm had ceased, and save for the drip of water outside on the ledge there was silence in the cave.

"I was knocked cold in that storm and my horse must have carried me here," Red Mask went on. "Or perhaps I have you to thank for rescuing me."

The girl laughed huskily and rose to her feet. She wore a *charro* costume of soft gray doeskin trimmed with silver buttons and cord, high-heeled boots of soft black leather, and round her slim waist hung a cartridge belt that sagged with the weight of a holstered six-gun. A rain-soaked gray sombrero was tipped back to expose a tumbled mass of hair black as a crow's wing. Apparently she was a native Mexican.

Taking a half-empty bottle of tequila from a niche in the rock wall, the girl passed it to Señor Red Mask.

"Take another drink," she invited. "You need it after the beating you took from the *granizada*. Those hailstones were as big as hen's eggs. I know. I just reached the cavern as they began to pelt down."

Red Mask smiled wryly and took a nip from the flask. In a moment

he sat up, warmed and strengthened by the fiery liquor.

"I owe you a thousand thanks for taking me in," he said in fluent Spanish. "Besides the hail, I got a clip on the head from a falling stone."

"Thank your horse," rejoined the girl. "The black stallion must have smelled the fire I had started. He came to the mouth of the cave and nickered. I had a time getting you out of the saddle. Your fingers were locked in the black's mane. At first I thought you were dead."

Red Mask rose to his feet a bit unsteadily and reached for a cigarette.

"Here, take one of mine," the girl said, offering a pack of black-paper cigarettes. "And then suppose you tell me something of yourself. A mysterious masked caballero excites my feminine curiosity."

Red Mask courteously accepted the proffered cigarette, stooped and picked up a firebrand and held it while the girl lighted her own cigarette.

"I am Señor Red Mask, at your service," he said politely. "Riding the Tecolote Trail."

FOR a long moment the girl regarded Red Mask quizzically, a mocking smile on her full red lips. There was a hint of feline cruelty about her that was not lost on the observant caballero.

"So, you tell nothing," the girl said with purring softness. "*Por diablos*, you do not deceive Conchita Delgado. Riding the Trail, *si*—but not as an owlhooter! You are a masked spy! A Juan Ley!"

"Not a John Law, señorita," Red Mask retorted coldly, "nor yet a spy. My business here is—*my* business!"

"I see." Conchita Delgado nodded, shrugging slender shoulders. "That answer goes for me, too. So we are even on that score. And now

that the storm has passed we had better ride on. I go to Malquisto. And you?"

"I, too, am riding to town," Red Mask replied. He was wondering what business could be taking the girl to that notorious hang-out of the owlhoot riders of Tecolote Trail. Wondering, also, how she came to know the location of this cavern, which was obviously an outlaw refuge. He could ask no questions, however, since he had refused to give any information regarding himself.

Picking up his sombrero and poncho, Red Mask followed the girl. They passed through a narrow slit in the wall which served as an entrance and found themselves under a wide, overhanging lip of rock. Red Mask's black stallion and a rangy bay horse were standing close to the cliff wall in this natural shelter.

The girl led the way, appearing to know the trail as though long accustomed to traveling it. Following the narrow ledge down a long, steep incline and then proceeding along a dim trail through a willow bosque that bordered a flooding stream, they came to a small valley. Brushy *lomas* loomed darkly on either side of the little valley.

AFTER the storm, an eerie quiet shrouded the night as the strangely met couple rode along. Red Mask could see a lone butte, like a giant sentinel on Ladron Mesa, standing out in bold relief against a rising moon that washed the rough landscape with a silvery sheen. Drifted hailstones sparkled like diamonds in the ghostly light. Red Mask and the girl rode in silence, a mutual antagonism seeming to discourage conversation.

The Mexican girl swung her mount to the right, leaving the valley by way of a gulch so narrow that they were compelled to ride single file, with stirrups brushing the rock

walls. Topping out of the defile, they were on the broken, chaparral-dotted upland of Ladron Mesa, near its far western edge. The moon drenched the wild terrain with pale radiance. Coyotes yapped in eerie chorus and hunting owls boomed. Ahead, at the foot of a squat, barren *loma*, the yellowish lights of a town glowed like evil eyes. Malquisto! Reputed the toughest town on the Tecolote Trail.

A quarter-hour ride brought them to the outskirts of the town. Emerging from the chaparral, they entered a narrow, rutty street bordered on both sides by flat-roofed, windowless adobe huts. Through the open doorways they could see dim figures moving about in the flickering light of tallow dips. Swarthy faces appeared. Black eyes scrutinized them. Then they were in the center of town. Strident voices, wild music and the clink of glasses came from a dozen cantinas, fandango halls and gambling places. Life was moving at a swift and reckless pace in Malquisto.

The girl pulled up her mount at a cross street and pointed a gloved hand at a sprawling adobe building with a dim lamp lighting its wide portal.

"The best and only inn in town," she said with a mocking smile. "I hope you have a peaceful night's rest, Señor Red Mask. *Hasta la vista!*"

"*Gracias, señorita!*" Red Mask said, lifting his black sombrero. "I am indebted to you for your aid tonight. *Adios!*"

He watched her as she smiled and rode away in the moonlight. It was the smile that disturbed him—a cold, mocking quirk of the lips that hinted of some secret she held which boded danger to the caballero. And the Spanish phrase she had used at parting meant she expected to see

him again. He shook his dark head and reined Thunder toward the inn.

CHAPTER III

FLAMING SIX-GUNS

HIS horse rubbed down and fed by a *mozo*, while he himself ate a hearty meal of *frijoles fritos con queso* and *carne asada*. Señor Red Mask prepared to see the town by lamplight. Since he couldn't well carry the heavy bags of gold coin around in his hands and had no safe place to leave them, he decided to ride.

It was in front of El Toro Rojo, the most pretentious cantina on Malquisto's ragged little plaza, that Red Mask reined up at the hitch rail. It was already filled with horses. He left Thunder at the center of the rail, opposite the cantina entrance, where he could keep an eye on the saddlebags with their precious contents.

In the arched doorway of the big adobe cantina, Red Mask paused to light a cigarette and make a quick survey of the place. One glance was enough. The owlhoot crew that thronged the Red Bull was as tough a lot of cutthroats as the caballero had ever seen. They wore an air of aggressive arrogance which proclaimed them bullies and bad men. A mixture of Mexicans, Americans and half-breeds. But their leader, Sangre Duval, was not present.

Red Mask strode to the bar with a jingle of belled silver spurs. He was aware of a sudden silence running through the various groups of drinkers at the bar and tables during his passage. The two bartenders eyed him suspiciously.

To all this interest the masked caballero paid no heed. In his bearing was a contempt which he made no effort to conceal. He rang a silver peso on the bar.

"*Tequila fina*, from that bottle of

Guadalajara Special on the back bar," he ordered curtly.

While he was sipping his drink a squat, pock-faced Mexican-Yaqui breed rose from a table and came toward the caballero.

"*Hola*, Masked One! What brings you here?" the hombre demanded insolently in the Mexican tongue. "I, Feo Mocolio, order you to unmask!"

Señor Red Mask gave the owlhooter a contemptuous glance without bothering to put down his glass.

"Good evening, *piojo*," he greeted the man. The hush that fell on the barroom was like a living thing; for by the use of the word *piojo*, which is Spanish for louse, the caballero had given Feo Mocolio a deadly insult.

Feo stopped as if paralyzed, the color draining from his ugly face till the pock marks stood out like dabs of putty. A maniacal light flared in his eyes.

"*Cabrón!*" he screeched. "I'll feed your heart to the coyotes!"

He whipped out a long-bladed knife from the sash round his thick waist, gripped its point between thumb and forefinger and was about to send it streaking toward his intended victim when a roar shook the barroom. A flash of flame from the pearl-stocked Colt in Red Mask's hand gashed the dim lamplight, and with a ringing of steel the long knife went flying across the room.

"Go sit down again, you cheap imitation of a bad man!" Red Mask told the slack-jawed breed. "You want to die? Then—*sientese!*"

Feo Mocolio backed away and sat down. But other men had risen from their tables. Savage mutterings ran along the bar.

RED MASK shot a swift glance sideways, toward the nearest door, one that led into the street at the side of the cantina. He could

reach his horse from there. It looked as though the crowd was going to rush him!

For an instant, they hesitated, seeming to get ready for the attack. Red Mask was ready. He meant to blast them with hot lead from the twin Colts he carried holstered under his silk sash, while he dashed sideways to that open door. And then came an interruption. The mob of owlhooters turned their eyes from Red Mask to the cantina entrance.

There came the furious pound of a horse's hoofs in the street, and Red Mask stared through the open doorway. He had an instant's glimpse of a huge pinto stallion, forefeet pawing the air, mane flying and eyes blazing as its rider reined it to a plunging halt. The horse was a wild, vicious brute. No sooner had it stopped at the hitch rail than its bared teeth snapped like a mad dog's at the shoulder of Red Mask's stallion. Instantly, Thunder lashed out with a shod hoof that caught the pinto with a resounding thud in the belly.

Red Mask started for the door. Here was trouble in the making. The pinto's rider had lifted the shot-loaded end of a quirt to strike the black's head.

"Hold it, hombre!" Red Mask's voice rang out in a staccato bark that froze the uplifted hand of the rider.

"Move that lobo down to the far end of the tie rail," added the caballero. "Don't you know better than to put him into a bunch of tame horses?"

For a long moment the pinto's rider stared at the masked caballero in the doorway. "Señor Red Mask!" he muttered slowly, as if doubting the evidence of his eyes.

"I am called that by the border buscaderos," Red Mask answered coldly.

He had no need to ask the other's name. There was no doubt in his mind that he was facing Sangre Duval. He had heard the outlaw chief described.

A sinisterly handsome man, the half-breed Duval was tall and powerfully built. He had a steel-trap jaw, thin-lipped mouth topped by a short black mustache, and a boldly arched nose of predatory cast. Something of a dandy, he wore clothes that were both Mexican and American in style: Green silk shirt, batwing chaps of spotted coltskin with silver conchos, and hand-tooled boots of American make. His fancy white sombrero was edged with silver spangles and in the shadow of its wide brim his greenish eyes glowed with evil fires. Sangre, the Bloody One, fully looked the part of boss of the Tecolote Trail.

Without another word, the big owlhooter whirled his mean-tempered mount away from the rail and spurred down to the far end where he securely tied the brute at a safe distance from other animals.

Red Mask turned back to the bar. His thoughts were milling. He wondered how much Duval and his henchmen knew or suspected of him, and whether they had found that dead owlhooter bound on the horse, wearing the mark of Señor Red Mask on his chest. They surely must have known that he was the rider who had been ambushed. Did they also know of the gold he carried?

SANGRE DUVAL was striding through the doorway with a clank of cartwheel Chihuahua rowels. Any doubt that he ruled those owlhooters was instantly dispelled in Red Mask's mind. He observed that in all the evil faces in the tough El Toro Rojo cantina there was reflected a great respect and fear for this big bandit. Even in the sullen

face of the bullying Feo Mocolio.

Señor Red Mask noted, too, that Sangre Duval wore a pair of ivory-butted Colts in tied-down holsters, and that a long-bladed knife with gold-mounted handle was sheathed at his right hip.

Duval seemed in good spirits. His green eyes roved over his henchmen. There was a mocking twitch of his thin lips as he stared man after man in the eyes and they all dropped their gaze from his. Only Feo Mocolio approached the owlhoot chief. There was a brief, low-voiced conversation between the two. Then Sangre Duval moved toward Señor Red Mask.

"You had some trouble with my *segundo*, no?" the outlaw inquired in the Mexican tongue.

"Trouble!" Red Mask retorted, cigarette smoke jetting from his nostrils. "Amigo, if all the Mocolios in Mexico were herded into one big bunch there wouldn't be enough of their rabbit breed to cause me a moment's worry. You've been misinformed. Feo, who is well named for his ugly face, was very close to having trouble with *me*."

Duval turned on his scowling lieutenant. "Go sit down again, Feo," he snapped. "You spoke out of turn. Some day that habit may have fatal results, *quién sabe?*"

Feo Mocolio nodded, cold sweat suddenly beading his ugly face, and slunk back to his seat at the table. But the look he gave Señor Red Mask warned the caballero that he had made a deadly enemy.

"And now, amigo, we will drink," Sangre Duval said with a thin smile. He flung out a hand in a sweeping gesture to the crowd of border riff-raff in the barroom. "Everybody drink!"

There was a murmur of approval from the owlhooters as they swarmed to the bar. Only Red Mask

stood aloof, his narrowed dark eyes gleaming through the slits of his mask. Why was Sangre Duval pretending to be friendly, he asked himself.

"What are you drinking, *amigo mio?*" Duval asked with an assumption of hearty hospitality. "Here, bartender, give the caballero a drink of my special brand!"

"Thanks," Red Mask said coldly. "I have my own." And again that pregnant hush fell in the room as it had when he insulted Feo Mocolio. For to refuse the bandit chief's offer of a drink was equivalent to signing one's death warrant. But Sangre Duval was staring into Señor Red Mask's eyes, that glinted frostily through the holes in his scarlet silk mask, and what he read there caused him to laugh off the insult. At his significant glance, however, his cutthroat crew began casually to shift their positions, hemming in the caballero from all sides.

A sweating bartender served Sangre a drink. Red Mask poured himself a small drink from the bottle of *tequila fina* at his elbow.

"*Salud!*" the owlhoot chief toasted.

"*Salud!*" Red Mask responded, lifting his glass.

The two glasses tinkled on the bar as Duval and the caballero put them down, empty.

"We shall now have some entertainment, amigo," the bandit announced. "You will see beauty and—wonderful dancing."

At a word from Duval, a *mozo* scurried to a door at the far end of the big barroom. A few moments later a girl came out and walked to a raised platform near the Mexican stringed orchestra which was playing sleepily. At her signal to the leader, a wild Mexican tune of the fandango halls struck up. The girl began to dance with a fiery

abandon that brought roars of applause.

WHEN she had finished, La Chispa came down through the barroom, the crowd making way respectfully for her. She went straight to the side of Sangre Duval, who made a laughing remark which she answered in kind. Then she was eying Red Mask through the smoke of a black cigarette, cool mockery in her dark eyes. Her blue-black hair was piled high and held by a great Spanish comb of tortoise shell. Her lips were scarlet, and her dress, a daring red-and-black creation, revealed white shoulders and slender ankles.

Red Mask stared in surprise. The dancer was Conchita Delgado, the girl of the cavern who had rescued him from the storm. But he gave no sign of recognition, preferring to let the girl speak if she wished.

"La Chispa—most wonderful dancer in Mexico!" Sangre Duval proudly introduced the smiling girl. "She is *mi novia*—my sweetheart!"

Red Mask bowed, his dark eyes matching the mockery in the dancer's gaze. La Chispa—the Flame! So a part of the mystery concerning her was solved. She was a member of the owlhoot legion that infested the Tecolote Trail, a protégé of Sangre Duval.

"Come, my friend," urged Duval, "and drink a glass of champagne with us at my special table—to the queen of the *danza*."

Red Mask hesitated. The sixth sense that warns men who live dangerously was prompting him now to watch his step. But to refuse to drink a toast to the girl who had cared for him when he was helpless would show a lack of gallantry which had no place in the caballero's code. He murmured a courteous word of acceptance and followed the smiling pair to a table.

As an obsequious bartender

poured the gurgling wine into thin-stemmed glasses, Red Mask watched the faces of his two companions. The ghost of a mocking smile still haunted La Chispa's red lips as she met the caballero's gaze over the rims of their glasses. He made no effort to fathom the hidden portent of that glance. Sangre Duval claimed his attention. The outlaw chief's boldly handsome face mirrored exultation as he swept the barroom with an insolent glance of his greenish eyes.

Señor Red Mask followed that glance with eyes that missed nothing. The set-up was perfect for a killing. Gun-hung renegades had drifted into advantageous positions around the big room. Their slitted eyes never left Red Mask. Only Feo Mocolio was missing. Apparently, the knifer had slipped out while Red Mask's back was turned. Mocolio's place at the table had been taken by a sandy-complexioned, pale-eyed owlhoot who carried his heavily bandaged right arm in a sling. There was something else that caught Red Mask's keen eyes, something that quickened his pulse.

"A peso for your thoughts, amigo," Sangre Duval said with a sneering grin.

"They may be worth far more, *quién sabe?*" Red Mask replied coolly. "For one thing, I was thinking how near you are to death, Sangre."

"What do you mean?" the owlhoot chief growled, swift anger flushing his cheeks. "Do you think you can harm me, or escape the trap you have walked into?"

RED MASK nodded with cool assurance. "Both," he said, picking up his half-empty wineglass. "I came here looking for you. Also, I knew what to expect—and prepared

for it well in advance. I said to myself: "There is a boothill graveyard in Malquisto where Sangre Duval's evil bones may be laid away under the branches of a mesquite tree." *Salud, Sangre!*"

"You mean—" the big bandit began as Red Mask emptied his glass at a gulp.

"I mean that the muzzle of a Winchester carbine is peeping at you through that window behind your back, and at the first wrong move you or any of your ladrones make, a hot slug will smash your spine. So drink up, Sangre, and then go for your guns. You are nicknamed Blood for a reason, so show your owlhooters how you can trade shots with Death."

For the space of a dozen heartbeats, Sangre Duval stared in wide-eyed alarm at the grim-faced caballero across the table from him. The sudden upset of his murderous plans seemed to have left him floundering like a fish out of water. Before he could speak or move, there came the sound of slow hoofbeats in front of the cantina, coming to a halt. A moment later Feo Mocolio burst through the door.

"Sangre!" shouted the owlhoot segundo.

"What is it?" Duval called out as he started to rise.

"Sit down!" Red Mask ordered sternly.

Duval sank back in his chair, but several of his men rushed out the door with the segundo. In a few moments they were back in the bar-room carrying a stiffened corpse bearing crossed sprigs of green sage fastened to its chest. They deposited the grisly thing on the floor beside Duval's chair.

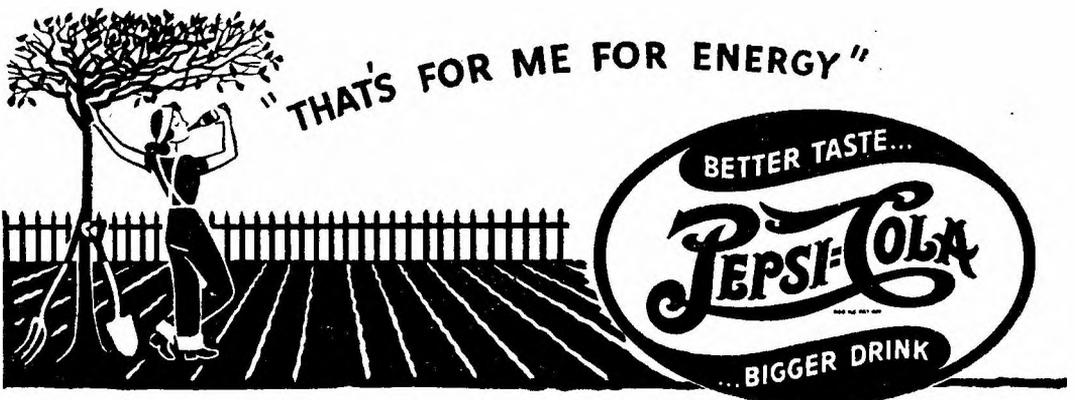
"Chapo Lopez—dead!" the owlhoot chief blurted hoarsely. Then, seeing the cross of sage, he added: "The bad-man's brand—the mark of Señor Red Mask! It is a challenge to—"

The outlaw's words were suddenly checked as La Chispa flung her arms around him, protecting him with her body from the hot lead that was about to fly.

"Benito!" bawled Sangre Duval from the safety of the girl's arms.

The American renegade who carried his bandaged arm in a sling rose from his chair and hurried toward the owlhoot chief's table.

Red Mask jerked to his feet as the man drew near. His arm lashed out and lamplight glinted on a long Colt in his hand—as the barrel crashed a stunning blow against the renegade's head. And in the same lightning-swift motion he ripped the bandage from the falling man's arm,



revealing a cunningly concealed six-gun.

"What a rotten bunch of cowardly murdering skunks you and your gang are, Sangre," rasped the caballero.

His surprise move had upset the murder scheme, but a dozen renegades' hands streaked to six-gun butts the moment the owlhoot crew realized that their leader was safe. The first man to draw died with a carbine slug in his heart, fired through the open window by Gray Eagle.

Red Mask's shots came in a stream. From the Colt in his left hand, two bullets streaked toward the ceiling; and in the next instant the big oil lamps were shattered and the barroom blacked out. His other six-gun blazed hot lead into a group of owlhooters who stood between him and the door. Then he was bounding toward the window, guided by the sound of Gray Eagle's voice. He leaped through it while the crowd in the cantina made for the front entrance.

"Stop him!" Sangre Duval was bellowing. "A hundred pesos to the hombre who downs him!"

Red Mask's mocking laugh rang above the tumult as he slipped into the shadows. A whistled call to the black stallion came from his lips, followed almost instantly by the pounding of hoofs. The great black came lunging around a corner of the building to halt at a word from Señor Red Mask.

"This way, *patrón*," Gray Eagle called softly as Red Mask swung up in the saddle.

The Indian slithered into a clump of mesquite and came out on the back of his roan horse. The buckskin pack pony trotted at the roan's heels. Stirrup to stirrup, Gray Eagle and Red Mask spurred their mounts through the narrow streets

of Malquisto with a mob of yelling, cursing owlhooters on their heels.

CHAPTER IV

EL MUCHACHO

WHIRLING into a small, brush-choked coulee at the edge of town, the fugitives heard their pursuers ride past and disappear in the chaparral thickets of the mesa.

"Sangre Duval escaped me tonight," Red Mask growled as they reined to halt, "hiding behind a woman's skirts. But there will be another time."

"Another time those *diablos* may be luckier, *quién sabe?*" Gray Eagle muttered ominously. "It was a foolhardy thing, entering their lobo den. You lost the gold, I suppose."

Red Mask chuckled. "What a cheerful comrade you are, Eagle," he murmured. "The gold is here in my—"

His voice checked with a gasp of dismay. His hand had gone to a saddlebag for a reassuring touch. The bag was empty! The other one, likewise.

"As I thought," grunted Gray Eagle. "It was a smart trick the owlhooters worked while you drank the health of the *danzadora*."

"A trick that will backfire before the night is over," Red Mask clipped as he sprang out of his saddle. "The pack, Eagle! *Pronto!*"

Gray Eagle quickly dismounted and removed the light pack from the buckskin pony's back.

"*Válgame!*" he exclaimed with a disapproving shake of his bare head. "Surely the *patrón* does not return to that place of death."

"I mean to find the gold and get it back," Red Mask clipped decisively.

With swift, deft movements he was stripping off his handsome *charro* costume. Just as rapidly he dressed himself in the various gar-

ments which the Indian handed him from the pack. When he had finished he was no longer the dashing caballero. Now he was El Muchacho, a poor young peon ranch hand who played a battered old guitar and sang Mexican songs.

Dressed in cheap cotton clothes, a huge sombrero of palm fibre on his head and *huaraches* of sole leather on his feet, El Muchacho would have fooled Tom Goodwin's closest friends. As an added feature of the clever disguise, a gaudy serape was draped over his broad shoulders, serving to muffle the lower part of his brown-stained face which was now half hidden beneath the wide, drooping brim of his sombrero.

Swinging into the old rawhide saddle of the lively little buckskin pony, El Muchacho slung his guitar across one shoulder by a strip of whang leather.

"The cry of the whippoorwill is the signal if I need help, Eagle," El Muchacho said as he rode away.

"I will not fail the *patrón*," the Indian rejoined gloomily. He never seemed able to comprehend the cold nerve of the young justice rider in going without his six-guns into the most dangerous spots of the border.

THE Toro Rojo cantina was still buzzing with excitement over the gun fight when El Muchacho dismounted in deep shadows beside the big adobe building.

A few moments later he was slipping unobtrusively through the wide-arched entrance. An old lamp, smoky and ill-smelling, had replaced the two ceiling lights which Señor Red Mask had smashed. By the dim glow of the oil lamp, owlhooters were drinking at bar and tables while they discussed the startling affair of the night. No two witnesses seemed to have observed it alike. Their lurid, exaggerated ac-

counts brought a covert grin to El Muchacho's lips. But, to his dismay, Sangre Duval was nowhere to be seen. That could mean the gold had been spirited away to some safe cache.

Pulling his guitar into position, El Muchacho lightly strummed the strings in a lilting tune of the ranchos while he strolled through the throng of drinkers. Such was his skill as a player that he quickly had the attention of the crowd. He gave them such old-time favorites as "Los Cuervos" and "Rancho Grande." Loud applause and a shower of silver coins rewarded him.

Pausing for a rest and a drink by himself at the far end of the bar where the light was dimmest, El Muchacho listened eagerly to scraps of conversation that came to his ears from little knots of owlhooters scattered over the barroom. He learned that Sangre Duval had gone to his quarters in the same inn that the justice rider had patronized.

"That's worth knowing," El Muchacho told himself. "More'n likely he took the dinero with him."

About to slip out the cantina by a side door, the justice rider glanced around in time to see Sangre Duval come striding through the entrance. The outlaw chief went straight to his reserved table and called loudly for a drink.

"This is a break for me," El Muchacho was thinking as he watched the big owlhooter settle himself. "While he's celebrating the stealing of that gold I'll go see can I find it in his room."

But as he turned to leave he heard a rough voice call out:

"Come here, *hombrecito!* Want you to play for the *jefe!*"

A burly renegade was motioning to El Muchacho, who stood undecided whether to stay or run for it. But to leave meant to arouse suspi-

cion of his purpose in coming there. And a bullet in the back might be his hard luck. He shuffled his sandal-shod feet toward Sangre Duval's table.

"Who is this—a peon *musico*?" Duval sneered. "These *paisanos* strum a few wild chords and think they're *maestros*."

"Wait till you hear him, boss," a hard-bitten American border jumper put in. "He sure pulls some mighty pleasin' sounds out of that old guitar."

El Muchacho struck into the rollicking "Mula Blanca"; followed it with "La Estrellita," singing the Spanish words in his rich tenor.

"*Por diablos!*" exclaimed Duval, slapping his thigh exuberantly. "This is a treat! Go call La Chispa. I want her to enjoy it with me."

A *mozo* was sent hastily to the dancer's room and in a few moments La Chispa came with a swish of silken skirts.

"*Mira, querida mia!*" Duval said. "This hombre is a real *musico*. He will sing for us. Some song of love, no?"

Smiling at the bandit chieftain's enthusiasm, La Chispa sat down beside him.

A GAIN that sixth sense which warns of menace was clamoring urgently at El Muchacho's nerves. He bowed his head low over his guitar and thrummed the opening chords of the poignantly beautiful "*Morir, Soñando*"—"To Die, Dreaming." It was a love song of old Mexico, land of dreams and romance. By the magic of the singer's golden voice, its haunting melody gripped and held his audience spellbound. When the last lingering notes of exquisite harmony died away, there was a momentary hush as though the listeners hesitated to break the spell. Then a roar of applause shook the barroom.

"Wonderful!" cried La Chispa, whose lashes were wet with tears.

"Give us another one, *hombrecito*," Duval requested. "You shall be well paid for this entertainment."

Again the slim brown fingers of El Muchacho found the humming strings of his old guitar. They brought forth the sweet, sad notes of that haunting, lonely song of old Mexico—"La Paloma." It was the player's own favorite, a song that he sang by the hour as he rode the dim border trails.

"Lift up your head when you sing, *muchacho*," La Chispa murmured softly.

A nameless dread chilled El Muchacho's veins. Then, with a smile in his dark eyes, he threw back his head and sang:

"If a white dove should come winging—"

The golden voice checked abruptly at a startled cry from La Chispa.

"*Válgame!* It is Señor Red Mask!" exclaimed the Mexican dancing girl. "Sangre, it is the caballero who brought the gold! I lifted his mask while he was unconscious in the Cave of the Owls and studied his face. I am sure—"

"Dog of a spy!" broke in Sangre Duval, his voice hoarse with rage. "I'll have Feo, the Yaqui breed, skin you alive. Grab him, *hombres!*"

But El Muchacho didn't wait to be grabbed. With the elusiveness of an eel, he wriggled out of the clutching fingers of the nearest owlhooter. Swift surprise was always his method when in a tight. He used it now. Darting past La Chispa, he snatched a six-gun from Sangre Duval's left holster while the dumfounded bandit chief was reaching for his right-hand weapon.

With the muzzle of his own Colt boring into his left side over his heart, Duval dropped his half-drawn six-gun.

"Now walk to the door with me, Sangre," El Muchacho ordered curtly, "and tell your lobos that if one of them fires a shot I shall put a .45 slug into your black heart. Talk, and then walk!"

The justice rider's voice, clear and sharp with determination, carried to every ear in the barroom. But his coldly gleaming eyes warned Sangre Duval to make no gamble, to try no tricks. In those dark eyes he read death.

"*Mis bravos,*" the bandit chieftain said to his men in a husky voice, "this hombre has his gun against my ribs. I will die if you try to prevent his escape. Make no move!"

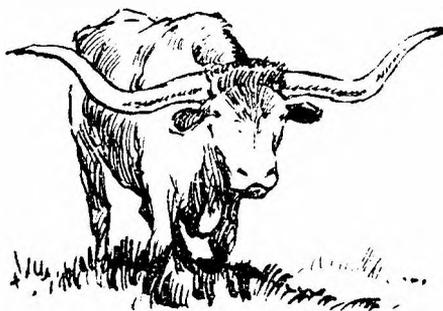
"Walk!" ordered El Muchacho.

DUVAL strode to the door with the disguised justice rider keeping step at his side. At the corner of the building nearest El Muchacho's buckskin pony, they halted.

"*Mira, Sangre!*" El Muchacho said coldly. "I should kill you, here and now, for that is what I have vowed to do. But I cannot shoot an unarmed man. The next time I cross your trail it will be death for one of us. Give some pesos to the padre when next you pass the Misión San Gabriel, for you have looked into the gray face of death twice tonight."

Keeping the six-gun muzzle against his captive's side, El Muchacho whistled the peculiar cry of the whippoorwill, or goat sucker. An answering cry came back like an echo from the shadows. In a few moments Gray Eagle rode up on his leggy roan.

"Keep your saddle gun on this renegade, Eagle," El Muchacho ordered. "If his men try to come to his aid, shoot him down. I go to his quarters in the inn to get the gold which he cached there. If I took him with me, his lobos would



quickly follow and have me at a disadvantage."

"He must be killed sometime," the Indian said ominously. "Why not a swift bullet now?"

"He is an unarmed prisoner," remonstrated El Muchacho. "Only to save our own lives should we kill him."

"I hope he tries to escape," Gray Eagle muttered grimly.

El Muchacho grinned at Duval, who stood with his back to the adobe wall and his greenish eyes wide with fear of the brawny Indian.

"*Hasta la vista, Sangre!*" El Muchacho said softly as he slipped into the shadows where the buckskin stood with dropped reins.

CHAPTER V

SHADOWS OF DEATH

IN a dark alley back of the inn, El Muchacho dismounted, hung his guitar on the saddlehorn and moved away silently toward the entrance. And suddenly he heard a faint footfall behind him. He whirled and sidestepped, at the same time snatching the six-gun he had stuck into his gaudy cotton sash.

A dark figure had risen up from the ground and hurled itself at the justice rider. There was a metallic click as the blade of a knife struck against the gun barrel which El Muchacho had whipped up. He

was tempted to give his assailant a bullet in the midriff. But it was too risky. A shot might rouse the sleeping guests in the inn. He had to pit his gun barrel against the knife.

He lashed out almost blindly at the dim figure in the shadows. The man dodged the blow and leaped in for the kill. El Muchacho struck again with the speed of a rattler. It was a skull-cracking blow across the temple, delivered with all the strength of the justice rider's powerful right arm.

Stooping over the body when it had dropped at his feet, El Muchacho shaded a lighted match with his sombrero and looked at the upturned face. It was one of the owl-hooters he had seen in the Toro Rojo cantina earlier that night.

"A guard posted here by Sangre Duval," he told himself, "and likely there will be another one inside the inn."

He hastened to the entrance, slipped inside and made his way down a dimly lighted passage that led to a large patio onto which all rooms opened.

At that late hour there was no one stirring in the inn. El Muchacho slithered through the moonlit patio, keeping in the shadows of palms and flowering shrubbery. Under a deep portal, he paused and glanced up and down the row of guest rooms. There were no lights showing. He moved along the portal till he came to a dark open doorway that seemed to lead to a little-used section of the big, rambling adobe building. Gun in hand, he went in and slipped down the gloomy hallway. It took an abrupt turn and as he catfooted around it cautiously he detected a gleam of yellow lamplight showing from under a door.

"There's three-four rooms on this side hall, with a private street entrance at the other end yonder,"

El Muchacho told himself. "It's a safe bet they're Duval's town headquarters. An' he's got another guard in that room where the gold's cached."

Hiding the six-gun under his sash, for poor peons never owned such weapons, El Muchacho went boldly to the lighted door and rapped.

"*Quién es?*" demanded a coarse voice which El Muchacho recognized as that of the murderous owl-hoot segundo, Feo Mocolio.

EL MUCHACHO'S quick wits did not desert him at this crucial moment. The thought flashed through his mind that Feo had not been in the cantina when the dancing girl exposed him. Therefore, there was little chance that he would penetrate the disguise the justice rider now wore.

"I come from the *jefe*, Don Sangre," replied El Muchacho.

The door opened a thin crack and a dark eye peered out suspiciously. Seeing what appeared to be a poor unarmed peon, the Mex-Yaqui renegade opened the door wide.

"Come in, *paisano*," he said brusquely. "What does the *jefe grande* want—another bottle of his private stock?"

El Muchacho chuckled mirthlessly. "It might help to soothe his jangled nerves," he said, "but I want the gold he cached here within the hour, *entiende?*"

Feo Mocolio's hand flashed to his knife so swiftly that El Muchacho was almost caught empty-handed. But he automatically whipped out the heavy Colt from his sash and blazed a shot just as the renegade threw himself sideways. The bullet grazed Feo's shoulder and the next moment he was lunging at El Muchacho with his long, wicked-looking blade held at waist height in an upturned palm, ready for a disemboweling cross stroke.

Quick as the stroke of a cougar's paw, El Muchacho's left hand shot out and clutched the knifer's wrist, twisting the blade aside. Then his six-gun muzzle was against Feo Mocolio. He slipped a restraining thumb off the pulled-back hammer and let it go. The renegade's squat body muffled the explosion.

Slowly Feo sank to the floor without so much as a groan. Dead as he would ever be—shot through the heart.

Without wasting a moment's precious time, El Muchacho started a hasty search of the handsomely furnished room. At any instant guests or servants, aroused by the gunshots, might come rushing to Duval's quarters.

Restraining his impatience, El Muchacho paused in the center of the room and gazed around him for several seconds, trying to locate a likely place for the gold cache. The floor, he noted, was of wide adobe bricks, covered with richly colored Indian robes and softly tanned cougar skins.

Stepping to a corner of the room, El Muchacho lifted a robe and examined the bricks beneath it. There was no sign that they had been removed recently. He tried the same thing again with no result. Then a big cougar pelt was lifted from in front of the fireplace, revealing a slightly depressed brick. The seam between it and the adjoining brick was so thin that only a knife blade would penetrate it.

PICKING up the dead segundo's knife, El Muchacho used it to pry up an edge of the loose brick to where he could grasp it with his fingers. Then he was staring into a cavity about two feet deep, containing the pair of buckskin bags which held gold for the Tres Cruces Rancho. There were other things in the cache—jewelry and loose gold

coins—loot of robberies by the Tecolote Trail *bandidos*. But the justice rider lifted out only the heavy bags of gold with which he had been intrusted by Long John Greer up in Texas.

Blowing out the lamp, he slipped into the silent patio and the shadows of the night. With a bag of gold in each sinewy brown hand, he made his way back to the waiting pony. When his precious cargo was securely tied back of the cante, he mounted and moved away toward the outskirts of Malquisto. The call of the whippoorwill was wafted back on the night breeze—to be repeated a moment later from the direction of the Toro Rojo.

Then the drumming of hoofs sounded in a straggling street and Gray Eagle rode up, tall and primitive-appearing in the white Mexican moonlight.

"The *patrón* got what he went after, I see," the Indian said with a glance at the buckskin bags.

The young justice rider smiled. "I generally do," he rejoined. "But I don't hear any owlhooters riding our trail. Did you cut all their throats?"

"It would have been better if I had," retorted Gray Eagle, who usually took his *patrón's* bantering seriously. "I only cut their horses loose from the tie rail."

"Which is one more grief added to Sangre Duval's night of trouble," El Muchacho remarked with a laugh.

"Your laugh is ill-timed," the Indian rebuked him somberly. "You have prodded that *diablo* till he is venomous as a rattler teased by the *paisano* bird. He will strike back. I feel it in my bones."

"Your bones will feel easier when they have had a few hours' rest," El Muchacho said, "and so will mine. We will get the Thunder horse and

make camp. At daybreak we ride to the Tres Cruces."

CHAPTER VI

BAD NEWS

THE first pink streaks of dawn light were blooming in the eastern sky when the justice rider awoke. Mesquite bush and cactus clump that had been mere blobs in the gloom, now took on their real appearance. A morning star shone like a brilliant jewel in the blue background which was fading to a soft gray with each passing moment.

He roused up and saw the red glow of a tiny Indian campfire on which coffee was bubbling in a small black pot. Hunkered down beside it, Gray Eagle was broiling plump quails that he had snared. With those appetizing odors tantalizing him, the justice rider hurried to a cold spring that bubbled from the sandstone wall of a little arroyo where they had camped.

The breakfast was quickly eaten and soon the two amigos were in their saddles. But now the justice rider was wearing his handsome charro rig as Señor Red Mask, and mounted on his magnificent black stallion.

"A good range, but few cattle," the caballero remarked as a lone yearling moved into the chaparral at their approach.

His keen eyes made out the brand on its side. Tres Cruces—the Three Crosses! It was the famous old Spanish brand worn by the cattle which Cortez had brought to the New World from Spain.

"I hear the sound of many moving cattle," murmured Gray Eagle, who had suddenly stiffened in his saddle and was staring across the broken range country, listening, "and I smell their dust."

Red Mask laughed. "You hear

brush rabbits and smell skunk weeds," he bantered.

Gray Eagle settled back in morose silence. And Red Mask, who depended much on the Indian's mystic gift of premonition, felt his own high spirits subside. Worry began to gnaw at his nerves. He wondered if anything had gone wrong at Tres Cruces.

THE sun had topped the serrated peaks of the Sierra Mojada when Señor Red Mask and Gray Eagle drew rein among the alamo trees that shaded the heavy gate of a walled adobe *casa*.

Getting no response to his hail, Red Mask leaned from his saddle, lifted the iron latch and shoved the gate open. A wailing came to his ears from down in the servants' quarters as he rode in, followed by the Indian.

"This is a house of death," muttered Gray Eagle, crossing himself.

With cold dread siding him, Red Mask dismounted in the patio and jingled his silver spurs up to the door.

A girl answered his knock, a golden-haired girl in a blue dress, whose gray eyes mirrored grief and despair.

"Señor Red Mask, at your service, señorita," the caballero murmured with a polite bow as he removed the massive black sombrero from his sweat-damp hair.

Terror swept the grief from the girl's eyes. "A masked *ladron*! I have nothing—"

Red Mask smiled reassuringly. "Not a *ladron*, but one who exchanges lead weeth them on frequent occasions," he said. "I come as Long John Greer's messenger, weeth gold for the Tres Cruces. And you are the *hija*—what you call daughter—of Jem Clayton, old-time amigo of Long John, no?"

"I am Cherry Clayton," the girl

answered with a quiver of her firm little chin. "But I have no cattle to sell John Greer. My herd was stolen just before daybreak and my vaqueros killed or wounded. Even my . . . my young friend, Jack Barton, who owns the adjoining range, was badly wounded when he tried to stop the raiders from crossing his rancho."

"*Por diablos!*" exclaimed the caballero. "That ees bad news, indeed. You theenk eet was—"

"I know it was the outlaws from Malquisto," the girl interrupted with a flash of anger. "My men recognized Sangre Duval on his big pinto horse."

"Then we weel recover the cattle," declared Red Mask. "I came weeth gold to buy a thousand *primos* and that ees what I weel do, *si Dios quiere.*"

"But you and the Indian are only two against many," Cherry Clayton reminded him. "The few vaqueros I have left would be of little help."

RED MASK considered this for a moment. It was true that he was up against a tough proposition. To enter a hide-out and overcome a score or more of the most vicious outlaws of the Tecolote Trail was no task for two men.

"I theenk there ees only one theeng to do, señorita," he said. "We must get help from the rurales. For those cows weel be lost unless we get them back *muy pronto.*"

Cherry Clayton's pretty face brightened. "That is a good idea," she agreed, "if you can locate the rurales. But I am told that they are kept very busy, with all the crime in this lawless border country."

"There ees a camp of rurales many miles from here, on the Rio Torcido," said the caballero. "I weel go there at once. Weeth good luck, those *primos* weel be back on their home range *mañana, si.*"

"I'll be wishing you all the luck in the world, señor," Cherry Clayton said warmly.

Red Mask swung back into his silver-mounted Spanish saddle and called a farewell to the watching girl in the doorway.

"*Vaya con Dios,*" she spoke the familiar Spanish phrase of parting.

Then the caballero and his Indian aid with the pack pony were riding through the gateway, headed southward toward the twin red buttes called Dos Hermanos, where the tortuous course of Rio Torcido cut through a small sage flat. But that camp of the Mexican mounted police was a long ride distant and between it and the Tres Cruces ranch-house was a wild section of brushy *lomas* and rock-rimmed barrancas.

"Did I not warn you that the *diablo*, Sangre, would strike again?" grumbled Gray Eagle. "And now you seek the aid of those blundering rurales who have more than once chased you like a pack of lobos after a deer. I am beginning to think that a curse rests upon that gold you carry in your saddlebags."

"*Silencio!*" Red Mask ordered impatiently. "The rurales ride in the name of the law. Do you think they will refuse to take the trail of those outlaws who stole the Tres Cruces herd?"

But Gray Eagle was dropping behind in moody silence. Soon he was lost to the caballero's view by a turn of the brush-fringed trail. And again Red Mask was bedeviled by doubts as to the wisdom of his course. It was true that he had had many a brush with the gray-uniformed law riders, in which he was always at a disadvantage because he would not return their gunfire.

Not for long was he left in doubt. A sharp decision was forced upon him before the nimble hoofs of his

black stallion had fox-trotted another mile.

Rounding a bend ahead came a squad of gray-clad troopers on patrol duty. Red Mask saw them while they were still at some distance. They looked grim and efficient as they came on at a trot. The morning sunlight glistened on their crossed bandoliers of cartridges. Sabers hung in scabbards at their sides. Booted carbines snuggled under each rider's left leg.

FOR a moment something akin to panic seized the caballero. The urge to turn back and run for it, as he had done many a time before, caused him involuntarily to tighten his grip on the black's bridle reins. His thoughts milled like spooked dogies in a corral: He had given his word to seek the aid of the rurales. It seemed the only course by which the rustled herd could be recovered. And the fate of the old Tres Cruces Rancho and an orphaned girl hung upon his actions.

Straight in the saddle, Red Mask rode to meet the grim law dogs of the border. He heard a brusque command from the captain; saw a dozen carbines flash into view. Hands held shoulder-high, he stopped the black with a word.

"*Hola, capitan!*" Red Mask called out, while his heart beat fast.

A stout, heavy-mustached officer halted the squad and rode forward a few paces. "Speak fast, *ladron!*" he said gruffly. "You must be loco to ride the trails in broad daylight with that mask on. Where were you bound?"

"To your camp on the Rio Torcido," Red Mask said boldly, "to get your help to round up Sangre Duval and his owlhoot crew."

"That's a poor lie," sneered the officer. "Why should a masked *bandido* seek to cause his master trouble?"

"I am not a bandit, and neither Sangre nor any other hombre is my master," Red Mask retorted. "But in the dark hour before dawn, Sangre raided the Tres Cruces and stole a herd of beef cattle, a thousand head ready for the market. Does that interest the *capitan?*"

"If true, it would," replied the captain. "But I take little stock in your tale, *ladron*. You are my prisoner."

At a word from the officer, a trooper rode forward and disarmed Red Mask. A lead rope was put on the black stallion, held by a rural.

"Search his saddlebags," the captain ordered.

Red Mask's heart sank. He remembered the gold he still carried. Would they believe—

"Gold, *mi capitan!*" exclaimed the trooper who was looking in the saddlebags.

The captain grunted a Spanish oath of exultation. "What luck, *ladron!*" he said to Red Mask. "I was hoping to cut the trail of the owlhooters who robbed a stagecoach last night, carrying gold for the Candelaria Mine pay roll. And then you ride up with the loot. *Válgame!*"

RED MASK watched as the gold was transferred to the saddle pockets of two rurales, a bag to each. His thoughts were not pleasant. He was almost ready to accept Gray Eagle's suggestion that a curse rested on those golden coins. He realized how almost impossible it would be to recover that dinero unless the real robbers of the mine pay roll should be captured and their loot regained. He remembered the slicker-clad riders he had seen the previous evening, just before the storm broke. Gray Eagle had shadowed them to their hide-out in the hills. More of Sangre Duval's work!

"*Capitan*, I can explain about the gold," the caballero began. "It is the—"

"Save your breath, *ladron*," cut in the officer brusquely. "A Wall of Sorrows is waiting for you to stand before it in the gray dawn. A firing squad will cut short your thieving career."

Desperate, Red Mask thought fast. Gray Eagle would be hiding in the chaparral. With the Indian's help he might escape from his captors. But by so doing he would forfeit his only chance of recovering either the gold or the Tres Cruces herd and he would become a hunted outlaw.

"*Capitan*, it is but a small favor that I am about to ask of you," Red Mask pleaded. "Ride to the Tres Cruces with me and let me prove to you that the herd was stolen, a herd that I was to buy with gold I brought from Texas. When I have done that, an Indian who knows the location of the thieves' hide-out will guide us to the spot."

"Lead me and my men into a trap, you mean," retorted the officer.

"Of course," Red Mask said shrewdly, "if the *capitan* is afraid to go to Sangre Duval's hide-out—"

"I fear nothing!" the captain broke in angrily. "Wild as your story is—and I believe not a word

of it—I will take you to Tres Cruces. And when your lies are exposed you will be shot then and there!"

Red Mask hid an elated smile. He had taken the first trick in his game of wits with the rural commander.

CHERRY CLAYTON was at the door when the cavalcade trooped into the patio of her big adobe ranchhouse. Speaking in fluent Spanish, she confirmed Señor Red Mask's account of the rustling and as to the gold with which he had intended to buy the cattle.

"And now," concluded the ranch girl, "I have lost my cattle and you, *capitan*, have confiscated the gold which I was to receive in exchange for the herd. That means I shall also lose the old rancho where I was born."

The captain preened his heavy mustache. Gallantry was not entirely foreign to his nature. And Cherry Clayton was a very pretty girl in distress.

"*Mira*, señorita," he came to the rescue, "I, *Capitan* Gallego, will take care of that. This masked *charro* says he has an Indian who will guide us to the hide-out of Sangre Duval's *ladrones*. *Bueno!* If we find the cattle, all will be well. If not, Señor Red Mask, as he calls

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himself, will remain there—forever! Meanwhile, I will keep the gold until he proves that he did not steal the mine pay-roll dinero last night. *Adios!*"

With a word of farewell to Cherry Clayton, Red Mask, who was still an unarmed prisoner, rode out of the patio beside Captain Gallego. When the troop filed out after them, the officer turned on Red Mask.

"Now, hombre, where is that Indian guide?" he demanded. "If you are deceiving me—"

The strident cry of a road runner, which the Mexicans call "*paisano*," broke in on the captain's speech. It came from a clump of chapparal close at hand.

"The *paisano* brings good luck," remarked Gallego, referring to a superstitious belief of the Mexican peons.

Señor Red Mask smiled as he reached for a cigarette. "This one does," he rejoined. Pursing his lips, he sent an answering call ringing through the hot midday air. A moment later Gray Eagle rode out of the brush.

"Here is our guide, *capitan*," Red Mask told the astonished officer.

Briefly, he acquainted Gray Eagle with the situation. "Lead us to the hide-out, chief," he ordered, "and pray to the Señor Dios that the herd is still there."

Gravely nodding, the Indian reined his roan horse toward the westward hump of Ladron Mesa, which bulked huge against the horizon.

And Red Mask settled in his saddle with an ill-concealed grin. He had scored a second time in his game of wits with Captain Gallego. Would his luck hold when the showdown came at Sangre Duval's hide-out? "*Quién sabe?*" he told himself with a shrug of broad shoulders.

CHAPTER VII

DEAD MAN'S PAYOFF

AS the grim cavalcade approached the malpais of Ladron Mesa, the easygoing grama-grass country was left behind. The smell of sage and creosote bush was in the air. There was no longer a trail, but Gray Eagle led the way unerringly.

They rounded the blunt shoulder of a gaunt ridge and struck a dim, almost invisible trail.

"No body of mounted men nor herd of cattle have traveled this deer path," Captain Gallego remarked with mounting suspicion.

"That is why we travel it," declared Red Mask. "It is a short cut and unguarded because it is unknown. The Indian found it by moonlight when he returned from trailing the owlhooters after the storm last night."

The captain nodded, his suspicions apparently lulled.

After following the dim pathway for a short time they found themselves mounting a long scarp. Gnarled bushes and stunted trees grew in scattered clumps, and the ground was rocky and uneven. The horses picked their way when all sign of trail had vanished. It was wild country and unless they were on the very heels of a fugitive, no riders of the law would ever penetrate far into it.

Then two huge palisades loomed ahead, gaunt and ugly with naked gray rocks. Gray Eagle rode toward them, followed by the now irregular file of horsemen. He passed between them and turned at a sharp angle. Beyond them was an open space, boulder-strewn and bare of vegetation. On the far side a rocky slope led upward to a V-shaped notch cut in a ledge of sandstone. Gray Eagle rode directly to it and halted.

"It is the hide-out," he said, turning to Red Mask and the captain.

who rode in advance of the troopers. "Cuidado!"

Dismounting, Red Mask and his captor moved cautiously through the notch and gazed downward into a little valley that was already bluish gray with the haze of late afternoon.

"There are your *buscaderos, capitán*," Red Mask said in low tones.

At one end of the valley several adobe huts teemed with life. Men were moving about and the smoke of cook fires spiraled upward. At a little distance from them, a pole corral held a cavy of horses.

"And the cattle," muttered Gallego, pointing to the upper valley where a large herd grazed near a waterhole.

Red Mask's spirits rose. His luck had held. "What do you think now, *capitán*?" he asked.

"You win, *amigo*," Captain Gallego responded with bluff heartiness. "With the coming of darkness we shall pay them a little visit."

IN the starlit evening the riders for law and justice made their way silently down to the floor of the valley. Señor Red Mask, his twin Colts restored to their holsters, rode beside Captain Gallego. Gray Eagle had picked the trail with uncanny skill. They halted under cover of thick mesquites a hundred yards from the row of adobe shacks. Through the network of trees they could see campfires burning redly, shadowy figures moving around them.

"When the moon tips the valley rim we will charge them, *amigo*," Gallego whispered hoarsely.

Impatiently Red Mask watched the eastern skyline. His veins tingled with the thrill of impending battle. He was about to even his score with Sangre Duval—

"*Allí está!*" murmured the captain, pointing to the eastward.

The silvery edge of a three-quarter moon glowed above a ragged rimrock. Its ghostly radiance began to spill down into the valley.

Gallego glanced back at his men. Pistols in hands, they were tense in their saddles, ready for the order to charge.

Red Mask gripped one of his own long Colts. He felt the black stallion quiver with eagerness beneath its big Spanish saddle. Then he heard a low command. After that yells, pounding hoofbeats—and the first shot.

Men were riding—riding like the wind. Ahead, startled cries came from the surprised owlhooters. A few scattered shots flashed redly in the gloom as the renegades realized what was happening. An answering volley from the charging rurales brought cries and oaths of pain. Then confusion reigned as the battle came to close quarters.

Red Mask held the eager black stallion in. The rurales did not need him especially and he was searching for his own particular foe, Sangre Duval.

The battle ground was clearing as the rurales rode down their quarry, gunning them in their tracks, throwing burning brands from the campfires into the shacks when they tried to take refuge there. Gray Eagle sat his roan mount like a bronze statue, the saddle gun he always used, even at close quarters, cracking out deadly shots that took a fearful toll of the outlaws.

Then Red Mask caught sight of his man. Sangre Duval's big body loomed in the moonlight as he quit the fight and ran toward his great pinto stallion tied to a post in front of the largest of the adobe huts.

Red Mask spurred forward to cut off the outlaw chief's escape.

"*Aviso, cabrón!*" he shouted the insulting challenge of the border renegades.

Duval halted, moonlight glinting on the six-gun in his hand. It whipped up like the head of a striking rattler.

"You masked *diablo!*" he snarled.

Red Mask reined his mount to a sudden stop as a flying slug ripped through his sombrero brim. Another one raked his shoulder. Then his own pearl-stocked Colt was blazing. He saw Duval take a staggering step toward him, firing a shot that streaked wildly into the night.

Red Mask fired again. Duval tried to lift his smoking six-gun, failed—and then the owlhoot boss of the Tecolote Trail pitched face downward on the ground.

THE caballero slid out of his saddle. The battle was over. Moonlight washed eerily over a scene of death and destruction, for even the adobe huts were smoldering wreckage. Red Mask saw the fight-sated rurales re-loading their hot guns and Gray Eagle sitting somberly on his leggy roan.

Abruptly, Red Mask glimpsed a figure running from the shadow of a smoking hut. Even in the dim light he recognized the beautiful face of La Chispa, the dancing girl of the Toro Rojo. She was garbed in the picturesque *charro* costume in which he had first seen her at the Cave of the Owls.

Before Red Mask realized what she was doing, the girl had loosed the tie rope of Diablo, the vicious pinto stallion. He saw her vault into the saddle and strike spurs to the pinto's flanks.

With a mad bawl of fury, Diablo reared and pawed the air. Then he was off in a whirlwind of flying hoofs and dust.

"He's got the bit in his teeth and she'll never stop him," Red Mask told himself with a shudder.

Scarcely breathing, he stood rooted to the ground while the

crazed pinto dashed straight up a steep and rocky scarp broken near its top by a narrow ledge. Bounding like a mountain goat, slipping, scrambling, the great horse went up the almost perpendicular incline with the girl clinging to the saddle. With a mighty heave the stallion launched itself at the ledge. Its forefeet caught, held for a breath-taking moment, and then slipped off. A fearful scream came from the girl's lips as the big beast toppled backward, bouncing and rolling over the jagged rocks until it came to rest at the foot of the scarp.

"*Madre de Dios!*" Red Mask groaned in horror. "What a death!"

UNDER a white Mexican moon, Señor Red Mask and Captain Gallego rode away from the little valley that no longer would shelter the owlhooters of the Tecolote Trail. At their backs rode the fighting troopers, some of them slumped in their saddles from wounds. One had been left behind, never to ride with his comrades again. Gray Eagle, stalwart and dignified as always, brought up the rear with the buckskin pack pony.

The dead bandits had been given decent burial, Sangre Duval and La Chispa in a single wide grave.

"A thousand thanks for your aid, *capitan,*" Red Mask said, lowering a hand for a reassuring touch of the gold that once more rested in his saddlebags. "Tomorrow the vaqueros will start the herd up the trail to Texas."

"It is well," murmured the rural officer. "Nobody but a Tejano could have saved both the gold and the cattle."

Señor Red Mask will be riding the justice trails soon again. Watch Wild West for his next hot-lead tangle with law-defying renegades!

What would be the payoff in that deadly game of chance which was being played out between Pete Landers and Joe Chillwood?



Joe had a pinwheel view of sky, trees and two masked men bearing down from behind.

RENDEZVOUS AT ROCKY FORD

by DEAN OWEN

SUNLIGHT fading from a darkening sky threw one last touch of crimson against the snow-capped peaks of the Minarets as Joe Chillwood rode slowly through the twilight to keep his date with gun smoke.

Nostalgia lay heavily upon him as he brought his sweat-marked dun to a halt on a pine-crested knoll and stared through the gathering shadows at the patchwork of crooked streets, the false-fronted buildings

of Rocky Ford in the valley below. Joe thought of the happy years he had spent there, and somehow the sight of blue smoke streamily lazily from chimneys and the first glow of a lamp-lighted window made him wonder if he was a fool.

He was gambling his chance for all these things, just because he had pride. There was a bitter twist to Chillwood's wide mouth as he sent his horse down the slanting trail. The hand that rubbed through the

bristle on his cheeks was long-fingered, delicate. A hand that could make a deck of cards do tricks, or turn on the death song that came from the muzzle of his long-barreled Colt.

It was three months to the day since he had ridden out of Rocky Ford in disgrace, and now he was back to settle old debts. He patted the full money belt around his lean waist, and a twisted smile touched his thin-lipped mouth. Twelve hundred dollars he carried in that money belt; money he had taken from hard-faced gamblers on the green cloth at the Washoe Palace in Virginia City.

Now he was back with money to fling in Pete Landers' face. He recalled Pete Landers' words that fateful day: "I'll meet you three months from today in Porcher's saloon. I'll play you for a third interest in the Rocky Ford Freight Lines against twelve hundred dollars. Then I'm going to put a bullet in your hide for killing my brother!" Pete Landers had also informed Joe that Mike Rogan was taking over his job.

Thoughts of Mike Rogan brought a cold light to Chillwood's blue eyes. In three months a man can do a lot of thinking, and Chillwood had the answers to a lot of questions. He and Mike had gone to work for Landers at the same time. They had been friends, but when Joe was made assistant manager of the freight line, jealousy's bright flame had been kindled and Mike Rogan changed. He threatened to go back to his old job as powder monkey at the mines in Virginia City, but something had caused him to stay on. Chillwood knew now what that reason had been.

Purple shadows deepened as Chillwood rode down the trail. He was a big man, with light-blue eyes and sandy hair which poked out from

beneath the brim of a flat-crowned hat.

DOWN where the trees grew close to the trail, the shadows were black and Joe Chillwood suddenly jerked erect in the saddle, some sixth sense striking a bell of warning.

His fingers touched the butt of his gun and then a voice cut through the stillness from somewhere behind him. The voice was flat, deadly: "Grab the sky, feller!"

Chillwood knew there were two of them, for he could hear the crackle of brush as they came out onto the trail in back of him. A grim smile touched Joe's lips as he pushed his hands into the air. He knew what they wanted, and he cursed himself for being a fool. He should have expected this. These men knew he was carrying a full money belt.

Suddenly Chillwood drove in the spurs. The dun squealed and leaped ahead. Startled oaths came from the bandits. There was a shout. Then Chillwood was riding hard through the tangle of brush that lined the trail. He was low in the saddle, but when the gun crashed the dun was lined out at an angle. Chillwood was trying to reach the patchwork of pines which offered sanctuary a scant fifty feet ahead.

Joe heard the dull thud as the dun took the bullet in the head. He pulled his feet from stirrups as the horse collapsed beneath him and had a pin-wheel view of darkening sky, trees and the two masked men bearing down from behind.

Chillwood landed hard and there was a flash of bright light in his head. He lay there conscious but unable to move a muscle. He was stretched out on his face, so when the money belt was taken from him he could not see his assailants. But Joe recognized the voice of one of

the men as he sneered: "The gamblin' man. He tried to quit the cards once and work for a livin', but now he'll be dealin' his last hand. Landers will kill him and I'll be laughin'."

The other man said: "Let's git back for a drink. Waitin' for him three days on this trail has put a chill in my bones."

There was the creak of saddle leather, then the pound of hoofs as horses and riders headed down the trail that led to Rocky Ford.

How long he lay there on the cool ground, Chillwood couldn't say, but finally the numbness left his body and he was able to lift an arm. With an effort he rolled over on his back and stared down at his shirt. It was open and the buttons had been ripped off. His shirt tail was out.

"They was sure in a hurry for that money belt!" Chillwood said bitterly.

He pulled himself to his feet, using the trunk of a sapling for support. His head buzzed and there was a sharp pain over his eyes. Then his thoughts cleared and he remembered fully what had happened. A bitter oath burst from his lips. "Mike Rogan and one of his pards did this!"

Chillwood's lips thinned out across his wide, sunburned face. He blamed himself for losing the money. It never occurred to him that Mike Rogan would be waiting on the trail for him, waiting to welcome him back to Rocky Ford.

It was three months to the day since Chillwood had left Rocky Ford; the day he was to stake twelve hundred dollars against a third interest in Pete Landers' freight lines. Mike Rogan knew that he would never return to Rocky Ford without the money—Joe had walked into a tight with his eyes wide open!

Now he didn't have the money for a game with Pete Landers; but

he knew where he could get it. Suddenly it was clear to Joe that this was exactly what Mike Rogan had counted on—a lot of pieces to the puzzle began to fit together.

NIGHT was clamping down and with the coming of darkness the air turned cold. Chillwood heard the rush of water over stones and headed drunkenly toward a grassy bank ahead. He bathed his aching head in the cold water of a creek and felt better.

Lesser men would have given up, turned back from Rocky Ford and tried to forget the gun-smoke challenge that had been flung by Pete Landers three months before. But not Joe Chillwood. He started down the trail that led to Rocky Ford, his head aching at each step. Lights from the town beckoned him on, seeming near and then appearing to move backward with each passing second.

How he made the trip, Joe never knew. He had been riding for two days without sleep and little food before the spill from his horse had drained the last strength from his body. But he kept on doggedly, his whiskery face covered with dust, his eyes red-rimmed. At last he saw the black bulk of the A-1 Stable ahead and knew he had made the outskirts of town.

Chillwood cut back through a dusty alley that ran behind the buildings fronting the main street of Rocky Ford. At the rear entrance to Porcher's saloon he paused, his hand on the knob of the screen door, eyes searching the interior of the place. But it was early and there were only three men at the bar.

Joe slipped inside, keeping to the shadows at the rear of the big room. A long-haired gent with a cigarette stuck on his lower lip was idly run-

ning a few chords on a battered piano.

Joe spotted Johnny Porcher, and sight of the fat saloon owner brought a chill to his eyes. Porcher's greasy hair was combed across the top of his head to cover a bald spot. His clothes were baggy and he wore a pearl-handled gun in a shoulder holster. The saloonman was leaning against the bar, nervously twirling a gold watch fob.

One of the men at the bar spoke up. "Ain't this the day that Joe Chillwood was supposed to come back?"

Porcher stiffened, and Joe could see the sweat on the man's forehead. "Yeah, this is the day," Porcher answered nervously. "I just seen Pete Landers ride into town."

Chillwood, still unnoticed, kept to the shadows of a narrow hallway. After a few minutes Porcher started toward the rear of the saloon, a ring of keys in his hand. There was a tight, drawn look on his face.

As the saloon owner came into the hallway, the muzzle of Chillwood's gun poked into his paunchy stomach. Porcher came up short, his eyes wide, mouth open. Then he forced a smile to his lips.

"Joe Chillwood!" he said, the breath running out from between his lips.

Chillwood's laugh was cold and the saloonman looked as if he were staring at Death. Nudging the fat man with his gun, Joe herded him to the door of the saloon office. Porcher unlocked the door with his keys and Joe kept his gun on the man as he lighted a lamp and pulled down the blind over the single window. There was a table and two chairs in the room, and an iron safe in the corner.

Porcher backed up to the table, sweat dripping off the end of his bulbous nose.

"Glad to see you back, Chillwood.

I reckon you come to take Pete Landers up on his proposition."

Joe nodded. "I had twelve hundred dollars in a money belt. Some gents lifted it when I hit the trail for town. I know one of 'em."

Porcher was regaining his confidence. "That so?" He rubbed his jaw, looking up at the tall, dusty man. "I got a proposition to make. You're a good house man. Chillwood. When you worked for me the games was honest and you made money for me. Why you ever wanted to quit and work on a freight line for Pete Landers, I'll never figger out."

Joe Chillwood laughed unpleasantly. "I got tired of the stink of places like this and gents like you." He paused a moment as Porcher's face darkened. "But you said somethin' about a proposition."

Porcher nodded. "You ain't got the twelve hundred that it'll take to buck Landers in a game. But you're the best when it comes to cards. To make it short, I'll back you in the game. You win a third interest in the Rocky Ford Freight Lines and you sign it over to me. You'll have the twelve hundred and a thousand more."

JOE pouched his gun, a hard smile twisting his lips. Out front he heard the babble of talk as men drifted in after the supper hour. The piano player was beginning to liven things up with a rendition of "Tanktown Jig."

Chillwood had known what was coming all along, but he pretended to be studying the proposition Porcher had put up to him. There was a cold light in his eyes when he said, finally: "In other words I'll play for the house. But what's to keep me from takin' twelve hundred out of that safe in the corner and playin' the game my way?"

Porcher shook his greasy head.

"Because that ain't your way. Most folks around here said you'd never show up again. But I knew you would. You got pride and so has Pete Landers. You two would meet here today if there was a foot of ice in Hades."

Joe Chillwood rubbed his thumb through the stubble of beard on his cheeks and stared thoughtfully at the fat saloonkeeper. Then he said flatly: "I'll string along! Go out and get things set while I shave with your razor."

Porcher started to protest; then, with a shrug, he went to a drawer in the desk and brought out a razor and shaving mug, careful to make no false move, for Chillwood's hand was never far from his gun. Motioning to a kerosene heater, he told Joe there was hot water, and then, licking his lips, he left the office.

Joe slid the bolt that locked the door and set about making himself presentable for the meeting with Pete Landers. Joe was sure Pete would be drunk before the night was over, which would make things easier.

As he cut through the whiskers on his face, Chillwood thought of the years when he had been Pete Landers' friend. That was all past now, finished because Landers' kid brother had come out from the East. The kid had been on the ill-fated freighter that Chillwood was driving to Red Hill. The freighter went over a cliff, hit by a landslide, and the wagon and its crew never had a chance. All were killed but Chillwood. When he was found, his clothes were soaked with whiskey and Doc Hammond had proclaimed: "Why, he's drunk as a whiskey-swillin' Comanche. No wonder he run off the road!"

Pete Landers had been in a rage. He tried to swing on Joe, but Doc Hammond held him off by saying:

"This gent isn't in any condition to fight now or for several weeks. He's got a broken ankle."

White faced with anger, Pete Landers had looked down at Joe Chillwood, lying on the dusty road. "That wagon and freight is worth twelve hundred dollars. If you got guts, Chillwood, I'll see you in Rocky Ford three months from today. I'll make it worth your while. I'll gamble a third interest in the Rocky Ford Freight Lines against twelve hundred dollars. That's an inducement to get you to come back. Then I'll settle with you for killin' my kid brother!"

And now Joe Chillwood was back, his ankle as good as new. If he could play this out to the end he would show Pete Landers the true picture of just what had happened. If he lost, the meeting would end in gun smoke.

**Before
you turn this page—**



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PORCHER'S saloon was crowded an hour later when Joe Chillwood stepped out of the office and paused in the shadows, his narrowed eyes sweeping over the crowd. He saw many familiar faces, but Pete Landers was not in the room. Then he searched again, hoping to catch a glimpse of the handsome, arrogant face of Mike Rogan, the man who had taken over Joe's job with the freight lines.

There was the familiar click of poker chips, the rattle of glassware on the bar. The piano player swung into a lively tune and a couple of half-drunk cowpunchers started to jig in their high-heeled boots.

Joe saw the empty poker table at the rear of the long room. Four chairs were tipped up, their backs resting on the edge of the green cloth. That was where the game of death was to be played.

Fat Johnny Porcher spotted Chillwood standing back there in the shadows. He came back toward the office door, walking with quick, nervous steps. There was a shine of sweat on his bald head and he blinked his eyes as if he were under a terrific tension.

And as Porcher came up, Chillwood thought of Mike Rogan and the twelve hundred dollars in the money belt.

The fat saloon owner had a sheaf of bills which he thrust into Chillwood's hands. "Here's the money. You buy in the chips like it was yours, then Landers won't git suspicious. He oughta be comin' in. One of the boys saw him down at the Mercantile awhile ago."

Chillwood took the money, fingered the crisp bills and shoved them in his pocket. Thinking of Mike Rogan and the twelve hundred dollars stolen from his money belt, Joe strode to the table, pulled back a chair and sat down.

Silence clamped down in the bar-

room as men turned to stare. The piano player broke off in the middle of his number and the two half-drunk cowpokes, who had been dancing, stopped, hitched up their belts and turned to the bar.

One of them said: "Let's get outta here, Jake. Skunk smell is shore deep!"

Chillwood felt the blood rush to his face, but not a flicker of emotion betrayed his feelings. He saw the cowpuncher wink at Porcher and realized that this was all part of the plan.

One by one, the men in the bar drifted outside until only Porcher and the piano player were left. Chillwood sat with his back against the wall, his lips a grim line across his face.

Porcher wanted the barroom empty for the game and he had gotten his wish. A few well-placed words among the men had renewed old hatreds, for most citizens of Rocky Ford blamed Joe Chillwood for the death of Pete Landers' kid brother. The only ones who didn't blame Chillwood were the ones who knew the truth of what had really happened up there on that wagon road to Red Hill three months before.

There was a dead calm in the barroom. Then a man's voice drifted through the batwings: "Joe Chillwood's inside, Landers. Give it to him good!"

Joe's hat was pulled low and he didn't look up when the batwing doors squeaked. He heard the heavy tread of a man's boots on the pine floor. The piano player got up from his chair and headed toward the back room, but Porcher's voice cut him short.

"Get back there, professor. We want music. Mebbe you know the funeral march." The saloonman laughed.

THEN Pete Landers was at the table and Chillwood stared up into the bleak eyes of the man who had once been his friend. Landers was big, heavy set. He wore a black hat, a neat white shirt and shoe-string tie. His coat was expensive and his boots polished.

"So you came back," he said coldly. "I never thought you'd have the nerve."

Chillwood picked up his cards, his eyes never leaving Landers' cold face. It was hard to believe that he had once called this man his friend. They had laughed together, worked together and stood at this very bar for their evening drink. But now both realized that this game might very well end in gun smoke—death for one of them.

Landers pulled back a chair, hoisted up his low-slung gun and sat down. "Give us a new deck, Porcher," he said grimly. "We'll keep this part of the game on top the table, anyhow."

The saloon owner brought the cards and tossed them on the table. Landers broke the seal and shuffled the deck. Chillwood could see the knots of men gathered outside the batwings on the boardwalk. But Porcher didn't want anyone to be able to see into the saloon. He waddled to the front of the place, closed the wooden storm doors and locked them. The front window was painted a dirty green color nearly to the top, so no one could see inside.

Back at the poker table, Chillwood and Landers began their deadly game. The owner of the Rocky Ford Freight Lines dealt the first hand, then he leaned forward, staring hard into Chillwood's grim face.

"I'm glad you came, Chillwood, because it's goin' to be a pleasure to kill you, no matter which way the game goes. I sure didn't think

you'd be loco enough to come back!"

Joe laughed coldly. "You've always bragged about keepin' your word. Mebbe I wanted to call your bluff."

Landers took out a piece of paper from his pocket, scribbled with a stubby pencil and then put his signature at the bottom. He tossed the paper to one side.

"There's a third interest in the Rocky Ford Freight Lines. I'm playin' it against twelve hundred dollars."

"That's the way we made the deal," Chillwood said, shoving a stack of chips across the table to Landers.

Landers took out a long black cigar, bit off the end and stuck it between his white teeth. He struck a match and stared hard at Chillwood through the wispy smoke.

"Who you want to leave your third interest to, Chillwood, in case you win?"

Joe shook his head. "Wait'll you see how the cards fall," was his answer.

THE game went on for an hour. Landers called for whiskey and Porcher brought a bottle and two glasses to the table. Chillwood shook his head when Porcher started to pour him a drink.

Landers' face went white under the lamplight. "You give up drinkin', Chillwood? Mebbe seein' my brother layin' on the rocks with a broken neck sorta put the fear into you."

Chillwood felt raw anger building up inside. He caught Porcher's meaning glance and the fat man nodded as if telling Joe to get the game over with quickly. That brought Chillwood back to the business at hand, giving him a check rein on his temper. He glanced anxiously at the door. Mike Rogan should be here. In fact, Joe had

been willing to bet that he'd be here for the showdown. But so far he had not put in an appearance.

Landers went on talking as he studied the new hand Chillwood had just dealt. "You killed my brother just as sure as if you'd taken a gun and shot him in the back."

Joe made no answer. Time was flying past and the showdown was still a long way off. The game was about even so far. He picked up the cards and dealt another hand, his nimble fingers sending the pasteboards flying across the green top of the table. He had to make this look good. If Landers caught him pulling any fancy work he'd take a bullet. Chillwood knew he had to string along because fat Johnny Porcher was getting impatient.

The saloon owner was pacing up and down behind the bar, his little eyes wide with excitement, his lips a tense line across his fat, greasy face.

From then on, Landers began to lose. His pile of chips began to go down steadily. Chillwood glanced up and saw that Porcher was grinning.

Landers began to pour down the whiskey. His face got red and he handled the cards with clumsy fingers. He threw more insults at Chillwood, his tone getting an ugly edge from the liquor. Chillwood won another pot and Landers threw his cards to the table.

"Too bad you ain't like Mike Rogan. He's doin' right well for himself these days. He saved up enough dinero to buy in my company. He owns a third interest. Just what you'll own if you win tonight. But your interest won't do you no good 'cause you're goin' to die!"

Joe didn't look up. He thought of the gunmen who had waylaid him back there on the road to Rocky Ford. News that Rogan owned a

third interest in the freight lines began to make sense to Chillwood. He knew the whole deadly scheme now. At first he had only suspected, but now he was sure.

THE back door rattled and Porcher stepped into the shadowed hallway. In a moment footsteps sounded on the board floor and Mike Rogan came into the saloon with a roustabout from the freight yards known as Harvey.

Sweat dotted Mike's handsome face. He nodded at Landers, then turned his back and ignored Chillwood. Crinkly black hair showed from beneath the brim of Rogan's expensive hat. He wiped his hands on his calfskin vest and ordered a drink from Porcher, who had stepped behind the bar. Harvey lined up beside Rogan and poured his own. They both wore guns and there seemed to be a deadly purpose in their being here.

Chillwood forced a cold smile to his lips. "Hello, Mike. Ain't seen you for quite a spell. Or have I?"

Mike Rogan turned and backed up against the bar, his eyes hot. "Just how d'you mean that, Chillwood?"

Rogan's hand inched down toward his gun. Johnny Porcher tapped him on the arm and Rogan didn't pull his weapon. Harvey stood with his back to the poker table, a glass of whiskey in his hand.

Landers glanced across the table top, a puzzled light in his whiskey-reddened eyes.

That was when Chillwood began to talk, every nerve strung tight.

"Had any more landslides on that road to Red Hill?"

Landers' face went white. He gripped the cards he held in his hand until they were bent almost double.

"No, there ain't been any more landslides, Chillwood. If you'd

been tendin' to business that day instead of bein' drunk, you'd never have let it get you."

Joe drew two cards. There was a film of cold sweat on his forehead. If this play didn't go off the way he had planned, there would be no escape. Porcher, Harvey and Rogan would be against him. And, likely, it would be Landers who would throw the first shot at him.

He drew a deep breath. "Just before the freighter went over the side that day there was a rumble. The whole mountain seemed to shake."

"What do you mean?" Landers demanded.

Chillwood glanced at Rogan and Porcher. Both men stood as if their boot heels were nailed to the floor. Harvey clenched his glass of whiskey hard. Then Joe looked at the man across the table from him.

"That could've been dynamite, Pete!"

There was a dead silence in the barroom. Johnny Porcher was behind the bar, his little eyes narrowed, sweat oozing over his fat cheeks. Mike Rogan licked his lips and called for another drink. Harvey put down his whiskey glass but kept his hand near his gun.

Joe went on talking, staring at Mike Rogan. "A man who'd had experience as a powder monkey could just about set off a charge that would knock a cliff down on a freighter." Then he turned back to the freight lines owner. "Know anybody that would fit that description?"

Pete Landers let his cards dribble to the table top from his big hand. Very slowly he turned around in his chair and stared at Mike Rogan. Then he shook his head and turned back to the game.

"Don't try to crawl, Chillwood. Play your cards!"

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THE tension seemed to go out of the air. Joe noticed that Porcher kept his hands beneath the bar. Rogan stood with his right side away from the bar so he could get to his gun, and Harvey waited there, tense, expectant, sipping his whiskey.

The game went on. Landers' chips diminished and he shoved the last stack into the center of the table. Porcher's face was strained as he leaned across the bar, trying to see this final play.

Chillwood raked in the last pot, his eyes narrowed. He looked across the table at Pete Landers.

"Well, this is it. I own a third interest in the Rocky Ford Freight Lines."

Landers scowled and Joe noted that some of the fight had gone out of the man. There was a perplexed frown on the freight line owner's forehead as he said:

"Ownin' a third interest won't do you any good, Chillwood. It wouldn't do you any good even if I didn't kill you. The outfit's bust!"

Joe laughed. "It's not quite as bad as you think, Pete. When I was laid up with my busted ankle, I stayed at Slag Creek for a spell. There's a gold strike due to break loose over there. They been tryin' to keep it under cover, but there'll be a boom and the Rocky Ford Freight Lines will be in on the ground floor."

Pete Landers opened his eyes wide, his jaw slack. That was when Mike Rogan snarled an oath and made a dive for his gun. He had the weapon out of leather when Chillwood shot him. The echoes of his gun drove through the silence of the barroom. Mike folded at the waist, tried to grab the edge of the bar for support and fell slowly to the floor. Blood from a hole in his chest spread out across the boards.

Joe was on his feet, kicking a

chair that caught Harvey at the knees. The man went down hard but he didn't draw his gun, because Chillwood had him covered. Joe took the roustabout's weapon and threw it into a corner.

Pete Landers stood there staring stupidly down at the body of Mike Rogan. Johnny Porcher was behind the bar, his hands out of sight. Chillwood said: "Bring 'em up empty, Johnny." Porcher obeyed.

Landers ran long fingers through his hair. "I don't get this, Chillwood."

Joe looked at the saloon owner. "Start in and tell it straight, Johnny. Tell Pete Landers that you and Mike was workin' together, that you had him and Harvey way-lay me on the road to town and steal the dinero I was packin'. You knew I'd come to you for backing in the game with Landers. And tell him about the day that Rogan dynamited the road so that the freighter went over. How when you found out I wasn't dead you came back and poured whiskey over my clothes."

Porcher wiped sweat from his forehead.

"Even if you're right you're playin' wrong cards." He seemed to have regained some of his confidence. "You're workin' for the house, Chillwood. That third interest in the Rocky Ford Freight Lines belongs to me."

Joe took the note that Landers had written, assigning him a third

interest in his company. Deliberately, he lit a match and burned the paper. Porcher watched the flames and suddenly went wild. He grabbed a gun and ducked, but not soon enough. Chillwood shot him in the arm and the fat saloonman howled as though he were mortally wounded.

Pete Landers was cold sober now. He put an arm across Chillwood's shoulders. "I reckon I been dead wrong, Joe."

"Yeah. Porcher and Rogan was set to clean up plenty by usin' your freight lines to truck in grub and supplies to Slag Creek when the boom hit. They wanted control of the outfit. You'd have been next on their list."

Together they headed for the door. On the steps outside they met the stares of the townspeople who had gathered there.

One of the men spoke up. "We figured you two was shootin' it out in there."

Landers smiled. "I got a new partner. I reckon I'm gittin' too thickheaded to run a freight line by myself."

Dead silence greeted his words. Then Joe said: "There's a gent inside who's made boothill. His two pards oughta have about twenty-four hours to get out of town."

But Johnny Porcher and Harvey didn't need twenty-four hours. They were on their way. Their bob-tail flush got filled with hot lead instead of cards.

THE END.



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The King came stumbling down the slope to side his son against the guns of Seely's hard cases.



When the King of Buckaroo Basin vowed he'd protect his range against a ruthless land grabber, he was calling for a blazing

SHOWDOWN AT KEYHOLE PASS

by CLINT McLEOD

WHEN King McPherson came tramping into the sheriff's office in Noontday, the bigness of him made the room seem small and the wrath of him was like the fury of a mountain storm. He planted his feet in the middle of the floor, waving his arms like a rampaging grizzly and finding it hard to talk. Sheriff Poke Winger, a hunk of a man himself, wedged tighter into his chair, gave a look at the granite-faced old cow-

man, and said: "Easy now, King! There's no call to make trouble!"

Hamilton Seely sat in a corner of the office, close to one of the windows. An immaculate figure in tailored riding garb, he carried his years well. He smelled of expensive lotions and there was a trace of talcum on his ruddy jowls. The sight of him was fuel for the fire consuming King McPherson. And Seely didn't help any when he said: "You can

send for some men, eh, sheriff, and they come out of respect for the law. But not the King of Buckaroo Basin. Sit down and cool off, McPherson!"

"We just want to straighten things out," the sheriff told McPherson hastily. "Mr. Seely, here, has complained that you won't let him shove cattle of his Tri-State Syndicate across your range."

A lot of years lay between King McPherson and Scotland, Texas years and Montana years, but his speech still smacked of the highlands. "So it's *Mr. Seely's* Tri-State Syndicate!" he said sharply. "'Tis John Annard who owns that outfit, do ye ken—a white man who's made a poor choice of his underlings. Seely has na right in Buckaroo Basin."

"That isn't so, and you know it, King," the sheriff countered. "The basin wasn't properly surveyed in the old days. Tri-State's had it re-surveyed, and the boundary of your K Rafter and the Caged J to the south of it are both wrong. There's a strip between the two spreads that's really public domain, and Tri-State is buying it. But they can't move cattle down from the north to stock that strip unless they come through Keyhole Pass and across your K Rafter. If they go the long way around the mountains, they'll walk all the tallow off their pure bloods. Why in blazes did you run Mr. Seely off your spread when he asked permission to make the crossing?"

The King squinted one eye. "I dinna hear that the court had made a decision," he said.

"Bosh!" exploded Seely. "You know confounded well that the court will find that second surveying correct. You're quibbling about nothing!"

"It looks that way." The sheriff sighed. "This matter ain't really in my hands, seeing as the court hasn't

decided and Mr. Seely actually has no legal right in the basin. But Tri-State's bound to get that land. Why don't you be a good neighbor meantime and let 'em bring in their cattle?"

"Ye're a good man, sheriff," said McPherson. "But ye're young and ye don't remember the old days. Twenty-odd years back this Seely ranched in the basin, getting himself a lick o' land, then spreading out, crowding his neighbors. So I ran him off the range, popping him across the britches with the end o' a rope every step of the way. Now he's back. But a hawg's a hawg in pen or pew, and he'll have all the basin if he gets a foothold here. 'Tis an old feud between us, and this is the showdown."

WRATH colored Seely's face. "And this time I've got the power of Tri-State to back me," he said. "It won't be as easy to run me out as it was in the old days, McPherson!"

"Ye'll set na foot on K Rafter land!" thundered the King, drowning out the sheriff's feeble protest.

"I'm writing my crew to start moving a herd down from Tri-State's northern holdings," Seely said bluntly. "A month from today they'll be at Keyhole Pass. And they'll come through, McPherson!"

"'Tis guns that'll greet them!" said the King.

"I don't think so," Seely drawled. "I've planned this for a long time—ever since John Annard gave me orders to buy new range. I've got an ace in the hole, McPherson. And, sheriff, I hope you won't forget the lawless attitude this old fire eater has taken today."

But King McPherson didn't wait for Poke Winger's reaction. He strode out of the office, slamming the door behind him, and pounded down the street, a giant ramrod of

a man. He was on his way to Noonday's telegraph office, and he stepped into that cubbyhole, snatched a yellow sheaf of blanks and wrote hastily: *COME HOME I NEED YOU*. Passing the sheet to the young telegrapher, he said: "Send that to Ian McPherson at Thermopolis, Wyoming, and the same to Rob at Fargo, North Dakota. Here's my tally book; you'll find the addresses inside."

The telegrapher grinned. "So you're going to fight!" he said with the easy familiarity of one who has known another all of his days. "Wait'll Tri-State bucks the whole McPherson clan! But ain't you sending for Walt?"

"He'll be here," answered the King and started for the door. But there he paused, held by an afterthought, and he turned back and scratched another message. "No word of this, mind ye!" he cautioned the telegrapher, then went on his way.

ON the third day the telegrapher from Noonday rode out and delivered three telegrams. Two of them were from the King's oldest sons, Ian and Rob, and said simply: *COMING*. The third was longer, and the King read it twice, grunted, and thrust it into his wallet. Then he went back to his lonely vigil, checking off days on the calendar. On the twenty-third day Ian McPherson arrived on a spent horse, and on the twenty-fourth Rob McPherson came home, gray with the dust of the stage road.

They made a lot of man, the pair of them. They were big-boned and red of face, and when you looked at Ian, you saw the King at thirty, and when you looked at Rob you saw his sire at twenty-seven. They broke bread together that twenty-fourth night, and Rob grinned and said: "Sending each of us to a different range so we'd learn new ways of han-

dling cattle was a good idea. But I had a hunch you'd find trouble and need us back."

"'Tis trouble enough," the King admitted. "Finish your supper and I'll tell ye about it."

"When's the kid getting here?" Rob asked. "I saw him in Mandan a few months ago. Doing right well." He paused to hoist his coffee cup, and Ian, who already knew what desperate need had caused King McPherson to call his clan, tried to bring a foot down on his brother's under the table. But he missed his mark and Rob continued: "Yes, sir, King; Walt looked fine. Was working for the Tri-State outfit, taking orders from a dude named Hamilton Seely."

"I know," said the King. "He wrote more often than ye two lads. Come now, and I'll tell ye the story."

They went to the porch and their three pipes glowed against the crowding darkness, and King McPherson told all of his tale from its beginning, twenty-odd years back. "Ye dinna remember Seely from the old days," he concluded. "But ye'll have a chance to meet him. And we'll be stopping him, do ye ken."

But Rob said: "And Walt's riding for that skunk! But he'll come over to the clan when he savvies and—"

"I'm not so sure," the King said darkly. "I—"

He paused, for a rider was wheeling into the yard, a K Rafter rider, who came down out of his saddle before the porch, too excited to greet the McPhersons who'd come home. "I've pounded leather from Keyhole, King," he blurted. "Tri-State's moving its herd down from the north. Rode fast to tell you—"

McPherson knocked the dottle from his pipe. "They're six days early," he said. "'Tis time to ride, lads."

They were into saddles in record

time, and they rode stirrup to stirrup, facing northward and sparing neither themselves nor their horses. The first of the moon was showing over the timbered hills when they came to a tiny cabin perched in the south end of Keyhole Pass. This rude building had been King McPherson's first ranchhouse, and the grave of his wife was beside it. The cabin was used as a winter line shack, but at this season it was deserted. Rob and Ian would have ridden by it, but the King stopped them, anger in his eye.

"Have ye been so long gone from the basin that ye've forgotten?" he thundered.

"Sorry, King," Ian said. "I sort o' figgered that we were short of time and—"

"Not that short," cut in McPherson, and came down out of his saddle. His sons followed suit, and the three of them came and ringed the grave, Stetsons in hand. The King prayed aloud and at length as was his custom whenever he passed this way. Then he clapped on his hat, plucked an encroaching weed from the grave, and turned to his sons.

"Ye'll find a barbed-wire barricade to the north of here, where the pass is the narrowest," he said. "Ride there and ye'll see my crew on guard. Tell them they're to go back to the ranch. Do ye ken, lads?"

"You're sending the crew home?" Ian exclaimed. "But we may need them if Seely has a big force!"

"Do as I say," ordered the King. "'Tis a family affair, this one. I'll na ask my crew to spill its blood. Send them home, I tell ye. And you, Ian, ride on up the pass to Seely's camp. Ye'll find my son there, likely. Tell Walt that his father wants to talk to him."

They saw little sense in his orders and their puzzled faces proved it, but King McPherson had taught them obedience before he'd taught

them to walk, and they turned and went to do his bidding. And King hunkered down on the doorstep of the cabin and fell to waiting. It wasn't long till his crew clattered past, headed southward, but the moon had climbed to a considerable height before Ian and another came riding.

WALT had the red, rugged look of the McPhersons, but his features were finer than his brothers', and the King had never glanced at him without seeing the woman who rested yonder. He was twenty-two, this youngest McPherson, and he owned the King's own stubbornness. There was a sullen, defiant set to his lips as he came out of his saddle. But where his brothers had forgotten, he remembered, and he tarried briefly at his mother's grave, hat in hand, then came toward the cabin.

"Well, King?" he said.

And now that his son stood before him, King McPherson forgot all the things he'd meant to say, but he let no hint of his indecisiveness show. "Ye're riding for Seely," he said. "I told you in my letters that I'm na letting him on K Rafter land. Are ye still siding him, lad?"

"I am," said Walt.

Ian took a step forward and said: "See here, kid—"

The King waved Ian to silence. "Why, Walt?" he asked.

"Because I think Seely's right and you're wrong," Walt said evenly. "Don't think I've forgotten my own flesh and blood. This goes beyond that. Time and again you told us boys to pick the side we thought was right in any fracas, and back it to the limit. That's what I'm doing. You taught me too well, King."

"And ye think Seely's right?"

"He's got the law on his side. Oh, I know the court hadn't decided when we started down this way. But they're bound to give the strip

to Tri-State. And I know that you and Seely had trouble in the old days. He told me a little about that when he asked me how I'd stand if there was a showdown at Keyhole. He packs no grudge against you, King. But you're still trying to fight your old feud."

"And ye dinna think I should do that?"

"Look at it this way," said Walt. "When you settled in Buckaroo Basin, there was no law. Somebody had to run the basin and you did it and made a peaceable place out of it. But that was yesterday. Now there are courts and a sheriff and a new way of things. But you're trying to live in the past. And when you put your own way above everybody else's, you're dead wrong. Seely may be a swivel-chair cattleman, but he doesn't try to run roughshod over creation. That's why I'm backing him!"

"And that's your stand, lad?"

"That's it, King."

Ian's fists clenched. "You never laid a hand on us, King," he said angrily. "And you never let us touch one another. But this is where the rule needs breaking! I'm not forgetting he's my kin, even if he's forgot. What I'm gonna give him is for his own good!"

"No!" said McPherson. "You canna tell a McPherson anything, and you canna beat a truth into his head." He looked at his youngest son. "Ye'll be getting back up the pass," he said. "Ye'll be needed there. For if Seely touches a strand of the wire I've stretched, there'll be lead burning!"

STIFFLY Walt McPherson stalked to his horse, mounted rigidly and rode away. Thus had the fourth McPherson come home and gone again. And when he was lost from sight, King McPherson was an immeasurably older man and he said

brokenly: "Seely's poisoned my bairn against me. He's used his smooth tongue to paint himself white and me black. This was his ace in the hole and he's played it."

"Rob's up at the barbed-wire barricade, King," Ian reminded. "Alone."

McPherson put his hand on his son's shoulder and the old stiffness came back to the King's spine and the old stubbornness to his jaw. "We'll be riding, lad," he said, and strode toward his saddled horse.

Then they were mounted again, and as the two of them came up the pass to its narrowest point, the moon made the scene as light as day—the sloping walls of the defile, the skimpy fence that symbolized King McPherson's defiance of the mighty of Tri-State.

Rob McPherson was using the butt of his six-gun to staple up the wire which he had lowered to let Walt ride through. He grinned bleakly. "The Tri-State herd is bedded down a few miles north," he said. "I looked their camp over when I went to fetch Walt. The crew is small, but they're a hard-case bunch."

"And they're coming," Ian decided. "I hear hoofbeats."

But the rising thunder of hoofs was coming up out of the south, and four riders took shape in the darkness, loping forward to the fence. Here they slithered to a stop, and McPherson mumbled beneath his breath, his hand edging toward his gun. For one of these riders was Hamilton Seely, filling a saddle to overflowing. But the others were Sheriff Poke Winger and two of his deputies.

"We stopped off at your ranch-house, McPherson," Seely said. "Your crew loped up and said we'd likely find you here. The sheriff has some news for you."

Poke Winger cleared his throat,

and his face showed his distaste for the chore that was his. "Mr. Seely showed me a wire he got from the capital tonight," he said. "The court has ruled that the strip belongs to Tri-State."

"But the K Rafter," said the King, "is still McPherson land!"

"Ah, you ain't got a legal leg to stand on now, King," the sheriff protested. "Custom is also law, and it's been the custom for one basin rancher to let another trail across his land, providing, of course, that the herd is cut at the border for any strays it might've picked up. As long as Tri-State had no bonyfide holdings hereabouts, you could consider them outsiders and refuse 'em entry. But they're basin ranchers, too, and you've got to let 'em pass."

"I dinna have to!" rapped the King, and went for his gun.

He was quick, but not quick enough. One of the deputies had obviously anticipated such a move, for he had a gun of his own in his hand. "Steady, King!" he barked. That gave Winger time to unleather a gun.

"I don't want to do this, King," the sheriff said. "But if you're gonna buck the law, I've got no choice but to lock you up."

The wrath of McPherson had grown out of bounds. "I'll na let my fence be touched!" he insisted.

"Disarm 'em," the sheriff said wearily. "All three of 'em. While they're sleepin' in the jail, Tri-State will have time to reach its own range."

The law held all the aces in a pat hand, and the King could only glower as his gun was lifted from his holster and his sons were likewise disarmed. The three were ordered into saddles. "South," said the sheriff. "You know the way to town." Then the lawmen were herding the McPhersons ahead of them. The last thing the King heard was

Seely's triumphant chuckle, and the last thing he saw, as he glanced over his shoulder, was Seely stepping down from his saddle, a pair of wire cutters in his hand.

It brought the wrath of King McPherson to the exploding point, that sight. More than that, the situation itself filled him with a gnawing desperation. Tri-State now had a legal right in the basin, but he'd expected that. Tri-State had gotten the law behind it, and Poke Winger was doing his duty as he saw it.

McPherson bethought himself of the telegram he carried. He could show that wire to Poke Winger and thereafter this affair would assume a different hue in the sheriff's eyes. But only half of the King's need was to keep Hamilton Seely from getting a foothold in the basin. The rest went deeper than that and was a matter that didn't concern the law. Therefore, McPherson knew he must escape from Winger before they reached Noonday.

His opportunity came sooner than he expected, but that was because no man without an urgent need would have considered it an opportunity. They began paralleling brawling Buckaroo Creek as it flowed up from the south, skirting its high bank and looking down upon the moon-glinted water. Where the creek angled, veering to the east, there was a narrow footbridge and the skittish horses were urged onto it, one by one. Poke Winger rode in the lead. After him came King McPherson and his sons, the two deputies bringing up the rear. And in the middle of the bridge, the King made his play.

It wasn't a great drop to the water, but a man's bones grow brittle as the years creep by, and if Buckaroo Creek was deep in some places, it was also shallow and boulder-

studded in others. These things were in the mind of King McPherson as he fell sideways out of his saddle. His shoulder hit the hand-rail a glancing blow, then he was plummeting downward, hitting with a great splash, clawing to the surface and letting the current sweep him along.

Above the creek's roar, the hoarse shouts of the lawmen came to him, blurred and indistinct. They were shooting, and even if Poke Winger didn't have his heart in his work, some of those bullets geysered water dangerously close. The King thought he glimpsed Ian and Rob struggling with the lawmen closest to them. Then he was swept around a bend and he clambered to the bank and wormed into the bushes.

He was afoot now, and without a gun. But he was free. Heading northward, he heard a great threshing in the bushes he'd put behind him, heard his name called frantically. But he hurried onward, possessed of a single idea that he had placed above everything else. And that idea was to get back to Keyhole Pass.

THE distance wasn't so great, but it was slow going—all the slower because the King was matching minutes with Hamilton Seely now. Possibly Seely might leave his herd bedded until morning; more likely he'd bring it through the pass this very night. The man wouldn't gamble that Noonday's jail would hold King McPherson long. Seely had the fence cut and would be on up the pass by now. It would take him a while to reach his herd, more time to arouse his crew and get the cattle moving. Then he'd have to haze them through. All these things McPherson considered, and he was gauging Seely's progress in his mind when he reached the cabin at the south end of the pass.

This cabin had been provisioned against the needs of any stray rider who might seek its shelter. There was food in the cupboards and a rifle on the wall, and it was the gun that interested King McPherson. He took it down, had a look at its loads, dug a box of cartridges from under the bunk and crammed some into his pockets. Then he was out of the door and, for the first time in twenty years, his need for haste was so great that he passed his wife's grave without pausing.

Hurry! That was the thought that pounded at him. He'd have swapped his chance at eternity for a saddle horse, but there was none to be had. He could only sprint along, and since there never was a boot made for footwork in this hill country, he was limping before half the distance was behind him. Still he hobbled onward until at last he came to where the cut strands of barbed wire lay in the fading moonlight.

He didn't pause here. Sounds were reaching him, unmistakable sounds—the bawling of irritable cattle, aroused from a night's sleep, the popping of rope ends as riders hazed them southward, the rumble of hoofs. King scurried up the left-hand slope then, climbing quickly to a pocket of rocks and bushes some twenty feet above the trail. And here he was standing when the point riders came into sight. They were Hamilton Seely and Walt McPherson, and the King cradled his rifle against his cheek and squeezed trigger. A gout of dirt geysered between the two horses and their riders came to an abrupt halt.

"Ye'll go no farther," said McPherson.

They hadn't expected any interference. That was plain enough, for Seely jerked with surprise. Recovering himself, he lifted his hand in a signal to his riders, and the King read the sign and knew it was an

order to mill the herd back there where the pass was wider. Walt was spurring forward. He came twice the length of his horse and cried:

"King! Have you gone crazy? Seely's told me how matters stand. You've bucked the law once tonight, but that was a small matter. Stop us now and you're an outlaw. You can't use a rifle against us!"

"Ye dinna think so?" the King countered. "Ye try shoving you critters another step and ye'll find out. 'Tis only one McPherson's bucking ye, but ye'll find him one too many!"

"King, this is the last straw!" Walt retorted. "You're proving everything I told you about yourself earlier tonight—you and your high-handed ways! Up till now I wondered what I'd really do when it came to bucking my own clan. You haven't left me any choice. I'm coming through—and so are these cattle. Is your stubbornness worth so much that you'll turn your gun against *me*?"

It was an argument that took some of the surety out of King McPherson and for a moment he was like he'd been after Walt had turned his back on him tonight, an oldster bowed by the weight of his years. Then he steeled himself.

"'Tis na choice I have either, lad," he called. "Remember that when ye come riding."

THERE was all the makings of a showdown in this moment, but Hamilton Seely laid a hand on Walt's reins. "Wait, kid!" Seely cried. "He thinks one man with a rifle could hold this pass against an army, but he's wrong. We'll stampede the cattle through! They'll go through this pass like greased lightning, and we'll be riding with them. There'll be dust enough to clog that old coot's sights, and he'll find it mighty poor shooting.

"Stampede the herd?" Walt said.

"Why not?" Seely demanded. "I rode up from the south tonight, remember, and saw the lie of the land. There's nothing to stop those critters for miles but an old log cabin. And what if a few cows pile up against it and are killed? The cost will be cheap enough to get us through the pass!"

All this King McPherson heard. And he was holding his breath when Walt said: "But you can't do that, Seely! My mother's grave is beside that cabin! Do you think I want it trampled under a stampede?"

Seely sneered. "What in blazes difference does that make?" he asked. Behind him his crew had got the herd to milling, and Seely raised his voice. "Line those cattle out, boys, and get ready to push 'em hard," he shouted. "Kid, you and me had better hightail it off to one side."

"No!" Walt cried in a stricken voice. "I can't let you do it, Seely. Not to her. If you haven't got a better way, then I'm backing the King!"

"I figured it would come to this, sooner or later!" Seely roared—and went for his gun.

Two guns exploded down below, and because one of them had come into the hand of Walt McPherson, and because Hamilton Seely was teetering in his saddle, plunging to the ground, the King had no fear for his youngest son at the moment. But there was Seely's crew, a hard-case lot, according to Rob, and undoubtedly hand-picked by Seely. They were riding up, skirting the fringe of the milling herd, and it looked as though one McPherson might need the help of another.

The King came tumbling down that slope faster than he had climbed it. Guns were barking again, his son was pitted against the others, and McPherson raised his rifle and

went into action, praying silently that the cattle would continue milling and that this gun thunder wouldn't start a stampede that would sweep down upon all of them. The herd stayed put, but there was quite a bit of gun smoke in Keyhole Pass when the law came riding up.

Sheriff Poke Winger was in the lead, and Rob and Ian McPherson and the two deputies were with him. They came roaring out of the south, the sheriff flourishing a gun and calling for an end to all this, and when he was obeyed there was time to see that Hamilton Seely was dead and so were two of his crew. The rest had their hands in the air. King McPherson had stopped one slug with his thigh and he was down in the trail, his head in Walt's lap.

"I should have knowed that you'd come right back here, King," sighed the sheriff. "I should have knowed it and wasted no time looking along Buckaroo Creek for you. I suppose this shambles was self-defense, but darned if you ain't a problem!"

"Telegram," said the King. "In my wallet. Look at it—"

THEY got the wallet and extracted the telegram from it. The waters of Buckaroo Creek hadn't done it any good, but they could still read it, by the light of matches, and they did; Ian and Rob peering over the sheriff's shoulder. The wire was from John Annard, president of Tri-State Syndicate, an answer to the telegram the King had sent the same day he'd wired his sons. It read:

SEELY OVERSTEPPING HIMSELF IN ATTITUDE ABOUT ENTERING BUCKAROO BASIN STOP MY ORDERS TO ALL REPRESENTATIVES ARE TO MAINTAIN AMICABLE RELATIONS WITH NEIGHBORING RANCHERS AND TO CROSS RANGE ONLY BY PERMISSION STOP PLEASE SHOW SEELY THIS WIRE IF HE PERSISTS IN PRESENT ATTITUDE

Ian said: "But I don't savvy it! You've had this wire all along! Why didn't you show it to the sheriff and Seely earlier tonight? You could have kept Tri-State out of the basin without lifting a finger!"

"Dinna ya ken?" said King McPherson. "I dinna care if Tri-State took over the strip—so long as Seely didn't come to hog the range. It was Seely I was trying to stop, not the syndicate. But that was only half the chore. Do ye ken, I told ye it was a family affair? And I said ye canna tell a McPherson anything. I had to show one McPherson what kind of man Seely really was. 'Twas a gamble I made, pushing Seely to the point where he'd forget his smooth-tongued ways and show the devil in him. I knew my bairn would side me when the truth came out."

"Don't you see?" Walt cried brokenly. "It was me he was trying to convince all along. He had to prove that his roughshod ways were the only ones to stop a man like Seely. I never saw through that skunk till he was so dead set on having his way that he would have stampeded his herd over mother's grave, no matter how I felt. The King hadn't counted on that happening, but he knew that Seely would show his claws when a real showdown came. And the King knew that would open my eyes."

He turned to his oldest brother. "You wanted to give me a licking tonight, Ian," he added. "I reckon I'm ready to take it now. And the King's too stove up for the time being to stop you. Go ahead."

"And ye can give the bairn a wallop for me," said King McPherson, but he was smiling, for he knew there was no need for a licking. Walt had learned his lesson. The fourth McPherson had at long last come back to his own to stay.

A DEPUTY EARNS HIS STAR

by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER



Skinny made short work of Big Buck Diamond—but he also made a dangerous enemy for himself when he tossed the rancher out into the street.

Young Skinny McCracken expected trouble when he asked to wear that law badge—but he hadn't counted on it branding him a traitor to friends and enemies alike!

CHAPTER I DEAD LAWMAN

THERE were two parts of Chemult County, parts so separate and distinct that they might as well have been divided by an ocean and a desert. Yet there was no ocean nor

desert between them. Only the precipitous side of a mountain called Domino Bluff. Below it lay the town of Bucktail in the center of a lush valley that stretched to the south as far as the Red Wall. Above it was the mountain country, criss-crossed by a maze of canyons and

dotted here and there by a nester's shack and pole corral.

Once a week Seth Dugan brought the mail from Bucktail by the narrow road that twisted up Domino Bluff directly above the big Three Diamonds Connected Ranch. Dugan was the one link between the valley and mountain people, the only man who dared show his face above the brow of Domino Bluff without inviting a hail of well-aimed lead.

Known as Skinny because his big-boned body carried three hundred pounds of what looked like fat and yet wasn't, Timothy Aloysius McCracken had spent most of his twenty-one years wondering what was behind this bitter hatred that lay between the valley and the mountain people.

Bill McCracken, Skinny's big-shouldered, gray-eyed father, could have told him, but if Skinny asked, the only answer he got was a snarled: "Shet your tater trap, and if I ever ketch you riding past the Three Diamonds Connected, I'll whup the hide off o' the seat of your pants."

There were other old-timers in the valley who knew the cause of the feud: Rufe Benlow, the county judge; Buck Diamond, who owned the Three Diamonds Connected, and the grizzled old sheriff, Jeff Curry, but like Bill McCracken, they never talked.

Newcomers to the valley recognized the feud, stayed below the Bluff and asked no questions. They took Diamond's or Benlow's word that the mountain folks were a bunch of bushwhacking killers who liked nothing better than to notch their sights on a valley man.

But Skinny wasn't like the newcomers. He had his doubts about the mountain men being the tough hands Diamond and the rest made out, doubts that were strengthened

the day he was fixing fence with his dad along the county road and Buck Diamond drove by in his buckboard with the body of Deputy Sheriff Lance Prindle.

"Found him a rod or so above Sand Springs," Diamond said grimly. "Looked to me like he'd been plugged from on top of the Bluff."

Bill McCracken shot a quick look at Skinny. Then he stepped toward the buckboard and stared at the body, anger mounting in his slate-gray eyes. He said harshly: "I reckon there ain't no doubt about who killed him."

"Mighta been any of them hellers above the Bluff," Diamond answered. "Rip Cooley. Stony Regan. Matt Keller. Hell, it won't be safe for any of us till we clean them hillbillies plumb out."

"Lance was mighty well thought of," McCracken said. An understanding look passed between the two men. "Mebbe this is the time we stomp out that nest of rattlers. I'm betting it was Stony Regan that beefed Lance. He's their top gun hand now. Rip's getting too old for their dirty work."

"Mebbe," Diamond agreed, "but whoever it was, we're going after 'em. Lance was the best deputy Jeff ever had. He can't sit around like he did the time Tom Lowrie was killed. They're gonna pay for beefing Lance if I have to dish out the hot lead myself."

"You won't be doing it alone," McCracken answered, and dropped his hammer into a can of staples. "I'm going into town with Buck, Skinny. Finish this job yourself."

For a moment McCracken's gray eyes bored into his son's, and it seemed to Skinny, as it had with increasing frequency these last few years since he had grown up, that his father was expecting and waiting for a break between them. But

the break didn't come, not then, for Skinny only nodded and watched his father step into his saddle and ride toward Bucktail beside Diamond's buckboard.

For as far back as Skinny could remember, Buck Diamond had been the big mogul in the valley. Big, this Buck Diamond, with thick shoulders and a massive head that held an aggressive, rocklike chin and a pair of bright, restless eyes. Ruthless and arrogant, too, was Buck Diamond, with the air of a man who ran things and wanted folks to know it.

Skinny thoughtfully watched his father and Diamond disappear around a turn in the road. It was strange talk Diamond had put out about Lance Prindle, for he had never got along with the deputy. Talk, Skinny guessed, that had been meant for his ears and not his father's.

FROM the time he had been a but-
ton, Skinny had wanted to be a
lawman. So had his best friend,
Russ Lowrie. This was their chance
if he and Russ could convince Jeff
Curry that they were the men for
the job. Skinny set his staple can
at the foot of a juniper post and
mounted his big roan. He'd never
defied his father, but he had a hunch
this was the time he was going to.

Russ Lowrie was puttering around
the Circle L corral when Skinny
rode up. He let out a joyous whoop
when he saw his friend.

"Get down off that poor tired
cayuse, you useless hunk of lard,"
Russ bellowed. "He's got a bend
in his back like an upended rain-
bow. I wanta see if it straightens
up when you hit the dirt."

"Looks like I've got to show you
I ain't useless, and I ain't a hunk
of lard," Skinny said coolly as he
dismounted. "You're mighty slow

to learn, pal. Seems like I have to
do this every time I come over
here."

"I just feel sorry for that roan.
Now look at him. His back is so
warped—" That was as far as Russ
got.

With surprising quickness for his
size, Skinny grabbed Russ' right
arm, and as he jerked the lighter
man toward him, he dipped his body
so that the point of his shoulder
came directly under Russ' armpit.
Russ knew what was coming. This
was a trick Skinny had played on
him a hundred times, but he couldn't
prevent himself from being whipped
across Skinny's shoulder and pin-
wheeled through the air to land with
a wind-jarring fall on his back.

"Now, my long-tongued friend,"
Skinny told him affably, "you eat
them words or I'll sit on you."

"I'd as soon have a bull on me,"
Russ said when he had his breath
back. He got to his feet a little
groggily. "By golly, Skinny, you
get bigger all the time. You sure
ain't a hunk of lard, but I still claim
you're mighty useless."

"Mebbeso," Skinny admitted. "I
figgered we'd go to town and ask
Jeff Curry what he thinks. I've
got a hunch this is a good time to
jump Jeff for a deputy job."

"Deputy!" Russ tapped his head
significantly. "You ain't only use-
less, Skinny, you're loco. Lance
Prindle's the best deputy Jeff ever
had. Folks all say that."

"Only Lance is dead, and I fig-
gered we'd better hit old Jeff up for
the job before somebody else gets
it," Skinny explained. "Buck Dia-
mond found Lance above Sand
Springs, and he's taking him into
town."

For a moment Russ stared
blankly at Skinny, as if he couldn't
believe what he heard. Then he
shook his head slowly.

"I'm guessing Diamond blames the mountain folks for it."

"Sure, and dad allowed it was Stony Regan."

"If we get the deputy job, we'll have to sashay into the mountains and bring Stony in."

"That's about the size of it."

"And we'll never get out alive. Stony Regan and that bunch is mighty tough."

"So Diamond and Benlow say. How do you know they're so almighty ornery?"

"We've heard plenty."

"Hogwash," Skinny snapped. "I saw Stony Regan in town once and he didn't look so tough. I claim there's something fishy about this whole ruckus. I've got a hunch we can straighten it out."

"Yeah," Russ said somberly, the dark light of a long memory in his eyes. He could remember the night they'd brought his father, Tom Lowrie, in with a bullet in his heart. Rip Cooley's bullet, Diamond had said, but Russ had never been sure about that, nor had his uncle Jake, who had run the Circle L since Tom Lowrie's death. "It'd be no cinch to straighten out a ruckus that's been going on for more'n fifteen years, and over something we never did know about. Jumping hoptoads, Skinny, they'd shoot us on sight! Besides, this county never has paid for more'n one deputy. Jeff couldn't hire both of us."

"It takes both of us to make one good man," Skinny said. "You're mighty handy with a gun. I've got brains. I figured we'd split the salary till the county court found out how important we was. Are you going with me, or not?"

"Sure. I admit I'm handy with a gun, but that remark about you having brains is questionable. Mighty questionable. If you did, you wouldn't be making no proposition like this."



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"Your tongue is swinging loose again, but I'll overlook it this time. Saddle up and let's mosey."

A SULTRY tightness lay over Bucktail when Skinny and Russ rode into town and racked their mounts in front of Pete Newby's harness shop. On every corner knots of men had gathered. As Skinny and Russ moved down the boardwalk, scattered bits of talk came to them, all of it about Lance Prindle's killing.

"The best deputy Chemult County ever had. Jeff won't find another one like him."

"Damned coyote nest on the other side of the Bluff. Time it was cleaned out. I want to know what Jeff aims to do about it!"

"Won't be safe for any of us now. Buck Diamond says he's been losing stock. Reckon that musta been why they bushwhacked Lance."

Skinny's elbow dug into Russ' ribs. "The pot's ready to boil over, son," he said softly. "I never seen the town ready to pop like it is now."

"She sure is," Russ agreed.

They angled across the street to the sheriff's office, and as they stepped up on the walk they heard Buck Diamond's anger-filled words. "You're going soft, Jeff. You can't sit here wearing out the seat of your pants and let Lance's killer go. Folks won't stand for it. All you got to do is get out on the street and hear what they're saying!"

Skinny grabbed Russ' arm. "Wait a minute," he breathed.

"I know what they'll say." Jeff Curry's tired voice came through the open door. "If they want a new sheriff they can have one. I took a posse up Domino Bluff and you know what happened. We lost five men, and we never did get Tom Lowrie's killer. I won't lead another five men to their death!"

Russ stiffened. Slowly he turned his head to look at Skinny, then started for the door. Skinny's big hand closed over Russ' arm again and pulled him back on his heels. "Keep on listening," Skinny whispered.

"You won't have to lead a posse up Domino Bluff, Jeff," Diamond was saying. "Deputize me. I'll do the leading—and I'll bring Stony Regan and Rip Cooley back here to hang!"

"No, Buck," Jeff answered quietly. "You don't know Regan did the killing no more than we knew Rip beefed Tom Lowrie. When I get proof I'll go after the killer myself. Whatever happens, I'll never deputize you."

"Why, you worn-out, moss-backed old goat!" Buck Diamond raged. "You don't need to get so high and mighty all of a sudden. You had as big a hand in—"

"Shut up," the sheriff said curtly.

"Let's mosey in, innocentlike," Skinny whispered, and moved across the porch.

CHAPTER II

NOT SO TOUGH

SKINNY had expected to see a gun in Jeff Curry's hand, but it wasn't there when he and Russ stepped into the sheriff's office. It may have been a moment before, for Skinny caught the blur of the sheriff's hand as it whipped back toward him and under the edge of the desk.

Buck Diamond wheeled toward the door as Skinny and Russ came in.

"What are you two mavericks doing in here?" Diamond bellowed. "Get out! I'm talking to the sheriff."

"Were you?" Skinny asked benignly, his round face expressionless. "Well, its too bad we got here

just now. We had something to ask the sheriff ourselves."

"Get out!" Diamond ordered harshly.

"If anybody gets out, you do," Skinny said easily. "It strikes me as kinda funny for you to be so danged anxious to lead a posse up Domino Bluff. I hear you been losing stock. They must be magicians, them mountain folks, if they can get your beef up the bluff without you knowing it."

Buck Diamond's eyes were hard with fury. "Bill McCracken has always been a friend of mine, but I'm damned if I'll stand here and let a bloated keg of taller talk to me like that, even if he is Bill's pup. Git out, or—"

Diamond had never seen Skinny McCracken angry. But then, he'd never talked to Skinny like that before.

Skinny didn't waste any words. One big hand grabbed Diamond by the shoulder, twisted him half around and over a corner of the sheriff's desk. The other hand slammed down with a dull thud across the seat of Diamond's pants. Then, as Skinny lifted Diamond back to a standing position, Russ Lowrie plucked the cowman's gun.

For a moment Diamond stared at Skinny, a strange grayness on his face that spoke too plainly of the killing rage that was in him. Without a word he lowered his head and charged at Skinny, his fists flying. He landed one blow on Skinny's face, and that was all, for Skinny's right fist smashed deep into Diamond's stomach with the devastating effect of a mule kick. Diamond went back and down, and lay there paralyzed as he fought to bring breath back into his lungs. Skinny bent, picked Diamond up by the coat collar and the seat of his pants, and tossed him through the door and into the street.

"If you come back in here I'll really work on you," Skinny called after him. He walked back to the sheriff and sank into a groaning chair. "Sorry about that little business, Jeff, but I don't like to be called bloated. What me and Russ came in here for was to ask you about a job."

JEFF CURRY looked as if he still didn't believe what he'd seen. He stared at Skinny's cherubic face and shook his head.

"Son, I'm getting along, and I thought I'd seen about all there was to see in this here burg, but I'm danged if I ain't just seen something I never thought I'd behold anywhere. You don't want no job. What you'll want is an undertaker soon as Buck gets his hand on his hogleg."

"He can have it any time," Russ said, and laid the gun on Curry's desk. Only Skinny ain't a gun fighter. That's my job. If Diamond wants to hang Skinny's hide on his saddlehorn, he'll have to get me first. Tell him that!"

"That's the way we work, sheriff." Skinny nodded. "You see, we know about what happened to Lance. We figgered that mebbe you could use us as your deputies."

Curry drew a gnarled hand across his whiskery face. "No, I ain't seen it all yet," he groaned. "Mebbe I ain't hearing good no more. Did you kids say you want to be deputies?"

"That's right," Skinny agreed. "We've had a hankering to be lawmen ever since we was buttons going to school. We ain't kids now, Jeff. Not the way you meant. Dad don't need me on the Half Moon, and Russ' Uncle Jake has been running the Circle L ever since I can remember. Reckon there ain't no reason why we can't take the job. We sure won't disappoint you none, Jeff,

and thanks. Mebbe we oughta have some stars, just so them tough mountain folks will know who we are."

"Hey, hold on there," Curry sputtered. "I didn't promise you no job. You're too young for this kind of business."

"I reckon we ain't," Russ said firmly. "Look what Billy the Kid was doing before he was our age. Of course we ain't no Billy the Kid, but we're old enough. I can handle a gun, and you just saw what Skinny can do. He ain't just fat like he looks. Besides, he's got a brain. He figgers things out."

Curry smiled a little at that. "What do you think you've got figgered out, young feller?"

Skinny leaned forward ponderously. "I haven't got it all figgered out, Jeff, but I've got enough to know there's something fishy about this ruckus between the valley folks and them that live above the Bluff. There ain't no reason for dad and Diamond and the rest down here to hate Stony Regan, and start claiming he did the killing when they don't have no proof."

Skinny stopped, his blue eyes searching the sheriff's face, but the lawman merely nodded and said: "Go on."

"All my life I've been raised to think Rip Cooley and Stony and the rest up there have got the devil's horns and they all pack a tail. Well, I saw Stony once, and he didn't look so tough. I've tried to find out what the trouble was, and all I got was a cussing or worse. I reckon you know what happened, Jeff. So does dad and Diamond and mebbe Rufe Benlow, but none of you will talk. Why, Jeff? If that mountain bunch had really done something bad, you fellers would be mighty willing to spin the yarn. Ain't that right?"

Again Jeff merely nodded, and said: "Go on."

"Well, the way it stacks up to me is something like this. The first ruckus, whatever it was, was really the valley folks' fault. Mebbe yours or dad's. Mebbe Diamond's. You've been hating them people up there and waiting for a chance to pay 'em back for what they did once when you took a posse up there to get 'em for killing Tom Lowrie, which mebbe they never did."

"How about that?" Russ demanded. "Buck Diamond always claimed Rip Cooley killed dad."

"I reckon Buck's right," Jeff agreed soberly. "Anyhow, folks thought Rip did it, and I took a posse up there to get him. We hit an ambush, and they got five of us. We were lucky to get some of our outfit out alive. I never tried to arrest Rip after that 'cause I didn't have no more proof against him than I've got against Stony Regan. It was just a case of Rip being their top gun hand like Stony is now."

"And Diamond was all bluff and holler then like he is now," Skinny said.

"THAT'S right," Curry admitted, "but he ain't bluff. You'll find that out if you stay around this county, Skinny. Was I you, I'd forget this crazy idea, and hightail out to a better climate."

"Nope. Me and Russ are gonna take a look-see on the other side of Domino Bluff. If you don't give us them stars, we'll go without 'em, but I'm telling you, Jeff, you're losing a couple of good men if you don't take us on."

Curry chuckled as he opened his desk drawer. "You talk plumb convincing, son. Here's the stars. If you bring Lance Prindle's killer in, they're yours as long as I'm sheriff. If you don't, you turn 'em in. Is that a deal?"

"Fair enough," Skinny agreed.

"You, Lowrie?"

"It's O. K. with me." Russ nodded.

There was a gray soberness on Jeff's leathery face as he shoved the stars across the desk.

"When you pin these on you're done being ordinary men for the time you pack 'em. They ain't no tin stars. They mean you're taking on the biggest job any man ever took. It's up to you to see that the hombre you think committed a crime is brought in, no matter what happens to you. It's your business to see that the law is enforced, even when it means hurting your friends or your kin. It's something that grows on you, and after you carry a star a spell, you get to knowing some things no man can tell you. Above everything else, them stars give you power you can't use for your own selfish business."

"I'm guessing that's why you wouldn't deputize Buck Diamond," Skinny said.

"That's it," Curry agreed somberly. "Now burn the breeze getting out of town. Heaven help you if Buck Diamond sees you."

"Buck didn't look so tough when Skinny had him stretched across the corner of your desk," Russ said, and chuckled at the memory. "I don't reckon that hombre throws quite as long a shadow as you're letting on, Jeff."

"You'll find out if you stick around here. Go on now. Mosey."

"We'll get some grub and a few boxes of shells," Skinny said, "and get moving. Come on, Russ."

CHAPTER III

BILL MCCrackEN SHOWS HIS HAND

BUCK DIAMOND wasn't in sight when Skinny and Russ stepped out of the sheriff's office, but Rufe Benlow was. He was standing in front of the Idle Hour Saloon, a long cigar tucked into one corner of

his thin-lipped mouth, his dust-yellow eyes moving from one end of the short main street to the other. For years he had been the county judge and Bucktail's only lawyer, a suave, shrewd man, friendly with both Buck Diamond and Bill McCracken, and, in Skinny's judgment, capable of any kind of legal trickery.

"Diamond ain't nowhere around," Russ said. "I'll bet he don't show up till we're out of town."

"You're wrong," Skinny answered. "He'll show up, and we'll have trouble. I'm hoping you're as handy with that iron you're packing as you think you are."

They pushed through a knot of men standing in front of Phil Madden's Mercantile, and went inside. While the storckeeper was filling their order, Russ said softly, "I don't get it, Skinny. How come you're so sure Diamond will make trouble?"

"You saw Benlow, didn't you?" Skinny asked, and when Russ nodded, he added: "He wasn't standing there for his health. Benlow and Diamond and dad are thicker'n three thieves. Mebbe that's what they are. I've often wondered."

"Your dad?" Russ asked. "Shucks, Skinny, you don't reckon he's mixed up in this with Diamond?"

"I sure do. That's one reason I'm wanting to find out what this is all about. The stork didn't give me no chance to pick my father. If it had it would have been somebody else besides Bill McCracken!"

Madden came up then. "There's your grub," he said, "and two boxes of .30-30 shells." He nodded at the star on Skinny's shirt. "What kind of a game are you two playing now? That looks real."

"It sure is, Phil," Skinny said, and grinned. He dropped a gold eagle on the counter. "That right?"

Madden nodded absently, staring at the star. "I reckon you're putting out one of your big windies again, Skinny. If that's real, Jeff Curry must have given it to you, and he wouldn't do that. Buck Diamond allowed he was gonna take Lance's place till the killing was cleared up. He claims Stony Regan did it."

"Diamond is fuller of wind than I am, Phil," Skinny said genially. "We're genuwine deputies, me and Russ, and we're aiming to have a talk with Stony. I figger he didn't beef Lance, but I'm aiming to find out."

"You're loco," Madden sputtered. "Stony Regan and Rip Cooley and that bunch ain't nobody to monkey with. If you go—"

But Skinny didn't wait to hear what the storekeeper said. He picked up the sack of grub and the shells and walked out, Russ close behind him.

"We oughta get a right nice funeral, Russ," Skinny said. "Looks like trouble right over there alongside our brones."

BILL McCracken was standing beside Skinny's roan, his hard, lean face alive with crowding anger. Buck Diamond and Rufe Benlow stood behind him. A dozen men were lined along the boardwalk in front of Newby's harness shop, staring curiously at the three men in the street.

"You, Skinny," McCracken roared when he saw his son. "I left you to finish that fence. What are you doing in town?"

"Why, I just thought I'd see what was going on," Skinny answered easily. As he turned to his horse he knew there could be no backing out for either of them. He saw it in the stubborn set of Bill McCracken's jaw, the live glow of ruthless anger in the man's gray eyes.

It was a break that should have come a long time ago, he thought. The brief memory of his mother came to him, of his own unhappy childhood, the beatings he'd taken, the tauntings about his fat, his appetite, and his uselessness. All this came to him in the brief moment it took to tie the sack of grub behind his saddle, and with it a driving anger he'd never known before.

"You get on the horse and hit back home," McCracken thundered. "When I leave you to do a job you're going to do it, or by hell I'll trim some of the fat off your carcass with a blacksnake!"

Slowly Skinny turned. He saw the malicious triumph in Buck Diamond's eyes, the sly grin on Benlow's lips. He felt the indecision in Russ Lowrie, an indecision that wouldn't have been there if it had been Buck Diamond who had been doing the talking. Ever since Skinny could remember, Bill McCracken had bullied him into submission. He'd never bully him again, Skinny told himself as his blue eyes moved down the long length of his father.

"I reckon you won't do no more trimming on me," Skinny said evenly. He tapped the star. "I'm a deputy sheriff. I had a little trouble with Diamond. Don't make me have no trouble with you."

"Deputy sheriff!" McCracken's biting laugh cut through the sultry silence. "You'll never be a deputy sheriff. Give that chunk of tin back to Jeff before you go. Takes more'n a star to make a deputy."

"Jeff is getting a little old," Rufe Benlow said, "and plumb incompetent when he picks a couple of buttons to play deputy. I reckon we'll have to look for a new sheriff."

"We will if he don't put a collar on Lance Prindle's killer," Diamond growled.

Skinny started to move around

his horse when his father caught his arm.

"I said to get rid of that star and head for home," he bellowed. "I'm damned if I don't think I'll have to get my blacksnake and curry you down right here in the street."

Skinny shook off the arm. "There's nothing on your ranch I want but my mother's picture. It's on my bureau. When I get back from the Bluff I'm coming after it. If it ain't there I'll break your neck. Savvy?"

McCracken rasped an oath. "A hunk of yaller butter like you won't break nobody's neck. Don't try acting like a man 'cause you ain't."

SKINNY had never raised a hand against this man who claimed to be his father, but he did now. His right fist came up in a smashing blow that caught Bill McCracken on the jaw and flattened him on his back in the dust.

Diamond let out a squall and reached for his gun. He pulled it half out of leather, and there his hand stopped, for he was looking into the menacing bore of Russ Lowrie's gun.

"They told me you was fast, Diamond," Russ jeered. "Fast like molasses, you crawling sidewinder."

"Put that gun down," Benlow ordered harshly. Then he whirled toward the sheriff's office and called: "Jeff, come here!"

"I'm coming, Rufe," the sheriff answered from the doorway of his office. He strode down the walk, a cocked six-gun in each hand, his leathery face twisted into a humorless grin. "You're damned right I'm coming, Rufe. Looks like I've got a couple of deputies that will be as good as Lance Prindle."

"Arrest them two," Benlow said curtly. "Skinny hit his father. Lowrie pulled a gun on Buck. They can't do that in Bucktail."

"They already done it," Jeff



Salty Saga

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Western Story

AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

grunted. "If I'm calling it right, Bucktail won't be the same again. Get on them cayuses, boys, and make 'em travel. I've got a hunch you'll find out quite a bit when you get on top of the Bluff, and I'm thinking Buck here may not want you to get there. Keep your hands away from your iron, Buck!"

"I'll kill you, Jeff," Diamond grated. "I'm telling you, if you let these two get out of town I'll kill you. And if I don't, you'll hang. Are you forgetting that?"

Bill McCracken was sitting up, shaking his head and frowning as if he couldn't remember what had happened.

"Sit pat, Bill," Jeff Curry said coldly, "and don't make no moves for your gun or I'll blast you where you sit. No, Buck, I ain't forgot, but right now I don't give a damn. Get going, you kids, and if I cash in, remember you're the law. I've been waiting for this for fifteen years, Buck. It's a sorry time when thieves fall out, but that's what's happening now. I've been waiting till the sign was right to give this county some honest law, and I'm thinking this is the time the sign is right. I'm stringing along with a couple of kids that ain't dry behind the ears, but they've got guts. That's plenty the way I look at it."

He was still talking when Skinny and Russ thundered down the street, past the boardwalks crowded with curious men, men who'd heard what had been said and didn't understand. Nor did Skinny McCracken fully understand, but the suspicion that had been in his mind was now a certainty. Later, when the town was behind and they had pulled their horses down, Russ looked at Skinny and shook his head.

"That was kinda close, son," he said. "I didn't know what to do when your dad started hoorawing you. I didn't figger you'd hit him."

"I never had before," Skinny said soberly. "I've taken a lot off o' him. I've always had a feeling he wasn't my real father, but I don't really remember any other. Kind o' seems like there was a time when my mother was living alone, but I'm not sure. Something happened when he was cussing me. Something inside of me said he wasn't no blood kin of mine. If we can get up the Bluff without getting ourselves shot, mebbe we'll find out a lot of things. Mebbe—"

"Well?" Russ asked.

"I dunno." Skinny shook his head. "I figger Jeff Curry's a white man, or he wouldn't do what he done awhile ago. He came into the valley same time Diamond and Benlow did. If he knows who I am, I've got a hunch he'll tell me."

It was late afternoon when they skirted Buck Diamond's ranch and started up the switchbacks that led to the top of Domino Bluff. Halfway up they stopped and looked back into the valley. For miles the rolling grasslands stretched toward the distant Red Wall, scarlet now with the sunlight upon it. Here and there were blots of cattle, ranch buildings with their alfalfa patches, and through it all ran the silver twist of Bucktail River. Midway between them and the Red Wall was the cluster of houses that made up the town they had left hours before.

There could be no turning back for Skinny McCracken. For that he was glad. He'd done the thing he should have done a long time ago, but with Russ Lowrie it would be different. Skinny turned his eyes from the valley and laid them on his friend. He knew the feeling that must be in Russ. Below them was the Circle L. There was his mother and his uncle Jake. There was his home, and for him, too, there might be no coming back.

"I'm sorry, Russ," Skinny said. "I . . . I reckon I didn't see what my plan was going to do when I rode over this morning."

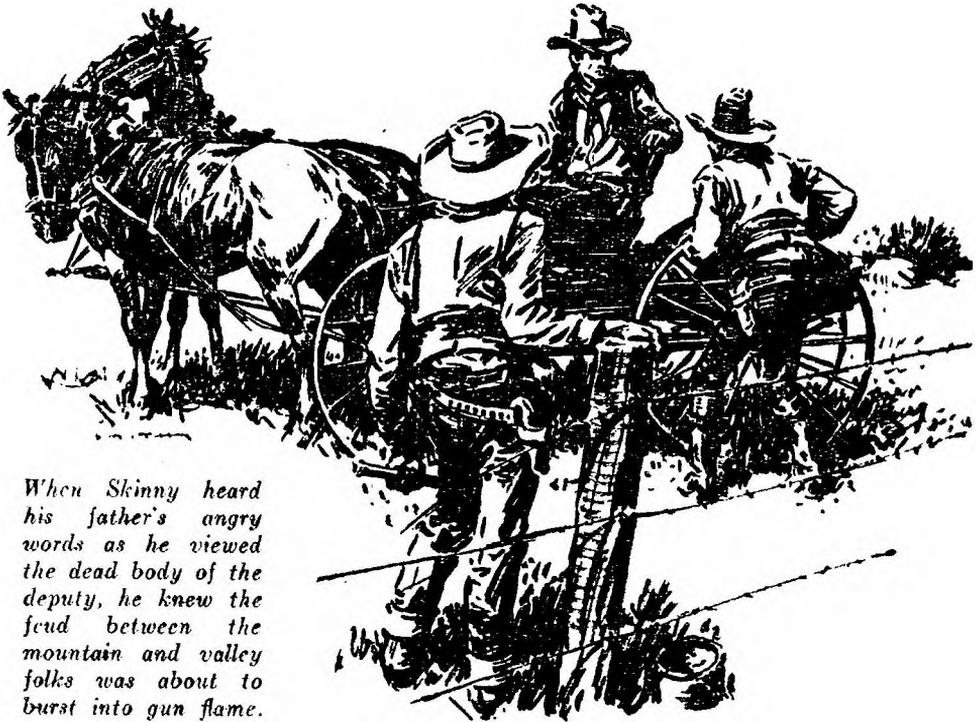
"I'm not sorry," Russ answered. "I've got something to find out, too, son. Don't forget that. If I find out that Buck Diamond killed my dad, I'll kill him. Reckon I should 'a' done it today. Only thing is how are we gonna get to where we wanta go without getting drilled?"

"We've always heard they keep a guard on top of the Bluff," Skinny

on top. Ahead of them the trail twisted down a pine-edged slope. For a moment they paused, eyes searching the silent timber and seeing nothing.

Crang! A rifle bullet lifted Skinny's hat from his head. Russ swore and roweled his horse into the cover of the pines beside the trail, but Skinny didn't move. He lifted his hands, and sat his saddle, wondering if another slug would be headed his way an inch lower.

"Come on, you danged fool,"



When Skinny heard his father's angry words as he viewed the dead body of the deputy, he knew the feud between the mountain and valley folks was about to burst into gun flame.

said thoughtfully. "I figgered he wouldn't bushwhack us. We'll just pull up when he hollers at us and tell him we want to see Rip Cooley."

"And mebbe we'll see Stony Regan through some powder smoke. Oh, well, if he ain't faster with a gun than Buck Diamond, I reckon I can take care of him. Let's travel."

Fifteen minutes later they were

Russ called from the pines. "You're making a target as big as a house."

Still Skinny held his roan in the trail. He'd heard a twig break under a man's foot. Silence again that stretched out into what seemed an eternity. Then a man said: "What are you doing up here, Fat?"

"Me and my pal wanta talk to Rip Cooley," Skinny answered. "We figgered you'd know where he was."

A jarring laugh was the man's only answer. A long period of silence followed the laugh, broken finally by the words: "Yeah, I know where Rip Cooley is. Mebbe he'd wanta talk. I dunno, but we ain't coming out while your pard's waiting out there in the trees. Call him back."

"Russ?" Skinny called. "Show yourself. This gent will take us to Cooley."

CHAPTER IV

MOUNTAIN MEN'S WELCOME

RUSS LOWRIE rode out of the timber, warily eying the pines on the other side of the trail.

"I don't like it, Skinny," Russ muttered. "It'd be like shooting young jay birds off a juniper limb to get us the way we're sitting out here in the open."

"Dab a loop on your tongue," Skinny ordered, "and keep your hands away from your gun."

A moment later two men rode into view, cocked six-guns in their hands. One was tall and angular with little red eyes that leaped suspiciously from Skinny to Russ and back to Skinny. The other was short and stocky, his round face burned to a mahogany tan. Skinny wasn't sure, but he thought the short man was Matt Keller.

"I don't reckon we oughta take these hombres down to see Rip," the tall man said darkly. "We'd better start 'em back down the trail, Matt."

The stocky man was Keller. Skinny had heard Bill McCracken say more than once that Matt Keller was, next to Stony Regan, the most dangerous man in the mountains, but he didn't look dangerous now. He slipped his Colt back into leather and for a long moment didn't speak while his mild-blue eyes studied the two before him.

"Take it easy, Bony," Keller said finally. "Let's hear what they've got to say. I reckon you're out of the valley. By the looks of them stars you must be deputies. Where's Lance Prindle?"

"Dead," Skinny answered. "Murdered at the foot of the Bluff. Buck Diamond found him this morning."

Keller swore. "Lance dead? Who does Diamond claim did it?"

"He figgers mebbe you did," Skinny answered. "Or Stony Regan. That's why we're up here. We had a hunch you boys didn't do it. Mebbe Diamond had some reason of his own to lay it onto you."

"That skunk would have plenty of reason," Keller said soberly. "Who are you?"

"I'm Skinny McCracken, and this is Russ Lowrie. We want to see Rip Cooley. We figger—"

"Russ Lowrie, eh?" Keller mused, his eyes on Russ. "You're Tom Lowrie's boy, ain't you?" When Russ nodded, Keller went on, "I should 'a' knowed that when I saw you. You're the spittin' image of Tom twenty years ago. He was a square-shooter, Tom was. Dunno how he ever got mixed up with Diamond and McCracken. You, Fat, don't look nothing like Bill McCracken. If he's your dad you ain't welcome here. He ain't quite as low-down as Buck Diamond and Rufe Benlow, but he's mighty near it. Now you can—"

"Hold on, Keller," Skinny cut in. "I'm not going back till I get what I came after. If I did show up in Bucktail, the gents you've been cussing would be after me with all the ammunition they've got. I can't take no credit for Bill McCracken being my dad, and I don't see no reason why I should be blamed for it."

"Mebbe not." A grim smile came to Keller's lips. "No, I reckon I can't blame you, only the name

McCracken is enough to start trouble up here. What's that about you having trouble in Bucktail?"

QUICKLY, Skinny told him, and added, "I'm aiming to find out what this fracas is about. I've had a hunch for a long time it ain't you folks' fault, and it always did strike me as mighty queer that dad or nobody down there wanted to talk about it."

"It's a trap," the tall man snarled. "Matt, let's turn both of 'em back. If them valley skunks have plugged Lance, it's time we went after 'em."

"Might be a trap," Keller admitted, "but their yarn sounds straight. Don't see that it would hurt to let 'em talk to Rip. Fact is, Rip would be mad if he didn't get to see 'em. It's the first time anybody but Seth Dugan ever had the guts to come up here, and when this fat boy says he's Bill McCracken's pup, he's got more guts than I ever gave any of 'em credit for. Besides, they might be spies, and it would sure be a mistake to send 'em back."

"Spies?" the tall man yelled. "Hell's bells, we can't run no chances on 'em getting back. Best thing is to beef 'em, and shove 'em over the Bluff. Let Diamond find 'em."

"You'd make him mighty happy," Skinny said cheerfully. "That wouldn't make Buck mad at all."

"Stay here, Bony," Keller ordered. "I'll take these hombres in. Rip is smart enough to find out what they're after. If they make a wrong move they'll wish they stayed below the Bluff." He turned to Skinny. "I'm letting you keep your guns in case Stony takes it into his head to feed you some lead. Can't never tell what Stony's gonna do. He ain't nowise like Lance, and I ain't one to let a man get shot

without giving him a chance. Now get going. The store is about two miles down the trail."

"Why should Lance Prindle be like Stony Regan?" Skinny demanded.

"They're brothers," Keller said. "Lance's real name was Regan, but he didn't dare take that name when he got the deputy job. You can ask Rip the rest of your questions. Mebbe he'll answer and mebbe he won't. Get moving."

Skinny asked no more questions. He was getting all he could ask from Matt Keller. If Lance Prindle was Stony Regan's brother, then he must have been sent into the valley to find something out. Perhaps he had found out what he wanted, faced Buck Diamond with his knowledge, and Diamond had killed him. The more Skinny thought about it, the more certain he became that he'd guessed the reason for the deputy's murder, but he had no idea what Prindle had discovered, and undoubtedly his knowledge had died with him.

"There it is," Keller said, nodding at the clearing that opened before them. "That's the size of our town. Ripburg, we call it, on account of Rip owns the store. He's kind o' mayor, judge and sheriff all rolled into one. He's done a good job for more'n fifteen years. Even Stony's afraid of the old man. And say, Fat, don't get on your high horse if Stony starts making talk you don't like. If he's there, and Rip ain't, you may wish I'd let you go back like Bony wanted to."

"Buck Diamond claims some of you killed Tom Lowrie," Skinny said to Keller.

The mountain man swore. "That would be like Buck Diamond. It wasn't us that beefed Tom, and I wish we knew who it was. We've got our own ideas, and that's all."

THE three of them rode in silence until they reined up in front of the big log cabin that housed Rip Cooley's store. Then, after they'd hitched their mounts, Keller said: "Remember to keep your temper down, Fat. Stony's here. That's his paint. He's bad when he's hoo-rawed, but he sure likes to curry the other feller."

They went into the store, Skinny and Russ ahead, Keller behind. A rough pine bar ran the full length of one side of the store. Shelves filled with goods were on the other side. Four men were sitting around the one card table in the back. They looked up, frowning when they saw that two strangers had come in.

"Where's Rip?" Keller asked.

"He's down at the spring," one of the men answered.

Silence then while Skinny moved toward the bar. Russ had stopped just inside the door. One of the men rose, kicked back his chair, and came toward Skinny. He was young and slim, with sharp blue eyes, a shadow of a mustache, and the long, quick fingers of a gun slick. This was Stony Regan, Skinny knew. It had been three years since he'd seen him, but Regan was the sort a man wouldn't forget.

"Where'd you find 'em, Matt?" Regan asked. He came up to Skinny, his eyes moving slowly down Skinny's broad frame.

"They came up the trail," Keller answered. "They want to see Rip."

"I reckon Rip will want to see this one," Regan jeered. "We're plumb out o' lard. Rip didn't have none the last time ma asked. I reckon we could boil this hog down and get a barrel. Or mebber we could just slice it off."

One of the men at the table snickered. Encouraged, Regan went on, "Or mebber it'd be easier just to squeeze it off. I never seen nothing quite like it. Did you, Matt?"

"Shut up," Keller said sharply. "This is one of Chemult County's deputies. He says Lance was killed last night, and he's trying to find out what we know about it."

An ugly glint came into Regan's eyes when he heard the news of his brother's death.

"Chemult County is getting hard up for deputies when it hires anything like this taller tub," Regan said. "That star he's wearing ain't even tin!" He reached forward to take the star from Skinny. That was a mistake. Skinny grabbed his hand, jerked Regan toward him and flipped him over his shoulder as he had Russ that morning. Stony Regan hit the floor and lay still.

"Hey!" one of the men at the table bellowed, and reached for his gun.

Skinny McCracken had never been fast with a gun, but he was fast enough to bring his Colt clear of leather and cover the men at the table before any of them had their guns in their hands.

"Sit pat, you gents," Skinny said softly. "Russ, keep your eye on Regan."

"He won't bother you none for a spell," Russ answered.

Skinny didn't turn his head, but out of the corner of his eye he saw that Russ had shoved his gun into Matt Keller's back.

"I was hoping we wouldn't have any trouble," Skinny said soberly as he moved toward the table, "but your friend Regan was sure asking for it."

"Looks like Bony was right," Keller growled angrily. "We should 'a' filled you full o' lead and shoved you off the Bluff."

"If you gents will get down off your high horse, mebber you'll change your mind, Keller," Skinny answered testily. "I told you we didn't want no trouble."

"You got it, anyway, son," a high,

strident voice sounded from the doorway. "Drop them hoglegs, you two!"

CHAPTER V

TRAPPED

SKINNY didn't drop his gun. Not then. He heard Russ' Colt hit the floor, saw Keller grab it and move away from the bar, his dark face full of fury.

"Let that iron go, Fat!" Keller said harshly. There was death in his voice, quick and certain death, and now Skinny knew why Bill McCracken had called Keller a dangerous man.

There was nothing for Skinny to do but let the gun go. Then slowly he turned toward the doorway. A white-bearded man was standing there, a double-barreled shotgun in his hands. He was eying Russ Lowrie thoughtfully, as if an old and almost forgotten memory was crowding back into his mind. He walked across the room and laid his shotgun on the bar, his eyes still on Russ.

"I'm getting a mite old, I reckon," the bearded man said finally, "and mebbe a little dodderly, but, by hokey, I'd say that this young un was Tom Lowrie if I didn't know Tom'd cashed in his chips more'n fifteen years ago."

"It's Tom Lowrie's boy, Rip," Keller said. "The other one's Bill McCracken's kid."

"Bill McCracken's kid," Cooley echoed, and stared at Skinny. Slowly he shook his head. "Don't look nothing like Bill. You got more guts than Bill ever had. What are you doing up here, Fat, and what're you toting that star fur?"

"Lance Prindle is dead," Skinny answered shortly. "Russ and me are deputies. We figgered it wasn't some of your bunch that beefed Lance. Buck Diamond claimed it was, and he's talking about getting

a posse together and cleaning you out."

Rip Cooley's eyes darkened. "So Lance is dead, and they're laying it onto us. They won't come after us, Fat. They tried it once, and I reckon Jeff Curry won't forget what happened that time."

Stony Regan was sitting up now, shaking his head dazedly. Cooley jerked a thumb at Regan. "What happened to him?"

"Fat gave him a ride," Keller snarled. "Knocked him colder'n a bull's horn on Christmas Eve. I was sucker enough to believe their yarn about coming up here to find out what was the cause of our ruckus with them valley coyotes. Him and Lowrie pulled their guns on us after Fat set Stony on his ear. Looks to me like they came up here to get Stony or me or mebbe both of us for beefing Lance."

Skinny had heard enough. Hard anger was crowding him as he walked straight toward the cocked gun in Matt Keller's hand.

"Mebbe I had it all wrong," Skinny said. "I never did trust Buck Diamond. I don't like Rufe Benlow. I ain't sure Bill McCracken is my real father. I always figgered you folks had been kicked around, and the real blame for the trouble oughta be laid on Diamond and his outfit. Now I ain't sure. You're acting like a bunch of mule-headed jayhoos. Keller, if you think I was gonna stand there and listen to Regan's smart-Aleck talk, you sure got me wrong. I pulled a gun because I had some talking of my own to do."

"Hold up, Fat," Keller barked. "You come another step nearer to me and I'll ventilate that wind-stuffed hide of yours."

"Hold your hosses, Matt." Rip Cooley put out a skinny hand and gripped Keller's gun hand. "I wanta hear Fat talk. He says

mebbe Bill McCracken ain't his dad. I'm kinda thinking he's right. Matt, do you remember who McCracken married?"

"Yeah, sure," Keller answered. "He married Lucy Day."

"That's right." Cooley nodded. "And Lucy Day was married to Sam Day, and he homesteaded on Bucktail River mighty near where Diamond's 'Three Diamonds Connected house is. She had a baby when Sam died. Might be Fat here is Sam's boy, and not McCracken's."

"Mebbeso," Keller snapped. "Makes me no never mind. All I know is these hombres came up here wanting to see you. I let 'em keep their guns 'cause I wasn't sure what Stony would do, but he didn't try no gunplay. He was just having some fun."

"I know the way Stony has fun," Cooley answered. "I ain't blaming Fat for what he done."

"But he didn't need to pull a gun on us," Keller grated. "I told him not to pay no attention to what Stony said. I claim they aimed to get us."

DIP COOLEY wasn't listening. He was pulling thoughtfully at his beard, his faded-gray eyes on Skinny. "I'm making a bet that's the way it was, son," Cooley said. "Sam Day cashed in a month or more before they chased us out of the valley, but they didn't bother his widder. I heard Diamond bought the homestead. Leastwise, Lucy moved into town, and later on she married McCracken. I never knowed what happened to the baby, but I'm guessing you're him."

Stony Regan was on his feet now and lurching toward Skinny, a gun in his hand. "Nobody can heave me around like a sack of wheat," Regan snarled. "I'm gonna slice some of that lard off o' you with lead."

"Hold on, Stony," Cooley said sharply, and picked up his shotgun. "You been riding purty high for quite some time. Mebbe you better go gunning for Buck Diamond if you're so anxious to take on a pot of trouble. It's a purty safe bet you'd be evenin' up for Lance if you got Diamond."

Regan stopped, glared balefully at Skinny a moment, then slipped his gun into its holster and slouched back to his chair at the table.

"What did you say about being chased out of the valley?" Skinny demanded of Cooley.

"Didn't you ever hear about that?" Cooley asked in surprise. "Sure. Me and Matt here and two, three more homesteaded along Bucktail River, but Diamond had other ideas. They was too much for us; Diamond, Benlow, McCracken, and the rest. Tom Lowrie was with 'em, too. Wasn't anything for us to do but get killed or get out, so we came up here."

"Just why Tom Lowrie was beefed, I ain't sure, but he wasn't out of the same skunk brood the rest of 'em was. He saved my life once when Diamond was fixing to shoot me in the back. I allus had a hunch Buck Diamond beefed Tom after they'd had some row. Mebbe 'bout coming up here. Diamond would like to have this country for his summer range. I don't reckon Tom was gonna stand for it. Anyhow, after Tom was murdered, Diamond and Jeff Curry and their bunch rode in here to get us, but all they got was some hot lead. They ain't never tried it since, and I'm thinking they never will."

"Don't be too sure about that," Skinny said quickly. "Diamond wants to come, but Jeff said he'd never lead another posse up here. We had trouble with Diamond and Bill McCracken before we left town. If Jeff hadn't sided us, I reckon

they'd be fixing to plant us by now."

Cooley snickered. "Jeff wouldn't want to try it again. No, siree." Then Cooley sobered. "You say Jeff and Diamond was doing some jawing?"

"Plenty." Skinny nodded. "The last we saw of 'em Jeff had his gun on Diamond, and Diamond was saying he'd kill Jeff if he let us get out of town."

"He said something about hanging Jeff." Russ Lowrie put in.

"Yeah. Looks to me like mebbe Diamond's got something on Jeff," Skinny said. "That's why we're here. We figgered that you might put us onto something that would give us a clue to why Lance Prindle was beefed."

"Rip, don't listen to their long tongues." Matt Keller interrupted. "I did, and I'm saying I never made a bigger mistake. We got no way of knowing they ain't up here spying for Diamond. I tell you they pulled guns on me and the boys. They ain't here for no good, or they wouldn't have done that."

PIP COOLEY didn't look at Keller. His eyes moved from Russ to Skinny, and back to Russ. "I ain't got no doubt about who killed Lance," he said. "He's a brother of Stony's, but he never lived here much. Grew up in Prineville, but he wrote to us all the time. He got it into his head that he could get a job in Bucktail, and mebbe get some proof about the land. The best part of Diamond's ranch is land that rightfully belongs to us, but we couldn't get nowhere long as Rufe Benlow was the county judge and Jeff Curry was sheriff. Waal, my guess is Lance got some proof, and Diamond killed him."

"Bill McCracken might have known what had happened before he saw Lance's body," Skinny said thoughtfully. It seemed strange to

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refer to McCracken by name. "They agreed mighty quick it was some of you who had shot Lance, and that they wan't gonna be safe until they'd cleaned you out."

"Mebbeso." Cooley nodded his agreement. "Matt, is Bony still guarding the road?"

"Yeah," Keller said. "If you reckon there'll be any trouble, me and Stony had better hit back for the Bluff and side Bony."

Cooley didn't answer for a moment. He was pulling at his beard again, eying Skinny. "If what these hombres say is straight there might be trouble. The only thing I can't see about this business is why Diamond and the rest of 'em would take it into their noggins to make another try at us when they've let us alone for so long."

"Suppose Lance had really found out something," Skinny said thoughtfully. "Mebbe Diamond is afraid he'd passed it along to you."

"Lance never took a chance on coming up here." Cooley shook his head. "Diamond would have kept an eye on Lance if he had any suspicions."

"Seth Dugan brings the mail up here every week," Skinny pointed out. "Even Buck Diamond wouldn't interfere with the mail. He may think Lance wrote you a letter telling you what he found out. He's got folks thinking you killed Lance, and that's all he needs to give him an excuse to come up here and salivate the bunch of you."

"He's talking sense, all right," Cooley said to Keller. "Mebbe—"

Outside the pound of hoofs and the skirl of wheels cut into Cooley's words.

"It's Seth!" Keller bellowed. "What's wrong? He never comes up here in the middle of the week!"

They streamed out of the store, Cooley and Matt Keller in front, Stony and the rest behind. For a

moment they had forgotten Skinny and Russ, a moment long enough for Skinny to pick up the gun he'd dropped when Rip Cooley had come in and slip it inside his shirt.

"You sure ain't convinced Keller of nothing," Russ said worriedly.

"No, but Cooley ain't so mule-headed," Skinny replied. "Let's amble out with the rest of 'em."

"I wasn't around when it started," Dugan was saying when Skinny and Russ came out of the store, "but I heard there was a ruckus going on downtown. When I got there, Diamond and Jeff Curry was blasting away at each other. Jeff ain't dead, but he's hit bad. Benlow appointed Diamond acting sheriff. The first thing he did when he put on Jeff's star was to start picking a posse to come up here."

"Benlow ain't got no right to do that," Rip Cooley roared.

"He done it, anyway," Dugan said. "They'll be here any time. Was I you, I'd hit for the brush."

"We ain't hitting nowhere," Cooley answered. "They chased us out of our homes once. Buck Diamond won't do it again."

THEN Dugan saw Skinny and Russ. "Diamond claims he's gonna throw you boys into the calaboose. You'd better light a shuck out of here."

"Reckon we'll stick around, Seth." A thin grin came to Skinny's lips. "If Jeff's shot up, me and Russ are the law. I reckon I'll arrest Buck when he shows up."

"You're dad'll be along. They're sure pining for bear meat. You kids ain't got a chance."

"If Bill McCracken shows up," Skinny said shortly, "he'll take his chances with the rest. I'm aiming to arrest Buck Diamond for the murder of Lance Prindle, and before I'm done I'll make it stick."

"You wouldn't arrest Diamond,"

Stony Regan sneered. "You'd get your fist on a gun and throw in with 'em, you sneaking spy. I oughta—"

"Shut up," Cooley snapped. "Matt, lock these boys up in the feed shed. I ain't sure enough of you two to let you sashay around loose when the shooting starts."

"Matt, you better light out for the road. The rest of us'll stay here. If they do come up the road, hold 'em off. When we hear the shooting, we'll burn the breeze getting there. I'm guessing they'll come up the Bluff by the river trail and hit us 'bout dark. We can't afford to get scattered too much. If Diamond's outfit tackles us we'll fort up in the store. You and Bony can pick off a few from the brush. Seth, this ain't your fight. You clear out, and thanks for coming."

"I'm staying." Dugan's jaw was set. "I never had no use for Buck Diamond. I'll be plumb happy to slam a little lead in his direction, but I'm telling you one thing, Rip. You're making a mistake not letting these boys side you."

"Can't afford to take no chances on having 'em around till I'm sure where they stand," Cooley answered stubbornly. "Go on, Matt. Bony may be needing you mighty fast."

"O. K., Rip. Git moving, Fat. You, too, Lowrie. That's the feed shed down there past the corral."

Skinny and Russ obeyed, Keller close behind them, his gun in his hand. When they reached the shed, Matt opened the door.

"Get in there," he ordered curtly.

Russ hesitated, glanced at Skinny, and then faced Keller.

"Mebbe I'm kind o' slow in the head, Keller," Russ said, "but it sure don't make sense to me to lock us up when you're gonna be needing all the guns you've got."

"Rip gives the orders around here, and you heard what he said," Keller

snailed. "There's a grain room in the back. Reckon that'll hold you till this shindig is over."

They moved the length of the shed, and in the gloom Keller didn't see Skinny's hand slip inside his shirt and clutch the butt of the Colt. At the door of the grain room Russ stopped again.

"Dang it, Keller," Russ exploded, "I tell you you're gonna need us. Mebbe you don't know Buck Diamond as well as we do. They'll salivate every son of you and burn the buildings. Me and Skinny'll fry in here like a couple of steaks."

"You mean a chunk of pork." Keller snickered and jerked a thumb at Skinny, but his eyes were on Russ. In that second Skinny's hand appeared with the Colt clutched in his fingers.

"Drop your hogleg, Keller," Skinny snapped, "or I'll drill you!"

FOR a moment Keller stood motionless, his gun on Russ. Then he moved his head enough to see the gun in Skinny's hand.

"Drop it," Skinny said again.

"I could down Lowrie while you was plugging me," Keller snarled.

"Which wouldn't keep you alive," Skinny countered.

Again Keller was silent, as if weighing his chances. Then his fingers opened and he let the gun drop. Russ scooped it up and backed away.

"We're getting in this fight whether you like it or not," Russ said. "You're gonna be the one who'll roost in the grain room, and mebbe fry if Diamond wins this ruckus. Inside!"

Keller obeyed, cursing. Skinny shut the door and twisted the turn-pin.

"Won't they wonder why Keller don't ride out?" Russ asked.

"They've got too much to think about," Skinny answered. "Besides,

it's getting dusk. Cooley may figure he missed seeing Keller in the dark."

"You mean we're gonna sit here?"

"That's it," Skinny nodded. "I reckon we'll do the most good after the fight gets started."

CHAPTER VI

SKINNY EARNS HIS STAR

SKINNY and Russ waited just inside the feed-shed door while darkness settled over the clearing. An hour later the moon rose above the pines, and with it came the sound of horses' hoofs.

"They're coming," Russ murmured, and drew Keller's gun from leather.

"And they'll burn every building they can," Skinny said, "including this one if we ain't lucky enough to down Diamond. Keller would have let us stay here and roast, but I ain't built that way. I'm gonna let him go." He walked to the back of the shed and opened the door of the grain room. "Sounds like they're coming, Keller. I'm letting you out."

"Thanks," Keller said sardonically. "When I get my hands on an iron, I'll give you what you got coming for trying to double-cross us. If you'd had a little luck, me and Stony would be headed for the Bucktail calaboose right now."

"For the last time," Skinny snapped, "I'm telling you we ain't playing Diamond's game. Alongside of you, a nuple is plumb easy to convince. Now get out of here."

Keller didn't answer. He raced out of the feed shed, stood for a moment in the shadows, listening, then dropped to his stomach and began worming his way toward the corrals.

"Danged fool," Russ whispered. "He'll never get through that bunch on a horse."

"I ain't so sure," Skinny said. "He's purty smart, Keller is, even if he is stubborn."

"Let's get out of here, Skinny. I'd feel a heap better out there in the brush."

"I'm sticking here," Skinny answered shortly. "I'm guessing this'll be a good place to grab Diamond. If we get him the fight's over. You go ahead, Russ."

"Then, I'm—"

"Hey, Cooley." It was Diamond's voice, heavy with authority.

There was no answer.

"Come on out, Cooley," Diamond yelled again. "I'm acting sheriff of Chemult County. I'm arresting you and Stony Regan for the murder of Lance Prindle. Come out with your hands in the air and nobody gets hurt."

Still no answer.

"I've got a posse," Diamond yelled. "You ain't got a chance. If you don't come out in ten seconds I'll burn you out."

"Go to hell," Stony Regan shrilled, and blasted a shot at the sound of Diamond's voice.

Before the echoes of Regan's gun thunder died, the night became a roaring inferno as Diamond's posse answered with rifle fire.

"They're wasting a lot of good ammunition," Russ muttered in Skinny's ear.

"I'd say it wasn't wasted," Skinny said. "Unless I've sized Diamond up wrong, we'll see him pull something smart before long."

Before Skinny had finished speaking, a lurid tongue of flame leaped skyward from a cabin at the edge of the clearing. A moment later another cabin burst into flames.

"There won't be nothing left of Ripburg in a minute," Russ whispered.

"Whoever's setting them fires will be here in a minute. Keep your smoke pole handy, son."

SKINNY had guessed right. Within five minutes four men moved out of the shadows behind the feed shed and stepped into the moonlight for an instant, long enough for Skinny to recognize them. They were Buck Diamond, Ed Lake, Diamond's foreman, Rufe Benlow, and Bill McCracken. Then they were around the corner of the feed shed and out of sight from the store.

"That building's mighty solid, Buck," McCracken said. "Don't see what good it does to keep the boys pumping lead into it."

"It'll do plenty good," Diamond answered with assurance. "We'll drop a match into this one and catch that other shack below the store. Then we'll give 'em one more chance."

"If they come out we'll string 'em up," Benlow said complacently. "If they don't we'll play Indian and drop a few lighted arrows on the roof. It's dry enough to catch mighty quick."

"They've got a right to a trial," McCracken said doggedly. "We're supposed to be a posse."

"Sure." Ed Lake snickered. "We'll give 'em a trial, won't we, Buck?"

"Don't go to giving us any of that law-and-order talk, Bill," Diamond growled. "You ain't forgot Tom Lowrie, have you?"

Before McCracken could answer, Skinny cocked his gun, a sound audible in a sudden lull in the firing.

"Get your meat hooks up, the four of you!" Skinny said coldly. "You're under arrest, Diamond."

Skinny had stepped away from the shed so that Diamond and the rest could make out the dark bulk of his body. None of the four had guns in their hands, and for that reason they stood motionless, as if frozen before the threat of Skinny's gun.

"Russ Lowrie's here in case any

of you figger on shooting it out," Skinny went on. "Don't make a wrong move, Diamond."

Diamond cursed sourly. "All right. I ain't loco, Skinny. How do you figger this is gonna pay you?"

"Plenty. I'm gonna take you back to Bucktail and shove you into a cell. Then when I find out what Lance Prindle knew, I'll have all the proof I need. I reckon you'll swing for his murder, and mebbe Tom Lowrie's, too."

It was Ed Lake who made the first move for his gun, a fast draw hidden by Rufe Benlow's body until the gun was leveled, but his shot was wild. An instant before he squeezed trigger, Skinny pitched a quick shot that caught the foreman in the chest. Flame ribboned the darkness as Diamond and Benlow plucked guns and fired. Skinny felt the hot breath of a slug fan his cheek. He shot twice at Diamond, saw the big man lurch forward and spill to the ground. Benlow screamed and sprawled headlong as Russ Lowrie drove a slug into his middle.

BILL McCracken hadn't drawn a gun. He stood there motionless, hands at his sides, and it was then that Matt Keller came around the corner of the shed, a .45 in his hand. He saw McCracken and fired.

"Hold on, Keller," Skinny belted, but he was too late. McCracken took a step forward, one hand clutching his side, and fell.

"You fool," Skinny raged. "he didn't pull a gun!"

"How'd I know?" Keller demanded. "Rip always keeps a gun in his saddlebag. I got it and was lying by the corral when I saw these huckleberries sneaking toward the shed. I heard what they said."

Skinny was kneeling beside McCracken. The man wasn't dead, but he had a bad wound. Skinny plugged the hole with his bandanna.

The firing had stopped as if both sides wondered what had happened here beside the feed shed.

"Dad"—Skinny said the word from force of habit—"Diamond's cashed in. No use of anybody else getting hurt. Can you pull this posse off?"

"I reckon I can," McCracken said hoarsely. "You and Russ get me over to 'em."

"Get into the store if you can, Keller," Skinny said. "Tell 'em to quit shooting."

"That posse will drill us before they find out who we are," Russ said.

"We'll take the chance." Skinny answered. "We'll work around the corral."

Five minutes later, McCracken was close enough to the posse to be heard.

"I wanta talk to you, boys," he croaked, and when they'd gathered around him, he said: "No use of staying here. Buck's dead, and so is Rufe. Skinny here is a deputy. I reckon he's the only one that's got any right to give orders."

"That's the way she stacks up," Skinny said. "I've been up here long enough to know who killed Lance Prindle. I'll bring the killer when I come. You boys hit the trail back to Bucktail."

For a time they stared at Skinny, motionless as if not fully understanding what had happened, but when McCracken raised a hand and said wearily: "That's right, boys. Get moving. You got no more business here," they turned away. A moment later Skinny heard the sound of their departing horses.

"I didn't think for a minute they was gonna go," Russ muttered, and mopped his brow.

"Before we left town," McCracken said, "Diamond told 'em to

follow my orders in case anything happened to him. Son"—he reached up and took Skinny's hand in his—"I've got a feeling I'm gonna be seeing the pearly gates before long. I dunno what happened to me awhile ago, but I guess it was hearing Buck remind me of Tom Lowrie. Buck beefed Tom 'cause he kept hollering about paying Cooley and his bunch for their land."

"Then that—" Russ began, and stopped when Skinny dug a fist into his side.

"I ain't been much man," McCracken went on, "when you really get the sand sifted down. Years ago, me and Jeff was on the dodge, and Buck knew about it. He's made us toe the mark ever since. After Buck killed Lance Prindle, Jeff finally got his belly full, and Buck shot him today. I still didn't see it straight, not till he reminded me of Tom. I ain't done right by you, neither. You ain't my boy. You're Sam Day's kid, and your ma made me promise to treat you like my own son. That's why you was never told. Now I'm at the end of the trail, and I'm saying the orneriest thing I've done is the way I've treated you since your ma died. The ranch is yours. Mebbe that'll help. And Jeff won't die. I reckon you've earned your star if that's what . . . you . . . really . . . want."

There was a shaft of moonlight squarely on Bill McCracken's face, and by it Skinny watched the gray eyes close, the hard face soften. Bill McCracken never opened his eyes again.

"When you finally get the sand sifted down," Skinny said reverently, "I'd say Bill McCracken was considerable of a man. Come on, Russ. I reckon Rip Cooley and the rest of his outfit will want to know what's happened."

IF YOU'RE MAKING MORE MONEY

...WATCH OUT!



THIS YEAR Americans are going to make—minus taxes—125 billion dollars.

But this year, due to the war, we are going to have only 80 billion dollars' worth of goods to spend this on.

That leaves 45 billion dollars' worth of money burning in our jeans.

If each of us should take his share of this 45 billion dollars (which averages approximately



\$330 per person) and hustle out to buy all he could with it—what would happen is what happens at an auction where every farmer there wants a horse that's up for sale.

We would bid the prices of things up and up and up. Instead of paying \$30 for a suit we're going to pay \$45. Instead of \$5 for a pair of shoes we're going to pay \$8.

This bidding for scarce goods is going to raise prices faster than wages. Wages just won't keep up.

So what will people do?

U. S. workers will ask for more money. Since labor is scarce, a lot of them will get it. Then farmers

and business men who feel the pinch are going to ask more money for their goods.

And prices will go *still higher*. And the majority of us will be in that same old spot again—only worse.

This is what is known as Inflation.

Our government is doing a lot of things to keep prices down... rationing the scarcest goods, putting ceiling prices on things, stabilizing wages, increasing taxes. But the government can't do the *whole job*. So let's see what we can do about it.

If, instead of running out with our extra dough, and trying to bid on everything in sight, we buy only what we absolutely need, we will come out all right.

If, for instance, we put this money into (1) Taxes; (2) War Bonds; (3) Paying off old debts;



(4) Life Insurance; and (5) The Bank, we don't bid up the prices of goods at all. And if besides doing this we (6) refuse to pay

more than ceiling prices; and (7) ask no more for what we have to sell—no more in wages, no more for goods—*prices stay where they are now*.

And we pile up a bank account. We have our family protected in case we die. We have War Bonds that'll make the down payment on a new house after the war, or help us retire some day. And we don't have taxes after the war that practically strangle us to death.

Maybe, doing this sounds as if



it isn't fun. But being shot at up at the front isn't fun, either. You have a duty to those soldiers, as well as to yourself. You *can't* let the money that's burning a hole in your pocket start setting the country on fire.

★ ★ ★

This advertisement, prepared by the War Advertising Council, is contributed by this magazine in co-operation with the Magazine Publishers of America.

KEEP PRICES DOWN!

Use it up
Wear it out
Make it do
Or do without

BUZZARD BONANZA

by RALPH YERGEN



The buzzard trainer's ghoulish scheme mushroomed the tide of anger in Danny Wade's brain.

To thirst-tortured Danny Wade, a drink of water was worth his fortune in gold—but what could he use to buy his life from Turp Skaglon's hungry vultures?

WITH sickening, blistering ferocity, the noon sun smashed down at Danny Wade. The white desert reeled before his eyes. He stumbled, dropped to his knees, the sand burning through his trousers like molten metal.

Something that glistened white in the sun's rays wavered within his vision. Danny's feet weighed tons and were shot with pain, but he forced them to respond and plunged toward the white object.

It was only a heap of human bones, like the many others he had passed on his tortuous way across Blastoven Desert. The bleached

skull seemed to grin hideously at him, as if it knew that the same fate was closing down on Danny Wade.

Danny knew it, too. The low red hills looked close, but he knew they might as well have been on the moon for all his chances of reaching their trickling springs. Even in April when he had first crossed the Blastoven on his way to the gold veins of Butcher Knife Mountain, there had been no water in all that forty-mile stretch. And during the long summer not a mist drop had fallen on the parched desert.

Danny had been the last prospec-

tor to leave the Butcher Knife. The others had pulled out singly or in pairs with their burros and bags of gold. All had been confident that the two never-failing waterholes on the vast desert floor would tide them across as they had before. The trail of skeletons formed grisly proof of their error.

Danny had long since passed the only two known waterholes on the entire expanse. In April they had been full of brackish liquid, but now both were dried up. The first one bore evidence of having been blasted. Someone doubtless had figured the larger the cup the more water would appear. But the blast had opened fissures underground, and all the water had seeped away into the earth.

Midway between the two, Danny's weary burro had collapsed. He had shot the suffering creature, then thrown away his gun to lessen weight. With only his heavy bags of rich dust burdening him, he had plodded on to the second waterhole and found it in the same condition. He had cached the gold and stumbled on through the blistering heat waves, knowing it was useless, but determined to fight that merciless desert until his last fiber of strength failed him.

His feet dragged in the scorched sands; his wide-sloping shoulders wilted lower. His tongue was like a bundle of dry rags stuffed in his throat, and pain pounded his temples. Cactus thorns jabbed his legs, but he hardly felt their sting amid the raw fire in his muscles. And through it all swarmed the sun's unbearable heat, battering, searing into him, leaving its bitter mark of defeat branded on his whirling brain.

Time faded, but the sun did not seem to move. Desert plants snailed past, many-hued and ageless, but the low hills ahead seemed to draw no nearer. The horizon grew

smudged and gray, yet night was hours away. And then a writhing cloud of black smoke seemed to bang low over the desert. Danny staggered into it. It seemed strangely cold and he shuddered.

A swishing sound turned his eyes skyward. The darkness receded and he saw a flock of huge black vultures swoop down from the sky. They circled low about his head and settled with a flapping of wings on the sand some fifty yards away. He struggled ahead, one faltering step after another, and then he saw them perched beside him, waiting.

Then the smothering blackness rushed at him and thundered into his brain. He felt himself falling—falling into nothing—

DANNY WADE came to his senses as if floating out of a fog. His first impression was of a horrible stench in his nostrils. He felt something wet trickle down his swollen throat. Gulping, he opened his eyes in time to see a tin cup withdrawing.

"More," he mumbled, and tried to move his hands. He couldn't. They seemed frozen behind him.

His vision cleared, and he was looking at a man he had never seen before. He had never seen anyone resembling such a man.

He was grotesquely tall and gaunt with a snaky waist and lank legs incased in tattered overalls from which a grimy six-gun handle poked. But his height was hardly noticeable because of the way he bent forward at the chest, his head and shoulders angling horizontally, and long, ape-like arms drooping to his knees. Dingy hair blanketed his neck and face like fur. Dead-black eyes stared unblinking. With his long, sharply hooked beak, he looked more like a wolf than a human being.

"More water," Danny repeated.

The man just kept looking at him

with those vacant black eyes.

Danny shivered. He understood now why he couldn't move his hands. They were tied. So were his feet. He was helpless.

He looked about him, hoping to see someone else, someone more human. A queer sight met his eyes. Beside a well-filled waterhole a canvas was pitched lean-to fashion, shading the man's food and supplies. A small burro was tethered beyond.

Queerest of all was a flock of huge black buzzards penned within wire netting. Necks stretched, bald red heads poked forward, they were strutting about restlessly, cocking an anticipating eye occasionally at Danny. Their stench seemed to fill his nostrils as he looked at them.

Danny pulled his attention back to the wolflike man. Maybe the hombre was deaf. He raised his voice, hoarse and cracked with thirst. "I'd like some more water."

The wolf-faced man blinked. The fur on his face crawled apart, disclosing a jagged row of yellow, fang-like teeth. His voice was strangely soft-toned, without inflections, as if he were talking to himself.

"You had enough for now."

"Who are you? What waterhole is this?" Danny asked.

"I am Turp Skaglon. People call me the buzzard man. This is my camp. I found the waterhole. Others don't know about it. I am glad they don't."

"Why am I tied up, Skaglon?"

"It is best for you, my friend. And best for Turp Skaglon. You will stay as you are. I have saved your life. My buzzards—my faithful boys—found you. I followed them and brought you here. It is the buzzard man who will say when you are to be freed."

Danny looked again at the big, ugly birds in the inclosure. He remembered the desert scavengers that had swooped out of the sky

back there when blackness claimed him.

"You mean you turned those buzzards loose and let 'em fly?" he asked incredulously.

"I turn them loose every day," said Skaglon. "They are well trained. I trained them myself. I understand them. They are my boys, my only friends. They soar far into the sky, circling and circling and circling. Sometimes they come back after an hour, and I feed them. Sometimes they light on the desert. Then I do not have to feed them."

Danny thought of the skeletons lying half buried in the desert sand. Those men were not long dead, yet the bones had been picked clean. A prickling sensation as from a thousand needles touched his spine, stronger than the pangs of thirst. He began to sense Skaglon's motive for making him a prisoner, but his sun-dyed face remained expressionless.

"Can I have another drink, Skaglon? It's been long enough."

A soft hiss of laughter escaped Turp Skaglon's throat. "You think water in the desert is free, my friend? You are already indebted to me for half a cup. You had no money. But I was too kind-hearted to let you die, even though you would have made an excellent feast for my boys."

"You mean you won't give me a drink unless I pay for it?" Danny asked quietly.

"You catch on, my friend. Water is precious in the desert. One cup will cost you much gold. One canteen a fortune."

THE buzzard trainer's ghoulish scheme unfolded within Danny Wade's active brain. It brought a rising tide of anger swelling up inside him, driving away thoughts of his discomfort.

"You fur-faced, scavengin' co-

yote!" he blurted hoarsely. "I can see now why you're camped out here with a dozen pet buzzards and a six-gun on your hip. You found out about prospectors working the Butcher Knife this summer. You knew they had to cross the Blast-oven with their pannings. When the well-known waterholes dried up, you perched out here by your own private spring to prey on dying prospectors. The buzzards lead you to the dead and dying men. You rob them of their gold. My guess is you dynamited those waterholes to dry them up so none would escape."

Except for the sudden glitter in his black eyes, the buzzard man did not appear to take offense. A ring of boastfulness appeared in his tone.

"It was simple. Easy for a man with brains, a man who can train fowls. I have gained more gold than my burro can carry. I am rich. Rich!" His voice dropped to a whis-

per. "But you had no gold, my friend. None near where you fell. You must have gold to buy a drink of this cool, clear water from the sands of Mother Earth. It is sweet and cool and good." He dipped his cup into the spring, gulped the contents greedily and exhaled a contented sigh.

Danny tried to swallow, but he felt as if his throat was jammed with dry cotton. His eyes dwelt on the glistening water, and the powerful craving mushroomed inside him.

Danny knew he could expect no mercy from this Turp Skaglon. The man's mind was viciously warped. He was crazed for gold. He was a vulture in human form. Yet water sparkled within a few feet. And water was life.

"I have gold," Danny admitted huskily. "Gold to pay for water. Three bags of it. Three fortunes. But it's cached where you won't find

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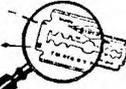
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4. CLEAN BLADE in water by loosening handle, then rinsing in hot water and shaking. Wiping the blade is likely to damage the edges

it, Skaglon. I'm the only one who can tell you where. And I can't talk any longer without a drink."

Turp Skaglon stirred. He ran his skinny hand over his furlike beard, the glitter in his eyes sharpening.

"You have gold hidden? Then we can bargain. First tell me where it is. When I am sure you are not lying I will give you all the water you can drink. And a canteen full to carry away with you."

Turp Skaglon exchanged the cup for a gallon canteen and filled it.

"I am an honorable man, my friend. You doubt that now, but you will learn that I speak only the truth. Here is the water which I promise you. When I return with the gold I will cut you loose. You may then take this canteen and be on your way. It is not your life that I wish. It is merely your gold."

He placed the canteen in the shade of the canvas and waited for Danny to speak. With those unblinking black eyes staring at him, Danny described the true location of his summer's rich take. He was skeptical about Skaglon living up to his end of the agreement. But the buzzard man's absence from camp would give him some faint chance to escape.

Skaglon listened, then loosed a soft cackle of laughter. "Never fear, my friend. I will find it if it is there. If it is not there—" His silence was more ominous than any words.

Crouching over a half-filled gunny sack, Skaglon scooped up a handful of ground meat scraps which smelled almost as bad as the buzzards.

At the vulture pen he clucked familiarly to the ugly birds. "You are hungry, boys. I know," he crooned. "You had nothing to eat today. But when I come back with the three bags of gold you will eat more hearty, my black boys. You will feast and feast and feast."

Like a gray wolf the buzzard man turned away and slunk soundlessly over the baked sands.

DESPITE the sun's fiery blaze, a cold chill rippled through Danny Wade. He did not have to guess twice as to what that feast would be. Skaglon had pretended honor, but he had lapsed careless when he talked to his odorous pets. When he returned with the gold, he would use that pistol on his hip. He was safe from the law's prying fingers as long as only dead men knew of his ghoulish murders.

Danny's eyes searched the camp for some means of severing those rawhide thongs. Hope dimmed as he surveyed one object after another and rejected them all. There was nothing with a sharp edge, nothing with which he could saw the bonds thin.

Time slid past with alarming swiftness. Sweat beaded Danny's forehead as his mind grappled with the tough problem. He strained every muscle in his body in a futile effort to snap his wrist thongs but fell back exhausted; and as he lay there gasping his eyes strayed again to those great, repulsive birds in the pen.

The sun was sinking low in the west and the buzzards were getting hungry. They kept pacing up and down the netting, searching for an exit through which they could soar aloft and forage for their natural food. Sometimes one would poke his long, ugly head through the wire and eye Danny Wade appraisingly.

"I know what you're thinking, you red-headed devils," Danny growled. "You figure I'll soon be ripe enough to eat. And I guess you're right. I don't see a chance to—"

Desperately, he reviewed the camp again, and his gaze halted on the sack of meat meal. Thoughts

spliced together in his mind, and an idea formed. It was full of flaws, but he grasped it eagerly. Rolling and squirming, he managed to back up to the canteen which Skaglon had filled and placed beneath the canvas.

Tilting the canteen with his fingers, he could feel water trickle on his wrists where the rawhide encircled them. When he judged the leather to be thoroughly soaked, he wriggled to the bag of meat meal and dipped his wrists into the grindings. The smelly bits clung to the wet thongs and to his skin as well.

Eagerly, he squirmed over to the



buzzard cage and thrust his hands against the fine wire netting.

The response was swift. A razor-sharp beak gashed his wrist.

Again and again, the beaks tore his flesh. Pain quivered along his nerves, and he could feel warm blood streaming down his hands and dripping from his fingers. But the thongs were suffering, too, as the ravenous birds pecked at the meat meal.

Danny rolled away. The pain of his lacerated wrists was making him dizzy. He summoned every fiber of strength to fight against those thongs. But added pain was the only result. The sharp beaks had not torn deep enough into the tough rawhide.

Discouraged, but not yet ready to give up, Danny repeated the meal-dipping process and squirmed back to the buzzards. They attacked the tasty particles with renewed relish. Each time a beak struck that thong it made a tiny nick in the water-soaked leather.

The sun began to slip between the upthrust fingers of a fluted saguaro off to the west. Soon Turp Skaglon would be coming back with the gold—and the gun.

With an almost insane frenzy, Danny Wade jerked at the cords. The thought of Skaglon's return spurred him to superhuman strength. His arm muscles bulged; gasps racked his lungs. Bands of fire seemed to ring his tortured wrists. He jammed all of his waning strength into one final, frenzied effort.

So abruptly that it startled him, the weakened thongs snapped. His arms dangled free and he slumped to the ground, lying there limply while he regained his spent strength.

WHEN he had freed his ankles, Danny sponged his worn and bleeding wrists with a soaked kerchief, bandaged them swiftly and took a drink of water from the spring. He considered concealing himself and trying to overpower Skaglon when the killer returned. But that seemed a foolish thing to attempt. He was still weak from the desert ordeal, and Skaglon carried a pistol. His best chance was to skin out fast and hope that he could keep ahead of the buzzard man.

He found another canteen and filled it. He considered refilling the first canteen and taking it as well, but one would last him until he reached the hills, and there was the matter of excess weight cutting down his pace.

The buzzards were lined at the fence watching him hungrily. All

except two who squatted in the corner, their bald red heads drooped sleepily.

"Maybe you boys will get cheated after all," Danny said hopefully. "Maybe you'll have to eat ground meal tonight."

His gaze fell on the trail of blood spots to and from the buzzard cage; then swerved to the tipped canteen under the tarp. They told a plain story of his escape.

Danny picked up the canteen, dumped the remaining water into the spring and placed the empty container back under the canvas. He ground the blood spots into the sand with his boot heel. Now Turp Skaglon would never guess how his prisoner had managed to break free. If some other unlucky prospector fell into this crazed man's clutches, the same method of escape would be at his disposal.

A mile from camp, Danny Wade topped a wind-combed rise and sank down to rest. He was desperately weary and weak. The waterless days on the desert had taken more out of him than he had realized. His hopes, so bright when he had left camp, were fast dimming.

They flickered to a low ebb when he spotted Turp Skaglon moving across the desert toward camp, his stooped figure crimsoned in the sun's dying rays. It would take the buzzard man only a minute to pick up the trail of his escaped captive.

Skaglon was a desert rat, a powerful man with tireless legs. He had suffered no recent privation. Danny could not hope to keep ahead of him for more than a few hours. He visioned Skaglon's pistol lining upon his back—the shock of lead—the buzzard flock swooping down from the sky.

He felt sick inside. The water which had cost him his fortune would do him no good now. Skaglon was a killer. Skaglon would

murder him to keep him from talking to the lawmen in the town beyond those distant hills.

Danny watched the buzzard man draw nearer to the camp. The sun relented and shot its fiery crimson against the single thin cloud hanging like a flaming cloth above the western horizon.

The hot wind moaned down to a whisper and then lapsed quiet. Changing colors crept with the dusk across the desert, drifting and blending. Magic purple, violet, gray-green. Wine, cobalt, creamy brown. Through them all the ageless saguaro giants reached stark fingers skyward in mute tribute.

As the pitched canvas blotted Skaglon from view, Danny lurched to his feet. He knew he should be plodding on, striving and fighting to keep ahead of the wolfish killer. But some secret spark of hope held his gaze to the camp like a magnet.

COOLNESS was stealing over the sands. The shades were deepening to a tomblake beauty, retouching the desert in deeper, more somber colors.

Danny waited. He waited a long time. And then a powerful impulse sent him down the baked slope toward Turp Skaglon's camp.

The first evening stars were winking out of a paling sky when he stalked past the canvas lean-to. The burro wagged its ears. The buzzards were fighting over something in the corner of their pen. And beside the waterhole Turp Skaglon lay sprawled on his back, a water cup still clutched in his fingers, his skin a greenish hue.

Danny bent and shook him. Skaglon opened his black, vacant eyes and stared.

"W-water—poison—" he muttered. "How—"

"How did I know you dumped some poison in that canteen full of water you were going to give me when you got back with the gold?" Danny asked. "I didn't know. But when those buzzards got one tiny taste of meat meal soaked in it, two of 'em got drowsy right away. I reckon they're both dead now and being taken care of by their hungry brothers.

"Just in case, I dumped that water back into the spring," Danny continued. "I knew first thing you would do after coming in off the desert would be to swill down a few cups of water. But I wasn't counting too much on that water being poisoned. I was afraid maybe those buzzards just went to roost early."

A tremor stirred Turp Skaglon. "I should . . . have . . . let you die. But I . . . wanted your gold. Three . . . bags of it. Three—" A dry rattle came from his throat and broke off suddenly.

Danny looked away and saw his three bags of gold dust lying beside a bulging canvas. He dug into the cloth and his eyes bulged. A score of bags were heaped there, every one fat and heavy. Here was the entire combined summer's take from Butcher Knife Mountain.

Danny loaded the gold on the burro. The proper authorities would decide what to do with it.

There was no shovel in camp, so Danny could not bury Turp Skaglon. But the next best idea occurred to him. He kicked down the fence and a stream of vultures poured outside.

"This would be the way you wanted it, anyhow, Turp," Danny observed. "This way your beloved boys will have their promised feast."

He picked up the burro's halter rope and headed into the desert night.

THE END.

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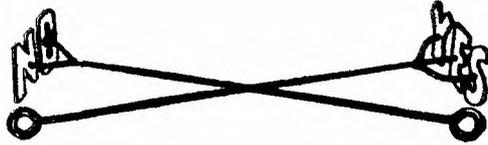


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READERS' BRANDING IRONS

The editor is always glad to receive letters from readers commenting on the magazine, or any part of it. He will appreciate your writing them in moderate length. Address them: To the Editor, Wild West, Street & Smith Publications, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Owing to our advance make-up of the magazine, it may be some time before letters appear in print.

LOWE'S LINE-UP

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Here are, to my way of thinking, the best stories in the March and April issues of Wild West:

1. "The Flaming Phantom," by Walker Tompkins.
2. "Quicksilver Guns," by Ward M. Stevens.
3. "Ghost of the Border Eagle," by Philip F. Deere.
4. "Bullet Aces to Beat," by Paul S. Powers.
5. "Blind Trails," by Emery Jackson.
6. "Owlhoot Brand," by James P. Webb.
7. "Hell's Highgraders," by Ed Earl Repp.
8. "Gold for Gunhawks," by Cleve Endicott.
9. "Blizzard Buscadero," by Hal Dunning.
10. "Renegades of Seven Springs," by D. F. Shields.
11. "Cow Nurse for a Sheep," by Lynn Westland.
12. "A Rebel Takes His Gun," by Wayne D. Overholser.
13. "Frying Pan Legacy," by R. S. Lerch.
14. "Buscadero Loot," by Guy L. Maynard.
15. "Satan Rides at Sundown," by Brad Buckner.

What's happened to Hungry and Rusty, Peaceful Perkins, Risky McKee and Rusty Ryan? [Risky McKee's boss, William A. Todd, has, so far as we know, is in the service, the rest are still going.—Ed.] Also what about the following authors: Bob Obets, Tom Roan, Eric Howard, M. Howard Lane, L. Ernenwein and Rolland Lynch? [Lynch is in the navy; the others are still writing.—Ed.]

Can I get any back issues of Wild West? [Yep. Issues for the past two years are still available.—Ed.]

I hope I haven't asked too many questions, but I like Wild West better than any other magazine.

Galax, Virginia.

ELMER R. LOWE.

We like questions—even when we can't answer 'em.

NOT ENOUGH GORE

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I've been reading your magazine for eight years and think it's tops, even though the last few issues haven't been so hot.

The Oklahoma Kid used to be one of my favorite characters. He's not any more. The last few stories I read about him didn't have enough action. Instead of being a tough outlaw he's turned into a master-mind detective.

Blacky Solone is getting to be the same way. In his last story he didn't even get into a good fist fight. The same applies to Rawhide Runyan. Slow Joe didn't even appear in the last Runyan story, so he didn't have a chance to kill anyone with his bare hands—which is what I like.

Give me weird, gruesome mystery stories. I like them. I also like your animal stories that appear from time to time.

My favorite characters now are the Fightin' Three of the Rockin' T. They are really tops.

Please leave all girls out of stories. They ruin 'em.

Tell the author of the Johnny Forty-five yarns to forget about that crumb, Krumm. Also tell the author of Rusty Ryan to get busy. He's been idle too long. [Keep yore eyes peeled, bub.—Ed.]

I just finished "Ghost-town Gun Gamble" with the Circle J pards. It was one of their best.

Yours until Blacky Solone and Toot Smith get into a fight. That, I'd like to see.

Even with all this criticism, I think Wild West is the best Western magazine on the market.

Adios,
Columbus, Ohio.

CHARLES CHILTON.

That last paragraph shore gave us a relieved feelin'.

ARKANSAS ADMIRER

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is the first time I have ever ventured to write to Wild West— or any other magazine.

Wild West is greatly improved, now that more of the regular characters appear in each issue. Your authors are certainly the best.

My favorites are Sonny Tabor (I disagree with those unappreciative readers who would abolish Slim Lowrie and Rita), Rowdy Lang, the White Wolf and Oklahoma Kid.

To be frank, I think the Circle J pards and Johnny Forty-five are more or less corny. [More or less, Miss Pat?—Ed.]

Don't let me forget Blacky Solone. He's a "must." [Don't forget Blacky Solone.—Ed.]

For goodness' sake, tell the author to handle Sonny Tabor more carefully. I got all mixed up in that last story when he changed horses.

I'm sixteen, and I'm not fooling when I say I get rawhided plenty about my love for the West. But I think the West has contributed more than any other section to our American tradition. People who make fun of cowboys should try doing a real cowhand's work for just one day. What would we do without them?

Wild West is my favorite magazine and I know it will continue to be.

Sincerely yours,

PATRICIA SMITH.

Little Rock, Arkansas.

P. S. Is Max Brand still living? Where?

Max is still living, Pat, but we're sorry to say we haven't heard from him in many a moon.

THAT DEMON AGAIN

YOU: If I were on a desert island and was bored stiff and there wasn't a thing to read but Wild West, I'd just sit and twiddle my thumbs.

THE DALLAS DEMON.

Dallas, Texas.

We used to know a fellow who liked to twiddle his thumbs. He was the most amusin' guy in the whole asylum.

WOMEN DON'T BOTHER HIM

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I am a constant reader of Wild West and enjoy it very much. It's well worth fifteen cents. There's only one thing wrong with your magazine: it doesn't come out often enough. [We wish it could come out more often, too.—Ed.]

I am very grateful to you and your authors for the splendid job you are doing. Your best author, I think, is Ward M. Stevens, who writes the Sonny Tabor and Kid Wolf stories. But the rest of your authors are almost as good.

Tell Chuck Martin to keep up his good work on the Rawhide Runyan stories. The last story

he wrote—"Boothill for Outlaws"—was one of his best.

My favorite character is Blacky Solone, but Sonny Tabor and Hungry and Rusty follow close behind. I also like Kid Wolf, the Circle J pards, Rawhide Runyan, Señor Red Mask, Johnny Forty-five, Tommy Rockford and Flash Moran.

Women in your magazine don't bother me a bit. Of course, it's not too good to have them around all the time. [???—Ed.]

No, there's not a thing wrong with 2W. I'll keep on reading as long as you keep your authors busy writing good stories.

RUSSELL SCHALOW.

Stratford, Wisconsin.

THE IDAHO KID CHECKS IN

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This time I am reporting for the first two months of 1943. Yes, I know I'm still behind, but I'm gaining. don't you think? [We think.—Ed.]

1. "Coffins for Deputies," by Andrew A. Griffin. That Johnny Forty-five is really good, and Krumm makes him better.

2. "Square Guns and Crooked Shooters," by Ward M. Stevens. Everyone welcomes Tabor back on the owlhoot trail.

3. "Skull Riders of the Panamint," by Ward M. Stevens. Kid Wolf doesn't appear often enough.

4. "Salt Water Waddy," by Walker Tompkins. I'd like to see a story featuring Dale Morse alone. How about it, boss? [As we said awhile back, we like questions—even when we can't answer 'em.—Ed.]

5. "Rawhide Resolutions," by Cleve Endicott. Buck Foster finally got his winter vacation in California.

6. "The Return of Dapper Donnelly," by Clay Starr. Let's have him keep returning. He's plenty good.

Your covers are just dandy, boss. Keep them coming just as they are.

It's sure been a long time since we've had a double-character story. I think it's about time for one.

Are we going to get the annual that's been mentioned once or twice? [As we said, we like questions—even when we can't answer 'em.—Ed.]

Adios, mi amigos.

THE IDAHO KID.

Saint Anthony, Idaho.

Hurry up with those other listings, Mr. Kid. We're all rootin' for you tub catch up.

NOTES FROM NEWFOUNDLAND

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Why don't that cock-eyed wangdoodle from down Carter, Oklahoma, way get himself slapped into a padded cell?

I've been reading Wild West for over four years and think it's tops. Girls sure help to

brighten up some of your bloodthirsty yarns, making them pleasing to all 2W fans.

Now I ain't tryin' to give this Boydston feller a special henpeckin'—he's got plenty of other goofy guys trompin' at his heels howlin' the same way as himself—but put him behind bars, anyway 'cause he's so batty I'll bet he looks like one.

Yours till Ed Sparks can brag about totin' the Oklahoma Kid's scalp on his belt.

SLIM MALONEY.

Argentina, Newfoundland.



MORE LISTINGS

DEAR SENOR RANGE BOSS: Waal, April was a plumb colorful month for Wild West.

How come there are four series characters in one issue and only three in another. Since there were two in every weekly issue there should be four in every biweekly issue.

[The appearance frequency of such series is closely related to and might be termed "high frequency resistance." The ratio R/R_0 of the high frequency resistance to the resistance at low frequency may be found simply by calculating the value of x from the relation:

$$x = d \sqrt{\frac{2uf}{p}}$$

We hope this explains everything.—Ed.]

The best stories were:

1. "Quicksilver Guns," by Ward M. Stevens. Many thanks for bringing Kid Wolf back to the 2W spread more often.

2. "The Flaming Phantom," by Walker Tompkins. The Tom Rockford stories always have their share of mystery.

3. "Snake-bite Showdown," by Lee Bond. The Oklahoma Kid really fixed Ed Sparks this time, didn't he?

4. "Paid Off in Lead," by James P. Webb. Blacky Solone is never disappointing.

5. "Boscadero Loot," by Guy L. Maynard. Señor Red Mask can even lick ghosts.

6. "Black Death in Piute," by Bill Bragg. Flash Moran is good, but he doesn't even come close to Bragg's other character, Silver Jack Steele.

Yours till the Scourge of 2W gives yuh a compliment. SAGINAW JIM.

Saginaw, Michigan.

We should live so long!



THE ROLL CALL

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Here are plenty of compliments on your magazine, Wild West.

I just finished reading the latest Sonny Tabor novel, "Death Is My Saddle Pard." I think it was his best yet.

My favorite characters are: Sonny Tabor,

Kid Wolf, Rowdy Lang, Blacky Solone, the Circle J pards, Tommy Rockford, Yuma Bill, the Oklahoma Kid, Señor Red Mask, Silver Jack Steele, Dapper Donnelly, the White Wolf, Johnny Forty-five, Rawhide Runyan, the Border Eagle, the Fightin' Three, the Whistlin' Kid and Flash Moran.

[Seems tuh me you forgot someone, chum.—Ed.]

I would like to know if I can get any back issues of Wild West—and, if possible, how far back? [For the last two years.—Ed.]

This is my first letter to you, but it will not be me last.

Yours till Sonny Tabor gets killed.

LEON SMITH.

Little Falls, New York.



WHO WAS BILLY THE KID?

DEAR SIR: I have been a Wild West reader for two years. I started reading your magazine when I was nine years old.

I have a question to ask: What was Billy the Kid's real name?

Yours truly,

DON JOYCE WHALEY.

Fletcher, Oklahoma.

Billy the Kid's name was William Bonney—and he was born in Brooklyn, New York—the home of "them Bums."

We hope you'll keep on being a 2W fan. Don. Write us again.



ANOTHER STRATTON BOOSTER

DEAR RANGE BOSS: What chance has a 2W range rider got of getting his say in the Readers' Branding Irons?

First, I would like to tell you that I think Wild West is the best magazine sold on any newsstand. I have been reading it for eight years. I also like *Western Story* and *The Shadow*.

How about having a sketch of a full-size six-gun in one of your issues? Incidentally, I think the covers on Wild West are real good.

My favorites are Sonny Tabor, Hungry and Rusty, King Kolt, and Kid Wolf.

One more thing: I would like to get my hands on Bob Stratton, whose letter was in the January 16th issue. The old buzzard! [Tsk! Tsk! Such language!—Ed.]

Waal, got to grab my saddlehorn and blow.

Adios, amigo,

HOWARD (TEX) HARRILL.

Roseboro, North Carolina.

Thanks for them nice words about our covers, Tex. But it'd be squeezing things pretty tight to print a full-size drawing of a six-gun in Wild West. Sorta jut out a bit, don't you think?

¿QUIEN SABE?

Answers

Continued from page 56

1. *It was a meeting of leaders of New Spain held in 1778 to decide whether to form an alliance with the Apaches to fight the Comanches, or with the Comanches to fight the Apaches. No action was taken because Spain was embroiled in a European war and had too much trouble nearer home.*
2. *They were successful explorers because they ranged far and wide in their quest for gold, but they were unsuccessful colonists because they did not bring their wives and families with them.*
3. *The extension of the railroads, invention of barbed wire, the building of windmills, and the immigration of grangers.*
4. *They were animals of the arachnida group, which includes all spiders, scorpions and ticks.*
5. *Besides meaning bovine animals, it also means personal property, including dogs, sheep, horses and mules.*
6. *It was a Congressional Act passed in 1873, giving title, at the end of eight years, to land on which the new owner had planted timber. This was done to encourage the growth of woodland on the Great Plains.*
7. *Impervious bedrock with a slope, a stratum of water-bearing material, a cover for the hole, also impervious to water, and a catchment area to maintain gravel at a relatively steady level.*
8. *No. It was rarely found that one could flow water to the ground level or surface.*
9. *Business conditions were slackening, currency condition agitated the country, and railroads had ended a rate war which heretofore had benefited the cattleman.*
10. *It did until late in the nineteenth century, when it gave way to farming because of successful agricultural experiments.*

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Somebody else may buy the old Ward farm. There should be many a good day's hunting in those rolling fields and back through the woods over to the State road.

Yes, somebody's going to buy it. Somebody's always coming along, with a dream and a little money, and doing the things we'd promised ourselves *we'd* do someday.

But this time, why can't that "somebody" be *you*?

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Then, one of these days, when peace has come again, the money you've put away starts coming back to you. And bringing *more* money with it—you get *four* dollars for every three you put in!

When that day comes, you can get out your pencil and start figuring just what kind of house you'll put on the river bend.

But to make sure that day *does* come, you'd better do this: get out your pencil *right now* and start figuring, not how *little* you can save in War Bonds, but *how much*. Chances are, you've done your bit and are doing it right now. But don't stop there! Raise your sights—*do your best!*

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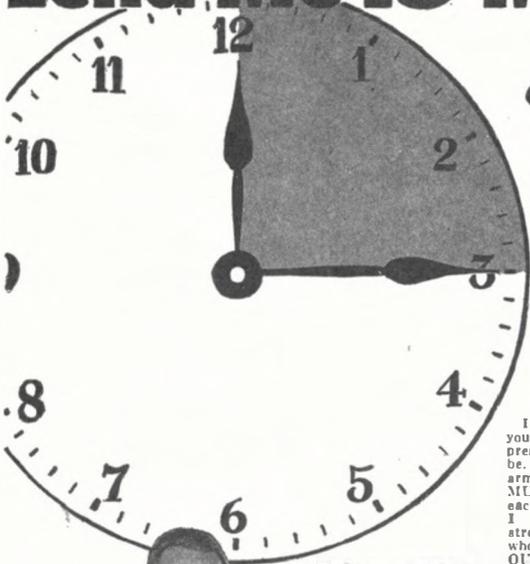


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worked such wonders for other fellows, everywhere?

I Was a 97-lb. Weakling

All the world knows I was ONCE a skinny, scrawny 97-pound weakling. And NOW it knows that I won the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." Against all comers! How did I do it? How do I work miracles in the bodies of other men in only 15 minutes a day? The answer is "Dynamic Tension," the amazing method I discovered and which changed me from a 97-pound weakling into the champion you see here!

In just 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home, I'm ready to prove that "Dynamic Tension" can lay a new outfit of solid muscle over every inch of your body. Let me put new, smashing power into your arms and shoulders—give you an armor-shield of stomach muscle that laughs at punches—strengthen your legs into real columns of surging stamina. If lack of exercise or wrong living has weakened you inside, I'll get after that condition, too, and show you how it feels to LIVE!

Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

Are you ALL MAN—tough-muscled, on your toes every minute, with all the up-and-at-'em that can lick your weight in wildcats? Or do you need the help I can give you—the help that has already

FREE This Famous Book that Tells You How to Get a Body that Men Respect and Women Admire

Almost two million men have sent for and read my book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." It tells you exactly what "Dynamic Tension" can do. And it's packed with pictures that SHOW you what it does. Results it has produced for other men. RESULTS I want to prove it can get for YOU! If you are satisfied to take a back seat and be pushed around by other fellows weak-in, weak-out, you don't want this book. But if you want to learn how you can actually become a NEW MAN, right in the privacy of your own home and in only 15 minutes a day, then man!—get this coupon into the mail to me as fast as your legs can get to the letterbox! CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 628, 115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

MAIL THIS COUPON NOW



Charles Atlas

America's Greatest "Builder of Men"
Among all the physical instructors and "conditioners of men" ONLY ONE NAME STANDS OUT. That name is Charles Atlas!

In every part of the country Charles Atlas is recognized as "America's Greatest Builder of Men." Almost two million men have written to him. Thousands upon thousands have put their physical development into his capable hands!

And now that the call is for men capable of helping America meet and conquer any national emergency, many thousands of others (even those already in their country's Army and Navy) are calling upon Charles Atlas to build the kind of men America vitally needs.

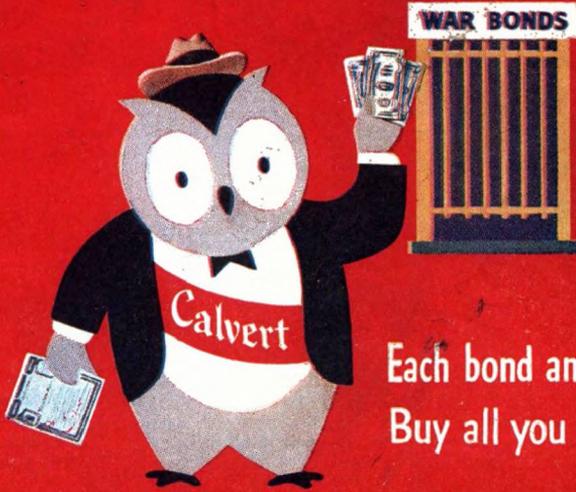
Actual photo of the man who holds the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

Here's PROOF Right Here!
"Result comes so fast by your method that it seems just as if some magician put on the pounds of solid muscle just where you want them!"
—W. L. Missouri
"Feel like a million dollars and have a 44" normal chest—a 2" GAIN!"
—L. A. S., Illinois
"My doctor thinks your course is fine. Have put two inches on my chest and ½ inch on my neck."
—B. L., Oregon
"My muscles are bulging out and I feel like a new man. My chest measures 38 in., an increase of 5 in., and my neck increased 2 in."—G. M., Ohio



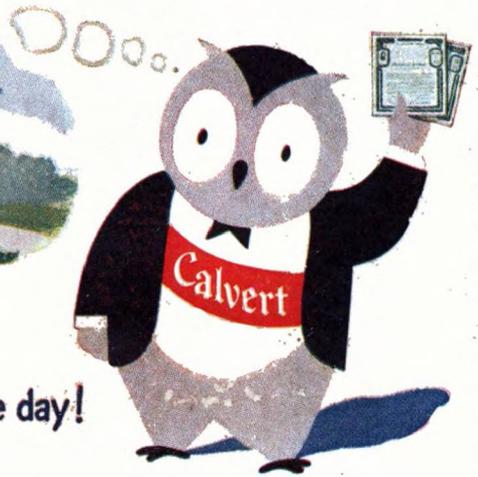
**CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 628
115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.**
I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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