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WILD WEST

JAN. 2, '43

WEEKLY

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1943 10c

ALL STORIES COMPLETE



THE **CIRCLE J** PARDS HAD TO END
THE OLD YEAR WRONG TO MAKE
RAWHIDE RESOLUTIONS

FOR THE NEW ONE!
Big Novel By **CLEVE ENDICOTT**
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WILD WEST WEEKLY

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All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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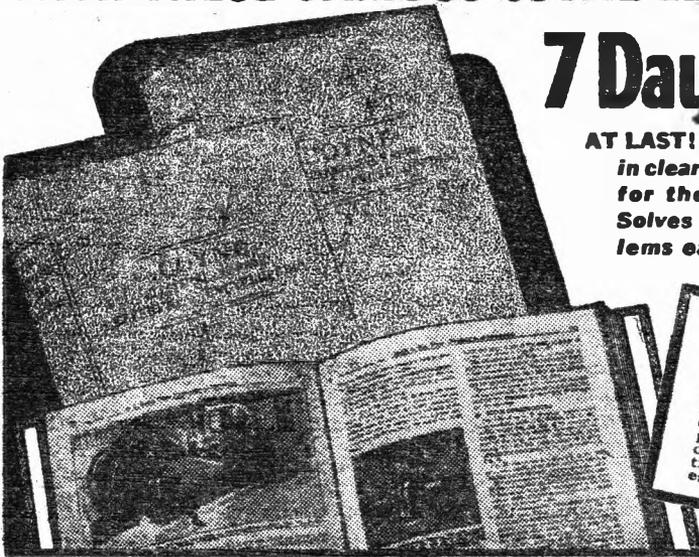
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A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

THIS country is entering into a year that shapes up as probably the most important and decisive one in all our history. For if we all do our part, whether we are in the field of battle or working our hardest to supply and support and offer good cheer to the men who shoot the guns, there is a fair chance that our side may have the European part of the war pretty well branded with victory before 1944 rolls around.

But the worst mistake anybody can make is to assume that victory is an absolute cinch. It's by no means an absolute cinch! The toughest part of the fighting is still ahead. Don't ever assume that the enemy hordes are pushover weaklings just because they also happen to be maniacs who believe a heap of idiotic things that aren't true. The enemy is plenty tough, and to beat him we'll have to throw at him everything we can muster with every ton of fury we can rally.

So don't soften up, and don't let your neighbors soften up, in any belief that it's all over but the shouting. There *is* that possibility of cleaning up that European part of

the war within a year or so—but it'll be a faded possibility unless all civilians redouble their efforts and really bear down!

Also, it's a plain fact that it takes money to fight a war—mighty big piles of money. Buying War Bonds and Stamps is a form of loaning money to your country, which is protecting you and your freedom by fighting the maniacs on their own territory. So buying Bonds and Stamps is a privilege as much as a duty. Even if we didn't get paid interest—and we *do* get paid very good interest—the buying of those Bonds and Stamps would still be the best investment we could possibly make, for it's an investment in the preservation of that freedom and those national ideals without which we'd all be worse off than slaves.

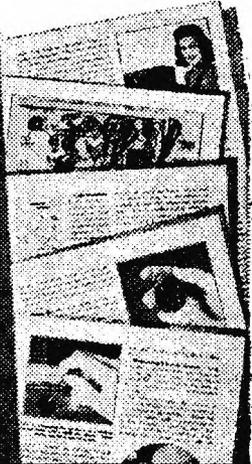
So that investment is the best way to prove we mean the good-luck and speedy-victory New Year greetings we've sent to our fightin' men, to let them know we're all with 'em a hundred percent!

But even when we're workin' hard for victory, we still need some recreation in our off hours. And what better or more economical recreation is there than readin' this here now magazine? For instance, there's a right good line-up for next week's issue. First off, Sonny Tabor is driven out of his undercover-lawman job and becomes an owlhooter again in "Square Guns and Crooked Shooters," a big complete novel by Ward M. Stevens. A highly unusual and excitin' tale it is.

Same can be said for the swash-bucklin' Yuma Bill novelette, "Redwood Renegades," by Ed Earl Repp. It's set in what you might call an exotic background.

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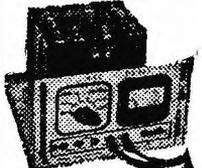
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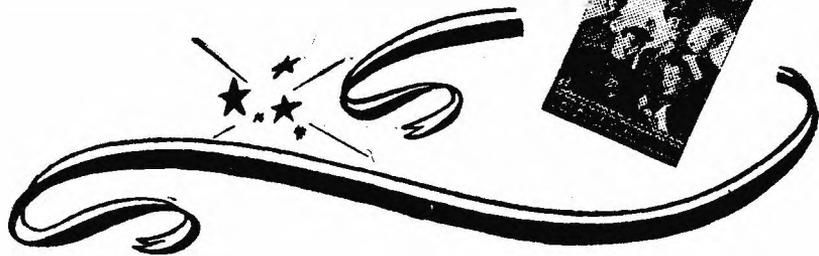
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*Billy West's right hand darted to gun butt
for the fastest draw he ever had made.*

RAWHIDE RESOLUTIONS

by CLEVE ENDICOTT

The old year was going to blast out for the Circle J pards in a blaze of bullets—if bushwhackers, bandits and a wrathful ranchero didn't nail down the pards' pelts first in that California clash!

CHAPTER I.

TWO-GUN SHOWDOWN.

THE small-town barroom held a quietly lazy menace as the warm afternoon sunlight leered through the windows and over the swinging doors. A dozen or so saloon loafers

sat around tables in the dirt-floored adobe building, or stood at the bar listening with mixed shades of interest as an old mossyhorn cowpuncher talked loudly and loosely.

He was saying:

"Yep, by ganny, this hyar Southern Californy climate plumb beats

the kind o' climate we got up in Montanner, whar I come from. Hyar it is near't the end o' December an' danged if this b'arskin vest o' mine don't feel a mite too warm." The old puncher paused, stroked his graying walrus mustache and said to the bartender: "Another belt o' redeye, mister."

"Done," said the bartender. He was fat but alert, and he wore a black patch over his left eye. "You say you come from Montana, stranger?"

"Yep. An' I'm tolerably well-knowned up thataway as the fightin'-est man in all Montanner. Tiger Buck Foster, they call me."

A man wearing two six-shooters, low-slung and tied down, was standing at Buck's right, by the bar. He was a well-dressed two-gun man and he seemed to be finicky. He looked Buck over coldly and sniffed with some distaste.

"Just passin' through to see the sights, I take it," the bartender said to Buck. The bartender had a month's growth of black whiskers.

"Mixin' business an' pleasure, yuh might say," Buck stated importantly, hooking thumbs in his old bearskin vest. "Me an' my pardners aim to buy up about ten thousand dollars' wuth o' them fancy Spanish hosses which is called palominos. Don't know whar we could locate some o' same, do yuh?"

"You aim to pay cash money for 'em?" the bartender asked casually.

"Shore," said Buck. "If they suit us, that is." The old Circle J puncher had tilted more than a half-dozen drinks of redeye, and it had loosened his tongue even more than was normal for him.

Once more the dandified two-gun man standing beside Buck gave the old Montana puncher a sour look. The two-gun man had a lean, tanned

face and a small, pointed, waxed mustache of black. His clothes and California sombrero also were black. He wore a wide gold ring, set with a single small diamond, on the second finger of his left hand.

Right now the two-gun man's thin nostrils were twitching with distaste. He tapped the old puncher on the shoulder and said:

"Move a little farther down the bar away from me, Montana Tiger. That vest of yours has a perfume like three goats in two hog pens."

Buck turned around slowly to face the gunman. Buck blinked and his jaw dropped. For years he had worn that old vest. It was almost a part of him. Though his own pards had often held the same opinion of the vest, they had never come right out and stated it in Buck's presence. He was so used to the vest that its aroma never really registered with him. Now he was blinking because he didn't believe he had heard aright.

"Whut's thet, mister? Whut did yuh say?"

"I said move away from me. You talk too loud and your vest reminds me of attar of skunk." The two-gun man's voice was calm, but his eyes narrowed.

Buck's amazement changed rapidly to rage. He crouched belligerently and roared. "If it don't suit yuh hyar, git out!"

"I like it here," the gunman said calmly, "except for you, that is."

"Why don't yuh put me out, then?"

"Maybe I will," said the gunman.

Buck, who was vigorous and active despite his fifty-two years, suddenly swung a left hook straight at the gunman's jaw.

But the gunman's jaw wasn't there. It deftly moved back about four inches and let the irate old puncher's fist fan the air violently.

The blue barrel of a double-action .45 was jammed firmly against Buck's wishbone before the Montana puncher could get himself back on balance for another effort.

"Move out of here, Montana Tiger," the gunman said between clenched white teeth. "Elevate your hands, too—pronto!"

Buck glowered balefully, slowly raised his hands. "Put that smoke-pole away an' fight me the way I started, yuh yaller-livered fancy-pants! Or give me a chanct to match yore draw!"

"I don't want to bloody this place all up," the gunman said calmly. "I was standing here having a peaceable drink when you came in and loused the place up with your smelly vest and loud talk about how much fighter you are and how much money you have. I'll bet you haven't five pesos on you."

"Yuh lyin' polecat! I got plenty on me—an' my pards got plenty more. But that ain't the argyment. Whut I want to know is have yuh got the guts to fight even up!"

"It's not an argument worth killing you for," said the gunman. "I just want to improve the air around here."

"That's a insult, an'—"

"No. It's a compliment to the proprietor," the gunman stated. "I wouldn't want him to soil his hands dragging your carcass out of here. Now vamoose—or do you want me to play rough?"

Buck was about to invite him to start getting rough, but the old Montanan didn't manage to get the words out of his mouth.

FOR at that moment a six-gun roared resoundingly from the batwing doors—and the blued .45 seemed to jerk out of the gunman's hand. The .45 smashed against the

bar and dropped to the hard dirt floor.

The gunman, angrily flipping his stinging right hand, whirled to face the door, his left hand dipping toward his other six-gun.

A voice from the door said:

"Don't do it, mister. Nobody's *that* fast!"

The gunman seemed to realize the truth of this suggestion, just in time. His darting left hand froze just about an inch above the gun butt. Except for his angrily narrowed eyes, his face was expressionless. He stared hard at the freckled, red haired cowpuncher who stood there just inside the batwing saloon doors pointing the still-smoking six-gun.

This redhead was Joe Scott, who was a top-hand rider for the Circle J Ranch in Montana. He took a couple of slow steps forward, not taking his gaze off the two-gun man.

"You oughn't to be so hasty with your insults, mister," Joe drawled. "Me, now, I heard all you said. It's all right for me to insult Buck, but I don't like to see anybody else doin' it."

"An' hyar's somethin' to make yuh keep it in mind!" Buck roared. He shoved the gunman, gave the latter a chance to see what was coming, and then swung his right.

This time the gunman, somewhat startled, didn't duck in time. Buck's leathery rock-hard fist connected with the fastidious gun-slinger's jaw and he went down hard, striking his head against the bar as he dropped. He lay there, out cold.

"Thet'll teach yuh to insult yores truly, the fightin'est man in all Montanner, by heifers!" Buck hitched up his chaps, squinted one brown eye balefully, poured himself another drink of whiskey and downed it.

Joe Scott asked: "Who is that two-gun hombre?"

The bartender shrugged. "He's a stranger, same as you gents. Never saw him before."

"He got any friends here?" Joe looked around the barroom at the other customers, who were all watching him, in various stages of tension.

"Don't know." The patch-eyed bartender shrugged again and glanced questioningly around the room.

If the fallen gunman had any friends, none desired to admit it. All the men in the room, a mixture of Mexicans and Americans, remained poker-faced, or close to it.

"Let's go, Buck," suggested Joe, firmly. He backed slowly toward the door.

"All right. Soon as I pay for my likker." Buck unbuttoned his shirt, reached into an unbuttoned section of a well-filled money belt and pulled out a new five-dollar bill. He tossed it onto the bar with a careless bravado, said, "Keep the change," buttoned his shirt and sauntered to the batwing doors. He went out ahead of Joe, who continued to back out slowly, keeping the customers covered with his six-gun, just in case.

Outside, Joe holstered his gun, grabbed Buck and gestured for him to speed it up, to keep close against the buildings as they headed north along the board sidewalk. Joe glanced back at the saloon several times, keeping his hand near his gun.

After they had proceeded three blocks up, Joe gestured again and they turned to the right.

"How come yuh to bust into thet saloon?" Buck asked, glowering slightly at Joe because the red-headed puncher had actually rescued Buck from a difficult situation and the old Montanan had thereby, in his own opinion, been put in a bad light. "An' whar we headin' for?"

"The boss sent me out to all the

saloons hereabout to see if I could locate you," Joe said. "He figured you'd be in a saloon, and not too close where we could find you in a hurry, either. We're goin' to that hotel yonder. Billy's got a line on a herd of palominos and we're goin' to take a look at 'em." Joe paused and glanced back again. He frowned and shook his head slowly. He muttered:

"Mossyhorn, I got a feelin' your old bearskin vest has choused us right into an underhand fracas, somehow. Why in thunder don't you get that vest fumigated once in a while?"

CHAPTER II.

EXPENSIVE SWIM.

BILLY WEST, well-set-up young boss of the Montana Circle J foursome, was sitting in the lobby of the rambling Spanish-style hotel and talking to the local sheriff as Joe Scott and Buck Foster came in.

Seated silently near his boss was Sing Lo, the little Chinese cook of the Circle J. Billy West had brought Sing Lo along on this trip, together with Joe and Buck, because the little Chinaman had more than once proved his loyalty and skill in helping his pards out of tough trouble.

"So you think the palominos are tough enough to stand the Montana winters?" West was asking the sheriff.

"Sure do," said the sheriff. "Though they may like a warm climate a little better, havin' been raised mostly in warm parts of the world, they've stood up well in the cold mountainous parts of California. This country's not all palm trees and fresh fruit all winter long, you know. Up in the north part of the State, in the high country, it gets right chilly at times."

"And you think this Spanish *ranchero* man has the best palominos around here. In that case—" Billy West broke off, looked up at Buck. "So here you are. Where'd Joe find you—in trouble?"

"Not much," Buck stated, cocking one brown eye warily at the silver star on the sheriff's vest. "Whut's this about them silver-tailed cayuses?"

"The sheriff here was telling me about a Spanish *ranchero* who has a big herd of first-class palominos. The ranch is twenty-odd miles up the coast from here, not far back from the ocean."

"We goin' up thar?"

"Yes," said West.

"When?"

"Starting right away, soon as we rent some saddle horses."

"That's a long ways to ride before dark," Buck objected.

"Well," said West, "if we don't make it before dark, we can make it after dark. There's no particular reason why we should get there before sundown."

"No matter when you get there, you'll receive a right hospitable welcome from Don Esteban Vasora," the sheriff stated. "He's a real Spanish gentleman—one of those who've done a heap to make California a great State."

"I figgered on restin' up a spell an' seein' some o' the sights." Buck frowned, muttered a little under his breath.

"You mean you're itching to cut loose with what you have left of that three thousand dollars you won in the dice game up in Montana a few months ago." Billy West smiled slightly, watching the old puncher's expression.

Joe Scott put in: "You'll get plenty chance to spend your dinero, mossyhorn. We'll be around this

country two or three months yet, likely."

"If the palominos suit me and the price is right I want to get hold of the palominos before somebody else does." West arose and looked at the square-set middle-aged lawman. "Well, much obliged, sheriff. If ever we can do you a favor, let us know."

"Quite all right, mister," the lawman said heartily. "I'm always glad to build up a little business for the ranchers hereabouts. Livestock market hasn't been so good the last year or two. I reckon you'll find Don Esteban a reasonable man to do business with."

"Maybeso findee Chinee fliend cook at Spanish lanch?" Sing Lo asked hopefully.

The lawman scratched his head and looked at the little Chinaman. "Seems to me Don Esteban has a kitchen boy who's a Chinee or somethin' of the sort."

"We'll find out, Sing," said West—not knowing how well he spoke of things to come. "Let's get going."

LESS than a quarter of an hour later the four pards were jogging northwestward out of town on four rented horses. They weren't especially good horses, but good enough for the purpose. There was a bay, a sorrel, an iron-gray and a blue-roan.

The livery stable where they had rented the horses had been north of the hotel and quite a distance from the saloon where Buck and Joe had had the run-in with the gunman. So there was no knowing exactly what had become of the black-clad gun-slinger. Joe Scott figured it was just as well that they kept clear of that neighborhood. The town, named Dioro, wasn't very big—there were perhaps two thousand

people in it—and it would be too easy to bump into somebody you didn't especially want to meet. That two-gun man had pulled his right-hand weapon with mighty flashy speed. Joe Scott had come to California in search of recreation, not for shooting scrapes, and he didn't vote Buck any thanks for this near scrape. Buck had a bad habit of getting himself and everybody around him into trouble.

In the distance ahead, over the low rolling brown hills, the pards could see the greenish blue of the Pacific Ocean. The whitecaps looked like—

"Danged if they don't remind me o' the suds on a cool scuttle o' beer, by ganny!" said Buck, perking up somewhat. "Why don't we go swimmin'? I always had a hankerin' to see whut salt water's like."

Joe muttered to himself: "I wish your vest had the same hankerin'." The redhead couldn't get that two-gun man out of his thoughts.

"Muchee stinge in nose," said Sing Lo.

"I'd be agreeable to dousing myself," Billy West said. "How about you, Joe?"

"Why not?" said Joe. "But we better go down off the main trail. Mighty few travelers along that ocean trail, on account the main road's up here in the foothills—but we got skimpy swimmin' suits. Just these short trunks, with no tops, which we bought yesterday."

They flicked their mounts into a lope and headed down off the main road toward the ocean trail. They crossed the latter, dismounted in a fringe of trees and looked at the water and the shore.

Joe Scott shook his head. "Too rocky. No place to swim right and no sand to lie in. Me, I like to lie in the sand. Besides, that looks to

me like an undertow out there in those rocks. Why don't we try it farther up?"

"It doesn't look so good, at that, close up." West nodded. "It's four hours till sundown, anyway. Plenty time to find a better place, and it's on our route. This trail's narrower than the other but good enough for saddle horses."

So they mounted again and continued up the trail.

But the shore continued to be rocky. When at last they encountered a wide stretch of sandy beach and calm waters they were perhaps fourteen miles from Dioro town.

"Well, I feel more in the mood than before, after this ride," Joe Scott stated. He had been glancing back over his shoulder from time to time, but had seen nobody.

"Seems as if we have it all to ourselves," Billy West observed. Between the ocean trail and the main road eastward there was a mile or so of rolling bush-covered hills which cut off all view of the main road.

Within a short time they were in their short bathing trunks and taking a run at the surf.

"Brrrrrr! By heifers, this hyar ocean's like Montanner in January!" Buck yelled.

"You get used to it after you've been in a while," Joe Scott told him, and plunged in—to cut loose with a few "brrrrs!" of his own.

The temperature of the water was about 53 degrees, which is chillier than many consider ideal. But the long and frigid Montana winters had toughened the pards so that, as Joe had predicted, they got used to it.

For a while they swam. For a while they stretched out on the clean white sand and let the sun pour its mellow rays over them.

For a while, indeed, things were well and life was all right. But all

peace must give way to conflict and conflict means bad times and trouble, because there's always somebody who can't be content with peace.

The four Montana pardes were lying there gazing out over the blue water at the setting sun when, from the fringe of high bushes and trees at the back of the beach, where they had left their clothes and guns to keep them from getting wet and their horses to graze, there came sudden harsh laughter.

ALMOST as one man, the Circle J pardes jerked their heads around, startled.

Five masked men were standing there in the bushes, focusing five six-guns on the pardes' bare briskets.

The spokesman of the five was dressed in black. He wore two guns, holsters low-hung and tied down—though of course one gun was in his right hand and wagging gently in a poisonous way.

"How do you like the bathing out here in California by now, you Montana bearcats? Is the water warm enough to suit you or would you like to have me dish you out a little hell to warm it up suitably for kings of the cow pasture such as you?"

The pardes were too surprised to have a fast answer to that. Besides, all men are at a slight loss for bright repartee when clad only in a few grains of sand.

With a flourish of his left hand the leader lifted a cigarette to the mouth gap in his black mask and took a couple of drags, inhaling calmly.

The sunlight glinted on a wide gold ring, set with a single small diamond, on the second finger of his left hand. Buck Foster and Joe Scott couldn't help noticing it. They noticed it at about the same time and they didn't feel reassured.

Buck gulped and Joe muttered out of the corner of his mouth: "You and your vest, mossyhorn! You and that hinged-in-the-middle tongue of yours, that wags into trouble at both ends!"

"W'y, yuh sneakin' skunk!" Buck roared. "It's—"

"It's what?" Billy West asked, somewhat dazed.

"No catchee, no savee," Sing Lo stated.

It was all news to both these latter two of the Circle J foursome, and to see Buck and Joe talking to the masked men like fresh-lost enemies was almost as startling as the appearance of the five bandits.

"I shoulda busted yore jaw an' stomped yuh right into thet dirt floor o' the saloon!" Buck bellowed. "In the dirt is whar varmints rightly belong! This is whut I git fer bein' kindhearted!"

"Wrong, my tigerish friend," said the gunman. "This is only part of what you get. I've decided I don't like either you or your pardner with the coyote-colored wig—if it is a wig and if it isn't a wig it ought to be. Maybe I'll pull it out by the roots to see. Maybe I'll hitch a horse on each side of it and let them pull." He paused, took another drag on the cigarette and continued: "I don't like your two friends, either. To be your friends they must be like you. If they like you they have very little judgment, and earth would be better off without them."

The red sun, taking no sides, was hurrying about its business, settling down low over the blue waters far across the great ocean.

Said the gunman: "This is my private swimming hole. The rates are high. Investigation discloses that this bath is going to cost you exactly five thousand dollars. By coincidence, this is just about the

amount I find in your four money belts and in your trousers pockets."

Buck Foster gulped. He still had about twenty-five hundred dollars left out of his Montana gambling winnings—still a fortune to a forty-a-month cowpuncher. Buck, with his usual strong-headedness, had insisted on carrying the money in his belt although in a recent adventure involving a Thanksgiving turkey in New Mexico it had gotten him into plenty of trouble. That fracas had taught Billy West a lesson. Though he had ten thousand dollars with him here in California, intending to buy horses with it, he had deposited most of it in the Dioro bank upon arrival in town yesterday. So his belt contained but two thousand in paper money, which he intended to use for a down payment on the horses. The remaining five hundred, which had evidently been stealthily counted by the masked gunman, belonged to Joe and Sing Lo.

"But I'm a fair man," the gunman said.

"What do you mean by that?" West asked sharply.

"I mean I want you to get a good bellyful of swimming in my private pond, inasmuch as you're paying for it." The masked leader gestured broadly with his gun. "Swim to your hearts' content, you kings of the cow pastures! Swim—and the sharks swim with you. They come in close to shore here and consider a cowboy's leg a very tasty tidbit! Swim, gents!"

CHAPTER III.

CHILL CHALLENGE.

THE sun, having done a good day's work, dipped out of sight, leaving a ruddy afterglow. A three-quarters moon was lofting over the hills to the east into the cloudless sky.

Seeming to take his cue from the sun, the masked leader disappeared back into the bushes as his speech ended. Three of his comrades disappeared with him.

The fifth man strolled halfway down to the beach and sat on a solitary boulder which glistened blackly above the white sand. He elevated his six-gun lazily in the eerie moonlight and pointed to the water, which had been gradually ebbing, exposing more of the beach sand with each weakening wave.

"All right you hombres—you heard the chief. Get movin'. Swim. Get out there and swim. If a shark makes a grab for you, try kickin' it in the teeth. If that don't work, sprinkle some salt on its tail and tickle it to death."

Billy West stood up, the muscles moving angrily in his jaw.

"What's the idea of this?" the Circle J boss asked.

"The idea's to swim—plenty and pronto! My chief and the three other hobgoblins crave a little sleep, like."

"I don't get it," Joe Scott snapped.

"You ain't supposed to," the bandit said irritably. "But you'll get some of *this* instead of shark's teeth if you keep on sassin' back!" The bandit pulled trigger, and a .45 slug kicked wet sand into the red-headed puncher's eyes.

Joe leaped up, blue eyes glinting crazily in the moonlight. His fists were clenched and he was trembling with rage.

The bandit drawled: "See what I mean?"

"You better put a bullet through me now, stranger," Joe said. "Because if you don't, some day I'm goin' to catch up with you."

"That'll be the day," said the bandit. "You with one of your legs in the belly of a shark. Get into that

water, the whole lot of you, before I blast you in!"

The Circle J pards had been in quite a few battles in their time; and one of the things you learn in battles is that the worst folly of all is to fight against hopeless odds. If you're dead you're out of all hope for direct revenge; if you're alive there's at least the hope.

Billy West, who was the most even-tempered of the Montanans, didn't want to see Buck or Joe lose their heads and get shot. Each of the two was rash in his own way, and right now they needed some steadying before the rashness got hold of them. Even now Buck was crouching as if aiming to charge the bandit bare-handed.

So West said with forced calmness: "Let's go swimming again. Looks as if this time we're caught with our pants not only down but altogether off!"

Grudgingly, the old puncher and the redhead relaxed. Glowering, they turned and headed for the water, as did West and the little Chinaman.

It was fifty yards or more to the water now. They entered it gradually. Out here the drop-off was somewhat more abrupt than it had been when the water was coming in higher up on the beach. After they had waded a rod or so it was deep enough to swim.

Fortunately, all four knew how to swim, though Buck and Sing Lo were far from expert. Billy West was best of the four, he having spent most of his summers as a youth in the cold creeks and rivers of Montana.

Not being very familiar with the nature of inshore California ocean waters, the Circle J pards didn't know how much truth there was in that talk about sharks. Billy West

and Joe Scott seemed to remember, with no great relish, having read about swimmers having disappeared in these Pacific waves, yelling "Shark! Shark!" while gradually being dragged under.

Swimming is very exhausting work, even in buoyant salt water. It was especially tough on Buck Foster, whose wind was not of the best, except when used for talking. After paddling clumsily out into deep water for several rods, the old puncher turned around and swam back to where he could stand up.

He was promptly greeted by a bullet, which ripped into the water a few inches from him.

"Swim, you bowlegged bearcat from Montana!" rasped the bandit guard. "Show me how tough you are!"

"I'll show yuh, by ganny—if yuh put down that smokepole fer about a minute!" Buck was panting from the exertion.

"Get back in there and swim!" the bandit repeated. "The chief wants you to get your money's worth!"

Buck swore violently for a few seconds, but a second blasting shot from the masked man's six-gun almost nicked the old puncher's ribs. He turned around hastily and swam out for a few yards.

Sing Lo, having once been assistant to a traveling magician in a carnival show, had learned a few mild tricks in the water, including the important one of floating. In a low tone he called to the others, swam by them and told them how to manage it, "Lelax. Bleathe easy. Puttee head back. Velly simple."

It wasn't so simple as the little Chinaman made it seem, but it had come down to a choice of swim or get shot—and they could pretend

they were swimming on their backs when actually they would be floating half the time. The waves were not much more than heavy ripples now in this particular lagoon, so they weren't carried into shore with each swell that came along. Humans have a way of learning things in a hurry when it comes to self-preservation.

So they learned to float. Buck learned just when he was on the point of floundering in to shore and defying the masked bandit to shoot him dead and get it over with.

All in all, it was an ignominious and uncomfortable position for the pards—and quite different from any sardonic outlaw viciousness to which they had ever been exposed in the past.

"Well," Billy West told Joe Scott, "you said you were in the mood for swimmin'. I hope you hold the mood."

"It's a mighty peculiar sort of torture," Joe said. "You reckon there's somethin' back of it, or do you reckon they aim to watch us drown one at a time?"

"Could be either, judging from these masked gents' personalities." West paused for a time. "Personally, I don't hanker to drown. I'd rather get shot. There's something about drowning that doesn't quite appeal to me."

"Me too," said Joe.

"Whenever you feel like getting shot, say so and we'll go get shot together," suggested the Circle J boss. "Maybe one of us can brain that hombre with a rock while he's shooting the other of us."

"Maybe," said Joe. "But I've got the livin' habit kinda set in my bones and I don't like to break it till I have to. Suppose we wait till we can't float any longer."

"Might be better," West agreed. "Might even renew that lease on the life you've got into the habit of not losing. I hear tell that a real good floater can practically homestead out in the middle of a wave and raise a large family, feeding 'em fish as the latter swim by."

"Maybe a cloud'll come over the moon and we can sneak up on the hombre. I'd shore like to get my hooks around his neck."

The Circle J boss looked up at the sky and muttered: "Not a cloud in sight—and that three-quarter moon is smirking down at us as if it enjoyed our—"

"Halp!" Buck Foster suddenly yelled. "Shark! One o' them critters has got me!"

The old puncher was floundering around wildly. Suddenly he plunged under headfirst and his feet came up. To one foot was clamped a large beady-eyed lobster, evidently angered because Buck had kicked it.

In a moment Buck's head came up again. He sputtered, geysered a stream of salt water from his mouth and started to yell violently again.

The masked bandit ran down to the edge of the water, flourishing his gun angrily. He pointed it at Buck's head, about three or four rods away.

"Shut up, you old coyote!" the bandit rasped. "Another yip out of you and you'll be swimmin' in two sections!"

"What's the objection to yelling—especially when a shark has him by the leg?" West asked.

"None of your business!" the bandit rasped. He added, as if in rehearsed afterthought: "You'll wake up my pards. They're sleepin' back in the trees. Been goin' hard lately."

"Where? Ahead of a posse?" West asked.

"What do you want to know for—so you can tell that Davy Jones galoot about it when you get down to his locker at the bottom of the sea?"

"That's no place for a cowpoke," Joe Scott said. "How about a little ransom?"

"How much?" the bandit asked, a little greedily.

"Buy you an ice-cream soddy if you'll turn me loose long enough to kick your guts loose," Joe told him.

"Smart hombre, eh?" the masked bandit snarled. "Get back to your swimmin' and stay there!"

Joe got, feeling a little more relaxed from having gotten some of the anger off his chest.

"How you coming with that shark, Buck?" the Circle J boss asked. "You tore it apart yet?"

By this time Buck had discovered the true identity of his "shark" and was looking a little sheepish there in the moonlight. He pried the sharp-clawed crustacean from his foot and threw it at the bandit, but missed—which was perhaps just as well.

The bandit went back to his rock and the four pards from Montana settled down to some serious floating. A very long spell of floating, in fact.

As was customary in California, most of the warmth had departed with the sun. The night chill crept over the water, and they began to shiver after several hours of it.

But the night chill was no chillier than their private thoughts. Though they usually took trouble as it came, without getting too grim about it, they wondered what was behind this peculiar form of torture. Was it slow death and eventual drowning—or was there something tricky behind it all?

The bleak and paling December moon stared down but it gave them no answer.

WW—2F

CHAPTER IV.

RENEGADE RETURN.

FLOATING is a thing that palls after about four hours in water none too warm. A professional swimmer would consider it no great feat, but a cowboy at best isn't very much at home in the water. His natural habitat is the curve of a saddle rather than the briny deep.

The four Montanans would swim for a few seconds to keep their blood flowing as warmly as possible and then would float on their backs for several minutes to keep as much of their strength as possible. It began to seem incredible to them that they had remained afloat so long—for all eternity!

That melancholy moon wasn't going to duck behind any cloud, for the reason that there still was no cloud for it to duck behind.

"What's the temperature inside you by now, boss?" Joe asked. "And how did those d-dice get inside my m-mouth?"

"Dice?"

"Yeah. Must be. C-clicks like 'em, anyway. Or maybe it's what's left of my crockery. Remind me to get rubber teeth before I go swimmin' next time. These clatter too much. Keep me awake. What time you reckon it is?"

West stared at the moon. "Somewhere between ten o'clock and midnight, I'd say. Regret to state that I didn't bring my watch with me." He paused, shivering from the chill that had seeped right into his bones. Then, presently: "Well, you ripe for throwing rocks yet?"

"Plenty ripe—and refrigerated," Joe said. "But there's one slight drawback to rock-throwin'."

"What?"

"No rocks."

"There *must* be some."

"But there ain't," Joe said. "I took a quiet little dive for myself once every hour, about, and in a different place each time—hopin' one of those grains of sand would match the size of my fist. But nary a rock. And what I always say is, no rock no cracked skull for gents in masks."

"Farther down the line there was nothing but rocks."

"That was farther down the line. This is here. That's why I been so quiet the last couple of hours. Meditatin' the errors of nature's distributin' system—never a rock where it ought to be."

"Maybe we ought to swim out to sea. Maybe there's an island out there somewhere."

"Yeah," said Joe. "I hear tell of one named Hawaii. But we couldn't swim it before breakfast at the very earliest. I wonder if Hades actually is warm. I mean warm enough to thaw me out. If I was sure about it, I'd tell that hombre to use me for target practice."

"Hang on, pardner," Billy West advised. "Maybe this seems a long time, but I reckon forever is actually quite a spell longer, so why not stick around as long as you can wiggle your hands and feet a little to keep afloat?"

Joe grinned wryly. "I intend to."

"By ganny, I think I'll rush that hombre," Buck muttered, his voice much weaker than usual. "I shoulda hit him over the head with that lobster."

"You're catchin' up on your Saturday-night baths for a whole year ahead, mossyhorn," said Joe. "You ought to be glad to be here."

Buck rolled his head slightly, listening. "Was them gunshots I jist heard, off in the distance to the north, like?"

Joe Scott was also listening. He bobbed his head in the water.

"Sounded like gunshots. But what of it? They were so far away they can't mean anything to us one way or another. On a still, cold night like this, with so much water around, the sound of a gun can carry three or four miles easy."

"Vellely tlué," said Sing Lo, floating serenely nearby. His Oriental nature steeled him to hardship, so that he managed largely to ignore the cold while he thought of things far removed. This trick kept him from needless worry about the unpleasantness and unknown future of the present situation.

Silently, the pards settled down to more floating—and to the three white ones, at least, it was becoming a grim business.

AN hour later Joe Scott's jest about the appealing warmth of Hades didn't seem to be so much of a jest any more. It began to seem preferable to this sort of torture. At least, it began to seem that way to Billy West, Joe and Buck Foster. They lacked Sing Lo's stoical Oriental type of character.

If they had been actually freezing to death it wouldn't have been so bad, for the later stages of freezing bring a pleasantly slumbrous warmth. But this water, combined with the night air, was just endurable, which was what made it maddening. Too much pain or shock to the body and nervous system isn't so bad as pictured because, after a certain point is reached, the human faints and feels no more anguish. But this was becoming one of the worst imaginable tortures. Increasing, penetrating cold is one of the most terrible of sensations when stretched out for hours.

"I—I don't know ab-bout y-you, b-boss," Joe chattered presently, "but me, I'm in the m-mood for

tacklin' that hombre about n-now, rock or no r-rock!"

"Well, I—I'm r-ready if y-you are," the Circle J owner said grimly.

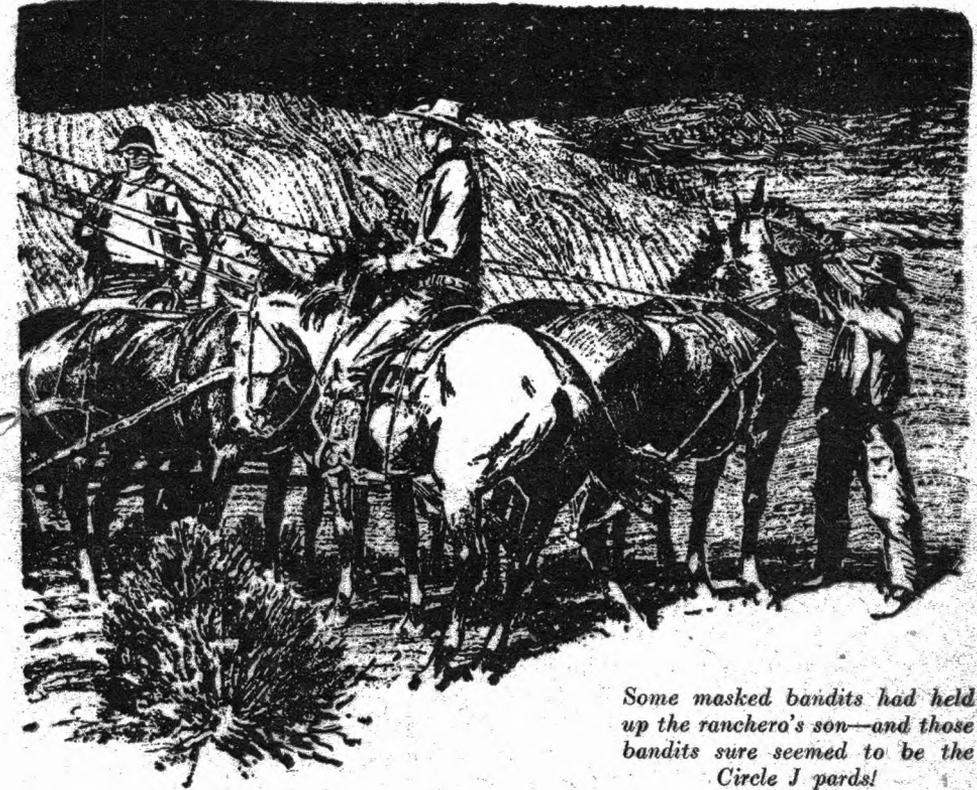
"Me too, b-by g-ganny!" Buck stated.

"All r-right then," said West. "We-we'll spread out. I'll go at him

heroism of his words themselves. "L-lemme take the front."

They argued for a minute or more, in low, chattering tones. Then West snapped:

"I'm still boss of this outfit. You'll do what I say! Head at him spread out. Now."



Some masked bandits had held up the rancho's son—and those bandits sure seemed to be the Circle J pards!

f-from the front, you t-two go at him f-from the sides. Sing Lo, you try to get away into the woods. If he g-gets all three of us, maybe you can somehow get him later on. All right?"

"Why should y-you t-take the front?" Joe demanded. "He'll blast y-you down right off the b-bat!"

"I been around l-longer you two hombres," said Buck, though not too enthusiastically, considering the

So they started.

By the time they reached the beach the masked bandit had risen from his rock and was flourishing the gun warningly.

"Get back there, you Montana muskrats! Swim! Get a bellyful of swimmin'. You asked for it!"

Billy West said: "You asked for something, too, stranger."

"And we're bringin' it to you!" Joe Scott added.

At that moment there was a crackling sound, as of horses, in the trees and bushes behind the bandit—and the two-gun leader's voice inquired:

"Well, how's that Montana tiger and his amigos enjoying California climate by now?"

The two-gun man, still masked, stretching his arms and yawning, stepped out of the undergrowth beside the guard. Behind the leader were the other three masked men, also stretching their arms and yawning.

Billy West gestured to his two hired hands to hold it. The Circle J boss realized they hadn't a chance against five heavily armed men in this moonlight. Besides, he wanted to see what the masked leader was going to do.

What he was going to do was so comparatively mild, after what the Montanans had gone through, that the two-gun man's words came almost as a shock. He said:

"So you've had a good long swim, eh? Think you've got your money's worth? Think you've learned not to smell up saloons or clip your betters on the jaw? All right, then. I'm going to tie you up so it'll take you a few hours to get loose. That's so we can make a getaway clean, with a good head start. Because otherwise you might be loco enough to follow us, and we'd have to kill you, and that might mess up the works. After all, you've paid us well for the use of my private pond. I'm no fiend. It likely would weigh heavy on my mind clear up to tomorrow noon if we had to butcher you, anyway."

"You leavin' us afoot and without clothes?" Joe demanded angrily.

"No. That'd be a practical joke—and a practical joke's not much account unless the jokers are around

to watch it. And we won't be. We don't need your clothes or your cayuses. We already have better ones." The two-gun man gestured to his men. "All right. Tie 'em up."

Billy West nodded to his pards to accept the tie-up. No matter how they were tied up, they would still be alive—which was more than they would be if they resisted now with their bare hands.

The tying got under way in a hurry. Instead of thongs, which might be soaked in the water and stretched, the bandits used fine copper wire—and they wrapped it tight around wrists and ankles. That done, each of the four Montanans was wired by his already wired wrists to the base of a stout bush at the upper edge of the beach. The four bushes were some distance apart.

When the Circle J pards were securely tied the two-gun man laughed harshly.

"Nobody except a magician could get out of that wire inside four or five hours," he said. "I know. I've tried it before. And by that time we'll be long gone with your dinero and enjoying it where the lights shine bright. Take my advice and hightail it out of this country. It's too tough for you. We Californio buscaderos play too rough. And after all, you're getting away with your lives—which is more than you have a right to expect. Feel lucky you got off so well."

"Sure," said Billy West, with deceptive mildness.

"Glad you have that much sense, at least." The two-gun man turned to his men, gestured brusquely. "Let's go."

They went, with a mocking salute in the eerie moonlight. Their five horses moved rapidly through the trees and bushes northeastward, toward the main road—

After a while Joe Scott broke the Montanans' silence.

"Well," said Joe, "here we are—between masked devils and the deep blue sea."

"Which," stated Billy West, "is better than being at the *bottom* of the deep blue sea. And I reckon that's about where we'd be now, full of bullets, if we hadn't argued that extra minute about who'd be the middle man in the head-on massacre."

"Which goes to show that it sometimes pays to argue," Joe said.

"Danged if I c'n see whar we're much better off," Buck growled. "Them varmints is hightailin' with all my dinero, an' these hyar wires is neart cuttin' me in four pieces!"

"Five pieces," Joe corrected.

Things indeed seemed only slightly improved. The future was by no means sunny-tinted.

CHAPTER V.

TRICKY WEATHER AHEAD.

FOR a few minutes the Circle J pardners relaxed as much as possible and thought their own thoughts. They couldn't relax much because of the position in which they were tied—and the chill night breezes on their wet skins didn't help toward easing the cold that still suffused their bones.

Presently Billy West said:

"Just thought of something."

"Whut?" Buck growled.

"You remember what that two-gun hombre said—that nobody except a magician could get out of this wire in less than four or five hours. Well, I reckon it's a fall on him. He didn't know we have a magician among us."

"That's so, by g-ganny! Chink, yuh've twisted them trick hands o'

yores outn more'n one tie-up. Git busy!"

"Velly busy alleady, Mistlee Buck," the little Chinaman stated in his singsong voice. "But coppel wiah is velly mean stuff. Not had muchee expelience with."

"Then this is a good time to get that experience," Joe said.

"Velly tluue. I gettee." The little cook was silent for a time. Then he added: "I fixee wlists to makee slack when they tie me. Maybeso it helpee some."

"It better," said Joe, "or we'll see each other next year right here tied to these bushes."

Billy West murmured: "That's so. Only about twenty-four hours till the new year."

"An' I was aimin' to have a high an' handsome greetin' fer it with my fresh dinero," Buck muttered. "Spanish seenyereetas an' wine an' music, by heifers. An' now look at me."

"Well, whose fault is it?" Joe reminded him.

"Yes—whose fault is this?" West inquired. "I'm a little foggy on that part of it, though I heard some mention of Buck's vest and a clip on the jaw somewhere back down the line."

Joe explained.

Bill West smiled wryly. "So that's the way. Well, being a new-rich hasn't bought you much peace, Buck, nor refined your manners."

They were beginning to shiver again and their teeth were chattering somewhat, so they lapsed into a depressed silence for a time.

THAT time stretched into nearly two hours. For once the little Chinese cook had nearly met a master tier-upper in the form of those copper wires. As he explained several times briefly, the fact that his wired wrists were also wired to the

base of that tough bush complicated matters.

But at last, his wrists chafed and bleeding, Sing Lo slipped one hand free.

After that it was but a matter of minutes until all were free, and Billy West, finding dry matches in his trousers pocket, built a sheltered fire that wouldn't be visible very far. All four clustered around it in a hurry, holding the forepart of their wrists over the flames Indian-fashion so that the surface veins and arteries, thus heated, would rapidly warm the blood all through their bodies.

When their teeth had stopped chattering they peeled off their wet bathing trunks and got their clothes from within the nearby clusters of bushes where they had left the garments when they had made ready to go swimming.

"And I see our hosses are still back in here where we left 'em!" Joe exclaimed. "I didn't really think they'd leave the hosses. Seems too good to be true."

"Maybe it is," West muttered.

"Whut yuh mean by that?" Buck asked.

"We'll wait and see," said the Circle J boss.

Before going swimming, the pards had unsaddled the four horses to rest them and had taken the bits out of their mouths so that they could graze on the grass back in the trees, tying them with the bridle headstraps loosely around the animals' necks so they wouldn't stray away.

That was the way they found the horses—just as they had left them. Or at least that was the way they appeared in the moonlight. Frowning, Billy West struck a match and inspected his horse closely. He frowned, pursed his lips, shook his head slowly and stepped on the lighted match.

"Whut's the idee?" Buck asked. "Why look at the hoss?"

"Don't know, exactly," West said, still frowning.

"Where do we go from here, boss?" Joe asked.

"Well, those hombres headed northeast," the Circle J boss said. "I guess we might as well point the same way. Besides, it's the direction of that Don Esteban's rancho. The rancho is nearer here than the town is, and we could do with some coffee and grub and a few minutes around a stove."

"I reckon I can trail 'em in the moonlight," said Joe. He was known as the most expert tracker in all Montana. "Mighty conceited of those masked polecats to leave us our guns and bullets and gun belts without havin' bothered 'em."

"It shows they have plenty self-confidence," West stated thoughtfully. "They should have—with more than two hours' head start in a country they know a heap better than we do."

THE masked riders had broken such a plain trail through the undergrowth that Joe Scott didn't even bother to study the bandits' horses' hoofprints. There'd be time for that later on, if necessary.

Even in the moonlight the four pards were a colorful quartet. Joe was wearing his favorite red shirt, Billy West a green one with a red neckerchief, Buck a blue one of bright hue. All three wore leather batwing chaps and high-heeled boots bedecked with nickeled spurs. Sing Lo was clad in his customary black-silk clothes, which somewhat resembled pajamas.

But their spirits were by no means so cheerful as the colors of the shirts and neckerchiefs. A mood of grimness was upon them, and it didn't

soften any as they realized how much the odds were against their ever catching up with the five bandits. The pards hadn't glimpsed the renegades' faces, nor even had a very good look at their general build. Nor had they so much as had a clear look at the five horses. If the Montanans were to encounter four of the five men on a sidewalk in town, for instance, there would be small chance of recognizing them. Of course, there was one fair hope—Joe and Buck had had a good look at the leader in that saloon, when he wasn't wearing a mask.

"I wonder," West mused aloud, "why he bothered to wear a mask tonight, when you'd already seen him."

"Who?" Joe asked. "That king-pin with the two smokepoles? Dunno. Maybe just habit."

"And maybe not," said the Circle J owner. "Also, it seemed to me they kinda overdid that yawning business."

"Why would they do that?"

"I wish I knew for sure," West said.

It was about a mile and a half to the main dirt highway by the route taken. When they reached it, Joe dismounted to study the tracks just before the tracks connected with the road.

The redhead knelt, scratched several matches, cupped them in his hand and peered intently. Presently he arose, scratching his head ruefully.

"What a smart boy I am. Put the old cap on me and let me stand in the corner till noon, teacher."

"What's wrong?" West asked.

"Instead of studyin' the tracks at the beginnin', down by the beach, I had to wait till we got here."

"And?"

"And," said Joe, "it turns out

there are a dozen or more sets of hoss tracks on the trail we're just come up. A dozen or more made *ahead* of us, I mean—maybe sixteen or seventeen sets in all. And so scrambled together it'd take hours to decide which is which."

"Maybe moon madness has put a curse on us or something," West muttered. He dismounted and inspected the tracks, confirming what Joe had stated. But West noted something else. He pointed to one hoofprint ahead of them, where they had not ridden their horses. "See that splayed calk? Peculiar."

"Yeah. What about it?"

"I've seen it before," said West.

"Where?"

Billy West didn't answer that directly just then. He said: "We're headin' for that Don Esteban's ranch pronto. It's eight or nine miles north, according to what the sheriff told me."

THEY made it to the arched front gate of the Spanish rancho in slightly less than an hour, keeping their horses at a slow, distance-eating lope most of the way. The animals seemed nearer exhaustion than they should have been.

There was no mistaking it—this was the right ranch. For in discreet metal lacework over the archway there were the words: EL RANCHO ESTEBAN.

Billy West dismounted, swung the hand-wrought wooden gate inward. He grunted an exclamation, jerked his hand up and looked at it closely.

"Whut's wrong?" Buck asked.

"Bloodstains on my hand. Fairly fresh blood, I reckon—maybe two or three hours old and kept damp by this heavy night dew from the sea. This thing gets fishier by the minute—especially considering what I've already learned."

"Such as what else?" Joe asked.

"Well, that splayed calk in the hoofprint I mentioned was made by the right front shoe of *my* horse, the one I'm riding now."

Joe's jaw dropped. "But it couldn't have been, boss? You didn't ride up that trail from the ocean to the road but once—and that calk-marked print had been made earlier."

"I didn't ride my horse up," West said, "but I think somebody else did—while we were swimming. Notice how weary our cayuses are?"

"But—"

"I don't know the answer," West said. "But I think we'll have it—or part of it—mighty soon. Keep your hands close to your guns, but don't shoot unless I shoot first. I'm pretty certain there's heavy weather ahead—and tricky weather. We'll go up to the ranchhouse and see what we see."

CHAPTER VI.

HANG-NOOSE SHADOW.

THE Spanish ranchhouse and surrounding buildings were located more than half a mile eastward from the main gate, across gently rolling hillocks to a fairly broad area on top of one of the hills which the Spanish gentleman evidently had chosen for the kingly view it afforded.

There were lights shining from several roofs of the rambling brown dwelling, which almost inclosed a flagstone patio.

The four Montanans rode into the patio, dimly lighted by two post lamps. Their horses' iron shoes made a good deal of noise in the still night air.

A carriage was drawn up in front of the main door. There were no horses hitched to it. But even in the dim light the pards could see bullet holes in the light wood of the car-

riage back and in both sides too.

"Tolerably fresh bullet holes, I reckon," West said grimly. He was about to dismount and go onto the main piazza to knock at the big front portal.

But at that moment the front door opened and a man came out slowly.

He was a man of proud bearing, straight and clear-eyed, perhaps in his early fifties. His clothes were of fine cut, Spanish style. He wore his graying goatee with dignity. The ornately carved butt of a Spanish-style pistol showed out of the carved-leather holster he wore on his right hip.

"Yes, gentlemen?" he said, gravely, face almost expressionless, except for the slightly lifted eyebrows. "I am Don Esteban and at your service. You are luckless wayfarers, perhaps?"

"Yuh dang right!" Buck Foster blurted. His voice was harsh and strained from the night's adventures, so that he sounded something like a preying buzzard. "We aim to shoot us up some skunks plumb pronto!"

"Indeed, sir?" Don Esteban's face paled slightly and became taut, his eyebrows elevated slightly more—for Buck's tone sounded extremely rude, coarse, insulting to a man raised in an atmosphere of high-grade *Californio* politeness.

"Dang tootin!" Buck roared. "I'll plumb shoot their guts loose an' drag 'em through a cactus patch by the light o'—"

Billy West was doing his best to shut Buck up without actually slugging him. But it was too late, anyway, to make a good impression with the proud don.

For at that moment someone spoke in a low tone through the partly opened door behind Don Esteban. The Circle J pards weren't sure of the words, but they sounded

like: "*It is they, padre!*"

In any case, the pards were promptly sure of the results of the words!

Don Esteban's right hand flashed down to that Spanish pistol and brought it up with more speed than the pards would have expected from a man of his culture and years.

"Raise the hands, señores!" the don ordered with crisp grimness. "Yours is an effrontery such as it never has been my displeasure to witness in the past, and it would give me no sorrow to kill you all!"

Billy West stiffened. Joe Scott stared. Buck's jaw dropped and his eyes goggled. Sing Lo's face remained expressionless.

Buck found his voice first. He roared hoarsely: "Whut's thet yo're a-sayin'? W'y—"

The door behind the don opened wider, and a handsome Spanish youth of perhaps twenty-one half-reeled into the doorway, clutching the door jamb weakly with his right hand and arm to keep himself upright. There was intense anger, proud and bitter anger, in his face. In his left hand he clutched a pistol, pointed it at the Montanans, somewhat waveringly to be sure but with firm intentions.

"Yes, padre, it is they—they who robbed me of the gold we had borrowed on our family honor, they who so brutally shot me, with jeers, taunts and blasphemous curses! Who also shot the legs from under my companion!"

"W'y, yuh lyin'—"

Billy West jolted Buck Foster hard in the ribs before the old Circle J trouble-maker could finish his blurring denunciation and make matters worse than they already were.

A non-Spanish man of middle age, evidently the companion of whom

the young Spaniard had spoken, appeared in the doorway behind the wounded young man. This middle-aged man was dressed like a well-to-do range man—but he had come to the door walking on his knees and one hand, for his legs, in which he had been shot, were swathed in white bandages.

He took a look out at the pards and said:

"They're the bandits, all right. Even if they were wearin' masks when they held up your son and me and shot us, Esteban, I'd know 'em anywhere! That old mossyhorn there: same turned-up black hat, moth-eaten bearskin vest and scarred chaps. Voice sounds like him too, only he's got hoarse in the last three hours or so. And that one in the green shirt, tan hat, dark-brown chaps. And that one in the red shirt and tan hat and light-brown chaps. And that Chinaman in black silk. It's them, all right!"

"You must have had an opium dream!" Joe exclaimed, staring.

The middle-aged man ignored him, pointed at the pards' mounts. "Even have the same horses. I saw 'em good in the moonlight: a bay, a sorrel, an iron-gray and a blue-roan!"

"It is they and they shall be hanged on the gallows!" the youth shouted weakly. There was a bandage around his head, a swathe around his left shoulder and another around his ribs where he had been wounded.

Without turning his head, Don Esteban spoke to him:

"Return to your bed, Felipe, my son. You are weak. You have lost much blood. You also, amigo Frank," he told the middle-aged man. Then, more sharply, the don called so that his command would

reach into the house: "Makimoto! Come!"

"Yess, boss. You want services of Makimoto?"

The Circle J pards momentarily turned their attention to this new



entry, who came out onto the porch from a door several rods farther down, where the kitchen might be. He was squat and stocky, little more than five feet tall. His large teeth protruded prominently, and he wore horn-rimmed glasses. His cheekbones were squarish. His skin was a brownish yellow. He was nodding his head in a half bow and grinning widely and, it seemed, hypocritically, as he approached the don.

In a low-pitched singsong, Sing Lo muttered: "One of monkey people! Jap! Sing Lo don't trust!"

Makimoto stopped before the don, bowed again, made the hissing sound peculiar only to Japanese and said: "What iss wish, honorabre employer?"

Billy West, who knew something of Oriental history, was sure then that Makimoto was a Jap, for Japs, except for a few well-educated ones born and raised in America, pro-

nounce the letter *l* to sound like *r*, whereas the Chinese pronounce the *r* to sound like *l*. This is owing to the fact that there is no *l* sound in the native Japanese language and no *r* sound in the Chinese language, so that members of either race born and educated in the old countries never can teach their tongues to master the respective sounds properly.

Don Esteban told the Jap: "Search them, Makimoto, to see if they retain on their persons any of the eight thousand dollars in Spanish gold doubloons which they have stolen from my son and my amigo Frank."

[I]t was more than an embarrassing and painful situation for the Montana pards—it was downright perilous. For Billy West knew he would never be able, even in self-defense, to shoot this proud and honest—but badly mistaken, to be sure—*ranchero*.

The whole crafty and fiendish setup was clear to the Circle J owner now. Piece by piece the puzzle had fallen into place—with this unpleasant climactic crash!

Following Billy West's lead, the Montanans had all raised their hands when Don Esteban had drawn his gun.

Now West said, as calmly as possible:

"Señores, I don't expect you to believe me, but we are as much the victims of those same adroit bandits. We—"

"You lie, coyotero!" young Felipe said, his face contorting in rage. "You are murderous, cowardly bandidos not fit for the lowest zopilote to—"

His intense anger, on top of his weakness, was too much for the young Spaniard. Vainly attempting

to trigger his gun at Billy West, Felipe toppled back into the room in a faint. The middle-aged man called amigo Frank—who was probably a friend or some sort of foreman for Don Esteban—caught the wounded youth, started to carry him as best he could back into the room where there were beds for them both.

Billy West, paling slightly at the interruption, continued:

"I know now that the masked bandidos, with the cunning of the fox and the viciousness of the lobo, planned this thing well. They forced my three amigos and myself to swim long hours in the ocean. While we were in the ocean they, unknown to us, borrowed our clothes, wore them. And rode our horses. When the deed was done, they returned to the ocean beach, pretending to have been asleep in the bushes nearby all the while, and left our clothes and horses as they had found them—so that we would not know, so that we would run into this trap or another like it elsewhere when the posses start searching for four men of our description."

"The posses already are searching, ladrone," Don Esteban informed him coldly. "Fourteen of my vaqueros, divided into two posses, are combing the countryside, while another vaquero has gone to Dioro town to bring the sheriff and another posse of townsmen. My duty to my son forced me to remain and care for him as our duenna is absent visiting. But I see no reason to explain further or to listen further. Surely, ladrone, you do not expect me to believe so poco loco a narrative?"

"No," West admitted. "That's the tough part of it. I *don't* expect you to believe it. I wouldn't believe it myself if somebody else told me." West smiled wryly. "I reckon that's

why those bandidos worked out such an odd scheme. Nobody would believe us when we told the truth. We would be shot or hanged—and they still would be loose to pull new robberies. A very foxy scheme, into



which we fitted by the fact that my hotheaded rannihan, Foster here, had made their leader good and angry in Dioro town."

"*Fantastico!*"

West smiled. "But simple and clever enough, once you know how it works. The pieces fit neatly, to our great sorrow. The further irony is that we were coming to visit you, to offer you a fine price for palominos—and the bandidos also stole all the money we had with us!"

"Enough, señor!" Don Esteban snapped. "You lie most glibly, but you shall hang from a tree less glibly!"

"Sorta looks that way, pardner," Billy West admitted, seeing no need to continue using formal language.

In fact, it looked as if he and his three pards wouldn't be using any kind of language—for that waning moon seemed to throw the shadow of a black hang noose over all visitors from Montana!

CHAPTER VII.

RENEGADE RING.

EXCEPT for the fact that the Jap had come forward and started to search Buck Foster, the Circle J owner's piecing together of the adventure might have drawn such looks of open-mouthed surprise from Joe and Buck that Don Esteban might have softened a trifle in his disbelief. But as it was, they were concentrating on watching the Jap as much as on listening to their boss.

Billy West felt a chill run along his spine. This was about as tough a predicament as he and his pards ever had faced. To stay here was suicidal, for those possemen would drift in sooner or later and shake out the old hang nooses. But to flee might mean killing Don Esteban and running into one of the posses somewhere out in the open country anyway.

A sour pickle indeed!

While he was still trying to decide what to do, event and instinct decided it for him.

Makimoto found nothing of value on Buck and started on Joe. The Jap reached his hand into Joe's left chaps pocket and pulled out something, held it up gleefully for the don to see.

"Iss broad gord ring, honorabre emproyer—with diamond in! Iss ring Don Feripe saw on bandido's hand!"

"Full proof," Don Esteban said.

It was the two-gun man's ring, sure enough!

Two things happened fast then. First, red-headed Joe Scott lost his temper and snatched the ring out of the Jap's hand—and Don Esteban, slightly startled by the commotion, turned his eyes that way for a brief moment.

In that moment Billy West's instinct prodded him into action. His right hand darted to gun butt and made the fastest draw he had ever made.

Don Esteban saw the move, flicked his attention back to the Circle J boss. And Billy West got off his shot a split second sooner.

His bullet tore the Spanish gun from Don Esteban's hand, and the don's hastily aimed bullet barely ticked West's left ear.

"Sorry to do that, señor!" West said. And to his trio: "Let's high-tail, gents!"

They did. They whirled their horses and sped out of the patio before Don Esteban could recover his gun or his composure. Sing Lo, as he turned his horse, swung out a slender leg, muttered, "Monkey man," and kicked the jap in the teeth, setting that hissing individual down hard on the flagstones.

A gun roared three times from inside the house. But the bullets, fired by the wounded amigo Frank, were yards wide of a mark.

The Montanans spurred their mounts fast into the night, heading due east. The moon had ducked almost out of sight and it was darker now, with dawn less than two hours away.

DAWN light found the Circle J pards holed up in an old mine opening in the hillside of an out-of-the-way valley some six or seven miles south of the border of Don Esteban's rancho. They had doubled south on an old trail that showed signs of recent travel—maybe by one of the posses—and would hide their horses' hoofprints among the others. They had seen the mine opening, somewhat overgrown with wild clematis and several varieties of bushes. Just before discovering it, they had come

across a brook which served two purposes: it provided much-needed water for themselves and their horses, and it was a fine trail eraser for them to ride their horses in almost to the mouth of the short but big-mouthed old tunnel.

Sing Lo had shifted some of the clinging vines better to conceal the opening and at least to make it appear unused by fugitives.

"Well," said Joe Scott, squatted on the rock floor and gazing out at the rising sun, "here we are. What's for breakfast? Me, I'll take a wraith sandwich, toasted."

"Whut kind o' sandwich is thet?" Buck asked suspiciously.

"Two imaginary slabs of fresh-baked bread surroundin' a thick juicy slice of imaginary ham," said Joe.

Buck glowered. "Whut we oughta done is shoot thet danged furriner an' et whut was in the kitchen."

"Don Esteban's no foreigner, Buck," West told him. "He speaks the language better than you and has likely been a much better citizen. It wasn't his fault he couldn't believe the facts. And we certainly couldn't shoot him. So all we could do was run."

"And now that we've run, what?" Joe drawled. He took out the ring, examined it, blew on it, polished it, admired it and put it on his finger. "We goin' to hole-up in this cave two or three years and live on soup made out of our boots?"

"I reckon we can tighten our belts today and travel tonight," said West.

"With this California moon?" Joe said skeptically. "Those posses'll figure that's what we'll do, and they'll spot us and shoot us and we can't shoot back because you, bein' so pure in heart, won't let us."

"There's no need to shoot honest possemen who're merely doing their

duty," West told him. "Apart from that, it wouldn't be smart for us to shoot any posseman. If we did that, we'd never have a chance of clearing ourselves. We'd be headed for the owlhoot trail as long as we lived."

"But it sets kinda hard to run away and hide like a scared ground-hog," Joe objected. "I wasn't raised that way."

"Me neither, by ganny!" Buck glowered out through the vines. "The fightin'est man in all Montaner never tucked tail an' run ary a time in my life till now. I was taught different."

Joe snapped: "Who taught you to shoot off your mouth in strange barrooms and show your money belt and brag about how much money we all were carryin'?"

Buck bristled and glared. "W'y, yuh young whippersna—"

"Ease up, you two," West ordered. "You didn't get any sleep last night, and your nerves're edgy."

"Anybody got a deck of cards?" Joe asked.

Nobody had any cards.

SO, it was by no means the most pleasant day the Montana pards had spent together. There wasn't much to do for recreation. They took turns standing watch through the concealing vines and slept through most of the day, though the rock floor of the abandoned mine opening was somewhat less than comfortable.

During the day two posses passed within sight of the cave's fugitives. The first group consisted of seven of Don Esteban's vaqueros, who passed westward at the bottom of the valley below the hideout. A good lusty throw of a stone from the pards' cave would have hit the posse.

The second posse appeared late in the afternoon, but it was a mile or

more away to the east and was heading northeastward. Evidently it was the posse from Diora town, with the sheriff probably leading it. No doubt it had been scouring the hills between this point and the town.

Darkness descended swiftly.

Sing Lo suddenly said: "Suppel! Come gettee glub, maybeso thlow it away!"

Buck Foster, dozing, perked up. "Whut's thet, chink? Grub?"

"Yessee, Mistleee Buck. Fo' soup cou'se, tighten belt one notchee. Fo' meat, anothel notchee. Fo' des-selt—"

"W'y, yuh low-down—"

Billy West cut in tersely: "All right, gents. Let's go."

"Go where?" Joe Scott asked.

"Away from here," said West. "We've got to have food, and there's no use staying here till we're too weak to leave."

"But the moon's comin' up, and we'll make an awful good target in that light when we can't shoot back!"

"We'll have to chance it," the Circle J boss stated.

Grumbling somewhat, tempers frayed and bellies empty, Buck and Joe saddled the four rented horses, which had had only a few sprigs of grass to eat since sunup, Joe having once ventured forth to risk getting some of the strengthening feed.

Sing Lo, who was keeping watch through the vines at the time, suddenly hissed a warning for quiet and pointed down into the fairly well-lighted valley.

"Monkey man headec east, all alone!"

"Eh?" Billy West stepped forward and peered out.

There was no mistaking the peculiar squat figure of the Jap. Maki-moto was riding eastward on a dark-colored horse. Occasionally he would

glance furtively behind him. But by the time he had disappeared from sight he had ceased to glance behind, evidently assured that no one was following him.

"He acts as if he's going to meet somebody," West muttered. He meditated a moment then turned to Joe Scott and said: "Joe, when that Jap pulled the two-gun man's ring from your pocket, do you think it was really in your pocket or in the palm of his hand?"

Joe scratched his head. "I . . . I can't rightly say, boss. I sure hadn't felt it there, but these chaps're thick. And fact is, I don't remember happenin' to reach into that pocket for anything from the time we got out of the ocean till the Jap searched me. The two-gun man *might* have left it in my pocket when he borrowed our clothes and hosses to pull that holdup of the young Spaniard."

"Not likely," said West. "I think we'd better follow that Jap. He's sneaky-looking, and I have a feeling he knows more about this whole thing than we know."

"Waal, then, let's foller the varmint," said Buck.

"We'll have to be careful and stay at least one hill behind him. If he sees us it's apt to scare him away from going on to whoever it is he aims to meet."

They spread the vines back, led their horses down to the edge of the creek, mounted horses and were about to head eastward in the creek to conceal their mounts' tracks as long as possible.

It was then that a harsh voice behind them ordered:

"*Lift your hands slow and easy, gents!* I want to make palaver with you."

A slight chill not entirely of the night air ran up each of the pards' spinal columns. Caught under a

cold drop, they sensed it would be quick death to try to draw, to whirl and shoot. Besides, the noise of shooting might bring one of those posses thundering this way.

The four Montanans raised their hands, turned their heads for a look at the new nemesis.

It turned out not to be a strictly new one.

It was the two-gun man, without his mask. He was riding a dark horse and he was alone. He had both guns focused on the four Montanans.

"How'd you stand it today in *your* cave?" he asked bitterly.

"Fine," said West. "Where've you been and where are your four friends?"

"Four friends?" The two-gun man frowned for a fleeting second and laughed harshly. "Hombre, I haven't even *one* friend, and haven't had for years."

"Where'd you pop up from just now?"

"I didn't pop up, I *rode out*—from the mine entrance across this little valley from your cave. It appears those would-be miners couldn't make up their minds where the gold was, so they dug a big hole on each side of the valley. Mine was better covered with those green vines than yours was. When I looked out just before dawn this morning and saw you hombres entering the cave across the way—well, I decided to wait and see what you were up to. What *are* you up to?"

Joe Scott was blinking perplexedly. "Holy smoke! You been sittin' across from us for twelve hours or so! But how could you have been—I mean without your four pards? What'd you do—shoot 'em and keep all the swag for yourself?"

"There you go, talking about my four pards again." There was an-

noyance in the gunman's tone—and harsh puzzlement. "What four pards? Are you loco? I'm strictly a lone wolf. I—"

"What're you starin' at?" Joe asked. He had lowered his hands somewhat and the moonlight shone on them.

The gunman lifted his two .45s slightly and his forefingers seemed to tighten on the triggers. He rasped between clenched teeth:

"Where did you get my ring, *hombre?*"

CHAPTER VIII.

RAWHIDE RESOLUTIONS.

FOR a long moment the Circle J pards neglected to answer that question. Their attention was too well focused upon the two-gun man's trigger fingers and the menace in his eyes.

Presently Joe blurted:

"Either you left it in my chaps pocket when you borrowed my clothes, or else that sneaky Jap planted it there from the palm of his hand when he searched me. I guess you know the answer."

There was angry impatience in the gunman's voice:

"Look, my valiant Montana bear cats, don't play games with *me!* Don't babble about my stealing your clothes and Japs and stuff like that." He stopped suddenly, meditated with a faraway look in his eyes. His eyes narrowed and he muttered: "Maybe that's it. They pulled a job and tried to frame these galoots and fixed it so that if these galoots somehow got on the right side of the law, I'd get the blame—or my corpse would, when it was found lying beside some road." He said this as if thinking aloud. Then he looked at Billy West and ordered:

"Outline what's happened to you

Montana hombres since I had the run-in with the redhead and the old gander of the stinky vest."

West shrugged and briefly told the gunman all that had happened.

The gunman nodded slowly. "That's the way. And here's my story straight: I'm a stick-up man. Got framed onto the owlhoot trail and had to stay on it. I picked up a pard over in Nevada about a year ago—a fat snake called Potgut. We held up a stage, got five thousand. Potgut hightailed with it when I wasn't looking."

"So?"

"I've been looking for him ever since. And I'd just caught up with him yesterday when smelly vest here and the redhead put the jinx on me. Potgut was the gent behind the bar and it took me a while to make sure it was him, because he'd let his whiskers grow and put that fake black patch over one eye. Also he'd put on weight. But I was just becoming sure it was him when you hombres muscled in."

"And?"

"Well, when old smelly vest here knocked me cold, that was just fine for Potgut. After you two left the saloon, Potgut dragged me into the back room to 'revive' me. Instead, he tied me up down cellar, figuring to torture me and maybe use me as the goat for one of his holdup jobs. He did, according to your story. He took my ring, had one of his men dress like me so you'd think I was the leader of those five masked hombres in case anything slipped up and you went to the law with your story. Then I could be found dead by some roadside and the case would be 'cleared up!'"

"How'd you get away?" Joe asked.

"Conked the hombre who made the mistake of getting too close to my hand when he came down cellar

to feed me last night. I guess Potgut and his crew were off pulling the holdup jobs on you and the Spaniard at the time."

"And I guess," said West, "that we'd better track after that Jap, poco pronto—before he gets clear out of sight."

The gunman nodded grimly. "You trust me and I'll trust you. After all, we're all law bait together right now. Apart from old smelly vest here, you look like fairly square galoots."

Buck bridled, glared. "W'y, yuh tricky fancypants, I'll—"

"Tie a loop on that stuff!" West snapped impatiently. "We'd better hightail fast."

They did.

It was safe enough to ride fast until they were near the brow of the first hill to eastward. Near the top they dismounted, peered cautiously over the top.

Makimoto was just disappearing over the crest of the second hill. There was about a mile between pursued and pursuers.

"We'd better keep this distance so the Jap won't know he's being followed, eh, mister?" West said.

"My name's Clinton," the gunman stated tersely. "Yeah. I think Potgut and his gang have a meeting-place hide-out where they split up the swag, near here. That's why I came out here. I choked that much fact out of the hombre who was handin' me the food—as soon as I choked him into cuttin' me loose."

THIS statement about the meeting place turned out to be fact indeed.

The Circle J pards and Clinton were near the crest of a hill less than three miles from their caves when they heard the faint sound of voices wafting from somewhere over the east side of the hill.

"I guess this is it," Billy West whispered.

Clinton nodded. "We'd better get off the horses, take off the spurs and ease over on foot. Maybe we can get the drop on 'em."

They did this. Even Buck Foster, for once, managed to make little noise. He managed it because West sternly bade him stay behind with the horses and Sing Lo, so as not to crab the whole show.

Lying on their stomachs a couple of minutes later, the two Montanans and Clinton stared down into a grassy glade. Six white men and one Jap were sitting or standing around the glowing but rock-concealed coals of a campfire, for the night again was chilly.

Two of the standing ones were Potgut and the Jap. Neither Potgut nor his five henchmen were wearing masks. Potgut was a man of such girth that he would have been too easily recognized to be an active bandit. It seemed to Billy West that it was likely the other five had worn the masks and done the work on the holdups of the Montanans and the Spanish youth last night, with Potgut no doubt lurking safely in the background out of sight and danger. The other five white men were of a size so that four of them could manage to have worn the Circle J pard's clothes on last night's sortie. The smallest of them, scrawny, little larger than Sing Lo, was undoubtedly the one who had worn the little Chinaman's clothes on the job of holding up the young Spaniard.

The Jap's sly look had vanished. It seemed to be replaced by apprehension and bewilderment. The pards and Clinton quickly saw and heard the reason why.

For Potgut, looking like a sardonic

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fat pirate of the land with that black patch over one eye, was staring at the Jap and saying:

"This is the funniest thing yet! Har, har! I thought it was mighty funny when Clinton caught up with me and got knocked cold by that old mossyhorn stranger before Clinton recognized me. I thought it was funny makin' them Montana galoots swim for hours while my men borrowed their clothes and hosses. I thought it was amusin' how Larry here, this wrong-gone ham actor, imitated Clinton's voice and manner to throw the blame on Clinton. I thought it was a good belly laugh shootin' up that high-toned young Spaniard, but lettin' him live so's he could throw the blame on them Montana galoots an' get 'em hung for our job. It was funny when—"

"But you promise sprit of storen gord Spanish doubroons, honorabre boss, if Makimoto ret you know when Spaniard take borrowed doubroons to ranch, so you can hordup and take. Makimoto did this. Give Makimoto his money now!"

"Har, har! You're a fool, Jap! You're a sneak and I'm a thief, only I'm tougher an' meaner'n you are. Sure, you spied on the Spaniards for me—but what good are yuh now? No good! Worse than no good, because yuh know too much. You're sneaky an' yuh'd likely try to double-cross me an' my hired hands first chance you got. That's why I say this is the funniest of the lot! You comin' here imaginin' I'll give you a pile of gold doubloons! Har, har!" His hand crept down toward a knife in his belt.

The Jap backed off several steps slowly. There was fear in his eyes as he glanced from one cold-eyed member of the bandit pack to the other.

UP above, Billy West and Clinton looked at each other, nodded silently. This was the signal.

The pards and Clinton stood up suddenly, started down the hill, hands near gun butts.

"Hello, Potgut!" Clinton called harshly. "You want your namesake spread all over the ground or do you want to elevate your hands? Decide it pronto!"

Potgut decided. For an instant he froze in surprise—and then his right hand shifted its direction from knife to gun.

The night was split asunder by the roaring of nearly a dozen guns.

But the two Circle J pards, being outnumbered, pulled their six-guns with a speed stemming from grim desperation. They, along with Clinton, drew first and fast—and they shot accurately.

Clinton, hating Potgut with a fine venom, concentrated his right-hand gun on the fat bandit leader's belly while he mowed down two of the others with his left-hand gun.

But Potgut's venom was equal to that of Clinton. The fat bandit, even as he sagged to his knees, was pouring lead into the fancy-clad two-gun man.

Joe Scott took a bullet in the right shoulder. He stumbled and went down forward in the grass on his right hand, his six-gun falling out of his grasp. He clutched the wound with his left hand.

But by that time the opposition was pretty thin—for Billy West's .45 had been mowing the bandits down somewhat on the order of ducks in a shooting gallery.

Meanwhile the Jap was hot-footing it away from there. But not very far.

For Buck Foster, seething with ire at being left behind, had leaped into the saddle at the first sound of

gunshots and, with Sing Lo riding beside him, was speeding down into the valley.

The Jap pulled a derringer. Buck shot it out of his hand, slid his horse to a stop, flung himself from the saddle and ran at the Jap.

"Hyar, yuh heathen varmint!" Buck roared, aiming to capture the Jap. He plunged right at Makimoto.

And the old Circle J puncher suddenly found himself flying right over the Jap's shoulder—into a small mountain cactus! Buck had never heard of jujitsu, but he was learning about it now.

Buck roared in rage and anguish, picked himself out of the cactus and rushed Makimoto again. But this time, when the Jap made a grab for Buck's arm, the old puncher swung the other—with a fist on the end of it. It cracked Makimoto on the jaw, and the dishonest Nipponese went over backward and lay still. Buck pounced on him, tied him up. He had barely finished when a sharp hail came down from the top of the hill in Spanish accents:

"Señores! What ees happen?"

"Yeah, what?" bellowed the Dioro sheriff. It was explained later that his posse had met up with one of the Spanish posses over a hillock less than a mile north of here. And when the shooting had begun, the combined posses had sped this way on the full run.

Only two of the bandits remained alive. One, not too seriously wounded, was scrawling a note of confession to Billy West on the promise that the Circle J boss would do his best to save the man's life. The other was Potgut, dying. Holding his riddled stomach with both hands, Potgut was looking with sad irony toward the dead Clinton and Potgut was muttering:

"I . . . I thought it was funny, too—when we joined up with . . . the sheriff's posse and . . . came lookin' for ourselves . . . splittin' off into a posse of our own . . . out here . . . so's we could bury the . . . money we stole. But I . . . I guess the last laugh's on me!" He slumped forward and lay still.

The combined posse came down, and it didn't take them long to catch onto the facts. There was plenty of evidence, including all that money in Potgut's saddlebags.

"Bueno, señores from Montana!" said one of the Rancho Esteban's vaqueros, smiling in admiration.

TWO of the vaqueros rode on ahead to explain things, including Don Esteban's understandable mistake about the Montana pards, to the proud Spanish *ranchero*.

But even so, there was a slight chilliness in Don Esteban's greeting as the combined posse and the Circle J men rode into the patio.

And it wasn't until young Felipe, smiling in friendly fashion from his bed where he lay repairing his wounds, pointed at the large clock on the wall of the big *salon*, that the *ranchero* mellowed.

"See, *padre!* The old year has but half an hour remaining. It is time to forgive, to understand, to give gratitude to the past that is good and a toast to the future that may be better!"

Don Esteban looked—and slowly smiled. He gestured to two of the vaqueros. "Juan, Manuel! The cellar—a barrel of my best wine!"

Then the *ranchero* walked to the Circle J pards and extended his hand, smiling.

"My pardon, señores, for my rudeness. For I was far more wrong than you—wrong to be hasty, wrong to have trusted Makimoto."

Billy West said quietly: "Any error you may have made, Don Esteban, was through no fault of your own, I assure you."

"Thet's so, by ganny!" Buck echoed.

"Same here," said Joe Scott, his wounded shoulder swathed in bandages.

"Velly tluе," said Sing Lo. "Chinee know leal gentleman when see!" And thereby he stated the feelings of them all. . . .

As the great clock chimed the twelve strokes that bade *adios* to the old year and hail to the new, the wine was flowing freely and all were in a mellow mood.

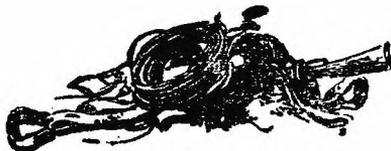
Buck Foster bellowed: "By ganny, I'm makin' some good resolutions! No more gittin' into trouble, no more heavy drinkin', no more spendin' my money foolish, no more—"

"Better make those resolutions out of rawhide, mossyhorn!"

"Why, yuh red-headed young coyote?"

"Because rawhide'll stretch!" Joe said.

Yep, we're afraid Buck's good resolutions may stretch—and snap him and his pards into a tough fresh batch of trouble before they get away from California! Watch for the Circle J pards' next exciting adventure in Wild West Weekly!





The old cobbler turned on his bench and said: "You're the hombre that's been robbing the express line."

Seems as though the trade of cowboy cobbler ought to be a plumb peaceful profession—unless it turns out you're a

BOOTHILL BOOTMAKER

by C. WILLIAM HARRISON

It wasn't just because he had been a drifter and old Ben Purdy had been the only man ever to befriend him that the killing was branded so deeply on Gil Shannon's mind. It was a thing that would have burned

red and ugly into any hombre's brain—and Gil Shannon would never forget it.

It was all the more bitter because he could do nothing to prevent it. The gun was already a cold and steady pressure against his back, and the mask-muffled voice of the killer was a bleak promise that grated in his ears.

"Get frisky and I'll blow your spine out, Shannon."

It wasn't fear for himself that held back Gil Shannon. Knocked around by life as he had been, as far back as his memory stretched, he had little fear of what lay beyond the grave. But he saw no sense in wasting his life by making a foolish break. Old Ben Purdy, Gil's only friend, was going to die—Gil knew that as certainly as if the murder had already been committed—and Gil's throwing his life away wouldn't help any. But guarding his chance of living might help bring the killers to justice.

He watched Ben Purdy helplessly. The oldster sat on his bootmaker's stool, half turned away from his bench. There wasn't any fear in his age-scarred face. He didn't know what was coming. This was just a job he was being forced to do without any promise of pay—nothing more than that.

The outlaw leader wore a slicker and was seated in the chair near the bootmaker's workbench. He was pulling off his boot and saying: "I want a new heel put on this boot, Purdy." His bandanna mask puffed out with each word.

The oldster nodded, his faded eyes traveling across the five masked men scattered around the room. It was when his glance shifted back to the outlaw leader that Ben Purdy made his first mistake.

"You're the gang that's been knocking off the Sage City express

line," he said. "It was a foolish thing to say, but then that was old Ben Purdy. He was too honest to know cunning.

"Keep your trap shut! And put a new heel on that boot," the outlaw leader rasped, leaping to his feet.

Ben Purdy took the boot, but he didn't look at it. He was shaking his white head slowly, almost sadly.

"It ain't right for men to take what don't belong to them," he said in his quietly reproving tone. "You men did wrong, and you should give yourselves up before you make a worse mistake. Some day you may be forced to kill, and then—"

"Shut up, you old coot!" The outlaw leader cursed.

There was sardonic danger in the soft drawl of an outlaw guarding the door. "The shotgun messenger on the stage made a bad mistake tonight, and he's dead. So is the driver. Don't preach any to us, Purdy. Don't preach none at all, or you'll get what they got. Just change that heel, quick and quiet."

Ben Purdy wasn't afraid. "They'll hang you for what you did," he said.

Gil Shannon spoke up, low and hoarse. "Ben, stop talkin'. They're killers, Ben! Don't say anything and don't hear anything—and *don't see anything!*"

He tried to drive his last words home, but he knew he had failed. Ben Purdy would see, and he would talk, and then he would be murdered.

"You're smart," sneered the gunman behind Shannon's back.

Ben Purdy turned slowly on his high stool. He hadn't looked at the outlaw's boot yet. Slabs of sole leather lay in the rack at his side; his hammers and knives and tack bins were on the bench before him.

A lifetime spent making range shoes made it unnecessary for him to

check the size of the outlaw's boot. The feeling of his gnarled fingers had told him that. He picked up a knife and began cutting leather for the new heel. He worked with the unconscious speed of long practice, seeming to have forgotten the outlaws scattered around his shop.

Gil Shannon found his nerves strained to the snapping point. "He'll see, and talk, and be murdered!" Gil's thoughts kept repeating to him.

It wouldn't be long now. Shannon threw all his thoughts into a single frantic hope. Maybe old Ben would be smart, maybe he would forget his belief that there was good in all men. Maybe he would keep still and stay alive.

THE heel leathers were cut and ready. Ben Purdy slipped the boot onto the last, a new boot, Gil Shannon saw, with a fresh bullet gouge across the side of the heel. So that was what had forced the outlaws to take this desperate chance! The boot heel of the outlaw leader had been marked, and to buy another pair of boots so soon after these new ones would point suspicion at him. A new heel would erase the evidence against him.

"Hurry it up, damn you!" the outlaw leader grated.

But Ben Purdy didn't work any faster. He had an old bootmaker's pride in the way he did his work, and in spite of the outlaw's threats he would use just as much care on this job as on any other.

He pried loose the bullet-gouged heel, and began forming the new one, his hammer making a sharp crackling sound in the silence. Tension squeezed cold sweat into the palms of Gil Shannon's hands. The steady rapping of the bootmaker's hammer seemed to drive icy spikes into his

brain. He saw the first layer of the heel shape up, the second.

Then the oldster's hammer stopped pounding. "Don't look!" Shannon's mind screamed. Words clawed up in his throat, but he fought them back. A warning wouldn't do any good. The outlaws would guess the reason, and it would be just as bad as Ben Purdy talking. It would be worse, Shannon knew, because then he, too, would be murdered, and no one would be alive to point out the killers to the law.

Ben Purdy was staring at the side of the boot as though seeing it for the first time, his faded eyes groping along the hand stitching that decorated the leather. Surprise knifed into his face, and he didn't try to hide it. He swung around slowly on his stool, and Gil Shannon saw the wicked heat that flared in the eyes of the outlaw leader. But Ben Purdy didn't see it. Or if he saw it, he wasn't afraid.

"Any good bootmaker can tell his work when he sees it," he said.

"Ben, shut up!" Shannon croaked.

"Go on and talk," the outlaw leader sneered.

Ben Purdy went on, cool and steady. "I knew I'd made these boots the minute I felt this one. I do all my work on order. All the while I've been wonderin' what makes a man turn killer, and I didn't think to look for my mark. That fancy stitchin' is my mark, and a long time ago I got the habit of hiding the initials of the owner in that stitchin', just for the fun of it. I identified a dead man once that way. I know who you are, killer. Why, your name is—"

He got no further. The masked man at the door swung his gun savagely.

But the outlaw leader ripped out harshly: "No shootin'!"

The outlaw leader moved with vicious speed across the floor. The brutal chop of his fist knocked the old man off his stool. Ben Purdy tried to get to his feet, white and stunned, but he didn't have a chance. The killer grabbed up the hammer from the bench, lifted it, slashed it down.

All Gil Shannon could do was watch.

HIS dead, ain't he?" In the red cloud of hatred closing around his brain, Shannon hardly knew he uttered the question. He got no answer from the killer. He didn't need any. Old Ben was a pitiful heap on the floor beside his stool, and an ugly red was staining the white thatch of his hair. A man couldn't live after being bludgeoned by one of those sharp-clawed hammers.

The outlaw behind Shannon grated, "Don't be a fool, kid."

But Shannon's bitter hatred was an unreasoning power that crowded him forward. There was something cruel in his slow movement, something relentless. He knew he didn't stand a chance, but that didn't stop him. He walked away from the gun behind him and caught the outlaw leader by the arm. He jerked the man around savagely.

"You dirty murderer!" He hit the man with all the strength in his iron fists, but that was the only blow he got in. The outlaws came rushing in from all sides, vicious and deadly.

"No shootin'!" the killer boss rasped. "Don't mark him!"

Their guns smashed against Shannon's arms and shoulders. They battered him around, and the clubbing of their gun barrels crushed the red clouds of fury out of his brain, turning him sick with agony.

"That's enough," the outlaw leader ground out. He rammed his

gun against Shannon's stomach. "Now get to work and finish heeling my boot," he snarled. "You've hung around Ben Purdy long enough to know how. If you don't want what he got, work fast and do a good job."

They wrapped a cloth around part of the boot so he couldn't see the stitching. He worked fast, using all the knowledge he had picked up since he lived with the old bootmaker. He nailed on the third and fourth layers of the slanted heel, and through the middle he drove in a long clinch nail, half of the head of which was curled back. He tacked on the final leather cap, trimmed the heel clean and dyed it. He handed it to the outlaw leader.

"I hope you walk into hell in those boots," he said harshly.

The killer slid the boot on, straightened, grinning wickedly. "You're lucky you ain't goin' there now," he sneered. "We're keepin' you around to take Purdy's place."

The gun barrel whipped up and down. Shannon tried to throw his head to one side, but the gun followed him, and a bolt of blackness knocked him into a world that was hollow and empty.

HE came to with hands jerking him roughly. Someone was hauling him to his feet and pinning him back against the workbench. Sheriff Mander's voice raked at him harshly.

"Come around, Shannon! Come around, you murdering snake!"

The room was a dizzy swirl in front of Gil Shannon's eyes, and his head was filled with a hot core of pain. It came to him slowly, a bitter thought prying his brain into life. They had called him a murderer! They thought he had killed Ben Purdy!

He said hoarsely, "I didn't do it." His voice seemed to clear out his

brain. He could see Sheriff Manders close before him, a short square man with a blunt shelf of a jaw.

The boot shop was clogged with men. There was Mike Duvall, who managed the Sage City Express Co., tall and solid-shouldered, bleakly expressionless. Near Duvall stood slender Lash Brude and chunky Dink Gerber, both drivers on the stage line. Joe Tracy, a shotgun messenger for Duvall, was staring his hate at Shannon and at the same time talking out of the corner of his thin mouth to the man who ran the town livery stables.

"It hits harder when a man like Ben Purdy gets murdered."

The hostler swore savagely. "It's a waste of the county's money, givin' that snake a trial. We ought to string him up!"

The hostler's words hadn't put a new thought in the minds of the bitter-faced men clogging the room. Lynch fever was a hot, deadly glitter building up in their eyes. It was only a matter of time before they would push Sheriff Manders aside and call for a rope.

"I tell you I didn't do it!" Gil Shannon strangled out. It seemed like a futile thing to say, but he couldn't think of anything else. It was as though he had two separate brains; one that felt the cold weight of danger piling up against him, the other that wondered why. He shifted his eyes to Sheriff Manders.

"You've got to listen to me!" he said desperately. "I was here when old Ben was murdered, but I didn't do it. The outlaw gang that's been hitting the stages did it. I'm telling you straight, sheriff."

Manders rasped an oath of bleak contempt. "If there's anything I hate worse than a murderer, it's a murderer who'll lie when he's been caught red-handed."

"I tell you it's the truth!" Shannon croaked. "They killed Ben Purdy when he discovered who their leader is."

"Then who is he?" Manders mocked.

"I don't know. Ben was about to tell when they killed him. He never got it out."

The sheriff sneered.

Bitter anger burned through Gil Shannon. "What kind of law do you represent anyhow?" he cried out. "I'm telling you what happened, and you won't believe me. The leader of that gang had his boot heel bullet-marked while he was holdin' up the stage. He came here to force Ben to put on a new heel. Ben took off the bullet-marked heel before they killed him. Its right here on the bench."

Shannon lifted his hand to point, and then halted it, staring. Fear jumped against his brain.

"Your hand's red, ain't it?" the lawman sneered. "You forgot about that, didn't you? It's Ben Purdy's blood. We found you still gripping the hammer you used on him when we broke in here. You still want to lie about it?"

"I didn't do it!" Shannon croaked. But his hand was red with Ben Purdy's blood, and they had found him gripping the hammer. Understanding funneled like a cold stream into his brain. He had been framed. There was one more thing yet needed to fill out the picture. He let his eyes drop until he could see his boot heel. He wasn't surprised. The heel on his right boot bore the gouge of a bullet.

"Is that the heel you were talkin' about?" Sheriff Manders mocked, his voice whipping out in a bleak, inexorable rush. "I'll tell you everything and save you the trouble of

lying! You're the head of that outlaw gang. You came here to make old Ben put on a new heel, but he refused and you murdered him. You must have heard something then and got scared. You jumped for the door, tripped and banged your head against that chair. Don't try to lie about that because some of your hair is in the blood on the chair arm. We've got you sewed up, killer, and it's time you started spillin' who the rest of your gang is."

Shannon's temper took a sudden bitter lunge. "You've got me sewed up just the way they wanted me sewed up," he flared. "They planted that hammer in my hand and smeared my blood and hair on that chair. They switched that bullet-marked heel to my boot, but you wouldn't believe that. All you can think of is what they left for you to see—just because I ran with a wild crowd before I came here. But I ran with that crowd because men like you wouldn't give me a chance. Ben Purdy is the only man I ever met who offered me a hand, and you think I murdered him."

His voice broke off, and he saw lynch heat flame through the men who crowded the room. They shifted forward, a solid, ominous body moving toward him, faces dark, eyes sultry.

One of them yelled harshly, "He'll never talk, sheriff. Get out of our way. We'll handle him!"

Manders jerked around angrily. "Not while I'm still the law," he began. "Try a lynching—"

He never finished. Gil Shannon moved with unexpected violence, desperate and savage. He lurched away from the workbench, smashed the full weight of his shoulders against the back of the lawman, sent Manders stumbling heavily against the crowd. He leaped to one side,

throwing up the gun he had jerked from the sheriff's holster.

"Freeze up, you fools!" he yelled. The danger in his voice was like a whip that cut the crowd motionless. He uttered his threat bleakly. "The first one of you that tries to stop me gets cured with this gun!"

He drifted along the wall, holding the crowd back with the menace of his Colt, and halted at the rear door, tense and poised.

"Stop pawin' around that cutter, Tracy!" he grated.

He twisted the key and jerked the rear door open, risking a narrow glance over his shoulder. The way seemed clear, the night like a black wall crowding the rear of the boot shop; but he knew it wouldn't be long before men were cutting around from the street to head him off. He grinned icily.

"Don't rush my gun, gents!" he warned.

HE backed through the doorway, hesitated tensely, then jerked the door shut after him. He spun and broke into a hard run down the rubbish littered alley. A hatred-pitched shout blared out behind him. Mike Duvall's voice!

"After him, dammit! Get that killer!"

Over his shoulder, Shannon saw the boot-shop door bang open, spilling out a yellow shaft of light. Men came boiling out of the building, guns fisted and ready. Shannon tripped into a rubbish heap, kicked his way out savagely.

"There he goes! He's headin' away from the livery—tryin' to trick us!"

A gun pounded, swift and violent. Lead raked the alley, and the thin spill of moonlight betrayed Shannon's quick dodge along the side of the feed store. The shouts of the

townsmen were like the blood cry of a wolf pack, high-pitched and wild.

"He's cuttin' toward the street! Keep crowdin' that polecat, he's huntin' for a hole!"

But more than the desperate hope of finding a hide-out was in Gil Shannon's bitter mind. What he did was raw with hazard, increasing his speed when the mob got too close, slowing when they dropped behind, always risking the smash of their guns to lead them on. He was like a man bridging a chasm on a tight wire, with death all around him to pay for a single mistake.

The lane between the feed store and the hotel was narrow and clogged with brush. Lead smashed around him as he kicked through the last sage tangle and leaped to the protection of the building corner.

But there was no protection for him there. He was momentarily clear of the guns behind him, but the street was filled with danger.

A man squalled harshly. "It's Shannon! There he is!"

A Colt's sharp roar was picked up instantly by others. From down the street! Shannon whipped a glance over his shoulder toward the knot of men moving along the street in his direction. A slug jerked at his shirt, left a burning sting in the flesh of his left shoulder. He lunged out of the hotel's window light in a wild burst of speed, twisting and dodging, the air around him alive with whispering death.

He reached the front of Charley Miller's harness shop, bent sharply along the plank walk toward the corner of the building. A man—Charley Miller—appeared in the door close ahead of him, startled, gripping a shotgun.

"Hey, you!" Miller yelled.

The impact of Shannon's fist sent the man stumbling back into the

harness shop. Gil twisted into the alley alongside the building, his legs pumping him through the darkness in a low crouch. He heard the harness man's harsh-pitched shout from the alley mouth behind him.

"Stop, blast you!"

Shannon threw himself to the ground in a hard roll as the shotgun roared. He jumped to his feet again, rounded the rear end of the building, his lungs drawing in hot gasps of air.

He circled around the north side of the harness shop, gauging his speed narrowly. He could hear the lynch mob pounding across the rear of the building, could recognize the deadly pitch of Mike Duvall's yell.

"He ain't back here. Must have cut for the street again!"

The street was empty when Shannon pounded across it. He didn't try to escape any longer. He reached the flared front of the hotel, halted in the darkness close to the wall, his face stiff and hard.

The lynch mob came around the side of the harness shop slow and wary. They spread out along the front of the building, their nerves thin-drawn by the fear of a trap. A man's hoarse voice floated across the street to Shannon.

"We crowded him too close for him to be far off." That was Lash Brude talking. "Keep your eyes peeled. He's cornered some place, and he's a killer."

Dink Gerber cut in thinly: "Curse a job like this at night!"

The line of men drifted across the plank walk and out into the street. Gil Shannon watched them with bleak intentness. Mike Duvall was limping badly, putting his right foot down as though his sole was on fire.

Shannon waited, grim and cold. Light from the hotel windows spilled past him to form a broad yel-

low splash across the edge of the street. Shannon waited until the mob prowled into the light and then halted them with an icy drawl.

"I'll kill the first man who makes a crooked move!"

HIS voice was like a whip slashing them motionless. He heard the startled intake of a townsman's breath, the poisonous snarl of Joe Tracy's oath.

"We got our man!" the shotgun messenger grated.

"You got him, but you ain't got the guts to take him," Shannon knifed back. He held them with the threat of his drawn gun. They outnumbered him forty to one and their weapons were out; but he was only a faint shadow in the darkness and they were plain targets in the yellow slant of light. He could see any move they made, but they couldn't tell where his gun was pointing.

Shannon's stare shifted and centered on Sheriff Mander. "I've got your gun, sheriff, and I'll use it if I have to," he said bleakly. "Ben Purdy was the only friend I ever had. I tried to tell you that I didn't kill him, but you wouldn't believe me. Now I'll prove it."

There was a thin shift of movement in the crowd, a man balancing himself, keying his nerves for what was coming. Gil Shannon watched that man, tense and ready. He knew the wild thought jumping through the killer's mind. Was this a bluff, or was it the real thing. The killer was searching the past, hunting for some mistake he might have made. But he wouldn't find any.

Shannon smiled in the darkness, let his voice come out cold and flat. "The shotgun messenger tried to save that bank shipment early tonight when that outlaw gang stopped the stage, and that's what

got him and the driver killed. But the guard did one good thing when his slug marked the heel of the boot of the outlaw leader. The drummer passenger in the stage saw that, but he slipped away before the gang could kill him. The drummer brought word to town, and the killer boss knew he'd be caught if he didn't have that heel changed. He framed me, and you believed what he left for you to see. Now I'll show you who murdered Ben Purdy."

Through the strained hush that dropped over the street, Joe Tracy sneered: "He'll still be lyin' like that when we string him up!"

Shannon laughed harshly, but there was no humor in the sound, no feeling in his tone when he spoke.

"You had a bad limp when you crossed the street here, Duvall."

Mike Duvall's face was tight and expressionless. "I picked up a rock in my boot chasin' you," he growled.

Shannon said with a cold vein of contempt, "It was a nail you picked up, Duvall."

The express manager flinched as though stung. His mouth opened to bark out a reply, but he said nothing. Grim, thin-lipped, he slid a glance around him, whipped his stare back to the man on the hotel porch.

Bitter hatred came lunging out of Gil Shannon.

"Do you still think you can get away with it?" Gil yelled. "You're the man who killed Ben Purdy. You've been robbing your own stage. I don't know the rest of your gang, but I know you're the boss. I knew that when I saw you limping across the street, *because I gave you that limp*. You made me finish that new heel old Ben started, and the heel cap covered an oversized nail I drove in. That's why I led you all this chase. I knew one of you would

start limpin' as soon as that nail worked through the sole, and only hard running would do that quick. If you want more proof, Duvall, we can rip off that heel cap. The nail I used had only half a head—"

But Mike Duvall had heard enough. In his fear he betrayed the rest of his gang, his yell blaring out with the jerk of the gun in his hand.

"Gerber! Tracy! Brude! Come in, dammit!"

GIL SHANNON fired as the outlaw leader's weapon swiveled and roared. He felt liquid fire slash across his ribs and in that same instant saw Mike Duvall sheer around under the impact of lead and go down.

There were other guns crashing, as Shannon drifted to one side, other fingers of flame stabbing at him, other slugs searching for him. In that chaos of roaring guns and squalling men, Shannon knew he was shooting only by the jar of the recoil kicking his bent elbow.

He saw Lash Brude's bony frame buckle and pitch down. He saw

Dink Gerber spin in blind, jerky strides, stumble against Brude's body, fall heavily. He saw Joe Tracy half hidden behind a swirling fog of powder smoke. Suddenly Tracy was sprawled out on the street, and there were excited townsmen milling toward the hotel.

Sheriff Mander was close in front of Shannon, his legs propped wide, his square face gray and grim.

"Shannon, when I guess a man wrong, I'm glad to apologize. I'll chew back everything I said about you any time you want me to. If it means anything more, I got a deputy's job open, and one of these days I'll be turnin' in my star—"

Gil Shannon shook his head, and his slow smile took the stiffness out of his mouth, as he handed the gun back to the lawman.

"There's a lot more men able to fill your job, Mander, than there are to fill the one old Ben Purdy left open. Ben told me once a man's soul was like a boot sole—it had to be repaired once in a while. I'll never be able to fill old Ben's place, but I reckon I'll give it a long try."

THE END.

¿QUIEN SABE?

Who Knows?

1. *What was the Ghost Dance, and who founded it?*
2. *How did Westerners hauling water save themselves in a prairie fire?*
3. *Who was Neawatha, and what does the name mean?*
4. *Why did Indians quit hunting to go to war?*
5. *Who used the first smoke screen in what battle?*
6. *Was Kit Carson killed by an Indian, a white man, a bear, a horse or a fever?*
7. *Who were the Contraries, and why were they so called?*
8. *What Western animal runs forward and backward with the same speed?*
9. *What was a cowboy's favorite practical joke on his Indian friends?*
10. *Where is St. Jacob's Well, and for what is it noted?*

Answers on page 111



COW COUNTRY SPANISH

by S. OMAR BARKER

Continued from our December 19th issue

Tortolita (tohr-toh-LEE-tah): turtledove.

Las Agujas (lahss ah-GOO-hahss): the needles.

Ojo de Gracias (OH-hoh day GRAH-see-ahss): spring of thanks.

Espejo (ay-SPAY-hoh): mirror; also name of an early Spanish explorer.

Fuentes (FWAYN-tace): fountains.

San Gerónimo (sahn hay-ROH-nee-moh): St. Jerome.

Sierra Amargosa (see-AY-rrah ah-mar-GOH-sah): bitter mountain.

Guerrero (gayr-RAY-roh): warrior; also a family name.

Boquillas (boh-KEEL-yahss): little mouths (of a canyon).

Trementina (tray-mayn-TEE-nah): pitch pine; turpentine.

Almagre (ahl-MAH-gray): a reddish rock, probably hematite.

Pajarito (pah-hah-REE-toh): little bird. A plateau west of Santa Fe pocked with ancient cliff dwellings.

Rincón Montoso (reeng-CONE mohn-TOH-so): timbered cove. Name of the "cliff dwelling" of the author of this series.

Menor (may-NORE): younger; smaller.

Mayor (mah-YORE): older; larger.

Bole (BOH-lay): bold; white-faced critter. Borrowed from the English "bally."

Despacio (day-SPAH-see-oh): slow.

Recio (RAY-see-oh): fast.

Peligroso (pay-lee-GROH-soh): dangerous.

Mozo (MOH-soh): servant; roustabout.

Mochó (MOH-choh): gotch-eared; droop-horned; mostly applied to animals.

Amarado (ah-mah-RAH-thoh): tied.

Torcido (tore-SEE-thoh): twisted.

Guzano (goo-SAH-noh): worm.

Corto (CORE-toh): short.

Largo (LAHR-goh): long.

Hombrote (ohm-BROH-tay): big; "plenty man"; tough jigger.

Mujerota (moo-hay-ROH-tah): big woman; feminine tough jigger.

Hombrecito (ohm-bray-SEE-toh): little man.

P a n z ó n (pahn-SOHN): pot paunch.

Chiquito (chee-KEE-toh): a little one.

Burrote (boor-ROH-tay): big burro.

Nuero (noo-AY-ro): son-in-law.

Guitarrero (ghee-tahr-RAY-ro): guitar player.

Cantador (cahn-tah-DORE): singer.

(Most of these can be used as feminine by changing the final "o" to "a" or adding "a" to endings).

THE END.

TOLL ROAD TO TOPHET

by LEE E. WELLS



Nobody envied Jed Parkins the gold mine he'd discovered in that narrow pass—and Jed found out why in a lead interview with the sons of Satan!

ALL up and down the mountain range, people said what a smart young hairpin Jed Parkins was. He was only twenty-six, but already he was counted one of the wealthiest men around Malpais. No one grudged his wealth, either. They

knew that he had worked hard, had been far-seeing and had cashed in on a hunch. Who but young Jed Parkins would have built a road through Matzlan Canyon when the silver strikes beyond the range were just beginning to come in?



Matzlan Canyon paid dividends on the labor and money which Jed had put into it. The only pass in seventy miles that was usable, the silver mines had brought heavy traffic through it. The wagons, riders and cattle herds, too, used Jed's road, and paid for the privilege. Just below the summit he had built an

adobe hut and had extended chains from one rock wall of the canyon to the other. Beyond the hut was a stout corral and resting station. Through a rock fault, a broad trail led to a natural valley hemmed in by the peaks that made a perfect holding and bedding ground for herds caught at night in the pass.

Jed's own comfortable ranchhouse sprawled near the adobe tollhouse.

Jed sat inside the hut sipping at steaming coffee. His mild blue eyes looked out beyond the chains to the slope of the road up from the rich grazing land of Matzlan Basin. The toll road climbed a few hundred yards farther beyond the chains and then dropped toward the cut-up badlands in which the mining village of Malpais snuggled. When the wind was right, Jed could sometimes hear the thud of the stamp mills this far up.

His wide lips broke into a pleased grin as he pushed back from the table and looked out on his domain.

THE canyon walls suddenly echoed to the pound of hoofs, and Jed swung back toward the door. He stepped outside. From Matzlan three riders came slowly around the curve of the mountain road. Jed waited, his red hair gleaming in the sun.

The three came up to the chains and stared across them at Jed.

One man had a pointed face with a drooping eyelid that gave him a leering appearance. "What's the idea of them chains?" he demanded.

Jed answered pleasantly enough. "This is a private road, hombre. Them that uses it pays for it."

The second man twisted around, looking back toward the Basin. He was a little stocky jasper, his leathery face deep-grooved with harsh lines. His bloodless lips had the snap of a bear trap, his voice held a burring rasp. "I sure didn't know about this, Pinto."

The first man shrugged. "Nothing harmed." His good eye traveled over Jed's six feet of muscle, the broad shoulders, the long arms and the gun belt with the worn holster. Pinto's long coat flapped open, and

Jed had a glimpse of brass in a heavy gun belt.

Pinto had a Texas drawl. "How much is the tally?"

Jed smiled and his harsh face seemed to soften. "Fifty cents a head, señor."

The third man pushed forward. His broad face was square with muddy brown eyes and a broken nose. He chuckled and spat on the ground at Jed's feet. "Shucks, Pinto, ain't no sense in paying out good dinero. Maybe this jasper knows how to take them chains down."

Jed's smile vanished and his voice clipped. "I do," he said flatly. "But they ain't moving until I see the brand of your money."

The big man cursed and his hand stabbed toward his waist. Jed's hand blurred down and his fingers slapped leather. His Colt jumped out and lined down. The big man was caught flat, his thick lips hanging open in surprise.

The man called Pinto laughed. He looked at the little man, and he fished in his pocket for change. "Shell out, Shorty. I reckon the carrot top talks gun smoke, and that's plenty strong language for me."

He leaned over the chains and extended some coins. Jed jerked his head toward the slotted box on the post. "Drop the toll in there." His eyes held the giant who sat frozen in his saddle.

The big man growled and his paw plunged into his pocket. With an angry gesture, he dropped the toll in the box and Jed nodded. "Now everything's all legallike and peaceful. I'll let you jaspers through."

He loosened the chains and dropped them into the roadway so that horses could walk over them. The three men urged the mounts forward, and Jed half turned as they

passed him, heading on down the canyon.

The big man twisted around, looking back. His broken-nose face was ugly. "You'll get some of that salt taken out of you, busky. I sure aim to come—"

The leader swore and his whiplash voice cut in. "Gouger! Keep your trap shut. The hombre had that dinero coming. Mc'n' Shorty are satisfied."

Gouger mouthed some curses, but straightened around. Jed watched the three riders disappear on down the canyon. He was grateful that there were only a few of that kind who came through. As he pulled up the chains and tightened them against the post, he wondered why some jaspers could be so mean about the small toll charge when most travelers paid without a second thought.

The morning went fast. There were quite a few traveling the road to Malpais, down toward the silver strikes. Jed could spot the men who had the fever for sudden wealth out of the earth. Two or three slim-fingered, tight-lipped gamblers came through, and once a coach with three girls who would entertain at the dance halls. The whole picture of the mining and cattle country passed before the little tollhouse.

LATE in the afternoon, Jed was working in the blacksmith shop when he heard a hail from the barrier. Ott Akers grinned at him from beyond the chains.

"Five hundred white-face, Jed, coming up the road. I figure to bed them down for the night."

Jed loosened the chains for the O Lazy A ramrod. "That'll take some figuring, Ott. How about resting your saddle and wetting your whistle while we dicker?"

Ott grinned and urged his mount over the lowered chains. Reaching the stable, he swung out of kak, and Jed left the chains down and joined him. He liked Ott Akers, a strong-jawed, two-fisted man with a gift of laughter. In the hut, Jed poured drinks while Ott beat the dust off his lanky frame.

He straightened, his eyes laughing at Jed. "Now you take it right easy on them charges. I want to clear a little on them cattle at the mines."

Jed nodded and grinned. "It's always a pleasure to take your dinero, Ott. Fifty dollars for the herd and that includes bedding and toll for you and your riders. You can pay what you think's right for your beans and java."

Ott grunted. "The last time the beans was burnt and the coffee weak. Say ten cents for the lot."

Jed laughed and threw the wadded tally sheet at him, going outside. The point of the herd was just coming into the canyon, and the riders kept them moving. A couple spurred ahead to turn the cattle off the road, guiding them toward the cleft rock that led to the bedding ground.

Jed stood to one side as the cattle streamed by. The last of them disappeared through the narrow crack and Jed prepared to pull the chains across the road. He heard a hail and turned.

A lone rider came through the dust raised by the herd. He had a slight build, but there was a lean toughness about him, a quick alertness in the narrow, dust-covered face. Jed waited, noting the crossed gun belts and heavy holsters against the man's lean thighs.

At the chains the man pulled up the grulla and wiped his neckerchief over his face. "I been told a man could bed down here."

Jed nodded. "That's right. You're

welcome to what we got."

The man swung out of the saddle. "I'm Hank Bryan from Montana. I figured on a job down near the border where it ain't so blasted cold."

Jed shook hands and told him the cost of food and lodgings. Hank paid without a murmur and Jed told him where to stable his horse. Jed tightened the chains across the road and snapped the locks on them so no late-traveling rider could slip them down and escape the toll.

When he came to the tollhouse, Ott and Hank were sizing one another up in the manner of the cow country. Hank turned at Jed's entrance. "I'd sure appreciate the grub. I been riding steady since sun-up."

Jed checked the day's receipts. "I'm closing up here. We'll eat at the big house." He swept the coins and bills into a sack and tied the mouth of it. He arose, stretching. "You ain't the only hungry hombre in New Mexico. Let's go get it."

THE three of them left the hut, Jed leading the way toward the sprawling ranchhouse. The cook was already rattling pans and the O Lazy A hands were joshing one another.

Hank Bryan walked beside Jed, Ott on the other side. The stranger called attention to the money sack. "Ain't you right careless about that dinero?"

Jed shook his red head. "No. There's always someone around, and I'm pretty fair with a six-gun myself. Leastways, I ain't been robbed yet."

Hank shrugged. "There's always a first time."

They ate with the O Lazy A hands in the big dining room, and afterward there were smokes and tall tales. Ott Akers spoke of the rapid

growth of the Malpais strikes and the opportunity it offered a cattleman to sell his beef. Jed had to walk out when he heard a hail from the toll barrier.

His lantern cast long shadows as he walked to the barrier, where he saw the dim, high bulk of a freighting wagon. The driver looked to be all beard and gleaming eyes in the lantern light. He had a hoarse voice.

"I guess I'll sort of corral for the night. Can't tool horses around hairpins as dark as it is."

Jed took his charge and lowered the chains, directing the jehu to the corral and stables. He helped unhitch and feed the horses. The driver was a big man with walking-beam shoulders and long arms. He had a luxuriant beard and bloodshot brown eyes.

"I'm Cracker Wilson. Been driving farther south but decided I could do better freighting up this way."

Jed took him to the house. Cracker had a rolling walk more suggestive of a bronc than a freight wagon. But he talked of many freighting outfits and seemed typical of the tribe. Inside, Cracker had a quick snack and then joined the group.

Already the cowhands were yawning and beginning to straggle toward the bunkhouse. Hank Bryan looked around at Jed and Ott with his shifting glance. "How about a friendly hand of poker?"

Cracker raised his bearded face. "Now that speaks my language. I been mighty lonesome for a good game. Seems like folks up here don't savvy the fine points of a bobtail flush."

Jed laughed and looked at Ott. The rancher nodded. "A few hands. But nothing powerful. I got to be driving them steers out come dawn."

Jed quickly cleared the table, pro-

duced chips and cards. The rest of Ott's hands wandered away, leaving the four men to play. The game went slowly, no one of them betting wild, the pots consistently low. Once Jed saw Hank looking hard at Cracker, but the cowboy's glance shifted back to his cards.

Finally Cracker dropped out of a pot and pushed back from the table. "I got some fire water out in the wagon. Reckon no one would object to a little stimulant to the game?"

Ott laughed. "I need it. I can't play the cards I get."

Cracker lumbered from the room and the three continued the play. Jed had the thought the freighter was gone a long time, but dismissed it as he raised a bet of Ott's. Hank raised, too, and the three settled to a whipsaw game.

Cracker came in with the bottle as Ott raked in the pot. They had drinks around, and the deal went to the freighter. Time passed.

A LOG cracked in the fireplace, and Jed suddenly realized that it was late.

"One deal around, gents, and we take the final tally."

Hank nodded. Again Jed thought he saw a quick glance between the cowboy and Cracker, but it passed too quickly for him to be sure. They had just called for cards when Jed froze and Ott looked up, his face blank. A muffled shot had sounded from outside. For a moment the four of them sat frozen. Then there came the faint bawl of cattle.

Ott swore and pushed from the table. "Something's wrong."

Hank's hand dropped beneath the table and came up with a gun.

"Nothing wrong yet, amigo, so long as you sit down and keep playing poker."

Jed's eyes widened and his hand

made an instinctive gesture downward. Cracker's hoarse voice snapped him around. "Hold right still, hombre, or you'll get lead."

The freighter's gun covered Jed and the broken teeth smiled through the thick beard. Jed's eyes sparked. "Rustlers!" he said.

Cracker nodded. "Yeah, rustlers. We knew the drive was coming and we figured this would be a good place to lift them critters. Any objections?"

Jed managed a thin-lipped grin. "Plenty, but I ain't doing nothing. Looks like you hold aces."

Cracker nodded. "Royal flush, hombre. Can't be beat. Hank, you unload their hardware."

Hank pushed away from the table and shucked the guns from Jed and Ott, unloading them and tossing the weapons in a far corner. Then there sounded a sudden shot and a quick burst of firing. Hank listened a moment then grinned when the firing died away.

"Reckon them cowhands changed their minds. Pinto and Gouger can be pretty convincing."

Jed started. Pinto and Gouger clicked in his mind. He remembered the three riders who had argued about the toll. His wide lips pursed thoughtfully. Those three had gone ahead to spot the bedding ground and to watch how night guards were placed. Hank and Cracker having effectively taken Ott and Jed out of the game, the O Lazy A hands were without direction and leadership. Jed gave the rustlers credit for a lot of brains.

He sat at the table, his hands flat on the wood. Cracker rested the six-gun on the edge of the table, the muzzle ready to spit lead at either of the two prisoners. Ott Akers sat very still but he kept the air blue with his swearing. Hank listened

and gradually a look of respect came into his eyes.

He whistled. "Hombre, you know more cuss words than I thought was made. I'm sure getting an education."

Ott's voice grew more sulphurous. "You'll get a heap of lead if I ever catch up with you."

Hank shook his head. "You ain't. We got a place to chouse those cows to fatten them. We got a market that'll buy and won't ask questions. Stranger, you ain't goin' to see me'n' Cracker no more."

The door opened and a man stepped through. Jed turned his head and saw the stocky little man called Shorty. The man's hard face seemed even more stern as his eyes swept over the room.

"Good work, Hank. We got them punchers holed up and the cows are on the way." His face turned to Jed and he grinned evilly. "I ought to take that fifty cents back, hombre. I hate to pay to ride a road."

Hank snapped his fingers. "Shucks, Shorty, we'll get it back. I reckon a hundred times more."

He grinned at Jed and moved over to the fireplace. Jed started to lean forward angrily, but Cracker's gun swiveled around to cover him. The hoarse voice held a dangerous growl. "Stand hitched, hombre. You ain't far from boothill right now."

JED cursed silently while Hank pried at the loose bricks and finally reached into the opening and pulled out the money sack. He held it up and grinned at Jed. "I could see you from the kitchen table." He chuckled. "You was plumb careless."

At the door Shorty snorted, his eyes gleaming at the weight of the bag. He jerked his thumb at Jed and Ott. "Just hold these jaspers

quiet. Me'n' the boys won't be long."

The sound of the herd on the move came quite plainly now, and Ott's pale face showed the strain of his angry thoughts. His eyes constantly darted from Hank to Cracker and then venomously at Shorty. The stocky owlhooter grinned and slammed outside.

There was another flurry of shots from the distant bunkhouse and Ott's face lighted. But disappointment showed in the sag of his shoulders when the firing stopped again.

Hank came to the table and dropped the sack. He chuckled. "We got them waddies sewed up tight. This will be some haul. Five hundred prime head and a sack of dinero — best we've ever done, Cracker!"

The bearded outlaw grunted and shoved away from the table. "You hold these hombres hitched, Hank. I'll get my bedroll out of that stolen wagon and help you pull stakes."

Hank nodded and passed over the money bag. "Give this to one of the boys, Cracker. I'll hang and rattle until you get back."

Cracker left the room, and Hank sank lazily into a chair. His six-gun ready in his hand, his eyes sparkled as he looked from Jed to Ott. "Make yourselves real comfortable, boys. You ain't doing nothing for a while yet."

Jed sighed and reached in his shirt pocket for his tobacco sack. He carefully filled a paper and rolled it, licking the tube into place. He studied Hank. The man would shoot at the least sign of trouble. The sound of the cattle was already fading down the canyon, and Ott Aker's face was a mask of held-in fury.

Jed fished in his pockets, one after the other. He looked at Hank, shrugged and slowly arose. Hank's

alert eyes followed him as Jed carefully circled the table and walked to the fireplace. He bent down and picked up a thin, flaming sliver.

Ott shifted restlessly and started cursing again. Hank's eyes turned briefly from Jed, and the redhead's hand moved quickly, his fingers seizing the unburned end of a flaming faggot. He whirled and hurled the flaming brand, hard and low.

Hank caught the movement and his six-gun flipped up. Seeing the hurtling flames, he instinctively ducked, shielding his face with his arm. Jed came charging across the room, his long arms grabbing at the outlaw's waist. Both men went backward, Jed wildly clawing for the gun.

His fingers settled on Hank's wrist and he twisted savagely. The gun roared deafeningly, and powder flamed along Jed's cheek, but he kept the gun wrist away. He fell on top of Hank with fists pounding at the snarling lips. For a moment they rolled and heaved, then the Colt thundered again.

Jed had a dim perception that Ott had charged across the room toward the unloaded sixes that Hank had thrown in the far corner. Hank's first banged into Jed's nose and made his eyes sting. Afterward Jed felt something warm flow over his chin.

Suddenly Hank went limp. For a moment Jed hung on grimly, not realizing that Ott had knocked the owlhooter out with the butt of a Colt. Then Jed shook his head to

clear the ringing and staggered to his feet. He bent over Hank, taking the six-gun from the lax fingers.

THE door flung open and Cracker charged in. The man's face was set in killing lines as his Colt roared at Ott. The slug whined close. Jed, still crouching, flipped up the six and the gun hammered back against the heel of his fist.

Cracker half spun as the slug plowed through his beard. The outlaw's gun chewed uselessly at the floor and then dropped from the spreading fingers. Cracker fell forward, his head heavy, and hit the floor with a crash.

Ott jumped forward and bent over the outlaw. The man was dead. Ott straightened, his eyes glinting. "We'd better ride after them cows."

Jed nodded grimly. "And my dinero. Gun belts first, and some fresh loads. You'll find them in the next room. I'll hogtie this sleeping buscadero so we won't have to worry about him."

He pulled Hank around and quickly lashed the man's wrists and ankles. When Ott returned with the gun belts and ammunition, Jed had finished the job. Hank Bryan would stand hitched until the law came after him. Jed quickly buckled on the belt, jammed fresh shells in his six-gun.

He shoved it into leather and sprang to the door in time to stop Ott, who was all for bursting out into the night.

"We don't know how many there

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are out there," Jed warned. "They held your boys tight while they rustled the cows."

Ott saw sense to Jed's statement and nodded. Jed's fist tightened on the six, he cracked the door and then jumped outside, flattening himself against the dark wall. Nothing happened. Ott joined him.

The yard was bare, the bunkhouse dark, and there was no sound of movement. Ott's whisper sounded desperate.

"Think them renegades killed off my boys?"

Jed shook his head. "Quién sabe? Let's find out."

They left the shadow of the house and charged across the yard. Suddenly the bunkhouse came to life. Guns roared and lead sang close. Jed and Ott dropped, hugging the ground. When firing stopped, Ott's cursing sounded loud in the narrow canyon.

"You rattle-brained mules! This is me—Ott."

A cowboy yelled excitedly: "Stop fanning lead, you sons! Hey, Ott, someone barricaded the doors, and them owlhooters was slinging lead fast through this window. Let us out."

Jed and Ott ran to the building, found the doors padlocked. Jed, remembering how long Cracker had been gone for the whiskey, saw now how the bearded jehu had quietly prevented the escape of the O Lazy A hands. Ott didn't wait, but blasted the lock with slugs.

They found two of the cowpokes wounded and the rest raging to ride.

Jed pulled Ott around and said: "Send the boys down the canyon. You ride with me. I know a short cut and we can get them long-loopers between two fires if your boys can pound leather."

Ott quietly gave orders and the

bunkhouse emptied, the men running toward the corrals. Luckily, their horses had not been taken. Evidently Pinto and Shorty felt themselves safe enough not to bother the animals, planning on Cracker and Hank to hold off pursuit for a long time.

SOON the canyon echoed with pounding hoofs, and the O Lazy A was streaming in pursuit of the cattle. Jed swung into his kak and neck-reined the animal around. He looked at Ott, restlessly holding in his horse.

"This will be mighty dangerous riding," Jed warned.

Ott swore. "You just lead the way. I'll ride your tail if it leads right straight to boothill."

"It might," Jed answered and spurred the horse.

For a few hundred yards they followed the road in the dust that the cowboys had kicked up. Then Jed swung the horse to the left, apparently straight for a dark fissure which appeared in the rock wall of the canyon. Jed plunged into the black shadows, and Ott followed right after him.

For a time the narrow canyon twisted away from the trail, then suddenly opened on a narrow ledge that clung to the lip of a deep gorge. Jed slowed the horse and the animal carefully picked its way forward.

Ott called behind him. "Hombre, you named the trail. It's a pretty good drop down there."

"I've explored this range," Jed answered, "and found this short cut. I've used it getting to Malpais."

They said nothing more. The gorge was so deep that there was only pitch blackness below; and the rock walls and the path on the ledge were a mere gray blur. The ledge

rounded a point and then opened onto a narrow platform where the walls dropped back.

Jed pulled up until Ott was beside him. "There's another narrow canyon leads off here. It opens just below where the main road dips toward Malpais. Them cows have had to go a long ways around and we'll be set to meet them."

Ott growled. "What are we waiting for?"

Jed set the spurs and again seemed to head straight for rock walls. As he plunged into a winding canyon, the strike of the hoofs had a million echoes. A half-hour's wild riding saw them plunging through a thin screen of bushes and out onto the Malpais road.

Here the mountain walls faded to either side and there was just a touch more light. Jed reined in his cayuse and held up his hand for silence. Both men listened, straining up canyon for the sound of the cattle. For a long eternity they heard nothing, then faintly they heard the yells of long-loopers chousing the herd along.

Jed swung his horse off to the left and signaled Ott to stay to the right. In this way they could catch the point riders between a crossfire, for somewhere back of the herd, the O Lazy A men would be spurring to close in from the rear.

The sounds grew louder, heavily magnified in the walls of the canyon. Jed, waiting, could see some of the outlaw plan. Once out of the pass, the rustlers could swing the herd in any direction off the road, toward some hidden bedding grounds in the rocky badlands of the mountains. If Pinto and Shorty were not stopped here, the herd would be lost for good.

The rumble was growing louder, and soon the first of the herd was apparent as a heavy, shifting shadow that juggernauted down on the two

waiting men. When Jed saw the rider at the point, his gun cleared leather.

Jed's voice cut through the sound of hoofs. "Raise 'em, Jasper."

THE man swung around as though a bee had stung him, and his hand blossomed in an orange flame that licked toward Jed. The slug whined by and then sang a high note as it glanced off the rocks behind him. Jed returned fire while, from the other side, Ott opened. The horseman faded to the right then suddenly slumped and slipped from the saddle. The cows increased their gait, frightened by the thunder of gunfire. Some in the front crowded back, but the sluggish mass behind them kept them moving forward. Another gun joined in as a rider tried to spur up to the front. The cattle were spreading out from the canyon mouth and Jed smiled grimly. The outlaws would never be able to round them up now before daylight.

Ott suddenly yelled. "Here they come!"

Jed saw the bunched riders bearing down. His gun bucked back in his hand, and red tongues of flame answered him as the riders spread out, their lead seeking him in the shadows. Suddenly Ott spurred out from the wall, and the outlaws turned their fire on him, a target they could see.

Jed cursed deeply and spurred away. Ott was firing and swearing, his horse was squealing and rearing. Ott was fighting the animal, and Jed knew it had been hit. He caught a dark figure in his gun sights and pulled the trigger. The man threw up his arms and fell sideways.

The cattle still streamed by, but now their number was thinning. Jed heard Pinto's drawl. "Cut 'em down, boys. They's only two."

Jed fired at the sound, and Ott was back in the game again. But as the outlaws worked closer, Jed saw that he and Ott would soon be trapped. He wondered where Ott's men were.

Abruptly Gouger loomed out of the shadows, spurring down on Jed, his gun flaming. Jed flung himself low in the saddle and sank the spurs. He jerked the horse to one side, missing Gouger's rush, that might have unseated him, dodging Gouger's gun flame. Then Jed's finger tightened on his own trigger, and he saw Gouger go crashing down from his horse.

Pinto's drawl cut short in a gurgling gasp, and Jed wheeled quickly in time to see Ott go down under Shorty's fire. Jed yelled and spurred forward. The stocky owlhooter turned and seemed to deliberately hold his fire. Jed caught the faint glint of metal and heard the roar of the gun.

A giant fist seemed to strike him square in the chest. It took his breath and sent him spinning backward. He landed sprawling, his whole body jarred, and for a second lay there, his head spinning, his body as weak as an empty flour sack. Dimly he saw Shorty set spurs, and Jed knew dully that he must stop the rider.

He felt that it took hours to raise his gun and line down the sights. As Shorty twisted around to look back, Jed painfully held the target and squeezed the trigger. The roar and mushrooming smoke from his gun wiped Shorty from his sight. Swirling blackness descended on Jed, and he dug his fingers deep into the dirt, fighting to hold onto his senses. Then the earth itself whirled away into a black vortex.

WHEN he opened his eyes there was sunlight and Jed didn't recognize the room. But the lined face above him was that of the Malpais medico, whose tired eyes smiled down at the tollgatherer.

Jed tried to struggle up, but the doctor pushed him back. "Take it easy, son. You got enough lead in you to start a mine."

Jed moved his dry lips. "What about Ott? The cattle?"

The doctor moved, and Jed saw Ott grinning at him from another bed. The ramrod weakly waved his hand. "For a toll-road keeper, you sure act like a tough gunny, Jed. I reckon we've wiped out that rustler gang."

"The cattle?" Jed insisted.

Ott's grin grew wider. "My boys got 'em rounded up and delivered here in Malpais. They found your money sack tied to that Pinto hombre's horse. Ain't none of 'em alive except that Hank Bryan, and I reckon it was your lead stopped most of them."

Jed dropped his head back on his pillow. "I'm sure glad for you, Ott."

The ramrod chuckled and then grew serious. "Jed, I could use a man like you. I'd be right proud to make you pardner on the O Lazy A."

Jed slowly shook his head. "I'm no cowpoke, Ott. Me, I'll just squat alongside the road up there in the mountains. It's a right lazy life and I got a plumb pretty place."

Ott snorted. "You're loco!"

Jed grinned. "Sure, Ott, like a fox. You work them cow critters from dawn to dark. I just sit around and charge you when they pass my spread. I like being loco that way."

He drifted off to sleep and didn't hear Ott's deep chuckle.



Rustler Shark Spalding and the ruthless ship skipper were drinking a toast to each other as the lawman entered so unexpectedly.

SALT-WATER WADDY

by WALKER TOMPKINS

***That tricky cattle rustler worked with the aid of the briny deep
—and Border Patrolman Tommy Rockford with his Ranger pard
were going to be right tasty shark bait when the moon hung high!***

CHAPTER I.

WATERFRONT SHOWDOWN.

THE biggest man hunt in Texas history brought Tommy Rockford and his Texas Ranger friend, Dale Morse, to the squalid little Texas cow town of Pirate Cove, on the Gulf of Mexico.

More than a month before, rustlers had massacred Rancher Gerd Brumbock and his Circle B drovers, and had hazed two thousand head of prime shorthorns out of the Staked Plains and into the shallow waters of the upper Brazos. There the trail had been lost.

Dale Morse of Company K, Texas

Rangers, had been dispatched from El Paso to the scene of the rustler ambushade. The lanky, hard-bitten young Ranger had led a big posse of local ranchers on the trail of the stolen cattle.

They had run afoul of a bush-whack trap at the spot where Brumbock's Circle B herd had been hazed into the Brazos River. When the gun smoke cleared away, seven of Morse's riders had been shot from saddles, while only one of the ambushed rustlers had been tallied by their return fire.

Two amazing facts came to light after that fracas. One was that an exhaustive search failed to show any further trace of the stolen Circle B herd. Gun-slung riders had patrolled the Texas stream for twenty miles up and down from the ambushade, and had found no trace of where the rustlers had driven the stolen shorthorns out of the water.

The second result of Dale Morse's costly brush with the unknown cattle thieves was what the young Ranger had learned from the dry-gulcher he had shot.

Doomed with a pellet of lead in his stomach, the half-breed Mexican owlhooter had gasped out twenty frantic words before he died:

"Shark Spalding . . . was the chief . . . of thees raid, señor. You find heem . . . at Waterfront Walt's cantina een Pirate Cove, *si*."

It was the name of Shark Spalding that electrified western Texas, when the news spread. It seemed impossible to make more than two thousand cattle vanish into thin air, but Shark Spalding was the outlaw to accomplish that miracle, if any man was.

Long a border-hopping smuggler, Shark Spalding had eluded the law for more than fifteen years. More

than one of his exploits had seemed almost miraculous, in the past. But this was the first time the slippery renegade had worked as far inland as the desolate Llano Estacado—

Because Shark Spalding was a smuggler before he had tried his nefarious talents at cattle rustling, Texas Ranger Morse had summoned his friend Tommy Rockford of the United States Border Patrol into the case.

"There's a chance this *mestizo* cow thief was double-crossing me, when he claimed Spalding was behind this Circle B massacre, Tom," the young Ranger had explained to Rockford, when the border patrolman had arrived in San Antone. "But I'm gamblin' that dying men don't lie. On the strength of that breed's say-so, I'm taking a pasear to this here Texas Gulf-coast town of Pirate Cove, and see if I can locate Spalding at Waterfront Walt's saloon. You want to come along?"

Rockford's ice-blue eyes had snapped at the invitation. He said: "The border patrol's come off second best with this Spalding hombre so many times it's a disgrace, amigo. Count me in to the last flip of the cards."

NOW, one week from the day the two lawmen rode out of San Antone, they were slipping into Pirate Cove under cover of the blackest night either of them had ever seen. A high fog off the Gulf of Mexico blotted out the stars, and the waterfront cow town appeared to be a huddle of lights along the curving Texas beach, and an assortment of smells—dead fish, chili and garlic from the Mexican huts on the outskirts, stable odors and the tang of salt in the air.

Lanky six-footers, both men wore

high-crowned Stetsons, batwing chaps and spurred boots. Rockford's famous gold-plated Colt .45s were matched by the staghorn-butted Peacemakers Dale Morse wore in his thonged-down holsters. Each man wore his law badge prominently on his hatband—Rockford's being the gold shield of a border-patrol captain, Morse's the circle-enclosed star of a Texas Ranger.

Shoulder to shoulder, they headed down the main street which hugged the waterfront, having left their saddle horses in a back-alley livery barn. The hostler had pointed out the location of Waterfront Walt's dive—a rambling false-fronted adobe cantina huddled at the foot of a long pier which extended out to deep water, its pilings lined with grubby fishing boats.

"A danged funny place for a cattle rustler's trail to end," muttered Dale Morse, as they headed up a flight of rickety stairs to gain Waterfront Walt's wooden-awned porch. "Now that we're here, I'm beginnin' to think that dyin' half-breed gave us fake information, Tom."

The border patrolman paused before the barroom doors, loosening his gilded revolvers in holsters.

"My hunches are buzzin' their rattles like all git-out, Dale. When I feel this way, it's a cinch trouble is brewin'. Come on—let's go in."

Stifling whiskey fumes and stale tobacco smoke met the lawmen's nostrils as they shouldered through the batwing doors. A motley assortment of Mexican fishermen, Texan cowpokes and saloon riffraff were lined up before Waterfront Walt's busy whiskey counter.

The clatter of an upsetting chair made Rockford and Morse jerk their heads to the left, where Waterfront Walt had his gambling layout. They were in time to see three burly, som-

breroed poker players leap up from a circular card table, pawing for guns as they kicked back their chairs. They were an American and two swarthy *pelados*.

"Shark Spalding!" rasped Tommy Rockford, his own hands plummeting to his Colt stocks as he recognized the bucktoothed visage of the most-wanted smuggler on the border patrol's lists. "Get set to swap lead, Ranger!"

Waterfront Walt's saloon had been the scene of more than one gun brawl in the past, but the entrance of the two Texas lawmen touched off a shoot-out which set a new record for speed.

Spalding was flanked at either elbow by serape-clad Mexicans who were backing his play. Three pairs of Colt .45s glinted in the light of the ceiling lamps, as the poker-playing trio opened fire on the two chap-clad lawmen by the doorway.

Morse and Rockford went into action with the smooth team play which had always characterized their partnership on past cases. Before flame had a chance to flick from Shark Spalding's gun bores, the Texas Ranger had dropped flat on the barroom floor, his own .45s blasting a hot salvo at the left-hand Mexican.

Tom Rockford's lunge had carried him out of the line of Spalding's frenzied shots.

Gold-plated .45s bucked and roared in Rockford's fists, and the Mexican to the smuggler's right flopped sidewise over the chip-littered table, his chin riddled by a bullet. And Shark Spalding, his red-stubbed face contorted with agony, dropped both guns and clutched at a slug-smashed left forearm.

It was over as quickly as that. Waterfront Walt's customers, most of them, had not had a chance to

spin around and start hunting for cover.

Death had struck twice in as many seconds—and the two startotting strangers were pouncing forward to where Shark Spalding was holding his bullet-smashed arm in a paroxysm of agony.

The acrid bite of gun smoke was in the death-hushed saloon as Tommy Rockford whipped out of his Levis pocket the manacles for which he was famous the length and breadth of the frontier—handcuffs plated in shimmering yellow gold, the fetters which Rockford had made almost a legend in the West during the twelve years he had been a railroad detective and, later, a member of the border patrol.

Shark Spalding released his pent-up breath in a serpentlike hiss as Rockford snapped the golden manacles about his wrists. Dale Morse prodded the two dead Mexicans with a boot toe, then pouched his smoking guns and turned to his partner with a bleak grin.

"This calls for a drink, Tommy!" The big Ranger laughed as he saw Rockford take possession of Spalding's six-shooters. "That *mestizo's* tip was luckier than I would've dared dream, eh?"

Shark Spalding lurched away from the poker table, his satanic face bone-white with suffering.

"Count me in on that drink . . . Johnny Laws!" pleaded the handcuffed outlaw. "I need one . . . bad."

Wide-eyed drinkers scrambled to one side to clear a space at the brass rail as the two lawmen ushered their wounded prisoner up to the bar. Waterfront Walt, a pendulous-bellied saloonkeeper with an onion-bald skull, waddled up with three glasses and a brown bottle of his most expensive bourbon.

"What's the idea, gents?" de-

manded the Pirate Cove bartender, as he sloshed out three drinks with a trembling fist. "What's Spaldin' done?"

Dale Morse laughed bleakly as he downed a stiff dram of amber whiskey.

"Among other things," commented the Ranger loudly enough for the entire barroom mob to hear, "he made two thousand head o' Texas beef critters vanish like magic. We aim to find out how."

Even as Tommy Rockford swallowed Waterfront Walt's whiskey, he knew the liquor had been drugged. And when the fiery draft hit his stomach, the room seemed to whirl before his eyes.

Shark Spalding caught a sharp glance from Waterfront Walt, in time to lower his own glass from his lips. Then, even as the gore-spattered outlaw stared, he saw Dale Morse and Tommy Rockford sway against the mahogany counter.

The lawmen's knees unhinged, and they slumped to the floor as limp as if they had been clubbed with a poleax.

CHAPTER II.

CAPTAIN OF THE "BELLA ROSA."

THE patrons of Waterfront Walt's place were unanimous in one respect—all had a hearty dread and hatred for any man who wore a law badge. As a result, no move was made to summon the Pirate Cove marshal, as they saw the two star toters hit the floor.

"Your knockout drops work fast, Walt!" Shark Spalding chuckled, setting his untouched liquor glass on the bar. "Are they pizened—or just knocked out?"

Waterfront Walt lumbered out from behind his bar with unusual speed for a man who tipped the

scales at better than two hundred and fifty.

"We *all* got to work fast, Shark!" snapped the saloonkeeper, grabbing Tommy Rockford by the legs and hauling the border patrolman out from the brass rail where his head was resting. "This buscadero ought to have a key to them bracelets somewhere on him."

A moment later Waterfront Walt's pudgy fingers had extracted a tiny golden key from a pocket of Rockford's bull-hide chaps.

Lumbering to his feet like a grotesque bear, the bartender unlocked the gold-plated handcuffs from Spalding's wrists and then, seized with a grim idea, squatted down to lock Rockford's right arm to the Texas Ranger's left.

Well-coached for handling such emergencies without delay, two swampers hustled up to lift the unconscious lawmen in their arms and hurry them through a door near the back-bar mirror, out of sight in Waterfront Walt's back-room office.

"You're bleedin' like a stuck pig, Shark!" the saloonkeeper grunted. "Come out back an' I'll patch you up."

Escorting Spalding toward the door through which his swampers had carried Rockford and Morse, the barrel-chested saloon owner turned savagely on the goggle-eyed customers and roared out:

"Belly up to the bar an' start drinkin' like nothin' had happened, you gape-jawed galoots! You didn't see a thing, savvy? I'll break the man's neck who breathes a word o' this outside!"

Back in his private office, the bar-keep unlocked a first-aid cabinet and took out bandages and medicines. A medico before the law had driven him out of his native Louisiana to set himself up in business here in

Pirate Cove, Waterfront Walt went to work swabbing the smuggler's gunshot wound with the smooth ease of a physician who had lost little of his surgical skill.

Wincing with pain as the saloon boss probed out Rockford's bullet with a pair of sterilized forceps, Shark Spalding kept his gaze riveted to the motionless bodies of Tommy Rockford and Dale Morse, whom the swampers had dumped unceremoniously on the floor. Only by the slow rise and fall of the lawmen's lungs did Spalding know that the pair were not already dead.

"If you were really back o' that Circle B rustlin' that all Texas is talkin' about, you better light a shuck to somewhere else, Shark!" advised Waterfront Walt, deftly fitting an antiseptic poultice to the outlaw's arm wound. "Them John Laws knew what they was talkin' about, or they'd never've tracked you here."

Spalding started to speak, then clamped his lips shut as Waterfront Walt's swampers once more entered the room, this time bearing the corpses of Spalding's two Mexican henchmen.

"Take all four o' them buskies out beyond the wharf an' dump 'em in deep water, Pancho!" the saloon boss ordered, busy wrapping gauze strips around Spalding's arm. "Make sure you weight 'em down good with scrap iron, before you toss 'em to the sharks."

Spalding waited until the Mexican swampers had carried his dead partners through a back door which opened on the beach.

"I asked you if them lawmen're dyin', or just drugged?" repeated the smuggler.

Waterfront Walt grinned fiendishly.

"Given a chance, they'd wake up with a bad hangover in a few hours,

Shark. As it is, they'll sink in forty feet o' water before they know what—"

Shark Spalding waved the saloon-man to silence, his pale-green eyes flashing with sudden guile.

"I got better use for them John Laws than fish bait, Walt!" whispered the outlaw, wincing as Waterfront Walt cradled his bandaged arm in a gunny-sack sling. "The *Bella Rosa* is short-manned. Cap'n Cordoza an' me have been combin' Pirate Cove for the past week, huntin' cowpunchers. Both Rockford an' that Texas Ranger were cowhands before they pinned on their stars, I happen to know."

The two men exchanged evil stares. Then Walt shrugged.

"*'Sta nada.*" answered the bartender. "It all amounts to the same thing. Once them Texicans get aboard Diego Cordoza's stinkin' cattle boat, they're worse off than if the sharks et 'em. Just get 'em away from my saloon, is all I ask."

When the swampers returned a short time later, Shark Spalding accompanied them out into the sticky night, as the Mexicans carried the two lawmen, handcuffed wrist-to-wrist, down to the edge of the wharf where Spalding's dead *compadres* had been dumped into a waiting skiff.

A FEW minutes later the flat-bottomed boat was gliding out over the tidewater which lapped Pirate Cove's curving beach.

A hundred yards beyond the pier, the swampers dumped the dead Mexicans overboard, a hundred pounds of scrap iron chained to their bodies.

Then, at a low order from Spalding, the swampers bent to their oars and sent the rowboat out into the

roadstead beyond Pirate Cove's breakwater.

The blackness of the Texas night was broken only by a row of lighted portholes from a low-lying, double-stacked freight steamer at anchor outside the breakwater. As the rowboat glided under the freighter's rust-mottled stern counter, the swampers could read the name of the ship by the light of a stern lantern:

BELLA ROSA DE VERA CRUZ.

A lookout up on the freighter's afterdeck answered Shark Spalding's cautious hail from the rowboat bobbing alongside the steamer's rivet-studded hull.

"I got a couple o' cowpokes all signed up an' rearin' to go!" yelled the smuggler, as the lookout threw down a line. "I reckon now Cap'n Cordoza can sail with the tide, eh?"

The two swampers from Waterfront Walt's saloon hastened to tie the rope securely around the two insensible lawmen, and they crossed themselves with a shudder as they saw Rockford and Morse hauled aboard the *Bella Rosa*.

The *Bella Rosa* was a hell ship, skippered by the most fiendish Mexican ever to ply the waters of the Gulf—Diego Cordoza, right-hand man to the devil himself.

The swampers breathed easier when Shark Spalding climbed up the rope ladder which was lowered over the taffrail, making the ascent with difficulty owing to his injured arm. Before Spalding had clambered over the rail, the rowboat was hastening back toward shore, eager to be away from the unlucky steamer.

Diego Cordoza, master of the *Bella Rosa*, met Shark Spalding amidships. In the scarlet glare of the port running light, the big Mexican ship captain seemed to be the very counterpart of the devil, with

his sleek black mustache and up-slanted eyes.

"*Por diablo!*" ejaculated the shabby-dressed ship captain, as he caught sight of the law badges pinned to the Stetsons of the unconscious prisoners who were being dragged along the deck behind Spalding by two swarthy seamen. "The *Bella Rosa* ees short of hands, *si*. But eet ees cowboys—*vaqueros*—we need, not the law *hombres*. For why you breeng thos' men aboard, Señor Spalding?"

Spalding laughed harshly as he thrust his good arm through Cor-doza's.

"Those Johnny Laws were honin' to solve the mystery o' them Circle B steers we choused on the Brazos, El Capitan!" The outlaw laughed. "They're goin' to find out what become o' them beef critters—but where they're goin' aboard the *Bella Rosa*, it won't do 'em no good, eh, *compañero?*"

Ten minutes later, bells jangled in the depths of the cattle ship's engine room, the forward winches hauled in the anchor chain, and the *Bella Rosa*, running lights extinguished, swung about with the flood tide and stood out to sea.

CHAPTER III.

SHANGHAIED BUCKAROOS.

TOMMY ROCKFORD groped back to consciousness and left behind him a nightmare in which he seemed to be strapped aboard a man-killing bronco which was bucking like a thunderbolt.

He opened his eyes—to find that he was not lashed to a saddle, but his world was still pitching and rolling like an unbroken mustang.

A nauseous taste was on Rockford's tongue and a sledge hammer

seemed to be pounding his skull with every heartbeat.

Climbing dizzily to his feet, the border patrolman focused his eyes on a circular patch of blue sky which was dazzling down upon him from a white-painted wall, the studding supports of which appeared to be steel beams instead of wood.

Rubbery-kneed, but no longer handcuffed, the cowboy lawman reeled toward the disk of blue sky. As his eyes drew into sharper focus, he saw that the blue was outside a circular-rimmed window of some sort, its frame a kind of wagon tire made of green-tarnished brass.

A cold salt breeze whipped at Rockford's face as he thrust his head out the circular opening. And what he saw snapped him back to full consciousness.

As far as his sight could reach, he could see nothing but rolling green waves. For the first time in his range-bred life, Tommy Rockford was aboard a ship on the high seas!

A peal of sardonic laughter made the lawman turn from the wind-blasted porthole. Then, for the first time, he saw that he was in a small compartment—and that he was not alone.

A dozen or more men, unshaven and haggard-faced, were lying on the rolling floor of the cabin, or propped against the steel-plated walls and bulkheads. Like Rockford, they wore the stilt heels and cactus-scuffed chaps of range riders.

"Set down an' cool yore saddle, cowhand!" rumbled a voice from the corner of the low-ceilinged compartment. "You won't be smellin' sagebrush an' mesquite ag'in, not ever. Like it or not, *amigo*, you're a salt-water waddy now!"

A sudden roll of the ship sent Rockford to his knees. Staring about him at the listless-faced men who

shared the cabin, the lawman saw that each of his shipmates bore the marks of foul play—bruised skulls, blackened eyes, blood-mottled shirts.

"What is this, anyhow?" gasped out the border patrolman. "The last I remember was swiggin' down some rotgut . . . at a saloon in Pirate Cove!"

The speaker back in the corner laughed sympathetically.

"You been shanghai'd aboard a Mex cattle boat, pardner. Like all the rest of us broken-down cowhands. We been steamin' out into the Gulf for goin' on eight hours, now."

Sunlight, penciling down through the single porthole above them, threw a dazzling spotlight over the blood-smear'd, bleary-eyed cowboys huddled like cattle in a chute. Some of them had been slugged, others had the doped look of men who, like Rockford, had imbibed some powerful narcotic before being shanghai'd.

"Howdy, Tom!" greeted a familiar voice behind Rockford.

The border patrolman turned, then relaxed with a grin as he recognized the rugged young Texas Ranger who had been with him in Waterfront Walt's Gulf-port saloon.

"Dale Morse!" Rockford chuckled, reaching out to grip his partner's hand. "Another salt-water waddy, eh? I'll bet this is the first time you was ever out o' sight o' dry land in your life!"

Before Morse could answer, a key grated in the compartment door and two men poked their heads inside. Rockford's jaw tightened as he recognized Shark Spalding. The other man was a pock-pitted Mexican in dungaree pants and an ill-fitting blue coat with four tarnished stripes of gold braid on the sleeve. Spalding's companion wore a black-billed hat of grimy canvas, on the front of which

was a corroded gold insignia bearing the Spanish words *El Capitan*.

"All out, you buckaroos!" snarled Spalding, brandishing a six-gun muzzle through the doorway. "You're seagoin' cowhands now, an' there ain't no time to sit on your hams when you're aboard ship."

Rockford and Morse joined the file of shaky-kneed cowpunchers who lurched out into a long, narrow alleyway, at the far end of which a ladder-steep companionway led up through a hatch into dazzling sunlight.

Mexican sailors, each armed with a six-gun, rode herd on the shanghai'd punchers as they followed Spalding and the ship captain to the upper deck.

There, blinking in the hot sunlight, they stared about them bewilderedly.

Rockford and Morse oriented themselves instantly by the sun. They were a considerable distance out in the Gulf, for to all points of the compass they saw no land, only empty, shimmering sea water.

"You buckaroos are able-bodied seamen aboard the steamship *Bella Rosa*, amigos," drawled Shark Spalding, as two grinning sailors assisted the wounded outlaw above the hatch opening. "You'll find out soon enough why you been brung aboard."

ROCKFORD repressed a grin as he stared about him. A more bizarre sight could hardly be imagined than thirteen bowlegged cowhands, straight from the plains of Texas, trying to steady their legs aboard the swaying forecastle deck of a tramp steamer plowing through the Mexican Gulf swells.

Steam was hissing from the deck windlass machinery on the forward well deck, and the border patrolman was astonished to see that booms at-

tached to one of the *Bella Rose's* masts were busily engaged in dismantling the forward smokestack of the vessel.

Apparently the funnel was but a dummy, as black smoke was belching from the smokestack amidships. The light metal plates which formed the dummy funnel were being lowered below decks by sweating Mexican forecabin hands.

"You're all hongry enough to eat the photograph of a can o' beans," went on Shark Spalding. "Well, you don't eat less'n you work, aboard Cap'n Cordoza's scow. An' while you work, remember two things: no English is spoken aboard this ship. She's registered under the Mexican flag. The other thing is this: you'll all be workin' at gun's p'int. Now, foller Cap'n Cordoza. An' the first man he catches loafin' will get lashed with a hoss whip."

Tommy Rockford and Dale Morse had done many odd chores during their thirty-two years of life, but nothing to compare with the labors which kept them busy throughout the day's cruising which followed.

Swung overside to port and starboard on narrow planks, each of the kidnaped cowpunchers was given a bucket of black paint and a big flat brush. Their task was to paint a given section of the *Bella Rosa's* hull, which, at the present time, was a rust-festering shade of white.

The cowpunchers worked in pairs, and Rockford's scaffold partner was a big horse wrangler from the Panhandle named Bucky Simpson. Simpson had been sleeping off a drunk in Waterfront Walt's saloon in Pirate Cove when a blackjack had clouted his skull, and he had awakened aboard Diego Cordoza's cattle boat at anchor offshore from the Texas port.

Unlike Rockford and Morse, who

had been shanghaied less than an hour before the *Bella Rosa* put to sea, Bucky Simpson had spent eight tortured days in the bake-oven compartment of the freighter's fore-cabin, while Cordoza and Shark Spalding assembled their seagoing crew of cowpunchers.

"You got me, Rockford," Simpson grunted in reply to the border patrolman's query as to their port of destination. "All I know is that this Cap'n Cordoza is a pizen-mean tyrant, an' he was needin' men with cattle-ranchin' experience. I speak a little of the Mexican lingo, an' the galley slave—he's the chuck-wagon cook—tipped me off that none of us would live very long."

Busy splashing black paint on the *Bella Rosa's* blistered hull, Tommy Rockford took a keen interest in a job which Captain Cordoza himself was overseeing, up under the freighter's curving bows.

During the afternoon, the foot-high bronze letters which spelled the ship's name were removed and stowed somewhere below decks. In their place, another name was bolted to the freighter's prow: *Cuban Moon*.

"I think I get it, Bucky," Rockford muttered, pausing to swab perspiration from his flushed cheeks. "It goes without sayin' that Cordoza and that smuggler Spalding are engaged in some sort of owlhoot voyage."

"Yeah," agreed Simpson, dipping brush to paint bucket and pausing to stare at his scaffold mate. "What you suppose those fellers got up their sleeves?"

Rockford pointed with his brush at the altered name on the *Bella Rosa's* bow plates.

"They've vented the brand on this tub to one of Cuban registry," Rockford went on. "This was a white-

colored ship when she was stopping off Pirate Cove. By the time we've finished blotting her hide, she'll be black. And they've removed one of the smokestacks, which will alter her appearance considerable. That could mean—"

A raucous yell from Shark Spalding interrupted him:

"Come an' get your grub before the cook throws it overboard!"

As their scaffold was hauled up the side of the hull by grunting Mexican sailors, Bucky Simpson said laconically:

"This'll be a teetotally different ship pronto. But the port we're sailin' to is still the same—an' that's Hades!"

CHAPTER IV.

A HELL SHIP DROPS ANCHOR.

FOR two days the *Bella Rosa*—now the *Cuban Moon*—lay to in the Gulf of Mexico. Her Mexican ensign had been replaced by the single-starred flag of the island republic of Cuba, with its three blue stripes.

While the single-stack freighter bobbed and rolled in the sluggish waves, thirteen Texas cowpunchers slaved at the job of painting the vessel black from stem to stern, from rails to waterline.

Their ranks were reduced to eleven when two of the buckaroos, helplessly seasick, dropped from their scaffolds and drowned in the greenish brine, without so much as a life preserver being tossed overside in their behalf.

On the third morning after their departure from Pirate Cove, the *Cuban Moon* got steam up and pointed its prow in a general southwesterly direction, as near as Tommy Rockford could judge from the sun. If they remained on that course, the border patrolman believed the tramp freighter would

make port somewhere near the mouth of the Rio Grande, between Texas and Mexico.

Rockford and Morse, together with a rawboned cowpuncher from Amarillo who had introduced himself as Skinny Adams, were busy chipping rust off the decking aft of the *Cuban Moon's* bridge when they were startled by a hoarse yell of warning from the Mexican sailor perched high up the foremast:

"A ship bearing down over the horizon off the starboard beam, El Capitan! A Gulf patrol cutter, *es verdad!*"

The lookout's warning, bellowed in guttural Spanish, caused a bedlam of excitement aboard Cordoza's ship. The beefy captain and Shark Spalding swarmed down an iron ladder from the bridge and started shouting orders.

At gun's point, the eleven shanghaied cowpunchers were herded forward from their various tasks, and sent down a companionway to the bulkhead compartment which had been assigned to them as sleeping quarters.

Spalding personally saw to the closing of the cabin's lone porthole and locked it. Then he withdrew, a strained look on his unshaven face.

"I don't want to rouse any false hopes, amigos," Tommy Rockford said, as he peered through the thick glass porthole pane at a ship which was steering toward them from the north. "But the lookout said it was a Gulf patrol boat that seems to be chasing us. That might mean we're about to be rescued, boys. The news might've leaked out about so many missin' men at Pirate Cove."

THE interval which followed was unpleasant. Packed like sardines in a can, with little fresh air coming down through a deck ventilator, the



Slapping his horse with his hat, the Johnson rannihan was spurring rapidly toward the break in the cliffs—and sure death from the guards' rifles.

eleven buckaroos cursed and sweated and took turns looking out the port-hole at the oncoming patrol steamer.

The *Cuban Moon* plodded steadily down the green gulf, bringing into view a tenuous thread of land to westward, which changed from the appearance of a belt of low-lying fog

into the desolate shores of Texas or Mexico.

The oncoming patrol boat angled in to intercept the Mexican hell ship, and finally the *Cuban Moon's* engines ceased throbbing, as the trim cutter, flying the Stars and Stripes and the blue ensign of the Gulf

Patrol Service, came alongside.

"Identify yourself!" boomed a voice through a megaphone over the hundred yards of glass-smooth water between the two ships. "Registry, tonnage, ports of call—"

Down through the ventilator tube came Captain Diego Cordoza's stentorian shout in Spanish, as the *Cuban Moon's* skipper megaphoned back to the law vessel:

"Steamer *Cuban Moon*, seven thousand tons, running in ballast New Orleans to Matamoros. Home port Havana, Cuba!"

Tommy Rockford, his nose pressed against the warm glass of the porthole, saw the skipper of the cutter conferring with another officer on the bridge. The two ships were drifting slowly apart, and the border patrolman knew that no amount of shouting which the imprisoned cowhands might do would reach the ears of the revenue patrolmen.

"We're looking for a twin-funneled tramp called the *Bella Rosa*," called the government ship. "She left Pirate Cove without clearance papers. Have you seen a white, well-decked tramp answering that description?"

After a moment's pause, Captain Cordoza's bullish roar made answer from his own bridge:

"*Si, señores*. Yesterday, we saw thees *Bella Rosa* and exchanged signals. Her *capitan* said he was sailing for Tampico weeth a cargo of baled cotton, *es verdad*."

Tommy Rockford's face was bleak as he turned to the tense, sweating men massed in the compartment.

"Cordoza's a slippery sidewinder," grated the border patrolman. "The cutter outside there isn't suspicious. They're heading around toward the south, it looks like."

Tension glazed the eyes of the

doomed cowhands as, a few moments later, the *Cuban Moon's* hull vibrated to the threshing propeller and the hell ship steamed on toward the low-lying coast line.

It was getting dark when Cordoza's cattle ship, moving at half speed, followed a channel past a reef flanking the coast a mile offshore and, with a sailor taking soundings at frequent intervals from the bow, stopped its engines some five hundred yards outside the creaming surf.

From the limited view the prisoners had out of the closed porthole, the strip of beach was wild and lonely beyond description. Tawny, eroded hills sloped down to meet a curve of shingled beach, and a small river emptied its silt-laden waters into the lagoon.

Anchor chains rattled down the hawse pipes, followed by a stern anchor, and the *Cuban Moon* floated in a landlocked, mirror-smooth sea.

A full moon was flooding the nearby shore with a spectral glow when Shark Spalding appeared, followed by a galley cook carrying a kettle of stew and eleven tin bowls.

Unlocking the porthole, Shark Spalding grinned fiendishly as he saw his shanghaied prisoners dip up bowls of stew and start eating the concoction with wolfish appetites.

"That's the Lone Star State out yonder, buskies!" jeered the smuggler. "The most deserted strip o' coast between Galveston an' Corpus Christi. You see that crick-runnin' out into the harbor?"

The cowhands regarded their captor indifferently, and went on with their eating.

"That's the Little Guadalupe," went on Spalding. "It branches offn the Brazos. You see, we loaded Brumbock's Circle B steers onto flat

barges an' floated 'em down the Brazos as far as the Little Guadalupe. That's why this Texas Ranger here didn't find no tracks."

Dale Morse lowered his dish of stew to stare at the outlaw.

"You mean those two thousand head of steers were floated down here to the Gulf?" he demanded incredulously. "You aim to transfer 'em to this ship?"

Spalding nodded, his buck teeth gleaming in the murk.

"You got it correct, Rangero. That's why Cordoza needed cowhands—to haze them critters offn our holdin' ground and load 'em onto the *Bella Rosa*. Them cattle will be shipped down the Mexican coast an' sold at a tidy profit. How's that for cattle rustlin' brought up-to-date, eh, buckos?"

Spalding picked up the empty stew kettle and backed out of the cabin, locking the iron door on the outside.

WHEN Spalding's footsteps had faded up the companionway outside, the puncher named Skinny Adams jumped to his feet and went to the porthole.

"It's an easy swim ashore," clipped the rawboned waddy. "I can swim like a fish. More'n once I've swum worse waters than this, hazin' mossy-horns up the Chisholm Trail, acrost the Cimarron an' the Red. Any objections if I leave you waddies?"

Already Adams was shucking off his Coffeyville boots and heavy batwing chaps.

"*Sta bueno*," grunted Tommy Rockford, sizing up the porthole as being too small for any of their number except Adams to crawl through. "If you aren't shot after you hit the water, Skinny, you should be able to bring help. There ought to be a ranch somewhere close to the Gulf."

"Yeah!" spoke up Bucky Simpson, his barrel chest heaving with new hope. "We'll be here a couple days, loadin' two thousand head o' beef stock onto this tub. You'll go for help, won't you, Adams?"

The scrawny cowboy shook hands around, tucked his mule-ear boot tops under the waistband of his Levis and, assisted by Rockford and Simpson, thrust his legs and narrow hips through the porthole.

A moment later Adams was clinging to the brass rim of the porthole with his fingers. Then, with a final whispered word of good luck from the men who were staking their lives on his errand, the cowboy thrust himself outward from the *Cuban Moon's* hull and plummeted to the water fifteen feet below.

In breath-held suspense, the remaining cowboys crowded about the porthole as they saw Skinny Adams come to the surface, several yards out from the hell ship. Then, with clean, powerful strokes, the cowboy started swimming across the moonlit ripples toward shore.

Less than a hundred feet from the ship, Skinny Adams gave vent to a soul-curdling scream.

Tommy Rockford saw the dorsal fin of a huge shark knifing across the lagoon, trailing a V of ripples.

Skinny Adams screamed again, and it was the last sound he made before lethal jaws closed on his threshing legs and he was jerked under the water in a lather of blood-stained foam.

"Adios, Skinny!" whispered Tommy Rockford, a cold lump knotting his stomach as he turned from the porthole. "I reckon Cordoza knew there wouldn't be any chance of his prisoners' swimmin' ashore tonight, amigos. Men-eatin' sharks would see to that!"

CHAPTER V.

CIRCLE B CATTLE.

MORNING found the ten cow-punchers, gaunt and spent from a sleepless night, herded before bristling guns to the foredeck of the *Cuban Moon*.

Two lifeboats had been lowered from the starboard davits, and Shark Spalding was waiting in one of them as Rockford and Dale Morse, followed by their fellow prisoners, crawled down rope ladders into Spalding's boat.

The second boat was loaded with the *Cuban Moon's* crew, and soon they were rowing toward the mouth of the Little Guadalupe.

"The Circle B critters," Shark Spalding explained from the stern of his boat, "are feedin' back o' that line o' hills yonder. But our first job is to make a raft out o' cottonwood logs, big enough to float at least twenty steers per trip. How are you range hands at wood chop-pin'?"

Diego Cordoza's boat landed first, and the cowpunchers saw that escape was impossible as they waded ashore through knee-deep water, under the alert guns of the Mexican sailors.

A stand of timber grew at the river mouth, and soon the sweating punchers, stripped to the waist, began plying axes at the larger cottonwoods.

By sundown, the weary punchers had dragged thirty logs, each measuring twenty-five feet in length, to the high-tide mark on the sandy beach.

Then they were herded back into the lifeboat and rowed back to the *Cuban Moon*. It was obvious that Shark Spalding was taking no chances on camping ashore overnight, and running the risk of his

shanghaied buckaroos attempting escape.

The reef-girdled lagoon was alive with sharks, attracted by the garbage which the Mexican cook threw overboard. Their tawny bodies were clearly visible against the sandy bottom, putting a damper to any hopes the cowhands might have entertained for diving overboard and taking their chances of getting ashore.

"We're in an air-tight trap, amigos," Texas Ranger Dale Morse said, after they had finished another supper of bad-tasting Chihuahua stew. "Afloat or ashore, we ain't got the chance of a snowball in Hades of getting away."

Tommy Rockford, sharing his sack of tobacco and thin husks from his fellow prisoners, grunted laconically in the darkness.

"Our main job is to haze those rustled shorthorns down to the beach, when that raft's finished," he pointed out. "The country's pretty rough back there, and we'll stir up a lot of dust. My advice is for every man to watch out for himself. If he sees a chance to break for it, then good luck to him."

But Rockford's hopes were likewise doomed to failure.

NEXT day Cordoza's Mexican sailors, under the supervision of the *Cuban Moon's* carpenter, set to work lashing the cottonwood logs together with ship's rope and bracing the huge raft with driftwood planks found on the beach.

Shark Spalding, meanwhile, made a trip back into the Texas hills and returned with a cavvy of saddle horses, no doubt stolen from Texas ranches.

When the unarmed cowpunchers were mounted, Shark Spalding climbed aboard a big-brisketed horse

and, holding the reins with his bullet-injured arm, swung a six-gun over his mounted prisoners.

The .45 glittered dazzlingly in the sun, and Tommy Rockford recognized the Peacemaker, with a start, as being one of his own gold-plated weapons.

"We're headin' back to the cattle now," Spalding said. "Don't get any loco notions of tryin' to bust loose, now that you've each got a cow pony under you. I've got two o' Cordoza's sailors up on the rim-rocks with a pair of Winchesters. And they know how to use 'em, even if they ain't landlubbers."

So saying, Shark Spalding reined about and spurred off into the Little Guadalupe's canyon, followed by his ten dejected puncher prisoners.

Half a mile back from the shore line, the river gorge widened upon a five-hundred-acre basin, girdled by fifty-foot shale cliffs.

The grassy sink was covered with grazing cattle, bearing the earmarks and brands of Gerd Brumbock's big Circle B spread, up in the Staked Plains.

Tommy Rockford's range-wise glance revealed instantly that the rustled herd had lost very little tallow as a result of being transported down the Brazos on barges. Here at their Gulf-coast holding ground, the Circle B shorthorns had fat grazing range at their disposal.

A flash of sun rays on gun metal up on the basin rimrocks, on either side of the Little Guadalupe's inlet, revealed the presence of the rifle

guards Shark Spalding had posted to prevent a getaway attempt.

Reining up on the river bank, Shark Spalding hipped about in saddle and waved a gold-plated Colt in the direction of the grazing cattle.

"Now, here's the set-up, buckos!" gruffed the outlaw. "I ain't such a monster that I aim to massacre you unlucky cusses, on top of shanghaiin' you an' bringin' you all the way from Pirate Cove to work for me. I intend—"

Bucky Simpson's throaty guffaw cut into Spalding's speech.

"I suppose," said the Panhandle waddy sarcastically, "that you're goin' to offer us wages—or mebbe a cut o' the dinero you'll get when these flitter-ears are sold down in Mexico?"

Spalding colored wrathfully.

"Close-hobble your lip, buckaroo!" snarled the rustler chief. "I'm offerin' you somethin' better than wages. Your lives—in turn for hazin' these cattle as fast as you can down to the beach, an' helpin' keepin' 'em bunched while the raft makes its trips to the ship. Get the idea?"

The ten waddies exchanged glances. But Tommy Rockford, while he would not have trusted their captor further than he could heave a bull by the tail, knew that nothing was to be gained by goading Spalding into a murderous rage.

"That's fair enough, Shark!" answered the border-patrol captain. "When the last beef critter is stowed aboard the *Cuban Moon*, you'll turn us loose on this coast to shift for

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ourselves. By the time we reach Galveston or Corpus Christi, your ship will be well on its way to Tampico or wherever you're sailin'. Is that the deal?"

Spalding grinned wolfishly.

"That's the deal. Now, get busy, you sage busters. Cut fifty steers out o' that herd an' chouse 'em down to the beach."

ROCKFORD and the other punchers deployed out over the grassy basin, and soon the air was stifling with dust as the riders, trained top hands all, began bunching Circle B steers on the nearest bank of the Little Guadalupe.

By midafternoon they had the first bunch of cattle down on the beach, to find that Cordoza's seamen had floated their raft at high tide and had linked it with the offshore freighter by means of a long hawser.

Spurring out into brisket-deep surf, Tommy Rockford and his fellow prisoners struggled with the tough job of loading the bawling, outraged steers aboard the log raft.

When twenty-two of the animals were snubbed down with short ropes to heavy spikes driven in the raft logs, Shark Spalding fired a gun to signal the engineer aboard the freighter, and the big windlass began drawing in the hawser.

When the raft load of cattle was alongside the *Cuban Moon*, a boom was swung overside and the steers were hoisted aboard one-by-one by means of a belly band, and lowered into the stanchioned holds of the cattle boat.

Sizing up the speed with which the cattle were taken aboard and the number of steers remaining on shore, Rockford believed the *Cuban Moon* would be able to sail by tomorrow noon, tide permitting.

Ten round trips were made between ship and shore before sundown, and then Shark Spalding had his weary cowhand captives picket their horses ashore and sent them back to the cattle ship.

"Spalding's offer didn't pull the wool over your eyes, did it, Tommy?" demanded Dale Morse, when they were making themselves as comfortable as possible for the night, in their jail cabin. "You don't think he'd be foolish enough to turn us loose, do you, when all we'd have to do, once we reached a settlement, would be to tip off the Mexican government to nab the *Cuban Moon* when it landed at some Southern port?"

Tommy Rockford glanced around at his gaunt companions and shook his head dourly.

"Spalding's got the whip hand on us," he said. "I think he's just enough of a braggart to keep his word—and defy us to cause him any trouble with this shipment of wet stock."

But Rockford's statement had been voiced to allay the horror which was growing hourly in the hearts of his fellow prisoners. Secretly, he knew that when the last raft load of cattle had been towed in from shore, Shark Spalding would put a speedy end to his kidnaped cowpunchers.

CHAPTER VI.

SPALDING'S PAYOFF.

DEATH struck once more at the ranks of the cowboys at noon the following day.

The tragedy occurred when Shark Spalding's captives were back in the cliff-girdled basin out of sight of the Gulf, rounding up the last of the grazing Circle B steers.

Of necessity, the various punchers were scattered far and wide over the

grassy sink, out of range of Spalding's six-guns. Tommy Rockford, Dale Morse, and a young puncher from up San Antone way were engaged in routing strays out of the cliff-bottom talus when the San Antonian cracked.

"I'm headin' up the Little Guadalupe—an' ridin' as far as this crow-bait will carry me, amigos!" snarled the young puncher, his outburst coming without warning. "By sundown we'll have the last o' these flitter-ears loaded on that raft. An' then you'll see how good Spalding's word is to turn us loose."

Tommy Rockford spurred up alongside the puncher's stirrup and reached out to grab the pony's bit.

"No you don't, Johnson!" grated the border patrolman. "You're forgettin' that two of those Mexican seamen are posted on the rimrock where the river cuts into the basin. You'd be shot down like a dog!"

Johnson whip-sawed savagely at the reins, seeking to loosen Rockford's grip on the bit ring.

"You got any better idea?" the young puncher flared, panic flaming in his red-shot eyes. "I'd rather be plugged out o' saddle than waitin' meekly for Shark Spaldin' to double-cross me!"

Rockford grinned bleakly.

"Morse and I *have* figured up a plan—the only way we stand a chance to get out of this murder trap, Johnson," explained the lawman. "When we get down to the beach, there'll be better than four hundred head of cattle millin' around next to the water. We aim to give a signal, and all of us make a break for it up and down the shore line, going both north and south."

"Yeah," cut in Texas Ranger Morse. "Spalding hasn't got guards posted on the beach. Some of us would get mowed down, yes—but

maybe half of us would get clear. And us bein' on horseback, Cor-doza's sailors couldn't overtake us."

Johnson's shoulders slumped in dejection.

"*Sta bueno*," he surrendered. "I'll string along with you."

Rockford released the pony's bit and spurred off into a *rincon* after a big blue lead bull. It was when he was larruping the stubby-horned brute back into the open basin that he heard a yell from Dale Morse, and saw his Texas Ranger pard pointing off toward the river.

Johnson's assent to their getaway plan had been a ruse to throw his well-meaning advisers off the scent.

Now, slapping his horse with his hat, the Johnson rannihan was spurring rapidly toward the break in the cliffs where the waters of the Little Guadalupe sluiced across the basin, later to empty into the Gulf lagoon where the *Cuban Moon* lazied at anchor.

"The poor, loco fool!" whispered Tommy Rockford. "He hasn't got a chance!"

Even as the border patrolman spoke, he heard the whip-crack report of a rifle, up on the east rim.

Johnson threw up his hands and reeled in saddle, as a steel-jacketed slug caught him in the throat.

An instant later the kid from San Antone pitched from stirrups and rolled lifelessly over the river bank, his empty-saddled horse stampeding in a wide arc back into the basin, stirrup leathers flapping.

"Just nine of us left for Spalding to massacre now, Tom!" grated Dale Morse, as the Ranger spurred up. "That Mexie is some sharpshooter, even if he is a seagoin' gun hawk."

Johnson's killing had been witnessed by Simpson and the other shanghaied punchers, who were bunching the remainder of the Circle

B beef along the river bank.

Under the menace of the gold-plated six-gun in Shark Spalding's fist, the cowboys worked the cattle into a long string and got them started down the river canyon toward the beach.

Sweat poured from the waddies' pores. They assembled the cattle on the narrow crescent of sand, watching moodily as the tramp steamer's big winches towed another raft load of cattle across the lagoon.

Rockford rode from man to man, warning each rider in turn to be on the alert for his signal. When Rockford believed the time was ripe to make a getaway break, he would lead the doomed cavalcade in a wild stampede for freedom, up and down the curving strand. But that moment would not come until Diego Cordoza's seamen were aboard a rowboat and headed for their ship.

WITH monotonous regularity, the steer-laden raft made its round trips between ship and shore. The Texas sun was westering into the flat horizon by the time the last of the Circle B steers were hazed onto the raft and were being towed at hawser's end to be transferred by derrick into the *Cuban Moon's* holds.

Tommy Rockford was spurring his saddler back out of the shallow-crested breakers toward the spot where the other punchers were waiting, when Shark Spalding raised a gold-plated Colt and fired a shot.

Rockford knew it was a signal, even before the Mexican sailors, waiting alongside their grounded rowboat at the water's edge, broke into two groups and sprinted to points fifty yards up and down the beach. The maneuver placed the heavily armed seamen in positions to thwart any attempt at a getaway in that direction.

Pretending not to understand the purpose of the sailors' rush, Tommy Rockford spurred his hoof-weary mount up on the sloping shingle beach to where Shark Spalding was waiting aboard his leggy mustang.

Rockford's lips compressed as he saw one of his own gilded Peacemakers leveled at his chest. Spalding's buckteeth were exposed in a leering smile, as the border patrolman reined up. In the background, the tense-faced cowpunchers sat their horses, nerves twanging.

"All right—I said I'd pay off you hombres when the job was finished, an' I ain't goin' to welsh on my word!" rasped the border hopper enigmatically. "But Cordoza an' me have talked things over, Rockford. We've decided it would be too risky to leave you buckaroos ashore, where you could tip off the law about the owlhoot cargo we got aboard the *Cuban Moon*. So we've decided to take you hombres back on board."

Obeying a gestured order of Spalding's gun muzzle, Rockford dismounted.

"Meanin' what, Spalding?" demanded the cowboy lawman, peering up through the sunset glow at the grinning outlaw.

"We're goin' to set you rannies adrift in an open boat, fifty-odd miles at sea," explained Spalding. "You'll have grub an' a canteen o' fresh water an' one pair o' oars. Barrin' a storm, you'll be able to row to shore in a day or two. By that time, the *Cuban Moon* will be well on its way."

While Shark Spalding was talking, the gun-toting sailors had been moving in to surround the mounted cowpunchers grouped on the beach.

Now, at an order from Spalding, the punchers dismounted and the sailors herded them at guns' point to one of the waiting lifeboats.

Rockford and Morse were the last men to go aboard. As they were in the act of straddling the gunwales, Shark Spalding swung out of stirrups and removed Rockford's famous gold-plated handcuffs from his chaps pocket.

Tossing the gilded fetters to a sailor who was waiting to help shove the lifeboat out into deep water, Spalding rasped out in Spanish:

"Shackle the Rangero and Señor Rockford wrist-to-wrist, Gregorio. They're the leaders of this outfit, and I'd feel safer if they were chained together."

Scowling, Rockford and Dale Morse submitted to being linked by the gold-plated bracelets.

"Chins up, amigos!" The Texas Ranger grinned, as Cordoza's sailors pushed the lifeboat's keel along the sandy bottom and floated it out amid the rolling combers. "Bein' left afloat on the Gulf isn't as bad a bargain as I'd expected, at that."

A few minutes later Spalding and the *Cuban Moon* crew were rowing alongside in the remaining boat, and one of the sailors caught the tarred painter rope with which to tow the boatload of prisoners.

Sharks flirted alongside the overloaded craft as it headed for the low-lying black hull of Cordoza's cattle ship.

Rockford got his first inkling of peril when he saw Spalding and the Mexican sailors climb up to the *Cuban Moon's* rail, leaving the boatload of cowpunchers bobbing against the steel-riveted hull plates below.

Then davit pulleys began rattling, as a steel cable with a hook on its end was lowered toward the swaying lifeboat.

"Shove that hook through the ring in the bow there, Morse!" yelled down Shark Spalding, leaning over the steamer's railing. "We're goin'

to tow you alongside until we get out to sea."

The Texas Ranger made the hook fast in the boat's big steel ring, then settled back on a thwart alongside Tommy Rockford.

"It's goin' to be a plenty wet cruise, bein' towed alongside that tub," grumbled Bucky Simpson. "A whole night of bein' dashed with salt spray, an'—*hey!* We're bein' double-crossed, pardners!"

Rockford and the other cowpunchers stared aloft, as they felt the overloaded boat give a sudden lurch.

Peering straight overhead, they beheld an appalling thing.

Captain Cordoza's seamen were tugging at the block and tackle which swung from one of the davit supports. The bow end of the



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punchers' lifeboat was being hauled up the ship's side! A matter of seconds, and every cowpuncher in the upended boat would be dumped headlong into the shark-infested brine!

With a yell of rage, Tommy Rockford hooked an elbow around the thwart on which he had been seated, as the keel of the lifeboat was jerked to a vertical angle alongside the *Cuban Moon's* hull.

Caught unawares, four of the luckless waddies pitched out of the lifeboat, landing with geysering splashes in the water below.

Clinging to the thwart, Tommy Rockford could have ridden it to the level of the ship's rail had it not been for the sudden plummeting weight of the Texas Ranger who was manacled to his left arm.

Jerked free of the lifeboat seat by Dale Morse's plunging weight at his other arm, Tommy Rockford saw the sea water rushing up to meet him in the blue dusk.

An instant later the lagoon closed over the heads of the two lawmen, as they sank deep into the grim waters.

Breaking surface in a smother of foam, Rockford and Morse heard shouts of derisive laughter from the rustlers lining the steamer rail twenty feet overhead. And mingled with their jeers was the blood-chilling screams of the cowpunchers, as saw-toothed sharks lanced in for the kill.

CHAPTER VII.

SHARK-TOOTH SLAUGHTER.

THE sweep of the incoming tide bore Tommy Rockford and Dale Morse away from the looming bulk of the outlaw steamer, as the handcuffed lawmen started swimming.

A fifteen-foot killer shark glided under them, its dorsal fin grazing

their threshing legs as the big desperado fish clamped its jaws on the arm of a screaming cowpuncher.

Blue twilight was settling over the lagoon, where nine souls were trapped in a one-sided melee against the pack of sharp-snouted undersea killers.

One by one, the Texas cowhands who were unable to swim were jerked beneath the surface as sharks jostled each other to get at their feast.

"Keep swimmin' Dale!" choked out Tommy Rockford, as he saw that he and his partner were fighting their way clear of the threshing bodies of their doomed companions. "We're the . . . only ones . . . who can swim . . . it seems!"

Hampered by the gold-plated manacles which bound their arms, the Texas Ranger and the border-patrol captain clawed under water to unbuckle the heavy chaps which threatened to bog them down.

A killer shark headed toward them, rolling over with a flash of pearl-gray belly to open an under-slung jaw at Tommy Rockford's threshing legs. A battery of spike-sharp teeth snapped shut, but Rockford's ankle was saved by the big steel shank of his Chihuahua spurs.

Gliding away, the shark was attracted by the blood which stained the foam-flecked waters nearer the ship, and concentrated its lethal energies on a dead cowpuncher a few yards away.

"Rockford an' Morse are gittin' away!"

Shark Spalding's bullish roar hurtled across the lagoon and bounced in echo from the nearby Texas hills. On the heels of the gringo's shout came a roar of guns, and powder flames stabbed the dusk along the *Cuban Moon's* rail.

"Dive!" choked out Dale Morse, as a bullet clipped the water between

the struggling swimmers. "They'll salivate us—if we stay on the surface!"

Filling their lungs with air, the two lawmen dived. Lead peppered the surface of the water, ricocheting off into the gathering darkness. The beach which had heard the thud of cannon, back in the days when pirates had infested the Texas shore, was a bedlam of gunfire by the time Rockford and Morse came to the surface again.

Bullets spattered briny spray in their faces, forcing them to dive again. But this time their boots touched ground and, holding their breath until their lungs seemed about to burst, the two handcuffed lawmen slogged shoreward until their heads were above water.

Night was falling swiftly, and the pale starshine from the Texas sky was not enough for Shark Spalding and his owlhooters to shoot by with any degree of accuracy.

Buffeted by curling breakers, pushed inshore by the surging tide, the bedraggled lawmen waded up to dry land and fell gasping amid the seaweed there, too exhausted to move.

"Lower that boat!" came Spalding's frenzied shout across the lagoon. "We got to make sure them lawmen didn't make it!"

Rockford and Morse summoned their flagging strength and lurched to their feet. They kept running until they reached the canyon of the Little Guadalupe, there to hide themselves amid the cottonwoods.

"We made it, pard!" gasped Tommy Rockford, as the two shook hands in an ecstasy of relief. "I reckon those seven other waddies are all inside sharks by now."

Reaming a thumb and forefinger inside the lining of a kangaroo-leather boot, Rockford got out a

duplicate key to his handcuffs and freed their wrists.

Then they set out for the crest of the coastal ridge.

As the night thickened and the starlight became brighter, the two soaked lawmen shivered in the night breeze and watched the futile efforts of Shark Spalding and his landing party to find some trace of their escaped victims.

THE tide was lapping the high-water mark on the drift-lined beach when Spalding and Cordoza's sailors boarded their lifeboat and rowed back to the ship.

"The *Cuban Moon* will sail as soon as the tide fills that channel through the outer reef," Dale Morse commented. "All we got to worry about is catchin' ourselves a pair o' horses, Tom. And as far as I'm concerned, I can't wait to get back to Pirate Cove an' see you slap those gold-plated handcuffs on Waterfront Walt. That snake-hearted saloon-keeper will stretch hangrope if—"

The Texas Ranger broke off, as a low voice hailed them from a clump of chaparral to their right.

Veins jelling with suspense, the two lawmen whirled, expecting to see that Spalding had left an armed sailor behind to capture them with the coming of daylight.

Instead, they saw the familiar bow-legs and wedge-shaped torso of Bucky Simpson, their fellow prisoner from the Panhandle!

"Yeah—I can swim like a beaver when sharks are after me, amigos!" The big Texan chuckled as he shook hands with the two lawmen survivors. "Did you ever see anything so horrible as them sharks chewin' up our pards? There weren't sharks enough to go around or I'd never have made it ashore myself."

Rockford swung his gaze out

across the night-shrouded lagoon to where the *Cuban Moon's* lighted portholes traced a filigree of golden ripples on the tidewater.

Then it was that an idea came to the border patrolman, and set his pulses racing.

"Pardners, we still got work to do!" whispered Rockford, wheeling toward Dale Morse and the dripping cowpuncher. "Bucky, you got your choice o' good saddle horses, grazin' down on the beach. I want you to fork one o' them cayuses and light a shuck to Corpus Christi. That's somewhere to the southwest."

The two men stared at Rockford.

"Have a company o' Texas Rangers waitin' at the Corpus Christi port, savvy?" went on the border patrolman. "Because Dale Morse an' I are goin' back on board Cordoza's ship tonight. We're not goin' to let those Circle B cattle reach a Mexican port if we can help it!"

For five minutes, Rockford spoke swiftly and earnestly, outlining the details of his new-formed plan. When he had finished, the three conspirators shook hands around.

"I'd give a heap to be in on that shipboard free-for-all," stated Bucky Simpson. "But I see I got my job cut out for me. Don't worry—I'll be waitin' for you at Christi when that hell ship comes sailin' in."

Descending the hillside, the three survivors caught a loose saddle horse for Simpson's use. Then they made their way to the beach and the three of them rolled a big cottonwood log out into the breakers, a log which had been left over from the making of Spalding's raft two days before.

Straddling the log, using boards which they had found on the driftwood-strewn beach in lieu of paddles, the two lawmen rowed their improvised craft out beyond the gentle surf. Soon they were lost to Simp-

son's view, as they paddled across the shark-infested waters of the lagoon to where the *Cuban Moon* lay shackled by its fore and aft anchors.

Keeping well out of range of the ship's lighted portholes, the two salt-water waddies paddled their buoyant log up under the overhang of the steamer's stern. The peril of sharks forced the cowboy lawmen to ride the unwieldy cottonwood on their knees, not daring to trail so much as a boot toe in the water.

Their prearranged plans served them in good stead, now that they were within earshot of the ship. Exactly as they had rehearsed their boarding plans back on the Texas beach, Rockford and Morse jockeyed their log over to the big iron cable which led to the *Cuban Moon's* stern anchor, three fathoms below.

The anchor chain, with its twelve-inch links, made an ideal ladder. Climbing with infinite caution, Rockford and Morse gained the taffrail and found the after deck deserted.

A moment later they were on deck. Sounds of revelry came from somewhere below, where Diego Cordoza's crew were celebrating.

Thoroughly familiar with the layout of the freighter, the two cowboy lawmen slipped into an after hatch and went down a ladder to a hold filled with rustled Circle B cattle, just forward of the engine room.

There, well hidden in the darkness, their movements masked by the bawling cattle, Tommy Rockford and his Texas Ranger partner awaited developments.

CHAPTER VIII.

GOLD-PLATED HANDCUFFS.

SHORTLY before midnight the *Cuban Moon's* engines started throbbing. Anchors were weighed, and the cattle-laden freighter swung

about and headed out through the reef channel into the open Gulf.

When the steady beat of the tramp's propeller indicated that the vessel was under way, Tommy Rockford and Dale Morse crept out of hiding and climbed to the upper well deck.

The crew had retired to its quarters in the forecabin, where a noisy drinking bout was going on.

As silent as twin phantoms, the two Texans made their way forward past the bridge. Up in the wheelhouse a light glowed faintly, where the Mexican quartermaster was on duty. Loud guffaws came from Captain Cordoza's cabin, where the *Cuba Moon's* skipper was carousing with his owlhoot partner, Shark Spalding.

A lookout was on duty at the steamer's bow rail, as Rockford and Morse had expected. Removing their spurs to prevent the jangle of chains from betraying their approach, the two waddies converged on the unsuspecting lookout, working their way past mounds of rope and windlass gear.

Pausing before the rusty capstan, used as a winch for drawing up the bow anchors when there was no steam available, the lawmen removed a twenty-inch steel bar apiece from the capstan spindle.

A thud of metal on bone, and it was all over. The lookout, believing he was being joined by two of his shipmates, had opened his mouth to ask for a cigarette—and that was the last he knew.

"Two guns!" whispered Tommy Rockford, his hands exploring the lookout's cartridge belt. "That's all we need, *compadre*. First we got to make sure the crew stays put."

Luck was with them, as far as the *Cuban Moon's* Mexican crew was concerned. A glance through the portholes of the forward saloon revealed that more than half of the



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outlaw seamen had already drunk themselves into a stupor.

By the simple act of barring the saloon door and locking it with a big marine padlock which dangled from a doorknob chain, Rockford and Morse converted the orgy room into a jail.

"Now Captain Cordoza in his cabin—and that hombre up in the steerin' room," muttered Tommy Rockford, as they divided the cart-ridges contained in the luckless lookout's gun belt. "I'll flip you to see who throws his gun on Spalding an' that pig of a sea captain."

Rockford won the toss, and the two waddies climbed a bridge wing ladder, where they separated. Morse crept toward the wheelhouse, where a helmsman was steering the *Cuban Moon* southward toward the Gulf horizon, his face sharp-etched by the binnacle light as he stepped over to consult his compass.

Tommy Rockford, meanwhile, moved down a canvas-walled catwalk and paused before the door of a cabin marked EL CAPITAN—ENTRADA NO PERMITIDO.

"No admittance, eh?" muttered the border patrolman, earing back the knurled prong of the six-gun he had taken from the knocked-out watchman. "It's lucky I don't believe in signs!"

Across the white-varnished panels of the captain's private cabin came a clink of whiskey glasses, the sound of throaty laughter as Shark Spalding and the *Cuban Moon's* lawless skipper toasted their latest venture in outlawry.

GRIPPING the tarnished brass knob with his left hand, Tommy Rockford kicked open the door and pounced into the smoke-hazed cabin behind a jutting gun. He snapped: "Elevate, pronto!"

Rockford's icy command paralyzed Shark Spalding and Diego Cordoza in the act of touching whiskey glasses across a small table. They held their rigid posture beneath the swaying ship's lantern, as Tommy Rockford stepped forward, his gun muzzle weaving between the two men, his left arm reaching in a chaps pocket to draw out his familiar gold-plated handcuffs.

"I'm takin' over this stinkin' ship, El Capitan!" drawled the border patrolman, the fetters jingling musically in his grasp. "That's mutiny, isn't it?"

Sweat burst from Diego Cordoza's pudgy face like juice from a squeezed orange peel. The Mexican sea captain dropped his tequila glass with a tinkling smash and elevated his arms, raw horror glazing his eyes.

Not so Shark Spalding.

By what miracle Tommy Rockford had boarded the *Cuban Moon*, already miles offshore and going full-steam toward Mexico, the diabolical border hopper could not guess. But he knew that a hang noose awaited him if Rockford succeeded in his mad venture of commandeering the freighter—and Spalding chose shoot-out rather than arrest.

His left arm in a sling, Spalding could not go for both of Tommy Rockford's gold-plated Peacemakers, which the rustler was wearing. But his right hand blurred across his body in a lightning-swift cross draw, and the lampshine glinted on the up-darting Colt as Spalding whipped the gold-plated .45 from holster.

The lookout's revolver bucked and roared in Rockford's fist, and lead lanced across the ship's table to punch a blood-spouting hole between Spalding's close-set eyes.

Reflexing muscles jerked the trigger of the gun in Spalding's hand,



*As sure as a questing
bloodhound, Sam
headed for the cliffs
and caves.*

SHOOT STRAIGHT OR DIE

by JACK STERRETT

***Wild young buttons are always getting
lawmen into hot water—and vice versa!***

FROM Coconino to Vulture Cliffs the plain was flat as a barroom floor. In the evening the long blue shadows sneaked first into Coconino, then crept silently toward the cliffs, like a soundless horde of ghost warriors. When they reached the yawning, black openings of the caves, the haunted and long-dead cliff palaces would seem to come alive with the

people of an ancient race. Then the caves would be still and dead again and it would be night all across the plain.

Sam Trasker, sheriff in Coconino, had seen this phenomenon maybe a thousand times and had never failed to be stirred by that imagined moving of a dead people. But he had never said anything of this to

any other man. He would have been called soft for such idle fancies. And in Coconino a sheriff had to be hard.

As he stood watching tonight beside the adobe-walled jail, he had old and weary lines in his seamed brown face, and his blue eyes looked tired. There was the hint of a stoop to his gaunt, square shoulders. Responsibility and a constant and impartial hardness are like saddle galls on a young man's spirit. And Sam was young to be sheriff.

JUST for a moment now, as the shadows swept the plains and climbed the cliffs, there was a shadow in Sam Trasker's eyes, too. He was looking back on his young life. His mother had died when he had needed her most as a button. His girl had thrown him over in favor of a rich man just when his hopes had been built the highest. Then his father, the old sheriff, had been killed in a violent gun battle, and young Sam, who had already begun to turn hard, had been urged into the office by cattlemen who had always banked on a Trasker herding the law in turbulent Coconino.

But Sam was no man to spend pity on himself. He'd done an unswerving, clean job in Coconino and always would. Perhaps, at times, he had been a little bitter and harsh, but always he had been fair, and he could take pride in the fact that there was nobody in this region who failed to respect him.

As the last fire touched the rim of the cliffs, Sam pulled himself erect and jerked back his shoulders. His eyes, losing their tiredness, became keen and sharp, his tall, slim body became erect and lithe. As he took up his nightly patrol through the dusty, thirsty, noisy little cow town, he was the law on guard, as clean

and hard as the straight line of his lips.

As the night swept in on Coconino, the hot spots along the street sprang into light and life. It was a Saturday and every whoop-hollering cowboy in from the hills had a pay check to burn. Sam dropped in at the Bandbox, then at the Devil's Hole, then at the Jackpot, and so on down the line of saloons. He lifted a hand and nodded at the proprietor in each place and walked through, looking the crowd over. He liked to know where everybody was, and the condition of each cowpoke as to liquor and his fortune at cards; then as he made his rounds Sam had a good idea of where to head on the run the instant trouble broke loose. Also, there were certain hard cases for whom he always had his eyes out. And if they dared to be in town, he would disarm them and ride them out.

He found a big game already under way in the private room at the rear of the barroom in the Devil's Hole. His lips tightened as he saw the size of the stakes and the amount of hard liquor which stood on the green-topped table. There were a half dozen men in the game, one of them a bull-shouldered man with wet-looking, curly black hair and bloodshot eyes. A handsome man once, perhaps, with a powerful body, but now a gross-bodied and flabby man with the ugliness of dissipation written all over his face. His hands showed that it had been a long time since they had handled a rope or grasped a cinch, except when sheer necessity had commanded.

"Take it easy, boys," Sam Trasker cautioned quietly, and they all looked up and greeted him courteously. All but the black-haired man, who glowered sullenly down at his cards and drummed his thick fingers

impatiently on the table.

Sam shrugged and turned away after nodding at the dealer. The sullen man with the liquor bloat was George Crain, the rich man who had taken Sam Trasker's girl away from him. But he was rich no longer. He had wasted both health and money and was now no more than an ugly, desperate and drunken gambler. He had no business to carry a gun, and it had been in Sam's mind to tell him so. But instead Sam merely shrugged and turned away. He would not shame the man in front of others. It would only cause talk. For there were plenty who knew that Crain's wife had been Sam's girl.

ON the sidewalk outside the saloon, Sam Trasker stood for a long moment in troubled thought. He knew that he soon must browbeat Crain into some sort of decency and respectability, maybe even refuse him the right to carry arms and frequent the town's saloons. Otherwise Sam would be leaving himself open for trouble. Already there were a few cattlemen who had steadily lost a few cows, and already there was talk that the little money Crain seemed always to have could not be honestly earned.

Sam's mouth twisted bitterly. It would be tough to have to ride a close herd on Dorothy's husband. Sam's somber gaze stared vacantly across the street. Suddenly he jerked to attention as he saw a black figure pass through a lighted doorway. Cotton Ross, Dorothy's wild young brother, was in town! Now, when had *he* returned? And what were *his* thoughts this night? Not pleasant ones, it was sure. Was Cotton packing a gun?

His breath sharply indrawn, Sam stepped down from the sidewalk, crossed through the ankle-deep dust

of the street, and waited outside the doorway Cotton had entered. And when Cotton came out, wiping the back of his hand across his lips, Sam was in a position to study the youngster's condition.

Cotton's hat was pushed to the back of his head, and his tow-colored hair flopped down toward his deep-set gray eyes; his face was black with dust. From wherever he had come, Cotton had ridden hard and had just hit town. Little more than a square-jawed overgrown kid with the stature of a man, it took only a little whiskey to prime Cotton Ross. But Sam could see now that Cotton was cold sober and that his mouth was drawn in ugly purpose.

"Howdy, Cotton," Sam said quietly.

The kid whirled, his hand slashing down to his hip. But Sam had stepped into the light so Cotton, able to see who it was, relaxed. His hand came away from his gun, and he reached up to pull his hat down toward his eyes. He did not look pleased to see Sam, did not smile.

"Howdy, yourself," he said, more rudely than politely.

"Looks like you're plain proddy," Sam observed. "The way you go for your gun is no fooling. You been practicing lately?"

"What I been doin' with my gun—an' what I aim to do with it," the boy growled sullenly, "is my business, not yours, Trasker."

"Well, it *could* become my business," Sam said softly. "But I'd sure hate to have it so. I suppose you're looking for George Crain?"

"If I am, that's my business, too. He in town?"

"Would I be the one to tell you that?" Sam rebuked him gently. "I reckon you know your sister would never forgive you if you killed her husband."

The kid's dignity and stiff poise broke suddenly into the hate that had brought him here. "Sam, you leave me alone! What I got to do an' what I'll suffer for it are my own lookout. You wasn't man enough to marry my sister an' protect her. You let that—that rat—get her. But I ain't gonna let her suffer!"

Sam's face was white in the dark. "C'mon," he said grimly, and took the boy by the elbow. "In some ways, you and I think exactly alike. We've got to have a conference, Cotton, and see what's to be done. C'mon up to the office, and we'll have a smoke."

The boy went unwillingly; but tougher and far uglier men than he had gone quietly when Trasker had urged them by the elbow.

IN the office, Sam gave Cotton a cheroot and held the match for him. The tow-headed kid gained pride in thus being treated like a man, and a lot of the ugly tension relaxed from his features as he leaned back and aped Sam in cocking his heels on the edge of Sam's spur-scarred desk.

"Well!" Sam said softly, and smiled. "This is better, eh, Cotton? You and I, we should never quarrel with each other. Where you been and when did you get back?"

Cotton scowled a little. "Reckon you know where I been, all right. I spent six months in the State reformatory—on account George Crain swore he caught me stealin' a gun from Ott's hardware, an' produced the gun to prove it. Hell, Sam—you sabe he must've stole that gun himself. He double-decked me to get rid of me, to chouse me off the Double R." The boy's face convulsed with misery and hate. "It was my own home spread before Crain married Dorothy an' my folks died. I had a right to be there!"

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Sam's leather-tanned, seamed face was very still, his lids were low over the blue flash of his eyes. The entire story was as familiar to him as the palm of his hand—because it was all a part of his own misery, too.

Under the fumbling management of old Logan Ross, the once-rich Double R layout had fallen into financial trouble. Dorothy and Cotton, the youngsters, had struggled, but their father, who was as stern as he was unlucky, would tolerate no interference. Sam, who loved Dorothy, had been helpless to aid them, being only a poverty-stricken cow-poke, himself. Then it was that the handsome and dashing George Crain had hit Coconino with a suitcase full of money and an eye for investments, had saved the ranch from the auctioneer's ax.

Dorothy had felt obligated to him perhaps. More likely he had driven the hard bargain in the first place and she had kept her word, marrying him even though she did not love him. For a roof had at least been kept over her parents' heads.

Sam's father had been killed shortly afterward, and Sam had become sheriff in Coconino. Cotton, Dorothy's kid brother, had grown up; the old Ross folks had died. Crain, though he had won everything, had maybe won only the bitter taste of ashes in his mouth, because he had never won more than money could buy. He had begun to drink and squander his resources, had fought savagely with Cotton, trying to force the youngster to leave home. And Cotton had fought back, hating the man instinctively.

"When they set me free of that place," Cotton went on bitterly, "I kicked around for a while. I punched cows for a couple of outfits, went on a drive to Wyomin', driftin' around in general. When I figgexed, finally,

that I could come back an' face that rat without clawin' for his eyes, I headed for home."

The boy's young face now went flat and blank with hate, and his deep-sunk eyes were almost hidden. "Sam—I went up to the place, before I come to town. Dorothy's been sick an' there's been nobody there to look after her. The place is dirty an' run down, fences down, barn fallin' apart, the stock wanderin' everywhere and half starved to death. Sam—I don't think sis has had enough to eat!"

SAM'S face went white as he jumped to his feet and nervously paced the length of the little room. He had not dreamed that even George Crain could treat a woman like that! He hadn't been up to Double R for months himself, having figured it his duty to stay away. He halted abruptly in his pacing and leaned his doubled fists on the desk as he stared down at Cotton.

"Kid, you hit town tonight to commit a murder. But, listen to me, a killing won't solve anything. You'd just get yourself hung and bring more tragedy into Dorothy's life. We've got to get a hand on ourselves, you and I—a tight rein. Almost anything we'd do would be wrong." He was silent for an instant, his mouth grim and straight, his blue eyes flashing and probing. "Hand me your gun!" he commanded then.

Cotton stiffened in his seat and began to cuss.

"Shut up," Sam grated roughly. "If there's a thing I'll move heaven and earth to keep from doing, that's hanging Dorothy's brother. Now hand me your gun."

Cotton was tough. The reformatory and his hard, rough months in the saddle had done things to him. But he wasn't tough enough to beat

down the grim command in Sam Trasker's eyes. Reluctantly he surrendered his Colt.

Sam spread a ten-dollar bill on the desk. "You don't need to ever let on to Dorothy that I helped out," he said roughly. "You can add this to whatever you've got to buy up a load of supplies to take out to Dorothy. Hunt up Farber. He'll be drinking at the Jackpot by now, but he'll open his store quick enough to make a sale."

"Crain—"

"Crain," Sam cut in sharply, "is sitting in on a big game. He may not be home at all, tonight. So you won't have to worry about that."

"I wasn't worryin' about that. I was wonderin' where I could find him."

"You forget all that and just do what I say. You get plenty of food and anything else she might need on out to your sister."

But when the boy nodded curtly and turned away, Sam had no confidence that his order would be obeyed. He was sorry that he had revealed that Crain was in town. Cotton's grudge went deep.

There was no solution that Sam could see. And, finally, he gave up his worried thoughts and pulled his hat over his eyes. He turned the office lamp low as he stepped out to resume his patrol of the town. He'd just mosey along and see if Cotton was doing what he'd been told. He'd try not to let the kid know he was herding him close.

INSTINCT, perhaps, headed Sam toward the Devil's Hole, where the big game in the rear room went on and where George Crain grew more drunk and ugly as the chips fell.

Sam had barely reached the batwing doors outside when a roar of

voices and a rush of booted feet inside warned him that trouble had only that instant burst wide. He flipped the doors aside and stepped in, his right hand at his hip.

The sudden explosion of noise had been made by other men, rushing at first to get out of the way and then forming a circle. Cotton and Crain were fighting savagely and in silence except for grunting curses. So the kid had played a hunch and had come straight here where he knew it was most likely a big game would be playing? Sam's mouth quirked grimly, but he made no move to interfere. So far this battle was with fists only.

Crain outweighed Cotton by sixty pounds. In condition, he could have held the kid off with one hand and broken him with the other. But Crain wasn't in condition; he was short of wind and flabby and drunk, and Cotton was tough and quick as a cat. He kept beyond and outside of Crain's huge windmilling arms, and dealt his sister's husband merciless punishment.

He closed Crain's eyes, split his nose and lips and loosened his teeth. He knocked the man's wind out of him, till Crain's whiskey-bloat was one huge agony of nausea. Crain fumbled blindly, gagged helplessly, and Cotton stepped aside and threw a ringer which tagged Crain on the chin. Crain went down, rolled and, bleary and helpless as he was, dragged his Colt from its holster.

"Hold it!" Sam Trasker yelled, and pounced through the circle and kicked the weapon from Crain's fingers. In the same motion, Sam's swinging gun barrel caught the side of Crain's head and put the man to sleep.

Sam gathered up Crain's weapon and stuck it in his belt, found Cotton's hat and tossed it to the boy.

Then Sam nodded and walked out, without speaking to anybody. Cotton followed quietly.

With two flour sacks crammed and bulging with supplies slung over the pommel of his saddle, Sam saw Cotton on his horse within the next half-hour and headed him out of town. He handed the boy his Colt and stared up at him.

"Look, Cotton, don't wear that weapon when you're in town or apt to meet Crain."

"You want me to get shot without a chance for my life?" the boy demanded sullenly.

Sam scowled. "I've got Crain's gun. I'll see he don't get it back right away, and I'll give him a talking to."

"He could git another," Cotton argued stubbornly. "You can only herd me so far. I got to look out for myself."

Sam had to let it go that way. He couldn't tell the kid what hell it would be if ever the time came when the law had to hang Cotton or Crain, either one.

The boy was staring down, perhaps wondering about that stiff, strained look on Sam's hard face. "I'll mosey," he promised, "an' I won't go to pick no fights with Crain. But what do you wanta just talk to him for? If I was you, I'd give him the excuse to try an' shoot me, then head him to boothill for good."

Sam stiffened as though a knife had been thrust through him. He slapped Cotton's horse on the rump and started him moving. "Get along, boy," he said huskily. "So long for now."

SAM stalked slowly back through town, headed once more for the Devil's Hole. He had to see now if Crain had regained his senses. If so,

he had to take the man down to the office and thrash things out, once and for all. But, at the saloon, where a crowd still milled in excited discussion of the fight and the consequences that might arise, Sam found that Crain had already departed.

A careful search of the town consumed time and in the end only proved what Sam had feared might be the case. Crain had left town. And the chances were that he had picked up a gun somewhere and was headed for the Double R. In twenty minutes, Sam had found and instructed a deputy to ride circle on the town, had saddled up a wiry dappled dun and was headed for the Double R himself. He felt a tortuous conviction of the need of such speed and was afraid that, even so, he might be too late.

Cotton Ross was like any other kid cowboy, he rode habitually at a headlong run. And George Crain's horse had been roweled by a raging man. Thus it was that, even though his dun was fast and he urged the animal to the limit, Sam Trasker covered the five upgrade miles to the Double R without overhauling the two who had preceded him.

He poured into the Double R ranch yard just in time to see the kitchen door to the house open wide and a stream of yellow light cross the packed earth—just in time to hear a hoarse shout, a woman's cry, then the blasting cannonade of six-gun thunder. Sam yelled as he rump-slid his dun and leaped down. He ran for the door, dimly noting, as he passed, the shapes of the others' horses.

He burst upon a scene that was to stick long in his memory: George Crain on the floor, rigid and motionless, Dorothy stiff with horror, cringing back against a wall with her

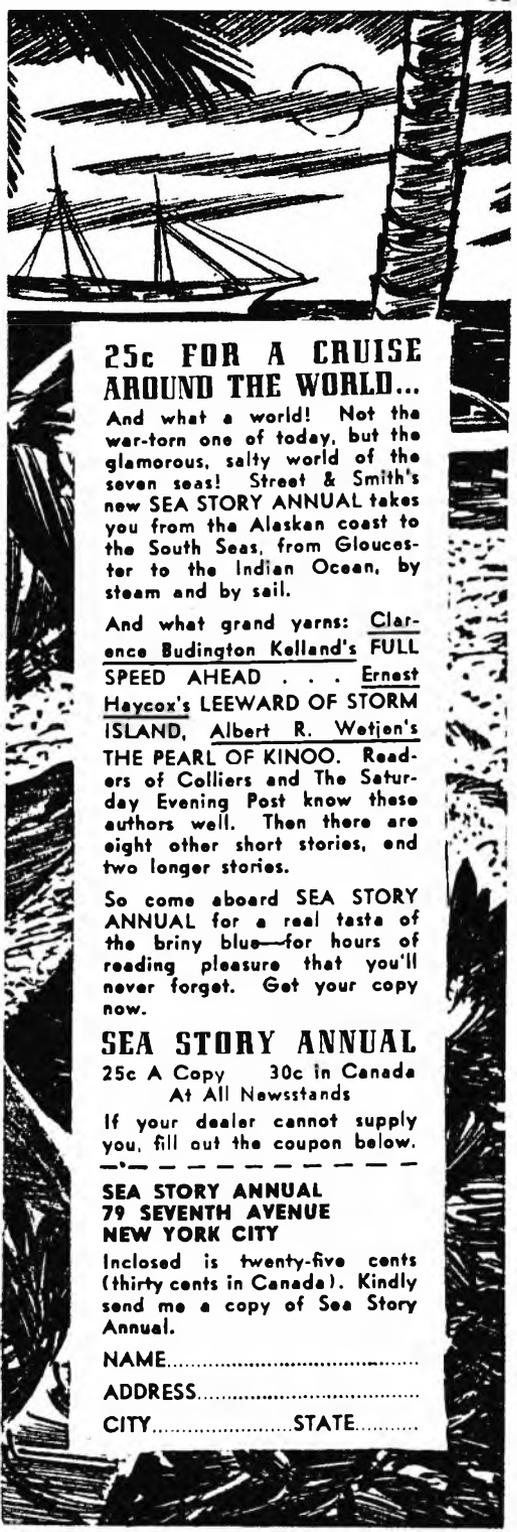
arms outspread as though she grasped desperately for support. Her face was white, her lips quivering, her brown eyes wide.

Then Sam heard the crash of a window at the rear of the house and knew that Cotton was leaping headlong for escape. Sam whirled and ran out into the dark. There Cotton's hurtling figure struck him and nearly knocked him from his feet. In a flash, the kid was leaping to his horse's back and pouring leather. One of those flour sacks still hung from the pommel and Sam could see its ghostly whiteness fade through the dark. He fired a warning shot over Cotton's head but the kid gave no heed. Even while Sam ran for his dun, Cotton disappeared in the dark.

Sam rode grimly, clinging to Cotton's trail for over an hour. Through the stillness of the star-sprinkled night, Sam could hear the drumming hoofs of Cotton's horse for miles, and it was only when Cotton's flight led at last into tangled and broken canyons that the sound was confused, seemed to come from a dozen directions at once and at last died away altogether.

SAM pulled slowly to a halt. His dun was drenched and trembling. The wonder was that, somewhere along the rocky trail, neither Sam's horse nor Cotton's had sprung a tendon or broken a leg. Sam slid down, loosened the cinch and tipped his saddle, cooling the dun's steaming back. By the time he had rolled and smoked a Durham, he had figured out his course.

His duty was clear. Back at the Double R a man lay dead, and the boy who had killed him was doubling and twisting his trail in the night through these canyons to make sure of his escape by daylight. Sam was



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now ten miles from the Double R, and nearly an equal distance from Coconino. No point in going back to either place. He must put himself in Cotton's boots and figure just what Cotton would do, in what direction he would head and where he would be most likely to hole up, come daylight. Sam had the sudden conviction that he knew these things. Having known Cotton for a long time, he knew the kid's past and how his mind worked.

So it was that when day broke, the



golden light flooded the mesas above the deserted palaces of the cave people to reveal a lanky tow-headed boy who lay flat on the pinnacle of a rocky spire and searched his back trail with deep-set eyes. In the recesses of one of those awesome caves below him, his horse was hidden and quiet. How the kid had taken the animal there down the face of what seemed a sheer cliff was a seeming impossibility. The cave people had reached their eerie dwellings by long ladders, so everybody thought.

So it was, too, that with that first flooding gleam of the new day a tiny shape could be seen on the trail, far down the cliffs below. Seeing it, Cot-

ton cursed and was suddenly desperate. Sam Trasker was outsmarting him.

Sam had figured what he would do, if placed in Cotton's boots. Sam had figured that Cotton would not skin clear out of the country until he had made certain that George Crain was actually dead. He had figured that, with the food supply that hung from the pommel of his saddle, Cotton would be tempted to snarl up his trail hopelessly in the canyons and then, in the dark, head up the granite ledges where no hoof-print could reveal itself and thus work his way to the mesa and from there down into the eternal dusk of a deep-set cave. From that cave, he would be able to keep an eagle's vigil over the entire countryside. He would be able to see Coconino and the size of the parties that rode in and out of town. If any of those parties approached his cliffs, he could detect them an hour before they drew near. He could climb to the top and make his escape far to the east along the mesa. And if nobody came, he could sneak into Coconino at night and waylay some drunken Mex and pump him for news.

So, as certain and sure as a questing bloodhound, Sam headed for the cliffs and the caves, and at daylight was climbing a dangerous trail which led up to the lip of the mesa. As a kid, Cotton had explored every foot of those caves. Cotton would be up there now, staring down with straining eyes. Just now, as daylight dispersed the shadows, he would have discovered Sam already at the foot of the trail and coming up. And the kid would get panicky. He'd have to hustle to get his horse out and make a break for it across the mesa before Sam could waylay him. And Sam's heart was heavy as lead in his

chest. Because he didn't like this thing he was forcing himself to do.

He didn't like the panic and fear he was jamming into the kid's brain. He hated the certainty of the murder trial and hanging that he would have to oversee. And as he thought this this youngster he hounded was the brother of Dorothy, Sam groaned. But his lips went wide and thin and as grim as rock, and he forced his dun up the overhung trail as hard as he could drive him.

Then it happened. Halfway up, the dun struck a rock in the trail that was as precariously balanced as a platter on a cup. The rock slipped and threw the running horse into a sprawling lunge. For a fighting instant, horse and rider clung to the edge of that dizzy trail, pawing and clawing madly at space. Then they toppled over. They struck far down, out of sight, and a big cloud of dust arose. Then they came into view again, slowly spinning and turning, as they slid down a sheer slope of shale which began to slide with them. And then they were gone from sight once more.

WHEN Sam came to, he swam through a reeling welter of pain and dizziness, of mixed and whirling lights and darkness. For a time he could put no order in his lurching thoughts. Then gradually all his pain was localized in his right leg, and his eyesight began to focus. And finally he saw how he was and where.

His right leg was broken and had been carefully straightened, stretched and splinted. He was lying on the edge of the rocky trail, and it had taken somebody an agony of effort to get him there. That somebody was Cotton Ross. Cotton was hunkered down close by, regarding

him with moody and deep-set eyes.

Sam grinned painfully. "Shucks, Cotton, why didn't you cut and run—or just let me lay? That way, you'd've been safe."

The kid shrugged and scowled, saying nothing.

"What happened to my horse?" Sam had made a search for his gun and discovered that it was gone. He did not let on.

"Broke his neck," Cotton answered. "He's dead."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Take you to sis. She can get help for you."

Sam pondered. "If you do that, you're apt to stick your head in a noose. I told Ed Dabney," Sam said, naming his deputy, "I expected trouble at the Double R. Seeing I failed to return to town last night, he might be out there now."

Sam could see the battle in Cotton's heart. If he left Sam now, if he just cleared out, he could escape. But it meant the same as condemning Sam to a lingering and torturing death here on this unfrequented ledge. The boy's face was twisted and hard, then he jerked his shoulders and muttered something beneath his breath.

"Look," the youth said roughly, "I reckon if you can help yourself a little, I can h'ist you up on my horse."

Sam's heart leaped. "I couldn't get—"

"Shut up!" Cotton gritted savagely. "I know you'd never git to Dorothy's alone. I'm goin' with you."

"But—" The half-uttered protest burst from Sam's lips and then died. He was proud of the kid.

Two hours later, they dragged into the yard between the Double R ranchhouse and the corrals. Sam

reeled in the saddle, his tortured leg having made him almost delirious. Sam was conscious of the sudden rigidity of Cotton's body and tried to clear his eyes as he looked toward the house. He was dimly aware of a hoarse sudden bellow of sound, saw a hazy figure bounding from the house and charging toward them, a coughing and spitting rifle held before it. It looked like George Crain.

Sam snatched helplessly at the saddlehorn to keep from falling. It was all he could do. He felt Cotton release his supporting grip and plunge from the saddle behind him. He heard the bellow of a six-gun added to the spiteful cracking of the rifle. A slug smacked into the saddlehorn and numbed Sam's hands. Then suddenly, for a moment, all was quiet, and Sam saw to his horror that Cotton lay stretched on his face on the ground and was motionless and that, only a few yards away, George Crain, too, was sprawled. Crain's face was turned up and half of it was gone, and now there was no doubt the man was dead.

Then a running man came around the corner of the house and leaped in at the open door. Presently he came out with Dorothy faltering unsteadily after. He came on the trot and knelt down by Cotton after the barest glance at Crain. He examined the kid carefully, then looked up at Sam with a wide grin that exposed his tobacco-stained teeth. It was Ed Dabney, the deputy.

Ed helped Sam down gently and sat him on the ground. "The kid ain't hurt only a little. Got a neck wound that grazed close enough to

the spine to knock him cold, but he'll be battin' his eyes open in a minute. Ain't hardly bleedin' at all. He—"

But Sam was barely conscious of Ed's words. His eyes were fixed on Dorothy's face as she drew near. She, too, had glanced only for an instant at her husband, and had closed her eyes and swayed perilously. Then she had straightened courageously and come steadily on.

Suddenly, Sam was trembling. "W-what happened?" he managed.

"Crain had locked his wife in a closet," said Ed Dabney, "and barricaded the kitchen door. He wouldn't let me in nor talk to me. He threatened me away with his rifle and acted crazy. There was nothin' I could do but stick around. I figgered you'd come back, sooner or later. And you did."

Sam had stopped trembling. He stared across at Crain's body with tired and thoughtful eyes. "Whose bullet killed him?"

"I was shootin' as soon as I could when he busted out with that rifle," Ed confessed. "So was Cotton. Mebbe it was Cotton's lead an' mebbe it was mine. Any difference?"

Sam Trasker took a deep breath and released it slowly, and all the lines and worry began to fade from his face, all its seamed grimness. "No, it doesn't make any difference." He was looking at Dorothy and smiling. "If it was you, Ed, you merely did your duty. If it was Cotton, it was self-defense. With him, it was just a plain case of shoot straight or die."

THE END.

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Tracks in the snow are so easy to trail that even spooks can follow them—which made it deadly convenient for the

GUN GHOST OF HELL'S CORNERS

by JOHN G. PEARSON

CHAPTER I.

OLD CARDS.

THE wind, cold and raw, blew the fine, powdery snow into tiny, wash-board ridges along the plateau high in the Terlinguas. Riding beside

Prince and the three men behind him. "I reckon that's a likely place to camp. We didn't stop comin' through with the cattle, but we'll have to stop goin' back."

Tired, wind-puckered eyes finding the niche in the cliff that would af-



Blinding snow had pounded at the roundup, deadening the men with fatigue.

John Black, young Tex Prince hunched his broad, sheepskin-clad shoulders and tucked his blocky chin down into the fur collar of his coat. The sun, already down behind the peaks, showed only a trace of its crimson glory in the sky as John Black, red-eyed, gaunt, unshaven, turned in the saddle.

"Up there," he husked to Tex

ford them protection, they all nodded.

John Black, big, rugged-framed, a tattered muffler about his throat, turned his horse toward the camping place. When he stopped, they all dismounted, fatigue showing plainly in them. Bowing their shoulders though it might, their weariness, however, did not extinguish the

light of pride in their eyes. For here, coming back along a trail that everybody in Hell's Corners said could not be traveled in winter, were men who had done the impossible. Just three days ago these five men, Tex Prince, John Black, Dan Ruggles, Hen Westley and Nate Dade, had driven a big herd of cattle up across these snow-driven hills. Screaming, shrieking wind, cold as ice, froze them; snow, blinding and deadening them with fatigue, had pounded at them; exhausted cattle, forever trying to stop, had demanded their attention for every minute in that struggle to go on.

Suicide, folks in Hell's Corners had said when the drive had started. But they had made it. They had gotten through, they had sold their cattle. They had the money, good shining gold pieces in the bag John Black carried on his saddle, to pay Buck Benson, the sheriff of Hell's Corners. Buck Benson couldn't foreclose on the little ranchers he had tricked into buying his land in the basin with its date of payment set at a time when Benson knew nobody could market cattle unless they drove through the hills.

When Buck Benson had sprung his trap, anybody but a bunch of fools would have told him to take back his land and call it a day. But these men had listened to Tex Prince when he'd asked them to remember the little ranches in the basin, the houses built by the sweat of their brows, the families, wives, sisters, kids. So they'd gambled—and they'd won. The proud, high light of victory was in their eyes now.

Old Nate Dade gave a harsh and cackly laugh that came from between his cold, stiffened lips, and said proudly: "Watch that Buck Benson when we ride into town. Watch his eyes pop when we hand him his

money! Curse his stinkin' soul! Wearin' a law badge while doin' his dirty work!"

"All Buck Benson needs is one good whippin'." Dan Ruggles observed sagely. "An' we're ready to hand it to him when we take him his money. It'll stop his sneakin' work. He won't be able to ever pull this same trick again. We've settled that."

THEY spread their blankets up under the protection of the ledge, and John Black put the sack of gold under his head. Tex Prince lay down, his sheepskin pulled up about him to shut out the biting cold. To him as to all the others, a fierce and exultant pride came in what they had done. Victory in the face of defeat, accomplishment of the impossible. What were frozen feet compared to that? What was a deadening fatigue so intense that they felt they could never move again when all their dreams were about to be realized? Lying there, eyes closed, young Tex Prince pictured the ranchhouse built with his own hands. He pictured the girl he had asked to share it with him—Susan McLain, the daughter of the livery-stable keeper in Hell's Corners. He pictured the land dotted with fat cattle, with—

His eyes opened suddenly. Through the darkness he peered at where John Black had lain. John was gone. The sack of gold, the blankets, everything was gone. The squeak of saddle leather over where the horses had been tied swiveled Tex Prince's head, and he glimpsed a dim figure swinging onto a horse. "Hey! Wait!" Tex yelled.

A gun flamed. A bullet tugged at the woolly collar of Tex's sheepskin. He scrambled up, fumbling awkwardly for the gun strapped under

his coat. The horseman shot again, the bullet whining past Tex's face. Then he was gone in a flurry of powdery snow, its softness deadening the pound of his horse's hoofs.

With stiffened fingers, Tex Prince bucked a saddle onto his pony, the others crowding around him, plying him with questions.

"John Black just took a sneak with the money!" he yelled as he swung into the saddle. "He shot at me when I called to him. Scatter and try to get him!"

He raked the pony and it plunged forward through the drifts, following the trail John Black had left. Off behind him Tex could hear the others, scattering, plowing through the snow, cursing John Black for a dirty snake. Then it was quiet, and the trail that Black had left became hard to follow in the darkness because the wind whipped the drifts to make them look like a horse trail.

Straying from the trail entirely, Tex circled and tried to find it. He stopped finally when he glimpsed a group of dim shapes before him. He cut his horse in behind some snow-covered manzanita and watched. There were three of them, but none of them could he place as John Black. Dismounting, Tex crawled through the snow till he could hear their voices.

One of them said: "He got it. We know that by the shots. But he's a double-crosser. He hit for the south instead of where we planned."

Tex couldn't place the speaker, but it sounded like Benson's voice, a voice with a nasal twang in it that made it easy to identify. But now, with the wind blowing, Tex wasn't sure.

Another of them gruffed, his voice muffled: "A good thing you thought to put some of the boys down where he couldn't get away. We'll get

him. He can't make it through the pass."

"You're damn right he can't," the one with the nasal twang boasted. "I'll—"

Just then Tex Prince's horse, tied to the manzanita, nickered loudly. The three whirled. Leaving his brushy concealment, Tex made a dash for the horse, a gun whamming behind him, a bullet plowing the snow near him. He vaulted into the saddle and slammed two quick shots at the three dim forms racing toward him. They scattered, circled, and Tex dashed away.

IN the darkness he lost them; then he turned, tried to get onto their trail so he could know for sure who they were. But the wind was strong and covered the trails too quickly; and the night was so dark that it was hard to see, and after a while he had to head for the peaks to get his bearings.

He kept on going, cursing John Black, wondering if it had been Buck Benson he had heard talking. Knowing that he would have to find John Black to prove anything on Buck Benson or to get the money back, Tex circled into the hills. Then he remembered one of the three he had heard saying that guards had been placed at the south pass so John Black couldn't get through. That would force Black to head toward Hell's Corners. So Tex headed in that direction.

It was still dark when he sighted Hell's Corners, its yellow lights blinking at him, shining on the glittering snow. As he came into town he saw Dade and Westley and Ruggles coming, shoulders slumped, horses plowing through the drifts, both men and mounts spent from the hard riding.

"You get him?" Dan Ruggles

queried hopefully as they stopped. Tex shook his head. Discouraged, Nate Dade let a big gust of air escape his lungs. "I guess that whips us," he admitted.

Staring at them, Tex could see defeat shouldering down on them, taking their spirit. "Not yet," he said. "We can still find Black. We can still pay Benson."

Dade laughed low-voiced, bitterly, the laugh of a man utterly defeated who laughs at himself. "I thought that once! I believed it when you talked us into taking the cattle across the divide. But what's it done? Benson was behind this. Him and Black. You can't whip men like Benson unless you got more guns than he has, an' we don't have more guns. We're sunk. I'm pullin' out."

Westley acknowledged dispiritedly: "I guess that's the way it stacks up for me, too. There's no use bumpin' yore head against a stone wall."

A genuine affection for these old neighbors in him, Tex argued: "You've still got two days left. Wait that out. If you're whipped, sit and wait while I try. I'm young. I can take a lickin' better than you can. I—"

"The hell you can!" flared Nate Dade. "Tell me what to do and I'll do it. Where—" He stopped, grinned.

Tex Prince smiled and said: "That's the way to talk. But I don't know what to do. I think Benson is behind it, but I can't prove it. All we can do is trust to luck, play what cards are dealt us."

"It don't sound so encouraging, does it?" Dan Ruggles ventured.

"It don't," Tex bluntly admitted. "But that's how it is when you got a busted flush. You got to ask for more cards."

He watched them ride away, but

knew by the sag of their shoulders that they wouldn't stick beyond Buck Benson's deadline—one day, two. Nate Dade's flare-up wouldn't last. His pride had spoken. But his pride wouldn't make him face Buck Benson's killers.

CHAPTER II.

MURDER MONEY.

HALFWAY up the street, Tex stopped. A whimsical smile forming at the corners of his lips, he dismounted, knocked at the door of the house where the light glowed in the window. Susan McLain answered the knock. She gasped, threw out her hands and dragged Tex inside.

"You did it!" she exclaimed, delighted. "I knew you would!"

She studied his face, and after a moment soberness came into her eyes. She asked hesitantly: "You did—you sold the cattle didn't you?"

Tex grinned and nodded. "That wasn't a lie. "We sure did."

The girl smiled and said: "Now . . . now it's all set, Tex?"

He nodded. "All set, Sue. We'll build a couple more rooms onto the house. Then we move in."

She laughed happily. Tex, uncomfortable, cursed himself because he didn't have the nerve to tell her they had lost the money. Regretfully he told her: "I have to go. A lot of things to tend to. I'll be back."

He went out, and the cold wind stung his face. He swore bitterly as he led his horse up toward the light that burned in the sheriff's office. A room to the house—and they'd move in! Not unless a miracle happened! Not unless he could find John Black and a sack full of gold!

Buck Benson took his propped feet down off the desk when Tex Prince

came in, stomping the snow off his boots. Buck Benson's big-boned face was expressionless. Not a thing could be read in it, in the jet eyes under the bushy black brows. Jim Garr and Ben Rude, Benson's deputies were with him, their faces also expressionless, the faces of men who have something to hide.

"So you got back," Benson observed.

Tex Prince nodded. He looked down at Buck Benson's boots, and they were dry. The fire in the stove had the office warm. But Benson had had plenty of time to get back to build a fire. If his boots had been wet with snow he could have dried them.

Tex said: "Yeah. We got back. But we didn't bring the money. Or mebbe you know that?"

No surprise, no expression came into Benson's face. Garr and Rude held expressions as wooden as Benson's.

"How would I know it?" Benson asked softly.

Tex smiled meaningly, taking Garr and Rude in with a cutting glance. But he said nothing.

"And"—Benson went on, a hard note creeping into his voice—"that's not the question anyway. The question is: when will I get my money, and if I don't get it, when do you move out? I suppose you're gettin' ready to vacate."

Tex shook his head and rapped flatly: "The whole thing stinks of frame-up, Benson. The deal from the start was sneaky. You knew we couldn't sell cattle at this time o' year, but you said the mountains kept the snow out of here in winter. You fixed it so when we couldn't sell you could ask for your money. We got it, then John Black stole it."

"I suppose that was a frame-up?" Benson asked sarcastically.

"Exactly," stated Tex Prince. "I heard it. Three men up in the mountains talking it over. They'd posted guards to keep Black from getting away. They knew he was going to get the money. If I knew it was you, Benson, I'd kill you now. But I'm not sure. And I'm not moving till I get good and ready!"

Buck Benson laughed. "You better never be sure! And you better get ready to move right quick. Texas gunnies don't last long up here, Prince. I've seen lots of 'em come and go. If you want a fight you can have it."

Tex Prince's face changed from a face to a mask. His eyes suddenly were not eyes, but glinting gray fires that looked at Buck Benson, staring through him, the eyes of a killer, seeing the yellow up Buck Benson's back.

Tex said softly: "You've seen lots of Texas guns, Benson. But have you ever faced 'em? That'll be different!"

He turned and went out without closing the door. He heard it slam shut behind him, his face still a mask, that feeling of urgency still with him that had come to him when Buck Benson had stared at him and talked of killing. He shivered a little as he went down toward the saloon, trying to shake that deadliness out of him.

TEX was rid of it when he stepped into the saloon, making his way toward the big, potbellied stove in the center of the smoke-filled room, about which a group of men gathered. At one side of the room, natty Lou Sago was playing Dave Tarrant two-handed stud. Dave Tarrant from up country was a rich and lucky devil, and it looked as though he had Lou Sago on the run, from the worry on Sago's pasty face.

Some of the men at the stove nodded to Tex Prince.

Hank McLain, Susan's father, grinned in a friendly fashion. "Son, I'm glad to see you back. I never thought you'd make it. See Susan?"

Tex nodded, watched Sago lose a hand to Dave Tarrant. Dave pushed a bundle of bills to the center of the table, Sago reached into his pocket and stacked some gold pieces up beside Tarrant's bills. Sago dealt. Tarrant won. Sago spread his hands, and Tarrant scraped the money into his hands and pocketed it. He rose and went out. It hadn't been a big game. Nobody noticed it, especially. But when Sago went to the bar, Tex Prince moved over beside him and asked for a drink.

To the barkeep Tex said: "There was some gold stole up in the hills. Twenty-dollar pieces. They got a D on 'em, Denver mint, dated 1890. If you see any of 'em you better tell Buck Benson. They're the only ones in circulation."

Porky Weems, the fat-faced barkeep, nodded and wheezed: "Sure, I'll watch for 'em."

Lou Sago drank his drink very hurriedly, it seemed, then set his glass down and went outside without waiting to get a heavy coat. Tex Prince followed him, but outside Sago was already out of sight. Dave Tarrant, however, on the main street, was down toward the livery, marching swiftly along toward where his horse was stabled. Suddenly a shot crashed out. Dave Tarrant stumbled, fell. A dim form leaped out and hunkered beside him for an instant.

Tex Prince yelled. His gun came out from under his sheepskin, flamed. But the light was bad and the target poor and barely visible; the figure beside Tarrant scurried away unhurt.

Men poured out of the saloon and

down to where Tarrant lay. Tex Prince strode back the way he'd seen the killer go. He saw the light blink out in the shack where Lou Sago lived. He heard the calls from the street, excited men telling that Dave Tarrant had been killed, murdered.

"Shot in the back . . . robbed . . . pockets turned inside out!"

Tex Prince smiled grimly. When Dave Tarrant had gone out of the saloon he'd had his pockets full of Lou Sago's gold. After Tex had mentioned within Sago's hearing that some gold could be traced, Dave Tarrant had been killed, the gold stolen. There hadn't been enough to tempt a killer unless he was desperate. Just a few pieces that might let it be known that Lou Sago had some stolen money!

In the darkness Tex Prince crept forward. With no danger visible his heart quickened. Seeing nothing, he still sensed danger, and the premonition of it sent prickly tingles up and down his spine. He took his gun in his hand, stopped near Sago's door.

He called softly: "Lou. It's me, Tex Prince. Don't shoot. I—"

A gun flamed from the darkness. Something hot and heavy smashed into Tex's side, sending him staggering off balance. The gun kept whamming at him, the bullets slapping wickedly past him. Abruptly, a million stars exploded in front of Tex Prince's eyes. He started to fall, and as he stumbled forward in an effort to catch himself, his gun yammered, just once. Then the well of darkness at his feet opened up and he fell into it.

CHAPTER III.

PIECES OF HATE.

LOU SAGO, hunched beside the window of his shack, peered through the darkness at Tex Prince's still form a dark blur out on the white

snow. The breath shrilled in and out of Sago's sagging lips. The gun in his hand trembled as he jacked out the empties from it, inserted new shells. He listened to the excited calls, the yells, the shouts of inquiry



They shot Black off his horse and killed him.

that came to him from the street, the sound of boots pounding on the snow that told him the crowd was coming toward his shack.

A stir of sound behind him made him whirl. A voice that was filled with cold and deadly menace, husked: "Drop the gun, Lou. I've been in here, waitin' for you."

Lou Sago's gun clattered to the floor. Fearsomely he whispered: "Black! John Black!"

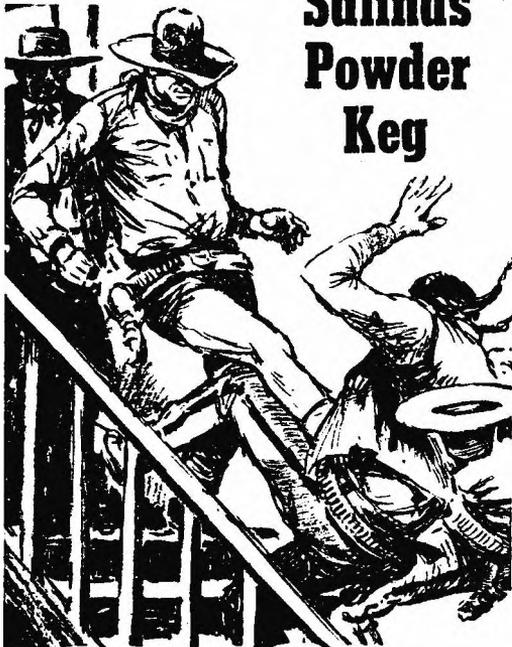
John Black laughed. "Yeah. Me. You got my gold, Lou. Where'd you put it?"

Lou said nothing, excitement making his breathing louder still. The sounds of the crowd coming closer were plain.

John Black talked low-voiced, desperation in his tone. "I hid it. Buck Benson had me trapped. I figured if he got me and I didn't have the money on me I'd have something to dicker with. They wouldn't kill me till they got it. I know you found it, Lou, because I trailed you in the snow straight from there to here. I've been waitin' for you. You better talk fast!"

As though under a spell of hypnosis, staring at the steady gun in John Black's hand, Sago said: "I . . . I hid it under that ledge just north of Tex Prince's place, John. I had to pass through there to get home. I didn't mean to steal it, John. I—"

John Black nodded. "Sure, Lou," he said very softly. "I know." He stepped backward, his gun flamed, and Lou Sago stumbled back and hit the wall to slide down and fall on the floor. John Black stepped out the door, stopping for a moment be-



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side Tex Prince. He smiled and let two glittering gold pieces drop from his hand down beside where Tex lay. Then he whisked around the corner of the house and was gone.

Tex Prince stirred, moaned. A crowd pounded up and gathered about him as he sat up and pressed his hands to his temples. Buck Benson, frowning, stared at him, went into Sago's shack, struck a match and stared for a moment at Lou Sago, lying there on the floor with a big hole in his chest. He came out, reached down and took Tex Prince's gun and checked the cylinder.

"You killed Sago. Why?" Benson asked.

Tex weaved unsteadily on his spraddled legs. He started to answer, but Buck Benson stooped suddenly and said: "Well, I'll be—Look here!"

He picked two gold pieces up out of the snow. "I guess I know why you killed Sago," Benson sneered. "You killed Dave Tarrant to get the gold he won from Sago! Then you killed Sago!"

"You're crazy! How could I steal it? I—" Tex was still foggy.

"How could Sago get out here to drop any gold pieces where you were layin'?" Buck Benson countered. "He's dead. He died in there. With a bullet through his heart he couldn't walk out here and back in there again. I think I'll lock you up till I get at the bottom of this, Tex Prince!"

Buck Benson looked at the deputy, Jim Garr, and winked.

"It looks funny at that," Jim Garr said. "It might be a good idea to keep this jasper under lock and key."

TEX smiled crookedly as they led him up the street. He wondered who had dropped the gold pieces beside him and why. Maybe John

Black had been here and was in cahoots with Sago. Maybe John Black wanted Benson to believe that Tex Prince had gotten the money, so Benson would quit looking for Black.

In the sheriff's office, Buck Benson said mockingly: "These Texas guns you mentioned. They're gettin' you into trouble!"

Tex studied the wooden face before him. "That was you out there where John Black stole the gold, wasn't it, Buck? You know you don't have a legal leg to stand on in tryin' to jail me for killing Lou Sago. But you're afraid. You've grabbed at a chance to get me out of circulation till you locate John Black."

Buck Benson grinned. Jim Garr didn't change expression. Ben Rude smiled out of one side of his mouth.

Ben Rude said, "This Texas gunny—he's pretty smart for a younker."

Jim Garr said shortly, suggestively: "Too smart."

Still staring at Tex with his shining black eyes, Buck Benson snarled: "He could try to get away. We'd have to shoot him if he did that."

"That's right," Jim Garr agreed.

"It's better than takin' a chance of him runnin' off at the tongue," Ben Rude offered. "He might get somebody to believe him, if he talked long enough."

That free and easy feeling was coming into Tex Prince's arms. His face was a mask; his eyes were alive with wicked lights. He thought for a fleeting moment of the house onto which he'd promised to build two rooms. For a breathless second he wondered if the little ranchers, Nate Dade and Dan Ruggles and Hen Westley, were not wiser than he. They were wise enough to know when they were licked, not cursed with that evil bane of the killer gunman. They could run away.

"Go down the corridor, Tex," Buck Benson ordered.

Tex turned. But he kept on turning, swung around and whipped up a chair that was beside him. He crashed it into Buck Benson and upset the sheriff as Buck was taking a gun from his holster. The gun fell to the floor, and Tex dived for it, scooping it up as Buck Benson whisked a second gun from the desk drawer. A bullet plowed the planks of the board floor an inch from Tex Prince's head. Jim Garr yelled, his gun flaming.

Tex laughed as he swung the gun up. "Texas guns, Buck!" he called.

But just as he leveled the gun Ben Rude shot out the light. In the sudden darkness Tex heard Buck Benson knock over a chair as he moved aside. Then it was very quiet. Only the breathing of the four men confined in the tiny room was audible. But out in the street the babble of a crowd was coming toward the office, drawn by the gunfire.

FROM somewhere off in the darkness, Buck Benson said warningly to Rude and Garr: "All we have to do is sit tight till the crowd opens the door. Then nail him."

Tex couldn't place the location of the voice. He didn't want to fire because the flash would make three guns open up on him. He recalled the door to the jail corridor being open and eased slowly toward it, his left hand groping along the wall. He felt the door, eased through it, quietly, stealthily, not a sound betraying his movement.

The noise of the crowd stomping along the street came steadily closer. Finally footsteps pounded on the porch. The front door was flung open, permitting a dim slip of light

to steal into the corridor down which Tex made his way.

Immediately Buck Benson yelled: "He's gettin' away down the corridor!"

A gun flashed, its bullet screaming off the steel bar of a cell, making a clicking racket as it slashed along another row of bars. More guns opened up. Tex was running now, flinging himself headlong at the back door as the bullets snickered about him. The mob after him, he crashed open the door and, in the dark, ran down the alley, the guns behind him keeping up a thunderous wave of sound. But none of the bullets reached him as he cut across the street to where his horse was tied.

Fancy Parker, the dude saloon-keeper, standing in the doorway of the saloon, stepped out and regarded Tex curiously as Tex swung into the saddle.

"What's up? What's the rumpus, Tex?" Parker asked. "Somebody said Sago was dead."

A yell up the street answered Parker before Tex could speak. "Stop him! Tex Prince is gettin' away! He killed Tarrant and Sago! Tried to murder Buck Benson!"

A half smile on his lips, eyes cold, Tex eyed Parker. "Either go back into the saloon or try to stop me now," he directed. "I'd hate to be shot in the back when I turn my horse around."

Parker made a half bow and said as he turned: "I'm on my way. The road's open as far as I'm concerned."

He went in the door, and Tex whirled his horse. A shot thundered at him as he raced down the street. The door of the white house where Susan McLain lived opened as he thundered past, and Susan, the light behind her painting her hair with gold, appeared in the doorway. Bitterly, as he swept past, Tex won-

dered what she'd think of the lie he'd told her. He had as much chance of building a couple of rooms onto the ranchhouse in the basin as Lou Sago had of coming to life! Or of John Black walking up and handing a fortune in gold back to the little ranchers so they could save their ranches!

CHAPTER IV.

FIGHT AND DIE.

THE snow-muted hoofbeats of Tex's horse hammered softly in his ears as he raced along. The cold wind bit at his face and cleared his brain of the fog Sago's bullet had caused. The slight wound in his side pained, but was not bleeding badly. He knew it was only a scratch.

Behind him, black dots on the white snow, he could see the posse coming, a mob inflamed by the sly and timely accusations of Buck Benson. Tired though it was, the pony beneath him responded to the spurs as he cut it toward the hills. Reaching the brush country, he headed toward his own ranch. Pondering over the events behind him, he recalled Sago's eagerness to kill him, even when Sago must have heard Tex say he only wanted to talk to him. That, to Tex, made it plain that Sago had the gold. Sago hadn't stumbled onto a few pieces accidentally. He had it all and he wanted to keep it. He'd killed Dave Tarrant when he'd learned that the pieces could be traced. He wanted to get them away from Tarrant so they couldn't be spent so Tarrant couldn't say where he'd gotten them. But who had killed Sago? Who had dropped the gold pieces beside Tex Prince when he'd lain unconscious in the snow outside of Sago's shack?

Had John Black done that? Killing Sago, planting the gold on Tex to make Buck Benson withdraw his

guards from the south pass so Black could get away?

The sky lighted, to become gray and tinged with crimson, as Tex circled in the hills. The sun, round and bright, rose above the peaks and sparkled on the snow-covered hills. From behind the concealment of the white-mantled brush, Tex now could see Buck Benson and the posse down on the flats, trying to follow his trail in the snow. But evidently someone else had come this way, either after Tex had crossed the basin or before, because Buck Benson split the posse, some of them heading around the edge of the basin, the way Tex had come, others—including Buck and his two deputies—heading over as though he was going to Tex Prince's ranch.

Buck was following a trail and anxious to see who had made it. Tex

followed Benson and the deputies, staying up in the brush while Benson skirted the hills. Abruptly, Benson stopped. Jim Garr suddenly galloped away, cutting around in one direction, while Rude rode in another. Pushing forward, Tex could see now that they had spotted a rider, that Rude and Garr were getting around ahead of him, Buck Benson staying behind him.

MOVING slowly, Tex went forward, leaving his pony behind him, tied behind some brush. Then he could see that the rider was John Black, heading toward a ledge of rock near Tex Prince's ranch. John could not see Rude, Garr or Buck Benson. He dismounted at the rock ledge and pulled a sack into sight that Tex recognized as the one containing the gold. Tex was so close to him now

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that he could hear John Black laugh as he swung into the saddle again.

Then John Black froze. A sarcastic voice from behind the ledge asked: "What's so funny, John? Tell me an' I'll laugh!"

John Black didn't look as though he thought it was funny. His face was white, his eyes welded onto something that Tex Prince guessed was a gun. A gun held by someone who would kill John Black in just a minute.

"Mebbe you was laughin' at the joke you played on us?" the ironic voice went on. "That must have been it, eh, John?"

Still John Black didn't speak. He didn't speak, but he moved. Swiftly, desperately, he swung himself sideways, down over his horse's neck just as he raked it with his spurs. His mount leaped forward and for an instant was lost to sight. Then Tex could see Black again, racing across the flats. A rifle yammered. Buck Benson, coming from down under the ledge, raced his mount to head Black off. Jim Garr, coming from another direction, circled in ahead of him. By the time Tex Prince could see them they were beyond pistol range. With his horse back in the brush, Tex could do nothing but sit there and watch them shoot John Black. They shot him off his horse, and Tex cursed them. Not that Black didn't need shooting. But the gold—

Buck Benson was picking the sack up out of the snow. He was laughing, his head tilted back so Tex could see his teeth as he opened his mouth. John Black was lying in the snow, still, evidently dead. His horse, reins trailing, stood nearby, nervous, legs quivering.

Ben Rude had a rifle in his hands, the gun that had blasted at John Black, the gun which now would keep Tex Prince out of pistol range.

Buck Benson emptied the contents of the sack into his saddlebags and mounted. They all rode away, leaving John Black crumpled on the snow.

Tex Prince didn't move. His eyes flamed with those wicked lights, his face was cold and stony and as expressionless as if it had been carved from the rocks above him. His mind was turning one thing over and over again, a fact now inescapable. The fact that everything was lost unless Buck Benson died, unless his stranglehold on the country was broken. With the money in his possession, with John Black dead and unable to contradict him, with Tex Prince outlawed for killing Sago and Tarrant, what a fancy story Buck Benson could tell. And he could make it stick!

While he hunkered there, hidden in the brush, some riders came in from the south—some Benson riders from Buck's ranch. Apparently Benson had placed them at the south pass so John Black couldn't get away. Now he didn't need them. Benson had won.

WHEN they had vanished Tex Prince rose and rode slowly over to the little ranchhouse where old Nate Dade came to the door and watched him dismount.

"You didn't get it," old Nate said prophetically. "I can tell by lookin' at you. Black got away."

Tex shook his head. "Black's dead. Benson killed him. Benson has the money. Benson had a deal with Black to split the money. But with Black dead, that can never be proved. Buck Benson holds all the cards."

He didn't bother to tell Nate Dade that they could fight Buck Benson. They might kill him, but more than likely they would be

killed. Nate Dade and the others were not built to fight against odds, not gun odds. They'd quit. They'd leave. Then Benson would work his scheme all over again on another bunch of unsuspecting family men who wouldn't be willing to die for a principle.

As he stood there watching Nate Dade staring off into space, seeing defeat in the deepened lines of Dade's old face, Tex recalled what Dade had said: "You can't whip men like Buck Benson unless you got more guns than he has. An' we don't have 'em."

Maybe that was right. Maybe only an utter fool would stay and fight when the odds were hopeless.

Nate Dade complained: "If we hadn't listened to you and drove the cattle across an' sold 'em, we might have had a few head anyway."

"It was a gamble, Nate," Tex replied. "We lost. I'll take another gamble today. Don't leave till you see me tonight."

His head high, Tex left the porch and mounted. He rode toward town.

Circling the town he approached from a direction in which he would be unlikely to be seen. Dismounting at the rear of the house where Sue lived, he tapped on the kitchen door. Her eyes full of worry, she opened the door and, a gasp of surprise on her lips, pulled him inside hurriedly.

"You know they blame you for killing Sago?" she asked excitedly as she grasped his arms in her tight-clutched hands. "And they say you killed Dave Tarrant. They say you saw him win money from Sago. You killed him and stole it, then killed Sago!"

He nodded. "I know. But Buck Benson can't make it stick. Some of the money found where Sago was lying was a part of the gold that was

stolen from us out in the hills. I can prove that. I can prove that John Black stole it."

He didn't go on to tell her that Buck Benson and his killers would shoot him on sight, that they had the gold, that he wouldn't get a chance to prove anything. Nor did he go on to tell her that the gold John Black had stolen was all they had in the world, that he was sunk. How could a man stand in utter humility before a woman and tell her he was whipped? How could he admit defeat while he was alive, while he had a gun at his hip? How could he look at her and say that the rooms on the ranchhouse would never be built, that he was powerless to beat a thief, that he would have to run and hide for the rest of his life!

"It won't take me long. Don't worry." That was all he could say.

He stepped out the door. He felt her eyes watching him as he circled the house. He knew he had not fooled her entirely, and he wondered how much she had guessed. He could run and live. But he would always be hunted, Buck Benson's frame-up eternally hounding him. Or he could stay and throw Buck Benson's lie back in his teeth. He could fight and die. That was what he knew he was going to do.

CHAPTER V.

BOOTHILL'S BULLETS.

WHATEVER regret that had been in him was gone when he came out onto the street. He loosed the big buttons of his sheepskin coat so his gun would be handy and, slowly, no hurry in him now, walked up the street, his eyes on the door of the sheriff's office. The snow, partially gone from the street, showed in big white patches in contrast to the wet

sand on which it lay. Still cold, a north wind made three ponies at the hitch rack in front of Fancy Parker's Saloon tuck their tails as they waited for their riders. The closed door of the sheriff's office, the smoke from its chimney trailing upward in a thin spiral above the snow-patched roof, led Tex Prince to believe that Buck Benson or some of his deputies were there, warming before the fire.

A woman, bundled in a greatcoat, a basket on her arm, came out of the general store. As she came down onto the street, she stopped, stared at Tex, then started to pass him, a little fear in her eyes. Tex raised his hand to his hat respectfully.

He advised, "Mrs. Preston, mebbe you better go back into the store. It's a long way down to your house."

She stopped and stared at him, her face going suddenly white. But his eyes were not on her. He was watching a man, Rin Tyler, one of Buck Benson's ranch hands, who had just stepped out of the saloon. The woman gasped, hurried back up the steps, her heels beating a quick tattoo on the boards. Tex moved on toward Rin Tyler, calling to him:

"Just a minute, Tyler!"

The cowboy stopped. "Well?"

"Buck Benson's playing for keeps," Tex said. "Why should I let you go up the street and get behind a wall so you could shoot me later?"

Tyler was just a kid. He licked his lips, his hand moving ever so slightly toward his gun.

"Mebbe," Tex suggested, "mebbe you'd rather get on your horse and take a long ride?"

The kid still hesitated.

"I'm sorry, kid," Tex explained. "But it has to be one or the other. I can't afford to toss chips away in this game."

White-faced, the kid answered with defiance in his voice. "I'm not

afraid of you, Tex. That's not it. I—"

"I know. Take your horse. I won't even look behind me when you ride away."

Tex didn't look. The pound of hoofs faded in the distance before he moved again, thankful for the cold that kept everybody inside.

Suddenly then, the door of the sheriff's office opened. Stopping in his tracks, Tex Prince counted the men who came tramping out. Two punchers and Garr and Rude. Then Buck Benson. They were laughing. Then Rude saw Tex. "Tex Prince!" he yelled. They all stared, standing very still, like frozen statues.

Tex Prince smiled. Close enough to them to talk, he said suggestively: "You'll all be a nice packed-up target if you try to get back inside again!"

FOR a breathless moment none of them moved. Then, it seemed, they all moved at once. Buck Benson leaped backward as his gun came out of the holster. And both Jim Garr and Ben Rude went into a crouch as their guns began to yammer. The punchers tried to get behind the post uprights on the porch, but one of them fell and rolled off the porch and shot at Tex from over the edge of the floor.

Tex stepped back, so that his back was against the door of a building in front of which he stood. The door frame partially shielded him, and he fired around its edge, knocking Jim Garr backward so that he, too, fell off the porch. But both Garr and the puncher were still able to shoot, and they raked the doorway in which Tex stood with lead.

All the bullets in the world, it seemed to Tex Prince, were whining and screaming about him. One gashed his cheek, another stung his

side. Still another cut his left leg from under him, and he fell down into the patch of snow in the street. He pushed himself up, braced himself against the building and emptied his gun at the group about the porch. He hit only Rude, but he didn't expect to do more than that, because they were all hidden now, crouched down behind the porch so that all he could see of them was their gun muzzles. He saw Rude die. When his gun clicked on a fired shell Tex laughed and threw the empty gun at them in one last gesture of defiance.

Then he waited. He expected to die. But gradually he became conscious of the fact that the din of gunfire had not lessened. It had increased. From across the street a big man was propped against the front of a building, firing shot after shot at the men about the porch. The newcomer, unlike Tex, was where he could see them. And another gun, unseen, clanging high and sharp like a rifle, was speaking from somewhere near the livery stable.

The man across the street was John Black. His sheepskin coat was open, showing a big smear of blood on his shirt front, and his hat was off, showing the deathly pallor of his face. The other gunman Tex couldn't see.

But he could see the havoc John Black was causing. John Black killed a man every time he fired. The rifle up the street kept the Benson killers in sight while John Black killed them. And it didn't take him long. It was over in seconds, the town still seeming to reecho the terrific crash of gunfire that had just ended. Five men were sprawled out about the sheriff's office. John Black sat there on the ground, his pistol in his hand, staring at the death he had caused. A girl, Susan, a rifle in her hands, stepped out of the livery-stable door, stared for a moment at the still forms, then

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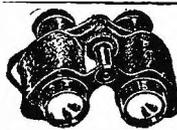
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dropped the rifle and ran toward Tex Prince.

She stopped a few feet from him, staring at him with all the tragedy in the world written on her pale face.

The crowd, gathering about, turned to look at John Black, bloody, dying, death creeping into his eyes as he leaned back against the building wall and beckoned.

"I killed Lou Sago," he admitted huskily. "Sago killed Tarrant. I made a deal with Buck Benson to steal the gold the ranchers got when they sold the cattle we drove over the pass. I . . . was to get half, Buck half. He could still get his land back. I could make a lot of money. But I double-crossed Buck. I wanted it all. I hid the gold. Sago found it . . . lost some to Dave Tarrant and killed him to get it back. Benson framed Tex so he could get rid of him . . . he knew Tex would fight. I . . . Buck Benson shot me . . . left me for dead . . . I—"

He stopped talking suddenly. He was sitting there dead, with his eyes open, staring at the crowd of people he couldn't see. Susan, her eyes filled with horror, was still staring at Tex. Whispering, she said to him: "I . . . I knew what you were going to do. I could see it in your eyes. I knew there would be no use trying to talk you out of it. So I . . . I got a gun. I shot to try to keep them from getting around so they could kill you. But I . . . I killed a man. It was Garr. I saw him—"

She buried her face in her hands as though to shut out the sight of what she had done.

Tex lied, contradicting her, making his voice positive, "You didn't kill Garr. I did. I saw my bullet hit him."

She searched his eyes for a moment, as he smiled reassuringly at her.

Three big wagons, loaded with household goods, rumbled into town

at its upper end, the little ranchers, Dade, Westley and Ruggles driving. Waving them down, Tex stepped up to where old Dade sat on a wagon seat, frustration and defeat both still written on his old, lined face.

"Tex said: "You can go into Buck Benson's office and get our gold. It'll probably be in his desk. Then you can turn around and go home. Buck Benson's dead."

Old Dade's face underwent a startling transformation. He stared at Tex, then whirled to call into the wagon: "Mother! You hear that? Buck Benson's dead! We got our money back! We—"

But Tex Prince wasn't listening. He was watching a glad and joyous light come back into a girl's eyes, a light he'd thought he would never live to see again.

THE END

¿QUIEN SABE?

Continued from page 46

Answers

1. *It was founded by Wovoka, an Indian dreamer who believed that his mission was to lead his people spiritually and to right the wrongs done to them by white men. It was a fanatical dance which stirred up raids and open warfare against white settlers.*
2. *They cut their teams loose and submerged themselves in barrels filled with water until the fires died down.*
3. *It was the name given by Indians to a white man who wore clothing fashioned with a weave like that of a spider's web. In Arapaho dialect "Neawatha" means "spider."*
4. *Because they found warfare less laborious than hunting.*
5. *The Kiowa, Cheyenne, Comanche and Arapaho Indians, in the bloody battle at Adobe Wells, near Dodge City, Kansas, in 1864, when they fought Kit Carson and his force of white soldiers.*
6. *He was killed by a fall from a horse in 1868, when he was fifty-nine years old.*
7. *They were Indian visionaries who practiced as a sacred duty the peculiar habit of doing the exact opposite of what they were expected or commanded to do. When ordered to retreat, they charged; when commanded to halt, they ran, and so on in reverse.*
8. *The pocket gopher, which fits so snugly into its burrow, it cannot turn around in it if attacked by an enemy. It dives into its burrow headfirst, but emerges backward with equal or greater speed. This reverse speed has saved the chubby pocket gopher from extinction and from being easy prey for predatory animals.*
9. *It was to rope the peak pole of a tepee and pull the tepee over. This playful prank was not calculated, however, to appeal to a red man's sense of humor, nor did it tighten the ties of friendship.*
10. *It is a supposedly bottomless pool in Clark County, Kansas, formerly reputed to be inhabited by mythological monsters. Even in severe droughts, the pool has never shown signs of going dry.*



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 Weekly, 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.



GOLDEN ANSWERS FROM THIS SILVER

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I don't know whether to thank you for printing my letter, or come to New York and have it out with you! I reckon when some of your readers read my first letter in 3W about the maverick and dogies, they got mighty interested in the whole thing. And was I showered with letters! Many of the readers of 3W were thrilled to know that I was from the good old West and had worked on ranches, and many of them wanted to know different things about the West as it is today. I really had a wonderful time reading all those letters from so many of your readers.

I spent many hours reading and that saved my high heels from getting caught in the hay mower, as the Range Boss warned me against such a thing. He probably knew that I didn't know a hay mower from a hay rake; however, I am not on the farm right now, as all my work is done this fall, and I will soon be heading West, to the country I love the best.

Now, to get down to what I was going to say: the many questions that I have been asked to answer I will do so to the best of my knowledge. I am sure that all you readers will like it this way, as it will save me a lot of money so that I can buy War Bonds and Stamps to help out in this war. There has been many who asked me to send a post-card picture of myself. I will gladly do so if you will send me a self-stamped envelope when you write again, and I will be very glad to send you one of the pictures for your collection, as so many of you are collecting. Also, if you have a spare picture of yourself, I would very much like to have one for my great collection. When you

write, you may address your letters to Gene K. Silver, Nelson Hotel, Rockford, Illinois. This is my headquarters up here. Well, Boss, and all you 3W readers, here goes some answers. I am answering these as I have used them on the ranches that I have worked on:

Well, chums, a maverick is an unbranded colt or calf that has been weaned and is more than two months old; the maverick's ma is alive—or possibly alive. If a calf or colt's mother is dead, the young animal is a dogie—definitely—until it's nearly grown-up. A motherless calf or colt, even after it's branded, is still a dogie. A slick is maybe a maverick, in some sections of the West. A dogie's still a dogie even after it's branded. A mustang is a wild or half-wild unbroken horse which has grown up without help from man; sometimes the word is used to mean the wild horses native to this country, and there are few if any of these left; some people claim there were *no* native horses, that the first horses were brought here by the Spaniards. A broomtail is any scrubby wild horse. Any *stray* calf or colt, so long as it is unbranded and weaned, is called a maverick. A female colt is called a filly. A wet horse or cow is one that's smuggled across the Rio Grande to or from Mexico, and thereby gets its hide wet in the process.

Well, I guess that answers most of the questions asked me by the many who wrote letters to me. Thanks to you all.

Nelson Hotel,
Rockford, Ill.

GENE K. SILVER.

Much obliged, Kid Silver. Hope you spend a pleasant winter down in the Southwest. Hope all those letters didn't cause you too much inconvenience. Matter of fact, most of the questions asked you have been answered in *Quien Sabe?* at various times in the past.

REMEMBER THE ALAMO!

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I just finished reading your August 15th issue. I sure did enjoy it. I think 3W is the best he-man magazine sold. It has been a long time since I wrote you last. I've been buying 3W for about six years. Keep up the good work. But I wish you'd bring back the Wranglers Corner, the way it was in 1938. And bring back the picture stories. They were good.

I like Kid Wolf, Sonny Tabor, and the Oklahoma Kid best of all. Like the rest pretty good, too. Bring back Freckles Malone.

I am a Texan, away out here in a different State. I'm in the army, but still buy good old 3W—and will continue to buy it as long as I can locate a copy regularly.

Yours till Sonny Tabor meets the Oklahoma Kid,
U. S. army. THE TEXAS RAMBLER.

Waal, much obliged to you, Rambler—and good luck! You come from a State celebrated for its fightin' men.

SUGGESTIONS

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is the first time I have written to you, and I sure hope to see my letter in your magazine in the near future.

I have been reading yore mag for five years and I sure think it is swell. The 3W can't be beat.

I have just finished reading "Scorpion Brands Are Scarlet," by Ward M. Stevens. It was swell.

My favorites are:

Sonny Tabor, Tommy Rockford, Kid Wolf, Rowdy Lang, Whistlin' Kid, Blacky Solone, Hungry and Rusty, Johnny Forty-five, Risky McKee, Circle J pards, Oklahoma Kid.

There are some others I like who do not appear in your magazine any more. Bring back Billy the Kid, Bar U twins, and Apache and Wagonwheel.

I agree with Elmore Cox about dames in your magazine. Why don't you have dames in 3W one week and nothing but men in the next issue? I think you could please everybody that way. I like girls, as I am one myself, and I think they can be as interesting as men. My dad reads your magazine also, but he doesn't like girls in his Western stories.

Don't take the Readers' Branding Irons out of 3W!

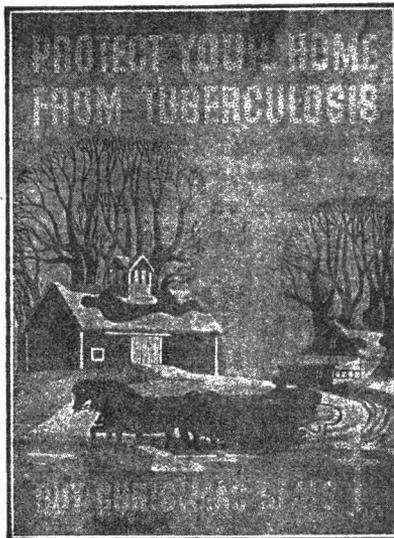
I don't like continued stories.

Yores until Rowdy Lang gets killed,
Star Junction, Pa. MARY ASHBAUGH.

AUGUST FAVORITES

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Well, here I am with a report on the best stories you published during the month of August.

1. "Gunmen of Devil's Garden," by Paul S.



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Powers. The first King Kolt story I've read in a long time.

2. "Death Stalks the Pool," by Lee Bond. Nothing unusual for an Oklahoma Kid story.

3. "Smoke Polls," by Eli Colter. Tell Author Colter to give us more stories of the Greenwood.

4. "Boothill Homestead," by James P. Webb. Tell Author Webb to put Rowdy Lang and Blacky Solone into a combination story. 'Ray for Rowdy!

5. "Border Eagle's Brand," by Philip F. Deere. Best of the recent Border Eagle stories. Say, Boss, what's Trig Trenton's middle name? (Dunno.—Ed.)

6. "Gunrunners' Brand," by Guy L. Maynard. Tell Maynard to put Señor Red Mask in a complete novel. (Done.—Ed.)

Other good stories of the month were: "Wolf Tracks West," by Hal Dunning; "Lone Star Loot," by Walker Tompkins; "Three Sixes to Beat," by Chuck Martin; "Gallows Ghost," by L. Ernenwein; "Chips From Boothill," by B. Bristow Green.

Well, until next time,

Remember Wake Island!

Saluda, S. C.

CHARLIE CHARLES, JR.



MISPLACED RESERVATION

DEAR SIR: This letter is for two purposes. First I have read your Wild West Weekly magazine for some time and have enjoyed all of the stories as well as the short features. Some of your readers write in that this or that story was not as good as others. Personally I think all of them are good.

Now my second purpose in writing. In your Wild West Weekly magazine for September 5, 1942, you made an error. I would like to have you correct. In your *Quien Sabe?* questions you asked: "Who was Crowfoot and how and when did he die?" For the answer you gave that he was the son of Sitting Bull and was killed on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in Montana. The first part of your answer was correct, but Crowfoot was killed in South Dakota, not Montana. My home until recently was on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in South Dakota, and Sitting Bull and his son Crowfoot were killed within fifty miles of my home.

If you will check on some map that has Indian reservations listed you will find the Standing Rock Indian Reservation is located in southern North Dakota and northern South Dakota, from the Missouri River westward. It is quite a large reservation and, unless they have moved it to Montana within the last month, you will find it is in North and South Dakota.

I hope you will check and make corrections. Yours for more accurate information.

LAWRENCE J. VERDOUW.

Washington, D. C.

Looks as if you made the correction yourself, pard. The *Quien Sabe?* man has been sentenced to ride bareback thrice through a cactus patch on a dark night in a swimmin' suit.

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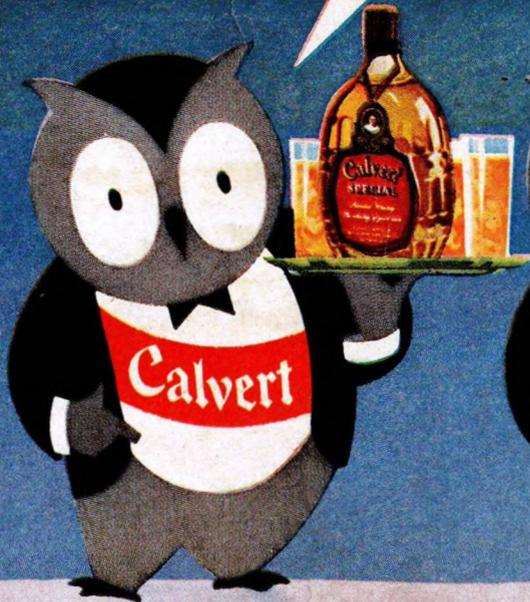
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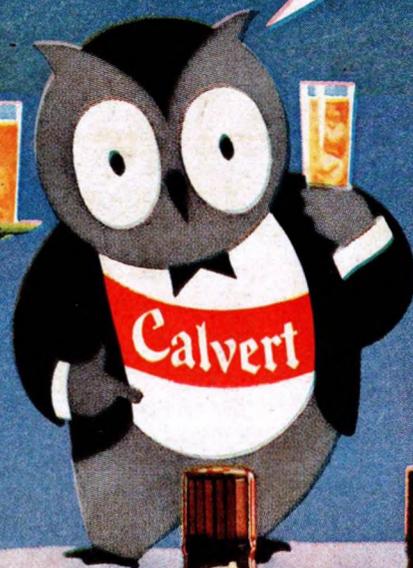
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