

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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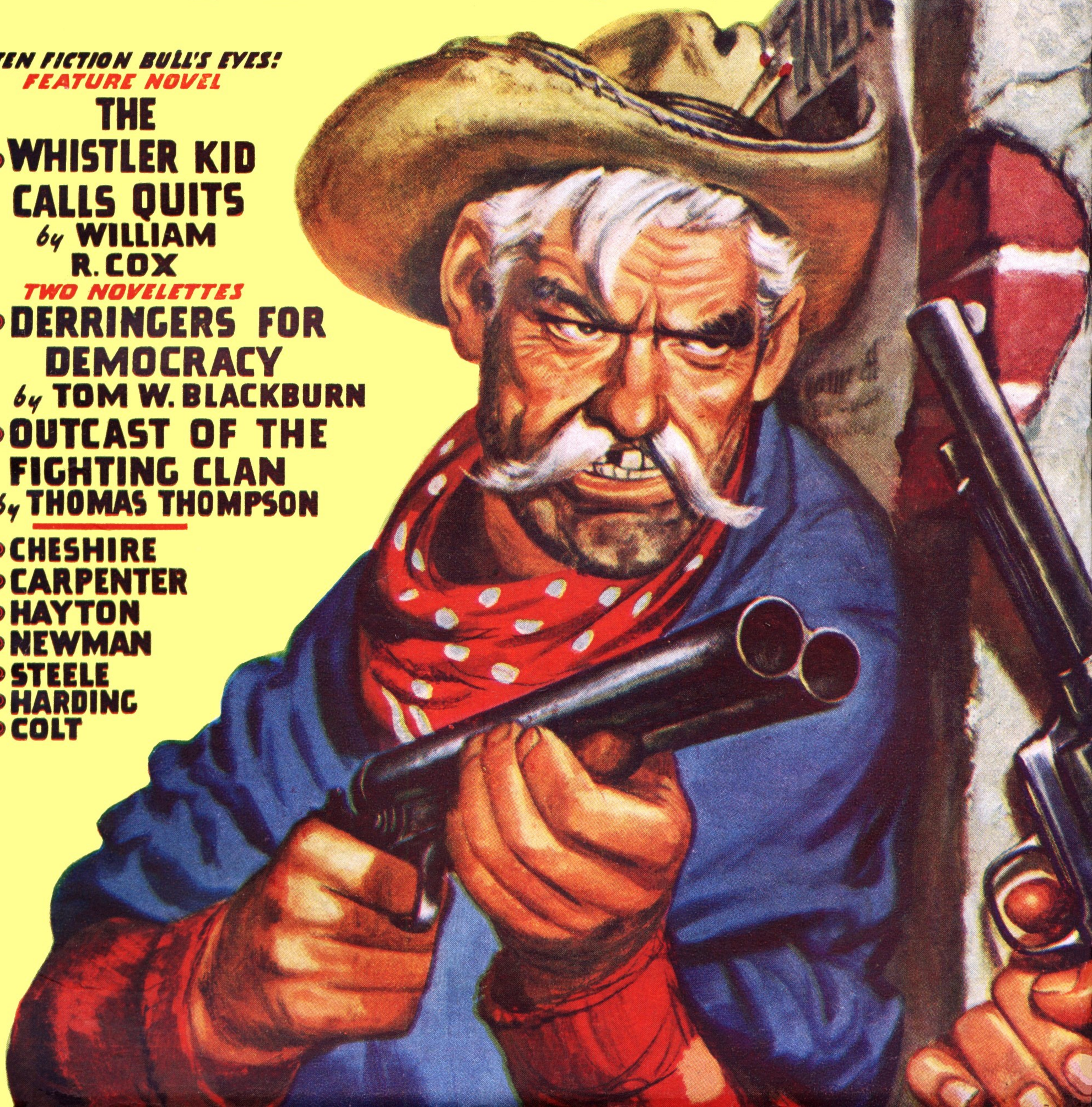
THE

- **WHISTLER KID
CALLS QUILTS**
by **WILLIAM
R. COX**

TWO NOVELETTES

- **DERRINGERS FOR
DEMOCRACY**
by **TOM W. BLACKBURN**
- **OUTCAST OF THE
FIGHTING CLAN**
by **THOMAS THOMPSON**

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YAAAAAY WILSON WINS!

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IT'S A SWELL STORY, ANY OTHER DETAILS?

YES. ADD THAT MR. WILSON WILL BE MY HOUSE GUEST WHILE IN TOWN - YOU WILL WON'T YOU?



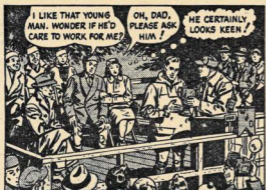
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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PUBLISHED
MARCH 12th

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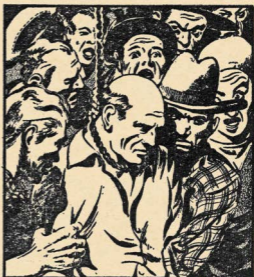
CHET LOGAN'S fist clubbed Coney's jaw with a hard, swift jar. Coney went down. Chet Logan was a cold, hard-bitten man who usually minded his own business—but seeing the flashy Coney with Francie just made Logan see red. For lovely Francie had once been a part of Logan's dreams.



LATER, Logan, in the notorious Belle Prince saloon, saw Francie and Coney go into a door marked, *Private*. Logan had always wanted to take the Belle Prince apart, and he figured that now was a good time to start. . . . He began to walk toward Francie and Coney, butting the dancers out of his way.



AS LOGAN rampaged into the private offices he came upon the mysteriously murdered Joe Prince, owner of the saloon. . . . Then suddenly the office door was split down the middle and a bouncer, chair-leg in his hand, and a saloon gunhawk saw Logan bending over the murdered Joe Prince.



THAT killing turned Tug Fork into a roaring hell. And a lynch-mad mob, in a hanging frenzy, decided to execute Francie's father for the murder. . . . The story of Chet Logan and Francie and the hell-hole Belle Prince will be told in the next issue in Rod Patterson's novel—"Welcome to Hangtown!"

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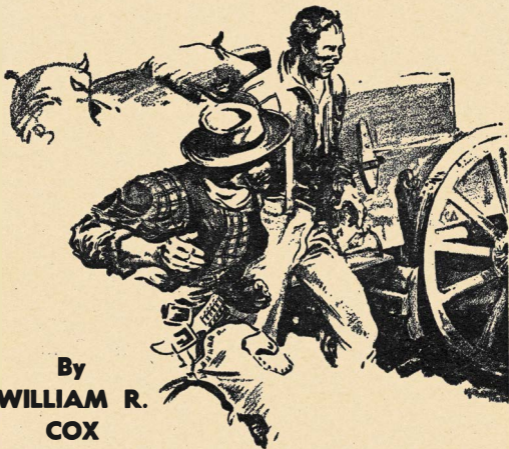
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THE WHISTLER KID

Tranquillity seemed to have a strange effect on the Whistler Kid. For he quit his job as cattlemen's rep, welched out of a posse, and took to the hills—to bag him a bushwhacking Romeo.



By
**WILLIAM R.
COX**

CHAPTER

Thankless Job

1 Back home in Silver things were quiet. The Whistler Kid went around to see Prudence Croy every night and sat in the midst of domesticity, shy, a bit confused by the warmth of Prudence's love. He was still under twenty-one and they could not marry, because Miz Croy insisted that the nuptials wait until he was a man in years, as well as in the eyes of Silver citizens.

He whistled and waited. But the cattle thieves were quiescent and things were dull. It was spring and the mines were producing very well, and a rather humdrum, bustling prosperity held Silver in what Willy Wooten thought was a monotonous, heavy grasp.

Bud Lott, recently an outlaw, was working for the Glory Mine, limping about duties not too arduous, with Bull Slavin as his mentor, and he and Willy shared a cottage on the edge of town. Willy's wages from the Cattle Association went on, but he felt

CALLS QUILTS



He rode straight at the kneeling
Kid, drawing his hideout gun. . .



self-conscious about taking them. Foster Deal, biggest rancher in the Silver country, said heartily, "We're payin' now for the protection you give us hitherto. It's all fair."

"Don't seem right t'me," said Whistler

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Kid. "And these books Dick Bland gimme are tough readin'." The truth was, he had trouble reading at all. He had been the town orphan, and some people thought the town bad boy, too, and his schooling had been scanty. But Marshal Dick Bland was educated east and believed in book learnin'. Willy guessed he did, too, when you came down to it, even if it was hard work getting through the Waverly Novels or Charles Dickens.

He was at the Croy house where Willy did not dare to smoke lest an ash drop on Miz Croy's hooked rugs, when the news of George Cape came in. Miz Croy said, "Well. Poor George. That handsome boy. I always wondered would he come back." Her face was compressed, a trifle pale.

Willy said, "That's the last of the Capes, ain't it, ma'am? Didn't they feud with the Lanes and get run out?"



Miz Croy said harshly, "They did. Sheriff Johnny Lane and his brother Mike Lane killed them. Sheriff Johnny ain't done a thing since then but live off the county like he did somethin' brave. But killin' the Capes and runnin' off that nice, handsome George was dirty business."

Prudence said, "Why ma! You always were against shootin'. I do believe you think George has returned for revenge!"

"Why else?" demanded her mother. "They drygulched Nap, or he'd have killed a couple of them. Oh, I'm against gun-slingers." She glared over her glasses at Willy Wooten, a brand snatched from the burning, she felt. "But Nap and George's father were waylaid and murdered. And everyone knows Johnny or Mike Lane did it."

Willy said to Prudence, "So George Cape is handsome, huh? You and him were old friends, I remember. He's older'n us, though."

"Twenty-five," said Prudence. "I had a baby crush on him. He is handsome. Very tall, with wide shoulders. Clean-shaven. . . ."

"I better go downtown," said Willy. "I better see Foster Deal. I'm thinkin' about a

new job. This doin' nothin' is killin' me."

"Willy Wooten, if you dare quit that fine job, don't you ever come back to this house!" snapped Miz Croy. "I declare, you're zackly like that father of yours, that Bronch Wooten! Improvident is no name."

Willy said gently, "I got \$5,000 saved. Reward money and sich. I am waitin' patient to marry Pru on your say-so, ma'am. I got respect for you. . . . But I don't take money for just a-settin'." He smiled disarmingly. He could get the best of Miz Croy every time—as his father had before him. He backed out the door, leaving the warmth of his grin for the two women, who smiled secretly at each other as they went about their household tasks.

It was early evening, and the digestion of Silver citizens was working placidly, and Bullard Street was almost empty. Sheriff Johnny Lane was a fat man who did not amount to much. He was merely a politician. He came out of the restaurant and paused, picking his teeth with an ivory toothpick. He said, "Some job you got, Willy. Wisht I didn't have any more to do."

Willy said, "I wish I did have somethin' to do. You want to swear me in as a deputy?"

Sheriff Lane's little eyes were merry. "Truthfully, there ain't nothin' to do but serve papers. And run for election."

Willy wanted to say something about George Cape, but it wasn't manners, so he refrained. He said, "Well, I'll see you in Red's later, huh?"

He walked a dozen paces. Sheriff Lane lounged beneath the awning of wood which covered the walk before the restaurant. Marshal Dick Bland came across from his little white cottage, waving to his wife, the lovely Molly. Bland and Willy turned into Red Morgan's Knave of Spades Saloon for the Thursday poker game, a mild affair among local boon companions.

A man came from an alley and stepped up to Sheriff Lane. He tilted his hat back so that fat Johnny could see his face. He said, "Hello, you coyote."

Molly Bland called sharply, "Dick! Oh, Dick!" but her husband was in the saloon. The newcomer threw a glance across the street, smiled genially. He was very handsome.

Johnny made a motion. His usually red

face was pallid. He kept his gun in his waistband, and Molly said later there was no doubt that Johnny went for his gun. But George Cape seemed to have one ready, for he just lifted his hand and shoved a weapon against Johnny's rotund belly and pulled the trigger twice. Then he stepped back and laughed even louder than Molly and a couple of others were screaming.

A black horse came out of the alley. George swept off his hat to the ladies, made a running mount. He hit the saddle as Willy Wooten and Dick Bland came charging out of the saloon. He ducked his head and went down Bullard Street, flying, going south. Willy took one look at the prone body of Sheriff Lane, lying loose in his clothes, looking not nearly so portly. Then he was aiming the long, smooth-butt Colt which had been his father's.

He had George Cape lined up in the sight and was pulling the trigger when a man seemed to stumble into him. He fired and of course missed. He wheeled about and the man said, "'Scuse me, bub. I was lookin' for the excitement."

THE man was smooth-faced, with small, ferret eyes and a weak mouth. He was a stranger to Willy, but he would never be a stranger again. Willy's low whistle would have been a warning to anyone who knew him. He just whistled without a tune, but he always fitted words to it. "This hombre sure saved George. . . . Wonder if that was his game. . . . He's got that look to him for fair. . . . Wonder if I should brace him right now?"

The man said, "By Gawd, somebody's shot!" and ran toward Johnny's corpse. Dick Bland had things in charge. Dick was boss in town, but with the sheriff dead there wasn't anyone to take a posse out. Cape had known this, Willy was sure.

Foster Deal, leaning against the front of the Knave of Spades, said, "Well, you can't hardly blame him. Johnny and Mike nailed the Capes, chased George out when he was just a button. I disremember which started it, now, but the Lanes sure won. George was gettin' back a lil of his own."

Red Morgan said, "Reckon nobody'll want to ride out and git George, huh?"

Mr. Carey, of the Silver Bank, said, "No. It is the result of a feud. We haven't got that law-abidin', not yet."

They carted the hulk which had been the Gant County Sheriff into the undertakers, and Dick Bland returned. Willy's whistling was almost inaudible but it had not ceased since the stranger jostled him. The stranger was with Dick now, and his name seemed to be Downey.

Dick said, "Well, Johnny's dead. Reckon we ought to go after George, Foster?"

The rancher said, "I was just sayin' I thought not. George ain't been here in ten years—he won't be back for another ten. He'll be in El Paso afore you kin ketch him. That's a good hoss he was ridin'."

The Marshal, a conscientious young man, hesitated. "There's Mike, up at Glory Mine. Maybe we ought to notify him quick."

Willy stopped whistling. He said, "I'll go up there. Mike and my pardner are good friends."

"Okay," said Bland. "You go up. I'll keep things quiet here."

The stranger, Downey, seemed excited about the killing, but he just stood around and said nothing. He had eyes which seemed never still. They darted here and there like humming birds on the wing, but never settled on anything. Willy shrugged and got his new pony, a sweet-running little gray with the mustang streak down its back, and rode up the steep way to the mine.

The road wound about, a precarious travail for the mules and the ore wagons. It skirted a pine gorge, the tops of the trees a hundred feet below the hoofs of the grey pony. Darkness came in, and the cabin in which Bud Lott often visited young Mike Lane, the ex-sheriff's brother, showed a welcome yellow square of light to mark the last quarter-mile.

Willy let the gray pick his way up the steep grade. The square of light was a beacon. And then there was suddenly no square of light at all.

It was his instinct for trouble which threw Willy forward. The low whistle emanated from pursed lips and the rifle from the boot unlimbered in his hands as he thrust the gray sideways. There were shots. He saw a flash off to the left and snapped a bullet at it.

He heard the wild outlaw yell of Bud Lott and then a Colt crashed its thunder from within the cabin. Willy pulled the gray to the right, going up behind and fired twice more, working the lever of the re-

peater. A horseman skeddaddled down the retreat the Whistler had left open on purpose. A second invader rode down and a third cursed in a ringing voice which Willy would remember. He fired his last shot and again the voice sounded out on the night. Then the third attacker rode down the hill.

Willy called, "Hey, Bud. . . It's me. I'm up behind."

Bud said, "Come on down. Did we run 'em off?"

Willy said, "We didn't hurt no one, worse luck. Is Mike all right?"

There was a moment's silence. Willy rode the gray down to the cabin and dismounted. The miners were coming down from their shacks above the cabin, bearing arms and torches. Bud Lott said softly to Willy, "Man stuck a gun through the window an' shot pore Mike deader'n hell. Who you reckon'd wanta do a thing like that, Willy?"

Willy stood in the doorway and stared at the second Lane brother to die that night. He said softly, "Man named George Cape. And he had help, too. A pair of bully boys with 'im. Don't scarcely seem fair—but all Silver thinks he's a bloody hero."

Bull Slavin came into the cabin. He looked down at Mike Lane's body. Mike was young, and not fat like his brother. He had always been a quiet boy. Bull Slavin had liked him. Willy told Bull what he knew.

Bull Slavin growled deep in his thick throat, "I ain't standin' for it, Willy. The cattle men don't stand for it. The mines won't, neither."

Willy said, "You want to send out a posse, Bull?"

The husky mine super turned and stared at the Whistler Kid. He said, "I take it you don't agree with the town that this joker is a hero. I take it you got other ideas—somethin' like my own?"

Willy said quietly, "I was thinkin' about quittin' my job. No action."

Slavin said, "You quit the ranchers. I'll pay you the same money. You go it alone until you need help—then we'll give you a plenty."

But Lott said eagerly, "I'll go with him."

"You'll do Mike's work," said Bull Slavin. "I need you here. The Whistler will make it alone. "I get confidence in the Kid."

That was all it took, a bit of confidence, of trust placed with him, of a job put on him. Willie rode the gray back to town that night, making no effort to pick up the trail of the killers in the dark, thinking far ahead of that night, knowing he had a thankless job on his hands now.

CHAPTER

To the Hills!

2

Miz Croy said, "I declare, you're a man-hunter in your heart, Willy! And if you touch a hair of that pore George Cape, you'll suffer fer it, mark my words. This hull town is agin you."

Prudence said doubtfully, "Willy, couldn't you skip it? George was only avenging his family."

Willy rotated the brim of his hat in his brown hands. He shuffled his high heels on Miz Croy's kitchen floor and said, "I'd be sorta hurt at what you're sayin', only downtown you should hear what they are a-callin' me. Benedict Arnold is the least. Arnold, he was the feller tried to sell out George Washington."

Prudence said, gently enough, "I know, Willy."

"But you shoul'da seen poor Mike," said Willy earnestly. "And they'd of shot Bud Lott if Bud hadn't grabbed his six-gun and stood 'em off."

Miz Croy said flatly, "You are doin' dead wrong, Willy. People will purely hate you if you harm George Cape."

Prudence considered this. Then she said, "Well, Ma, it is kind of funny, worrying about George when he is half a head taller and thirty pounds heavier'n Willy. And wears his guns low. And has a couple of men with him, while Willy is goin' alone. It's kind of funny to tell Willy not to hurt him!"

Willy grinned, grateful to her. She always came around to his side, and now he knew she was thinking straight, right past the prejudice of her mother and the rest of Silver, taking a sane look, weighing the matter, knowing what his side amounted to. He was always proud of her, and humble in the knowledge that she loved him when so many others desired her. He made his manners to Miz Croy and left, spurs jingling. At the garden gate, saying good-bye to her, he touched her hand and

Pru kissed him tenderly, in broad daylight, for anyone to see who cared to look. He rode off on the gray like one of those fellers in the Waverly novels with a lady's glove in their hats—helmets, that was.

He did not, however, go very far out of town. He proceeded on the trail south, toward Deming, to a place he knew very well, slid down off the gray and led the horse over rocks into a spot where boulders were strewn carelessly. There he waited, patient as a fox, thinking of Prudence and her goodness and of Miz Croy, who underneath was also on his side, though she grumbled for the record.

Very soon a rider came from Silver. Willy held the nose of the gray and squinted at the road, dusty in the late afternoon sunlight. The man rode hard, hat pulled down over his eye. He rode a chestnut with long legs, a swift horse but scarcely one for a long chase, Willy thought critically.

The man was undoubtedly Downey, the stranger in the midst of two killings. His ferret eyes were strict on the road; he went as one deep in thought. He went right past Willy Wooten and the gray.

Willy waited with extreme impatience, taking his rifle from its cover and making sure of it, working the lever, injecting fresh cartridges to pass the time. When the dot of dust was gone over the horizon he got into the saddle and slid the gun uncovered into the boot. The gray loped southward in the wake of the stranger.

At dark Willy camped near the road. The tracks were plain—the chestnut took a longer stride than a lesser horse and one shoe was marked with a crack across the toe. He had no desire to lose those tracks. He endured his cold camp, without food, drinking from a small stream. He slept like a baby and in the morning awoke with the sun.

He went on his way. He was almost to Deming when the break came. The sign on the hard-packed road had long been straining his sharp eyes, and finally he lost it. He got down and on hands and knees, he went over the space where it disappeared. There was nothing to show which way it turned off.

And there was no use trying to follow it on either side of the road. The stranger had chosen well a place to scramble his backtrail. There was shale either side of

the road, going to an elevation which in turn became a no-man's land of far reaches, piled rock, occasional pinons and cottonwoods. It was a convenient waste country. A man, or men, could lose themselves here, come out on the other side to slide into the unknown unnoticed—or they could lurk and descend like wolves whenever profit beckoned.

Exploring this country would be more than dangerous. There were a thousand spots where an ambush would waylay even the wariest. Willy grinned wryly, remounting the gray. He went on into Deming and hung around the biggest saloon in town until dark. He saw no trace of Downey, or George Cape, nor of two strangers who might have been in the Glory Mine affair. He asked a few discreet questions of Boulder, the Marshal, but learned nothing. As he had some doubts about Boulder's honesty—and perspicacity—he desisted, and after the sun had gone down he took off again, heading vaguely northward.

He passed through the rocky wilderness again and came to the foot of the irregular contours of Kneeling Woman. There was a moon and he could see almost as well as by daylight. The stars were brittle and sharp against the deep hue of the sky and he sat on the gray cayuse, thinking, watching, waiting. It was midnight when he rode toward Silver. He came into the town about three in the morning and Bullard Street was quiet as a church.

He put the gray in the stable at the hotel and walked in the dirt of the street so that his heels on the boards would not wake anyone. He had a room behind Red Morgan's saloon which he used when in town and he knew that he must get some sleep. He saw the light in the back of the bank almost without pausing. If he thought anything at all, it was that Mr. Carey was working late at his job. The fact that it was more than late, that it was a scandalous hour for any citizen of Silver to be abroad save lawmen, struck him as he got a door or two past the bank.

He whirled, and as he did, his weary brain sparking into action, a horse whinnied in the shadows. That, to a born and bred Westerner of the day, was the real tip-off and he cursed himself for not having paid closer attention. He tried to run back, caught his heel in a crack of the board walk

as he came down heavily on the second stride. He was stiff from his hours in the saddle and had to thrust out his arms to keep from smacking against splintery boards which cut his palms.

A MAN'S heavy voice husked a warning and the light in the bank went dead. The horse's gear creaked again. Willy snagged one of his father's long Colt revolvers from its holster and fired once in the air, waited a second, then fired again, a signal to Dick Bland if the Marshal were not too deep in slumber to hear.

Again the man's voice sounded. Two revolvers crashed. Lead sang near Willy, and he rolled over without getting erect again. It would be a humiliating memory all his life, how this night of the big Silver Bank robbery he scarcely got to his feet. He returned the fire of the thief, but the man had both guns going, having reloaded while the Whistler was finding more shelter behind the rain barrel at the corner of the building housing Ham Hamilton's blacksmith shop.

Down the street a lamp glowed in Dick Bland's window. People were calling in petulant, half-asleep voices to know what was wrong. Willy jammed cartridges into the first Colt, looking for a target at which to aim.

There was a low, shuddering explosion. The lookout bandit seemed to be a steady man. The shower of lead was unceasing and deadly. Willy dared not do more than thrust a revolver around the edge of the rain barrel and let fly. The earth shook a little after the explosion.

Willy left the rain barrel. He ran around behind the bank building. Once again he heard the hoarse voice, out in the street, warning his companions that time was short. He reached the rear lot and a man stepped out and whipped a shot at him from a short carbine. He barely flattened himself, and again he was pinned down, helpless. The bandits had planned too well—and there were more of them than he had thought.

The moon held him to earth, where the thief behind the bank could not help seeing him if he moved among the trash of old tins and boxes. He held his breath, trying to edge around for a shot. He got a glimpse of a lanky man with a chaw of tobacco making a huge lump in his cheek and remem-

bered a photograph on a handbill in Johnny Lane's office.

Then a man called, and the bandit turned and sprinted with commendable speed for the alley where the horses were waiting. Two others came from the back door of the building. Willy got to his knee and fired. One and two made three, and the man out front of the bank was four.

He was missing running targets under the moon. He ran and swore, trying to get to where he could at least down a horse. He came to the head of the alley and they laid in several more shots. He had to hit the dirt and shot at a horse from the ground.

He saw one of the steeds stumble. He moved and fired again. A man yelled and came down from the back of an animal. He took two steps and was up behind the leader in the retreat, a man on a large, superb mount.

It was all so quick that Willy Wooten could not swear to everything he imagined he saw. He knew they were going out of town northward, away from the house whence Dick Bland was coming with his rifle, which certainly meant they knew the layout of the town. But then they would know that, as all bank robbers must. The fine, large mount was reminiscent of the one George Cape had whistled from another alley after Johnny Lane had died. There had been three men who attacked Mike Lane—but Downey, the town cover, could certainly make the fourth.

They were gone like ghosts, all but the horse Willy had shot. He got up and went close, examining the shattered foreleg of the fine chestnut, putting a merciful bullet in the tortured animal's head. The saddle was a center fire Southern model with no distinguishing marks. There was no saddle bag and the bandit had taken his rifle, if he had been carrying a long gun. These were not thieves to leave a clue behind.

Dick Bland had come close by now and he said, "Too bad you didn't get the rider. That was a good cause."

"Ever seen it before?" asked Willy. The street was filling with people, but the lawman and the boy were intent on their own thoughts.

"No," said Dick Bland. "It's got a blotched brand."

"Like all stolen hosses," the Whistler said. He was whistling again, under his

breath. It had been a chestnut that Downey rode, he knew, down the trail toward Deming, but not going to Deming, branching off the road near Kneeling Woman. He didn't have a spark of evidence worth a hoot in court, but he was sure piling up a big inner relief in the identity of the bandits.

Dick said, "Some tough ones from the hills. It'll be the devil trailing them. We've got no sheriff, so I guess it's up to me. You take charge of getting up the posse, Willy."

Mr. Carey was hustling into the bank. The little man with the mutton-chop whiskers was pale as a ghost.

Willy said quietly, "Can't do it, Dick. I don't work for the Cattlemen's Association no more. I got a job with the mine."

"What does that matter?" demanded the Marshal sharply. "We'll need every man to ride north after those thieves."

Mr. Carey came out of the bank. It was as bright as day now, what with every lamp in town going and the moon coming from beneath a cloud. Miz Croy and Prudence arrived and Pru found unerringly where Willy stood and smelled the burned powder on him and grabbed at his hand, relieved that he was alive.

Mr. Carey came to where Dick and Willy stood and said numbly, "Got it all. Thirty-five thousand in cash. Blew the safe with dynamite. Cleaned us out."

Dick said in a low voice, "You mean the securities, too?"

"A hundred thousand," nodded Mr. Carey. His lips trembled. "You've got to get it back, Dick. It'll ruin this town. The mines are all right, but the securities are negotiable if a man is clever enough."

The Marshal said, "Willy, you'll have to come. This is terrible. This can affect everyone in Silver if a run starts on the bank or a big depositor gets scarey. You've got to help."

Miz Croy said, "What's that? Willy? You says what?"

The Whistler pulled away from Pru, so that he stood alone. "I got to see a man. You all go on. There's plenty for a posse and you got Injun Bull."

He tried to get away quietly, but Bland's stern eye and Miz Croy's accusing, "Willy! You come back here!" drew the attention of the crowd. Men he had known all his life

stared at him with ill-disguised hostility.

A low voice said, "Thet friend of Willy's —thet Bud Lott. Seems like he was a bad lot. . . ."

"Over in his home county. . . . Willie brought him out. . . . Bud Lott." The voices picked up the name and bandied it around.

FOR a moment Willy thought he would have to stay and explain. Then he knew that the local feeling for George Cape, a home town boy, and the ever-present suspicion of folks against an outlander would only make his task hopeless. So he kept right on going, setting his jaw. He was without sleep and he needed sleep, but he dove into Johnny Lane's curiously deserted and silent office, lighting the shaded lamp upon the desk. The handbills had already gathered dust in a neglected corner. He leafed through them, selecting the one he wanted.

The man had the same wad of tobacco in his cheek. It was rumored that he could sleep with his cud. His name, in big, black type, was Leb Mueller, and he was a recognized and established bank robber of some repute. There was a reward of \$2500 on his head by a bank association; another \$1,000 was offered by the Territory. It said Dead or Alive, which proved him a very much wanted and dangerous bandit indeed; not a royal, king-type bandit to be sure, but one of the sort who are in many robberies.

Leb Mueller was, to put it bluntly, the sort who would string along with a desperate leader, a couple of sidekicks of note, and swashbuckle and lay outside in the back shooting at folks like Willy Wooten, who tried to take the crowd by the back way. He was the man who had nearly shot Willy with a carbine.

Willy went out into the street. The posse was forming up. He saw Miz Croy shepherding the blonde Pru toward home. He slipped past them, a small, almost inconsequential lad, very slight in physique, nothing in his bearing proclaiming the steel and whalebone which comprised his various parts. He got to the hotel unobserved.

He re-saddled his horse because none of the livery stable cavvayer was able enough. He mounted and rode up the winding trail to Glory Mine's cabins. Bud Lott had

stayed to clean up Mike Lane's affairs and was sleeping in the room where the unfortunate sheriff's brother had been killed.

Willy stood over the ex-outlaw and said, "Dress and we'll wake up Bull. You and me better take out unless you can prove where you was all this evenin'."

"I was right here, but all alone," said Bud, instantly awake. "Who got kilt this time?"

Willy told him of the robbery while Bud Lott unconcernedly dressed. The lame bandit was the bravest young fellow Willy knew. They went together up to Slavin's house and awakened him. The heavy-set mine operator listened broodingly and spat, "The people of Silver ain't never quite bright. G'wan up in the hills and hide out."

Willy said politely, "Sure do thank you, Mr. Slavin. But I got to work on the killin' of Mike Lane. You're payin' me. I resigned from Mr. Deal's job and truth to tell, Miz Croy, Mr. Deal and most everybody don't like for me to do it. Least I can do is earn the money you're a-payin'." He smiled ingenuously and led the imperturbable Bud Lott out to where Slavin kept a dozen fine steeds in a corral. He picked out the two he thought would do and the youths rode out of Glory Mine at daylight, heading south.

CHAPTER

Outlaw Genius

3

At noon they awoke under a rocky ledge within sight of the high promontory which looked amazingly like a woman in a prayerful attitude, her hands on a rough altar which blended into the mountain-top. Willy took a chance and cooked a squirrel Bud knocked over. The smoke was only a thin wisp and a stiff breeze carried it away immediately.

Bud said candidly, "S'help me, Willy, I don't see where you got evidence on no killers. Hombre jest stuck his hand inna winder and kilt Mike. I seen a gauntlet, that's all. Wasn't no different from any other gauntlet worn by cattlemen all over this here West."

Willy said, "Wasn't thinkin' of that kinda proof, Bud."

"You got the funniest ways," Bud said without complaint. "Reckon you know what your a-doin', all right. . . . People sure

will hate you for goin' off with me this-away, pardner."

"People's entitled to think the way they want," said Willy. "I'm somewhat useta them doin' like that."

"Last night I sure looked and acted foolish. Shoudla come in quiet and killed all their hosses whilst they was so intent on blowin' up the safe. You reckon they took the dynamite from the mine when they were up there t'other night?"

"For sure," nodded Bud Lot. "These folks is tough."

It was hot at noon, and the Whistler shoved back under the rock. He squinted up at Kneeling Woman and said quietly, "You augur anything from the things that've happened and what I tole you?"

Bud said, "Don't be scared to ask me anything, Willy. Naturally I kin figger a few things, like the layout at the bank and the way they planned to kill the Lanes. All outlaws got a sorta pattern. This is a smart gang, and it has got a leader, don't you ever forget that. Leb Mueller never was no good without a boss man over him. I heard plenty about him when I was on the dodge, him and his tobacco-chewin'. They allow that he's a whipped dog without 'at cud he chaws. This here Downey, now, I never heard of him, but he sounds like a smart, town man. The other is just a killer, prob'ly. A damn dangerous man, or they wouldn't have him. And then you got the leader and it is this Cape. Mark my words."

Willy said, "I wisht that Kneelin' Woman would tell me what she knows. That rocky spot up yonder is the best hidin' place in Gant County. An army couldn't take it and its approaches is so open an ant can't squirm in thar without bein' seen by a lookout behind a boulder."

"So we set and wait," nodded Bud Lott. "And keep a watch of our own."

"Thet feud," mused Willy Wooten. "Started over nothin', wiped out every member of two famlies, 'ceptin' only George Cape. . . . Feuds is like wars, pretty damn silly businesses which is won by nobody."

"We got a war of our own," Bud Lott reminded him. "I wonder what thet bunch is plannin' next? All thet loot is sure burnin' their jeans."

The two young men settled down to grim vigil. One dozed, the other watched. They

were without field glasses, an oversight which plagued Willy sorely. They had good enough eyes, but the distances in that altitude were deceptive and the glare of the sun bothered them so they they squinted half the time.

* * *

Up on the table of land next to Kneeling Woman, a natural stronghold as sturdy as any castle on the Rhine, there was no such lack. The tall, handsome leader of the quartet put down his high-powered glasses and said petulantly, "I planned every damn little thing but this. Those two got to be stopped."

He was a very tall, very handsome man and he did not look like a man with murder on his soul. His brown eyes were wide-spaced and intelligent. This last of the Capes was the best of them in breeding, in brain power. If his lips were a bit too thick and moist, his jaw a trifle heavy, the women in his past had all loved it.

Leb Mueller spat a stream of tobacco juice, impaling a horned toad with strict accuracy. He said in a high, nasal whine, "Thet damn lil feller takes some killin'. I fired point blank at 'im last night. And at thet, he done downed Downey's hoss." Something in the alliteration of his last remark caused him to chuckle.

The sneaky-looking, lean man turned red. He said, "I shoulda gunned the damned button when he was pot-shootin' at George. Nobody in the town of Silver was agin George but him."

"What matter?" George demanded. "You said no one suspected us of the sort of work we did last night."

"Nobody did," said Downey. His fox-like face was cunning. "But this Wooten boy, he's smart, I tell you. The Cattlemen's Association don't hire dummies. This boy has cleaned up the rustlers hereabouts so good that I knew it was the bank caper or nothin'. And man, I was purely right!" He actually licked his lips at the thought of the money in the canvas bags reposing in the cool cave alongside Kneeling Woman.

Leb Mueller said, "Yeah. You done figured it out good, Downey."

"He blew the safe properly, too," nodded Cape. But behind Downey's narrow back he made a knowing face at Mueller. Downey was the weak sister, a coward, a

man not to be trusted in a pinch. He turned and stared at the fourth member of his small gang.

Okay Keller was a hump-shouldered man with one crooked arm—his left. His right arm was twice the size of a normal right arm. He had slender, incongruous hands and long fingers and the brutish face of an unimaginative man. He was a born murderer, of course. He had been out in front of the bank, with two guns.

They were a good bunch for desperate, quick work. Downey worked the towns, gleaning the necessary information. Cape planned the raids. Then Mueller and Keller killed whoever was in the way while Cape and Downey took the cash, and a fast getaway always made them safe from bumbling, politically minded sheriffs and citizen posses which were clumsy and inept. They had remained out of the orbit of Ranger or Federal Marshal with success thus far. George Cape's return to Silver had been a long-planned, shrewd move.

CAPE said, "Someone's got to go into town. We've got to know what's going on. Bland will circulate description by telegraph—and we got to know how much this Wooten saw. He must've seen one or two of us."

"Wooten's got to be killed," Downey grated.

"Could be," shrugged Cape. "You want to go down there and take him and his friend?"

Downey said, "They are fortified up in as good a place as this. How we goin' to git them outa here? I'm honin' to spend some of that thirty thousand in Kaycee."

"Noo Yawk fo' me," Mueller said complacently. "I had a pardner went there oncet, said they was women wearin' dresses down to here and smokin' real cigarettes, like a man."

"Not in Delmonico's," Cape told him. "Not smoking. But the dresses, yes. And to get there, we've got to get past those two young fellows and we've got to appear in Silver and allay suspicion. Otherwise they'll be after us. We've lasted this good mainly because we are never suspected. But we got to show down there, act poor, pretend we are lookin' for jobs. Everybody knows the ordinary road agent can't wait to spend his gains—in New York or elsewhere!"

Mueller said, smiling, "Yore dead right, George."

"Still," Downey insisted, "it's possible to git out and have some fun. I ain't had no fun sence Juarez . . ."

Again the look was exchanged between Cape and Mueller. Cape strolled fifty yards to where Keller was watching. Then he thought of the hundred thousand in negotiable securities which he meant to cash in a foreign capital as soon as he could get away. Some of Downey's impatience transferred itself, willy nilly, to Cape.

He glared through the glasses at the two youthful pursuers. They were under the rocky overhang, stretched out, their rifles handy. Their hats were tipped to shade their eyes, but their alertness was a matter of which Cape did not doubt.

He studied the terrain about the pair with attention. He went over it again and again. There was no way to attack them from above, which would be the safest and best. Coming up from below was, of course, suicide. That left the rear, which was ridiculous, being composed of one blank wall with cave. And it left each side.

On the north, the stretch of rock and soil made it an impossibility to get within a mile of them without being detected. But to the south there was buffalo grass, now at its height, thick and plentiful. Cape ran his glasses to and fro, figuring distances, angles. He muttered, "Not in daylight. But after dark, it could be done."

Keller said nothing. He was the one with the greatest endurance and also with most indifference.

But if he knew about the securities, George thought with a slight shudder, and that they were not worthless, as George had pronounced them upon examination, there would be little doubt as to his action. For Keller was loyal—loyal to his fellows and obedient to his leader and he expected that honor be done to him in like amount.

Not even Downey guessed that the stiff paper of the bonds was negotiable to thieves. None of the trio had any idea that George Cape could dress the part of a man of means and business responsibility and enter any bank in the East and cash those pieces of paper for a hundred thousand dollars.

He gloated a bit, staring through the glasses. No one in Silver suspected that he

was more than handsome youth returned to get a bit of his own from the Lanes, who had killed off his family. He was safe—and there was the girl who had followed him everywhere he went in Silver before the departure after the Lanes had gone amok. . . . Prudence Croy she was. He had noted her close observance of him when he returned . . . her long lashes failing to conceal her curious glances. A week or so should be enough for that conquest, he told himself confidently.

He said to Mueller, "Leb, we can go down to the south and come around. After dark they can't see us in that buffalo grass unless the moon is brighter than last night."

"That damn moon," said Downey. "I don't like movin' in the moonlight."

"I'll admit it is a desperate thing," said George Cape. "Not safe like we usually manage. But these two are too close to us. How they ever got onto our trail. . . ."

Downey protested, "I covered every inch of our tracks. They guessed."

"Could be," Cape shrugged. He was too astute to be drawn into argument about peccadilloes. He went on, "I'll go in first and try and see if they are keeping a watch."

Mueller said, "Now, George, you always wanta take the chances." He really believed it. He spat tobacco juice and said, "Me and Okay will go in together, with yawl behind. If they're awake, too damned bad for 'em. We'll go in so quiet they'll never know what hit 'em."

Downey said, "If that posse gets around this way and hears shots . . ."

There was a short silence. Then Mueller said gently, "Downey, you're s'posed to be smarter'n me. But sometimes I dunno. It'll be dark, won't it? And did you ever know a posse could ketch four smart men? Let 'em find the bodies—we'll be in Silver, separate, actin' innocent. Why, I mought even jine that there posse if conditions gits right!"

Cape laughed, without jeering, and Downey had to grin. Keller kept watching the ledge across the way. Heat shimmered upward from rock and the lookout drew a hand over his eyes. Cape said reasonably, "I'll take it for awhile, boys. You go inside and play seven-up or something." He also knew enough to take over arduous tasks—at the psychological moment. He was a very good leader indeed. Under cover of dark-

ness they would imagine him right up there with them—or making some sortie to aid them—but they would not know he had the bonds and his share of the cash in his saddle bags, ready to ride like the wind if things went awry!

CHAPTER

Where's the Kid?

4

The blanket had seen its best days and was not much of a sacrifice. The ponies objected, but they were well-broken and soon became adjusted to the muffings. It was necessary to take greatest precautions against the roll of one small stone, for the moon was hiding behind a thick bank of black clouds, and Kneeling Woman was an imagined black mass overhead.

They moved with the agony of suspense on them, yet with skill and some small degree of speed. Coming in close, they dragged the reins of the cayuses through a ring and made a picket rope which they could lay on the ground. They left the ponies there and began their climb. It was extremely difficult to carry a rifle and not make any sound in the night.

There was a narrow path upward and every step was laden with the fear of sudden, blinding, lethal rifle fire. They went one at a time, heads low, facing death with a grimness and philosophy beyond the belief of everyday humdrum civilization, more like unquestioning animals—or the phenomenally brave Chiricahua Apache who was at present biding his time in the not too distant reservations.

In the lead, it was necessary to keep the rifle presented, finger on trigger. The lone figure went up and up, pausing, breathless, listening with ears which strained until silence became almost unendurable. A faint glint of moonlight struggled through a crowd and the invaders held tight to what belief they had in luck, in Fate, or in their own marksmanship, this moment conceivably being their last in which to hold onto anything.

The clouds thickened again. There was a twist in the narrow, precipitous trail. The rifle clinked, despite everything, on the projecting edge of boulder. They froze, one high on the trail, the other behind, kneeling with nervous finger to cover his partner.

Again the silence fell. Time stood still,

then lurched again, another step ahead. The man in the lead went around the turn in the trail and mounted the last few steep paces which would give him shelter from the ledge where the deadly enemy lay. The man below began scrambling faster, with his partner gone from view.

The path grew wider and less steep. The leader, crouching, commanded the ledge. His rifle swept in an arc, his dry throat contracted as he sought the black shadow of a single oval boulder as tall as any man and twice as thick. The second man came up the path and joined him, kneeling there, beneath the unseen figure above, the likeness of the woman who knelt at the altar.

The second man said, "You was plumb right, Willy. They're gone."

"It was a plain hunch," Willy Wooten panted. The fear was dying in him. It was a fear which gripped him before the shooting began and he was glad to feel its departure. He took out a bandanna and wiped his brow, although the night was cool in the high mountains. "I figured they wouldn't hole up here with all that loot in their pockets."

Bud Lott nodded. "Bandits want money the quick, easy way and they spend it the same. But what would we of done if they'd been here, Willy? I swear, it'd been hell."

They closed in smartly, taking the ledge. They went into the cave and the acrid odor of tobacco juice was everywhere. Bud Lott said, "Mueller's been here for sure."

They could not make a light, because it would be seen all over the countryside, clean to Silver. But they sort of felt around. Willy's hand struck the canvas bag by accident. He smoothed it, bringing it close to his eyes in the darkness. He muttered, "Bud, this here is a bag like the bank has money in, all the time."

"Sure," said Bud. "I ain't surprised. Are you?"

"It's sure evidence," said Willy stubbornly. "I aim to have law evidence if I can get it. We'll stay here until tomorrow and read track. Ain't no use us followin' four men like them—even if we knew which way to follow."

Bud said mischievously, "If we was Rangers now, we'd jest go down there somewheres and capture 'em, easy. Kill mebbe two, three. . . ."

"You always pickin' on Rangers," re-

proved Willy. "You got no call to make fun of them fellers jest because they are Texans."

"No?" demanded Bud. "What's funnier'n Texans?"

It was an old argument between them and they pursued it amiably, passing the hours until they slept, in turn, each guarding the other, awaiting the daylight which would provide more "evidence" for Willy Wooten.

* * *

On the ledge across the way from Kneeling Woman, George Cape rode in and said sharply, "Gone? Then they didn't see us."

"They were only bluffin' people in Silver," Downey said happily. "Come on out here and laid up, pretendin' they knew somethin'. They are only country Jakes after all."

Cape said, "At any rate, they wouldn't cut and run off if they thought we were around. This is our opportunity to go into town while that Wooten boy is not there. Downey, you ride in first and get the gossip. I'll come in at daylight and register at the hotel and pretend to give myself up to Bland." He had thought it all out. He would go at once to Miz Croy—and the blonde Pru—and enlist their sympathy. With the women—bless 'em—on his side, and the town agog with the hold-up and its aftermath, he would be safe as in a church. He went on easily, "Leb, you and Okay stick out a day. Then you come in, ridin' separate, and hang around. Play like you don't know Downey and me. But keep close to us, in the same bars and watch us, especially if Wooten turns up." He took a deep breath and in the darkness watched all he could see of Mueller. He said softly, "Leb, if Wooten does come in, mebbe you can start him. You got a way with you. Okay'll be around, and between you . . ." He left it delicately unfinished. It was not a thing to discuss in brutal details.

Cape said, "You got the idea, Okay. . . Downey, you ride on in. And Downey—don't start spending your cut, do you hear? Honest to God, if you're drunk—"

The sneaky man whined, "Don't you worry 'bout me. I wanta spend my money in a city—not no lil ole mine and cattle town." He rode off in the darkness with a stiff back. He was displeased, but he had been that way for a long time, Cape knew.

Leb muttered, "He's got to go, George."

"Maybe we can make it happen," Cape said thoughtfully. "When we get to town, you linger. I'll say to Downey that you're reluctant to tackle Wooten. I'll put Downey where he can scarcely refuse to tackle the young feller himself. I'll let him drink and build him up, soft-soapin' him, and then provoke a quarrel."

MUELLER said, "Say, that's good. Downey ain't no gunslinger—and if he did happen to make good, it'd save us a job."

"That is the general idea," said Cape urbanely.

Cape lay down in his blankets to recover some of the night hours in slumber. He was infinitely relieved, more than he would admit even to himself, that the two youngsters had not fathomed his retreat. Now it was fairly simple—certainly no one in Silver would believe that bank robbers would drift back into the town where they had so recently pulled their last job. He had the sympathy of the town, and he meant to play upon it. He could, he was sure, pick up a more reliable rascal than Downey . . . after Downey was downed.

He smiled a little, falling asleep.

* * *

The posse rode back into Silver and Dick Bland went into the sheriff's office. The handbills describing wanted bandits lay on the desk where Willy Wooten had left them, but he did not see them, so irate was he. Foster Deal came in and dropped onto a chair. Deal was getting old for night riding.

Bland said, "Injun Bull can go on, but I can't see how they got away. They went north of town and inside a mile they disappeared."

Foster Deal said, "This was well-planned. Somebody knew what he was doin' and done it. The get-away was best planned of all."

Bland nodded. They had tried to pursue blindly, the fleetest going ahead and fanning out through the land to the north, hoping that superior knowledge of the terrain would allow them to track down the bandits. They had failed and even daylight had revealed no tracks to Injun Bull.

Foster Deal said, "I wonder where that danged Whistler Kid went? Him and his ex-outlaw pardner. . . ."

Bland said irritably, "He turned me down

cold when I tried to get him to join us.”

“He done quit our association cold, too,” said Foster Deal. “Dunno what got into that boy.”

Bland said, “Well, he is gone. And Mr. Carey is worried sick. The securities—bonds and such—are what have him worried.”

Foster Deal said calmly, “I own a passel of cows—but if Carey’s bank fails, I’m up a stump high as he is.”

“The money for my house is in there,” fretted Bland. “The savings and hopes of half of Silver is in that institution. If it fails—we’re all set back years of our lives.”

Foster Deal said, “I know you’re right, Dick. And I know we got to turn up those securities. But I don’t know how.”

The two men sat glumly regarding the wall. The sun’s shadows lengthened and a rider came in. They glanced without curiosity at the thin, stooped man who seemed to know where he was going. Bland recognized him as the narrow-eyed man called Downey. . . .

There was absolutely no evidence against anyone in the matter of the robbery of the Silver Bank, he thought dismally. The sheriff was dead, the Governor had not appointed a successor as yet. Bland had local authority and it was up to him. But he could do nothing—absolutely nothing.

He hated to go home to his wife and admit it, for Molly was a great believer in his infallibility . . . and he wished to high heaven that that pernickety, mysterious, narrow-faced kid, the Whistler, was where Bland could exchange questions with him. . . .

CHAPTER

5

Showdown Ahead

George Cape climbed stiffly down from the black horse, drooping a little. He had managed to get himself covered with dust. Head hanging, just a trifle, enough to allow him to glance from under his hat brim, he sought Dick Bland, found him in Red Morgan’s Knave of Spades Saloon. Dramatically, as the others watched, Cape extended the six-gun from his holster, butt first, to the Marshal.

“I couldn’t do it,” he said frankly, throwing his head back now, rolling his eyes just enough for effect. “I came back to Silver

and found it home. I couldn’t run like a coyote all my life. I give up, Dick. I’ll take my medicine.”

Bland said uncomfortably, “Well, George—truth to tell, there’s no charge against you. Not here in town. Johnny went for his gun. My wife saw him. Seems as though you were quicker, that’s all.”

The revolver went slowly back, into the holster. George Cape smiled, spread his arms. “If I had the price, gents, I’d buy you all a drink. But I’ve got to get a job. I want to work my way back to bein’ a plain Silver citizen.”

Dick said cautiously, “There was something else, George. Mike Lane got killed up at Glory Mine. That’s not my territory, rightly. But Bull Slavin didn’t like it. Of course nobody saw who did that job. . . .”

“Not me,” said Cape flatly. “Must have been some other folks gunnin’ for Mike.”

Downey was at the end of the bar. He said in his shrill, confidential voice, “Come t’ think of it, dynamite was stole from up there to rob the bank, didn’t someone tell me?”

“Thet’s right,” said Foster Deal. “Mebbe the robbers was seen by Mike and hadda gun him. . . . Sides, they was three of them and George here’s been alone ever since we knowed he come back.”

Cape said, “I won’t pretend I wouldn’t of fought Mike. No use. He was a Lane. I’d of met him, like I met his brother, and I’d of given him warnin’.” It sounded very good, the way he said it. He changed his tone and went on, “Did someone say there was a bank hold-up?”

“No hold-up,” Bland told him. “Robbery at night.” The details were filled in by all present, each embroidering his version of the night’s events. When they had finished, Cape asked innocently, “Did this Wooten recognize any one of the bunch?”

“No, worse luck,” said Foster Deal. “They pinned him down. And the hoss he shot was stolen somewheres outa Silver country.”

At his end of the bar, Downey drained his glass in an access of glee, saw Cape’s eye upon him and sulked silently again. He was, after all, the key man, he told himself. Without him the blundering fools would be caught time and again. His was the subtle, clever way. Cape was a bully, Leb and Okay his brute pets.

Cape said, "I must find a place to board. I got just enough money to pay a week in advance. If any of you gents know where I could get a job..."

Foster Deal said, "I heard Miz Croy was thinkin' of lettin' a room. Willy Wooten couldn't stay there account of he's engaged to Pru and it wouldn't be proper. So it's still vacant."

Cape said humbly, "If the lady'll put up with me, Prudence Croy will be safe enough." He rolled the words on his tongue, took his departure from the bar and walked his horse down to the neat white house with the picket fence. The girl was in the garden, sunbonneted, graceful.

Miz Croy came out and said, "George Cape! You safe hereabouts?"

"Dick Bland just gave me a clean bill of health," he said, doffing his sombrero. His hair curled tightly on his head, his full lips were wet and red. Prudence stared at him and was immediately conscious of distaste. He went on, "Ma'am I need a refuge—and some home-cooked meals. I can pay enough until I get a job, I reckon. Foster Deal sent me over here."

Prudence bent to her gardening. Within her a small voice said over and over, *This man will never live in the same town with Willy Wooten.* They were as unlike as a puma and a snake. The man's eyes, his too-carlet lips were amazingly unattractive—and she had thought him handsome, at a distance. A little fear went through her, making her shiver in the sunlight. She heard her mother say, "Why, George, I fed you cookies when you were a button, I reckon I can feed you some now."

It was accomplished, and he brought his saddle bags into the house and put them in the upstairs room. Pru almost spoke to her mother, then realized that it was futile, that her mother would never put him out now. She wondered where Willy was, and what he thought and when he would return. There would be trouble, she knew, when Willy returned. . . .

Downtown a whirl of men talked all day. Injun Bull came back and flatly said the robbers had not gone northward. A new posse got together and started south, with Injun Bull, still doggedly hoping to pick up a trail, in command. The breed, a man of substance, was no fool. He was slow, but painstaking and Silverites respected him.

Pru worked her garden and when the man came swaggering down to deign to scatter his charm about the place, her demeanor was so frigid that her mother scowled and George Cape felt the first dash of cold water since his triumphant return to Silver. Thinking the girl merely coy, he flourished his big hat and departed for the Knave of Spades, where the gossip centered. He learned then how important was the loss of the securities to the town. It was no secret from anyone and he almost laughed aloud at the fright in public places, the haunted nightmare face of Mr. Carey.

AT GLORY MINE, Bull Slavin listened, then said, "I better send some of the boys down to town."

"Wish you wouldn't, Bull," said Willy Wooten earnestly. "There's allus been squabblin' between miners and cowmen. Foster and the others think George Cape's a misunderstood young hombre."

"When we tell about him, they'll know different," said Slavin grimly.

"We only know three of the gang," said Willy, as though Bull had given in and was going along with everything Willy said. It was the best way to get along with the husky mine super. "Me and Bud'll go down to town and check on some things and then we'll backtrack. I jest wanted to let you know we was workin'—and Bud wanted to get some fresh shirts. They got clean away in the night. We may have to go a long ways to find 'em. But we will. We found leetle signs up at Kneelin' Woman. Like this Leb Mueller spittin' tobacco juice all over everything. And a canvas sack from the Silver Bank."

"That doesn't sound like evidence to me," said Bull dourly. "I better send some men out to comb the hills. Miners ain't trackers, but they can shoot."

Willy said, "Later, mebbe. We'll send word to you, Bull. Thanks for everythin'." He saw Bud coming and got out, leaving the mine super grumbling that he wouldn't stand for thieves and kiffers around Glory.

Bud said, "We may have t' separate and chase down every robber's roost in the cities. But we know Leb Mueller and he's notorious."

Willy said, "I got a funny feelin'. Let's hurry t' town."

"Mebbe we can pick up some ideas, at

that," said Bud. "Mebbe Dick Bland knows somethin'."

"It's Pru," Willy said simply. "Sometimes I get hunches she ain't feelin' well, or somethin' ain't right with her. It's because . . ." He looked shyly away from Bud at the side of the road . . . "it's because the way we feel 'bout each other. She gets the same way 'bout me. If I'm in a gun fight or somethin' . . ."

Bud said callously, "Must be annoyin' to both of ye."

Willy sighed, then whistled aimlessly under his breath. It wasn't any use trying to explain that feeling to Bud, who had never been in love. But the more he whistled the more he worried. He was going on the idea that the robbers would get out and head for cities where they could spend their money. If he were wrong he could be leading Bud into hiyu trouble, there wasn't any two ways about that. He had to think, and with him, to whistle was to cogitate.

They rode thus into town. By an effort of will, Willy made for the Krave of Spades rather than Pru's house. He hitched the gray, which he had retrieved from Glory Mines' corral, and glanced curiously at a black horse tethered nearby. He crossed the board walk with Bud at his heels and went into the bar.

The first person he saw was Downey at the far end, sopping up a whiskey. The second was George Cape, between Foster Deal and Dick Bland, smiling, obviously very much at home. The third was Mr. Carey, who eyed him with no friendliness whatsoever, turned his back and did not speak.

Willy eased his way down the bar, going spider-wise. Bud Lott's young face had frozen instantly into hard smoothness. Between Downey's post and the friendly group which included Cape was a space which Willy pre-empted. Bud took elbow room at his side.

Red Morgan, a great diplomat, put two bottles of sarsaparilla before the young men. They poured without words. Red shrugged and went back to serving whiskey to the older men. Willy's eyes sought the mirror, looking for immediate action, for Leb Mueller and the mysterious unknown who was the fourth bandit.

Only Downey and Cape were present and they pretended to be strangers. Bud

watched Downey. Willy watched Cape. After a moment Dick Bland separated himself from Cape and Deal and came down the bar and said, "Where you two been?"

Willy, in a low voice, said, "I'll tell you later."

Bland said irritably, "You had better tell me now. A posse has gone southward. Did you see them?"

Willy said, "I'm not talkin', Dick."

The Marshal said, "Willy, it seems as though you are looking for trouble. You brought Bud Lott in here and vouched for him. He never made a secret of his past and we all turned to and helped him. Now you two go gallivanting around the country with robbers running loose and . . ."

Willy turned away from the bar. Bud started to say something, but Willy's hand flicked his arm and Bud shut up. Willy's voice had become toneless, cold. He said, "Dick, yore my friend. I know there's been trouble. I know you're hard put to it. But Dick—jest drop that their line."

DICK BLAND had been Marshal of Abilene, of Dodge. Out of the East, he was one of the bravest and quickest gunslingers of the day. He faced Willy Wooten, his face crimson and the indignities of the past few days choked him. He was on the edge of action. Willy had ceased to be a friend.

A little, toneless whistle came on the air. It was involuntary, every man present was aware. It was Willy's tiny, rattlesnake's warning, one he never knew he made. His hands rested quietly on the bar's edge, propping his body away from the mahogany. He was on the toes of his small feet, balanced, waiting.

Downey snapped out of his whiskey haze, staring. Cape, secretly glowing with hope, started to make a move, but found Foster Deal in front of him. The cattleman said gravely into the tense silence, "You boys might's well stop that. We got things on our mind. Willy, you been makin' yerself awful scarce at a time Silver needs you. . . . But I reckon you got reasons. Jest go on out until Dick cools off. We can't spare either one of yuh."

Bland turned abruptly away, still angered, but obedient to the older man's behest. Willy's whistle ceased. His eyes went around and fastened on George Cape. He

said softly, "Why, Foster, you are dead right. Jest so's Dick don't put his mouth on my pardner. I see there is sure goin' to be hell t' pay in Silver. I see it jest as plain as day!"

Keeping his eyes on Cape, he led Bud out the way they had come in. When the doors swung behind him he put down his head and started for the Croy cottage, Bud trailing behind. At the corner of Bullard Street and Pru's street Bud said, "You didn't have no call to jump Bland. He's mighty swift and good with them irons."

Willy said, "T' hell with that. . . Watch here, huh, Bud?"

"If one of 'em comes within shootin' distance I'll blow him to hell," Bud said harshly. "I'm gettin' sick of bein' shoved around, ain't you?"

Willy said softly, "Yes, Bud. And I don't aim to stand for it much longer. But the town's with Cape. The folks are agin us. Lemme take it to Pru. She knows a heap more'n me about a thing like town sentiment."

He went down to the gate and Pru came running from the side yard. She drew him into an arbor and never had she thrown herself into his arms with such abandon. He kissed her again and again. Then she stammered. "George Cape. He has come to the house. Mother took him in. He—he stares at me, Willy."

Willy froze for a moment. Then he said gently, "He can't do you no harm, Pru. Don't you ever fear."

She said, "He is full of danger. I feel it in him. I see it in his mouth, his eyes."

Willy said, "Why sure, Prudence. I know what yuh mean. Lemme tell yuh about it, Prudence." He felt peaceful and his mind was suddenly working clearly and he could tell her convincingly what he guessed, what he knew. When he had finished he said anxiously, "You think I'm headed right, Pru?"

She took his face in her hands and kissed him again. "I know you are."

He said doggedly, "They'll all be agin me. But it's comin' to a showdown and I got to even things up."

She kissed him again. "Cape's bad. You're good. That's enough for me."

He said, "All right then. I better go back to Bud." He was happy. It was always good to take his troubles to Pru.

CHAPTER

Willy Whistles

6

The thing was, Willy thought, he had been close to every crime, closer than anyone. He had seen Cape shoot Johnny Lane. He had almost seen him shoot Mike Lane. He had been right on top of the burglary of the bank. He knew little which could be proven, but no one knew as much as he.

Cape sat in the kitchen, Miz Croy waiting on him, laughing at his sallies. Pru remained in her room and Miz Croy could not understand her daughter's sudden dislike of the new border. Cape laughed and came into town and talked to Foster Deal about a job on the ranch. Red Morgan put on the whiskey and Downey, still at the end of the bar, allowed himself to be drawn into the conversation, asserting that he too needed a job, and was formally introduced to George Cape. The circle was narrowing.

A rider had come in, and another was dismounting before the saloon. Men were debating the robbery and discussing Injun Bull's expedition, from which a messenger had returned saying there was track around Kneeling Woman. Cape, hearing this, gave a signal to the first rider and Leb Mueller got himself into the general conversation by asking about the robbery and again the details were gone over by every man present.

But folks so love to talk about tragedies, rehearsing them a thousand times, that when the man with the crippled left arm came in, he also was regaled with the story—in which Downey and Cape, as experienced listeners, now helpfully joined in. Within the afternoon's space of time they were all one, with Cape and the other newcomers as much a part of the crowd as Foster Deal.

Willy and Bud were here and there, and they managed to get into the bank despite Mr. Carey's apathy toward them. Poking about in the ruins of the safe, Bud turned over a burnt-edged piece of paper. It was half of a green note. Then, outside, Willy called. Bud went to join him.

At the end of the building, toward the rear, there were several splashes on the plastered adobe, long, brown smears. "Mueller," said Willy. "His mark. Tobacco juice."

Bud said, "I got a hunk of torn bill."

"May mean somethin'," said Willy. "We got Mueller tied in, anyway. Let's go over to the Knave of Spades and have a sass."

Bud said, "Seems like we're most big enough for whiskey." He was half in jest, but he had drunk a lot of liquor in his outlaw days and sometimes he regretted the fun of getting half a snootful.

Willy said, "I'll tell yuh, Bud. I wisht I could drink. I would, too, 'ceptin' I'm scared."

"Scared? Of what, gettin' into a shoot-out?"

"No, I kin shoot good enough in a bar," said Willy seriously. "It's on account of Bronch Wooten. He'd of died a rich man hadn't booze got in his way. I sure liked my old man, but he punished the bottle awful."

Bud considered this. Then he said, "Well, the Bible sez somethin' 'bout the sins of the fathers. . . ."

They entered the Knave of Spades. Willy's eye picked out Downey and George Cape at once, saw that they were together. His mind leaped at this possibility and clung there, but his eye went around again and stopped, chilly, upon Leb Mueller. Dick Bland was actually conversing with this man who was billed in Johnny Lane's office as wanted.

It occurred to him then that he should quietly walk out and go down to Lane's office and bring back the dodger and spread it in front of Bland, whose stubbornness had stabbed at Willy yesterday. He saw Bud's face tighten at sight of the wanted man and thought again.

He would probably never make the journey down the street and back if he attempted it. He could read that in George Cape's eyes now.

He stared at the big man, remembering what Pru had said, that he was evil and looked it. Willy knew exactly what the girl meant. He wheeled, crabwise, going the length of the bar. Unless they opened up right now, in the midst of the Silverites, he could at least maintain good position for what was to come. He was fully aware now that he had made a big mistake.

This band, of which he alone had knowledge, was too smart to head out to spend their gains while Willy Wooten lived. He had been too close on their trail. They did not know how much he had against them—

but they were not taking any chances. Cape was cleverer than he had believed. He was bitter at himself for underestimating an opponent, a cardinal sin in his book.

He saw the traditional line-up, Cape a step or two away from Downey, and Mueller wide, sort of riding point. They had him in the semi-circle of their guns. He wondered when the ball would open.

Then he cursed himself savagely, for almost making another error. He had completely forgotten, for that instant, the fourth man. It was now necessary for him to pick this one out of the crowd.

He took a look at Bud, and then he got it. The three he knew had him enfiladed. But they did not have Bud covered, because Bud was spreading, not staying close to Willy, giving himself—and Willy—elbow room to fight. He saw the brutish face of the man and his quick eyes noted something out of kilter, something wrong. In a second he detected the left arm. It was shorter than the other. The man wore only a right hand gun, but his left hand was long-fingered and looked normal. He drank whiskey and he was directly in line with Bud Lott.

All these things ran through Willy's head in a moment. Then Leb Mueller was saying loudly, "Jine us in a drink. Death to outlaws!" He was addressing Willy. Foster Deal and Dick Bland were drinking with him and with the magnetic George Cape.

Willy lifted his sass and said drily, "I'm with you. . . . Mueller!"

Leb Mueller put his glass slowly on the bar. He said stonily, "Sorry, son. My name's Carter."

THERE was a rule Willy knew by heart. Bronch Wooten had taught it to him, and especially in bars he thought of Bronch, his reckless, terrible father. Willy said in his soft young voice, "Why, I beg your pardon, suh. Seemed to me I saw your picture. In my old friend's office."

"Never had one taken," said Mueller. He raised his voice querulously. "Say, young feller, are you pickin' a quarrel with me?"

Dick Bland said sharply, "Willy, you've no call to start something with this stranger."

"He may be a stranger to you, but he

ain't to your big pardner, George Cape!" said Willy distinctly.

Bud Lott had caught onto the fourth man and was stepping quietly out of line and setting himself free for action. George Cape looked somewhat annoyed, as though the proceedings were not according to his plan. . . .

Cape laughed easily and said, "This young feller is really hot about somethin'. His girl was tellin' me this morning how he was off his feed or something."

Willy endured the lie steadily and the slur with some difficulty. He said, "That lanky one, Downey, saved Cape's life after he downed Johnny Lane with his hideout gun in his hand, makin' Johnny draw, but havin' him covered all time. I'd of got Cape off that hoss if it wasn't for Downey. Then there's the tobacco juice on the side of the bank buildin', which puts Mueller with Cape on that job for sure. . . ."

Cape shouted, "That's a damn lie! I don't have to stand for that!"

It had all gone awry. Before Mueller and that other fire-eater, Keller, could pick a fight with this youth, the ball had really opened. Cape's great capacity for leadership failed him. He was glaring at Keller as though it were the crippled killer's fault that this atrocious thing had happened. Dick Bland was wheeling about, suspicious of everyone now.

Bud Lott said over the sudden hubbub, "And the big rat never even shot Mike. Because the killer was wearin' gauntlets. I seen the gauntlet on him. And this here other 'stranger' is wearin' them!"

Keller flinched despite himself. He wore gauntlets and his left hand darted to his side, where the gun was in a sewed-in pocket of his loose pants. It was the beginning and it threw confusion over the entire affair. Men ducked, not knowing what to believe, but aware the lead would kill innocent, guilty or bystanders.

Willy was backed against the bar, and he was whistling. Bud Lott had drawn and was holding Keller, watching him. Then Keller fired, but Bud fired first and Keller went backwards with a bullet in his brain.

George Cape was near the door. He took two strides. Leb Mueller, shouting something, had two revolvers in his hands. Dick Bland and Foster Deal closed in on him and with one sudden motion disarmed him,

pinning him to the wall. Downey was already running, but a man tripped him. George Cape made the street on a dead run, and he was whistling now and Willy Wooten was after him.

The big man wheeled and fired two shots. They missed. Willy aimed at the gun in the man's hand. It was a bad target but Willy was playing in luck. The gun went out of his hand and Cape cursed in pain. Then he called out in a ringing voice to his horse and Willy knew that voice from Glory Mine.

The horse came and Cape made his mount, wringing his shocked right hand. He was a superb rider and he knew better than to ride away from Willy and get shot, yet he had to get to Pru's house and his saddlebags. His plans depended on those bags and he had had everything going perfectly. He could scarcely believe, even now, that Wooten was not dead in the saloon.

He rode straight at the kneeling little figure, drawing his hideout gun with his left hand. The man on horseback, charging, is always fearsome, he knew.

He came close, leaned down. Wooten was not there to be shot. Somehow he had got behind the jump of the horse. Somehow he was up in a gigantic leap.

An arm was around Cape's neck. Cape came down backwards, off the horse, screaming at the unexpectedness of it. He tried to get his gun around to bring upon his captor. The arm tightened around his neck, then the gun was kicked from his hand. He tried to batter the slight youth with his fists, his poise gone, fighting blindly now.

Willy ducked, thinking of the slur this man had put upon Pru. He holstered the gun he had drawn. He stepped inside the wild swings of George Cape. He struck out as the miners had taught him. He was not a cowboy when he fought with his fists. He had learned from prize-fighting miners, hard as nails, and his blows went trip-hammer hard against the handsome face.

Gasping, wilting, George Cape went down. Willy stepped back. He was scarcely breathing. He said, "Dick, you better arrest him.

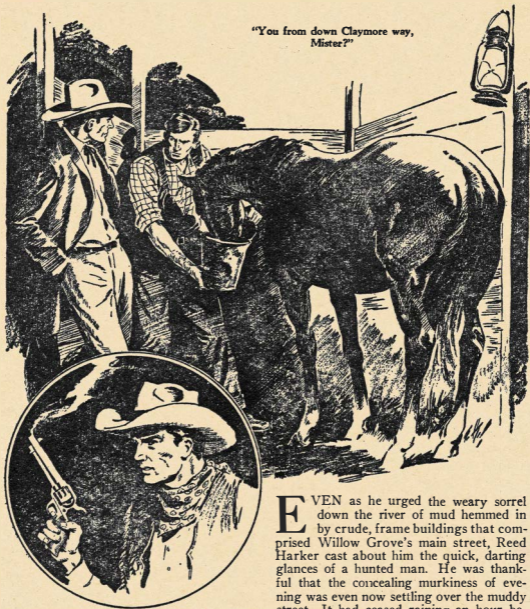
Bland said, "Sure, Willy. But can you prove anything?"

Pru Croy was coming down the street.

(Please continue on page 91)

HANGMAN'S WELCOME

"You from down Claymore way,
Mister?"



By **HARRISON COLT**

EVEN as he urged the weary sorrel down the river of mud hemmed in by crude, frame buildings that comprised Willow Grove's main street, Reed Harker cast about him the quick, darting glances of a hunted man. He was thankful that the concealing murkiness of evening was even now settling over the muddy street. It had ceased raining an hour before. The sullen, overcast sky promised a sudden and early dusk.

Reed Harker rode on slowly, past the stores, saloons, and dancehalls, now quiet

*It wasn't healthy to be a stranger riding into Willow Grove—especially
a black-haired stranger . . . on a sorrel horse.*

and nearly deserted. Later, he knew, they would blaze with light, and echo with the sound of banging pianos, the howls and laughter of reckless men and painted girls.

As he dismounted before the large, open door of the town's combined blacksmith shop and livery stable, the man stepped around the corner of the barn. Reed, in the failing light, had a quick impression of a bewhiskered, deeply-lined face and graying hair. He gave Reed a slow, deliberate and careful glance. Then he brushed past him, and kept on down the street at a plodding gait.

Reed stared after him, frowning. Something in the way the man looked at him was vaguely disturbing. But a moment later he shrugged, and led his horse inside the gloomy barn. A huge, burly-shouldered man with a wide, good-natured face and twinkling eyes came forward and took the reins.

"McLeod?" Reed asked, recalling the crudely-lettered name above the barn door.

The big man grinned and nodded. He cast an appraising eye over the sorrel. "You got a nice bit of horseflesh there, Mister," he remarked, adding, "I see you come a long way."

"I got to go on this evening. Will you be here?"

McLeod nodded. "I'll be here all evenin', mister. My hired man got took by the war-fever. Went back East to enlist. Makes pretty long hours fer me, until I kin find someone to help out."

Reed waited while the liveryman removed the saddle, and followed as the sorrel was led to a stall in the rear. He leaned back against the rough boards of the side-wall, looking on while the big man watered and fed the horse.

For a while McLeod proceeded about his work in silence. But suddenly he looked up, eyeing Reed shrewdly.

"You from down Claymore way, Mister?"

Reed tensed. For a moment he didn't reply. "What gives you that idea?" he inquired then, his gaze hard and unfriendly on the other man's face.

McLeod shrugged his powerful shoulders. "Dunno," he said carelessly. "Just figured you might be."

"I come from east of here. Bardlesville."

The big man grunted. "Then you would not know anything about what happened down at Claymore?"

"I reckon I wouldn't."

"Someone shot and killed Jesse Murdock."

Reed Harker said nothing.

"You don't seem much surprised, Mister." The liveryman leaned the pitchfork he'd been using against the wall, and stared curiously at the younger man. "You've heard of Jesse Murdock, ain't you?"

Reed nodded. "He was second in command to Quantrill when he raided Lawrence. How did it happen?"

"I understand this feller rides into Quantrill's camp makin' off like he's anxious to join up. A couple of days later he goes with Murdock on a foragin' expedition, just the two of 'em. They're ridin' down a road when this gent goes for a gun and blasts Murdock out of the saddle. Quantrill's men are combin' the roads fer him. They think mebbe he might be ridin' this way."

"That so?" Reed Harker's eyes, bright and watchful, did not move from the big man. "They got any idea how this gent looks?"

"Yeah." McLeod peered intently through the gloom of the big barn at Reed Harker. His alert eyes took in the younger man's thick black hair under the flat-crowned Stetson, his straight, well-shaped features, his long, angular jaw, and the black, intense eyes under heavy brows.

"Young chap. Good-looking. Dark hair. About yer height and build, I understand."

"Is that all?"

"One thing more. He was ridin' a sorrel horse."

REED slid his right hand inside his coat, closed his fingers around the chill hardness of the derringier he wore under his arm.

"You haven't got any notion I'm that man, have you, McLeod?" So quiet was his voice, it seemed almost a whisper.

There was a faint glitter of humour in the big man's eyes. "Nary a notion, friend. And even if you was, you'd have naught to fear from me. I don't advertise it around, bein' as I'm livin' where I am, but my sympathies has always been on the Free-soil side of the argyment. To my way of thinkin', the gent who pumped lead into Jesse

Murdock deserves the thanks of every decent person on the Border. I only wish he'd done the same for Quantrill and Anderson while he was at it!"

Reed studied the livery-owner thoughtfully. From the conviction in the other's tones, he sensed McLeod was stating the truth about his feelings. He relaxed his grip on the derringer, but did not take his hand from under his coat.

"Wouldn't you say the man who killed Murdock would be a fool to come to Willow Grove?"

"Knowin' the way most folks around here feels, I'd say he would be either a damn fool or a mighty smart man."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, I reckon the last thing Quantrill or his men would be expectin' this gent to do would be to ride into Willow Grove. Especially when the place is known as a recruitin' station for the guerillas. And with the Missouri jest a few miles further on, and safety waitin' on the Kansas side of the river. Fer that reason, I'm thinkin' he could be a smart man. But on the other hand, with his looks so well known, he might be recognized in town any moment, and then his goose'd be cooked."

Reed reached down into his belt and pulled out the bulk of a heavy-laden money pouch. He selected a gold coin and spun it through the air in the direction of McLeod. The big man caught it deftly, stared in surprise.

"A twenty-dollar gold piece. I'm afraid I can't change that, mister."

Reed smiled faintly. "I like my horse to have the best of everything. Well, I think I'll be getting over to the hotel. You'll be here when I come back?"

"I'll be here. But there's jest one more thing. They say that Jesse had a small fortune in gold hidden in his belt, and when they found him it was gone. If you—I mean, if that man we was talkin' about is wise, he won't go carrying a loaded money pouch around with him. My advice—What was that?"

A sound from the front of the stable made him to break off abruptly. Again Reed Harker's hand sought the butt of the derringer inside his coat.

"Who's there?" called McLeod, the twinle gone out of his little eyes.

The shapes of man and horse formed

dark silhouettes against the lighter oblong of the barn door. "It's Bob Larrimore," replied a pleasant voice. "I've leavin' my horse for the night, if it's all right with you."

"See you later, McLeod," said Reed, and headed for the door. As he passed the man and horse, he gave both a swift glance of appraisal. The horse was a powerful animal, sleek and shiny-coated. Except for white markings on the face, it was coal-black.

Larrimore was a dark, smooth-faced man with a noticeably square jaw. A mild grin was on his lips, as he led the horse forward in the semi-dusk of the barn. Reed wondered how much of their conversation he might have heard, if, indeed, he had heard any. There was a possibility that the man might have been standing outside of the entrance for sometime, before the restless pawing of his horse betrayed his presence.

Reed stepped from the big barn, plowed through mud and water until he reached the unpainted two-story frame hotel some fifty yards further up the street.

He engaged a room, and presently found himself alone in a small upstairs chamber whose window looked out on the street. Its furniture consisted solely of a bed and a dresser with a cracked mirror, on which stood a chipped wash-bowl, a pitcher and a kerosene lamp.

After locking the door, he threw himself wearily onto the bed. But almost immediately he raised himself and sat on the edge. Lying down, the temptation was too great to close his eyes and drift off into a sound sleep. And he had no intention of remaining in Willow Grove longer than was necessary to take care of the business that had brought him to this hot-bed of pro-slavery sentiment.

The room became grayer and murkier, but he did not light the lamp. He sat there, his face dimly reflected in the cracked mirror, his dark eyes staring blankly from under heavy brows.

IT WAS a face that jutted with a new hardness; a hardness that emphasized and deepened the lines about his mouth, that was reflected sharply from the depths of the harsh, bitter eyes. It was a hardness born of sorrow and vengeful hatred of the

rebel band who had murdered his father.

They had descended upon the quiet of Laurence, Kansas at daybreak—Quantrill and his raiders, killing, looting, burning stores and homes.

Reed Harker, returning from an overnight visit to a friend living on a farm east of town, had encountered a hard-riding column of Federal troops. These were Major Preston Plumb's men, and they were galloping hurriedly in the direction of Laurence. It was then that he became aware of the black smoke lifting from the burning buildings in town, and spurred his horse forward through the choking haze of dust left by the blue-clad cavalrymen.

He reached Laurence on the heels of the troopers, to find the Harker house a crackling pyre of flames, his father wounded and dying.

Later, in the bedroom of a neighboring house, Jason Harker had managed to utter a few pain-racked sentences. They concerned the fact that a pock-marked man with sallow features and tawny yellow hair had forced him to open the safe, and that the considerable sum of money inside had been taken. Taken by the same man who a moment later had shot down the old man in cold blood. It was money entrusted to Jason Harker by a former neighbor, Dr. Armstrong, who had gone off to war, and wanted to be certain that his wife and small daughter would not be left penniless if something happened to him.

Reed, knowing his father, realized that the thought of having failed his friend was more painful to the old man than any agony caused by bullets that had torn his flesh. He had promised Jason Harker to recover Armstrong's money and restore it to them, every penny. "Don't worry about it, Dad. And don't try to say any more. You need to rest."

A faint smile crossed the old man's face, and his eyes had seemed very gentle as they rested on his son's face. After that he had turned his head on the pillow and died.

It was then that the grimness had come into Reed Harker's face. He had armed himself and ridden eastward, crossing over to the Missouri side of the river.

Two weeks later, under the guise of a new recruit, he had come into the camp

in a dense thicket where the guerrillas were hiding. But it was not until nearly a week later, after the band had decided to split up for greater safety, that he'd found his chance to be alone with the pock-marked man.

They had been riding together down a soggy forest trail in a driving rain when Reed pulled his gun. A spark of panic had flickered for a moment in Jesse Muddock's eyes. Then Reed's bullets had ripped into him. Reed remembered how he had looked, sprawled awkwardly across the water-filled ruts of the road, rain splashing and rolling on his dead face.

Reed Harker had killed without compunction. And he had been ready to kill again, when he momentarily had suspected the big liveryman, McLeod, of being an enemy. He sensed that the thing was happening to him that had happened to many others.

Strife and blood-shed and violence had darkened the soil of the territory along the Kansas-Missouri border. It had left its mark on the men who lived there. They came in time to the belief that a man had to be brutal and hard and unfeeling to exist in this bloody battleground of bitterly conflicting ideas, this turbulent land extending along the banks of the muddy Missouri.

* * *

The little room was quite dark now, and Reed went to the window and stared out. With a sense of satisfaction, he saw that dusk had deepened into the velvety blackness of a starless, cloud-obscured night.

He moved toward the door, then recalling McLeod's warning, stopped and stood for a moment gazing about him. He took the bulky money pouch from his belt, tucked it into the space between mattress and head-board, and carefully replaced the bed clothes. Next, he removed the deringer from his shoulder holster and gave it a careful inspection. After a last quick glance around the room, he locked the door behind him and went downstairs.

In answer to his inquiry, the clerk rubbed his cheek thoughtfully. Reed thought he detected a faint stirring of hostility deep in his eyes.

"Armstrong?" he repeated slowly. "There were some folks by that name living around here. A lady with a little girl."

"That's them," said Reed quickly. "You know where I might find them?"

"They come to stay at the Grant farm about a year ago. I understand she was Mrs. Grant's sister. But they left after the fire."

"Fire!" Reed stared. "You mean they were burned out?"

The clerk shrugged his thin shoulders. "Mebbe. The Grants were suspicioned of having Abolitionist sympathies."

"You know where they went?"

"Somebody said they moved over to Osage City on the Kansas side. That's all I know."

REED thanked him and turned away. There was no reason now for him to remain in Willow Grove. He would slip out of town under cover of darkness, and ride directly to the ferry at Belman's Crossing. Morning would find him back in Kansas, where Quantrill and his men would hardly dare follow.

There remained only to fetch his horse from the livery and upon his return to the hotel, to recover the money pouch from his room and settle the hotel bill. Reed felt the cheerful conviction that nothing was likely to interfere with his plans now.

As he came down the hotel steps, the night wind felt pleasantly cool on his face. Lights from brightly blazing saloons and dance-halls fell in amber patterns across the muddy street, hacking sharply at the blackness of the shadows.

Reed started down the street, his boots making little sucking sound with each step. He came to the livery and stepped through the open door. The barn was gloomy and dark; a single lantern fastened to an over-

head beam cast a sickly glow onto the floor but left the walls and corners hidden in shadow.

Reed stood for a moment, just inside the door, a faint uneasiness stirring within him.

"McLeod," he called. "You there?"

Someone moved in the dimness at the rear of the barn. A man limped forward, the feeble rays of the lantern outlined his shuffling, stooped figure. His eyes, set in an ugly, hard-bitten face, seemed to Reed as vicious and menacing as a hawk's.

"What yuh want?"

"Where's McLeod?"

The man was slow in replying. His eyes never wavered in their intentness on Reed's face. "Somethin' come up. He left me to take keer o' the stable while he's gone."

"Funny. He told me he'd be here all evening."

"It's like I told yuh," said the stooped man, a note of impatience in his voice. "Somethin' come up. Anything I kin do fer yuh, mister?"

"Yes. You can fetch my horse."

The man nodded and turned away quickly. But not quickly enough to hide the gleam that had come into his eyes. He limped away in the direction of the stalls.

Reed gazed after him, frowning. His eyes probed the shadows of the big barn, but could make out nothing. The blackness was too opaque. Half a dozen men might be hiding in the darkness, and he'd never know the difference.

The stooped man was shuffling back now, leading the sorrel mare. "Here's yer horse, mister."

Reed's eyes narrowed. His mouth felt dry. He was staring down at the straw-



TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER



strewn earth at his feet. He said abruptly, "That's not my horse."

"Not yer horse?" The man stared sullenly, almost angrily. "Yuh sure, mister?"

"Hell, man!" Reed's voice held the correct amount of surliness. "Don't you think I know my own horse? This is a sorrel. Mine is a black with white markings on the face."

The stooped man still stared at Reed, as though unwilling to believe he was not the sorrel's owner.

"Now if you'll just have the kindness to bring me my own horse," snapped Reed. "I haven't got all night!"

"All right, mister. Keep yer shirt on," snarled the bent figure. His eyes were baffled and angry. "Why didn't yuh tell me the big black was your'n?" Grumbling and muttering to himself, he led the sorrel back to his stall.

Reed began to breathe easier. Again he looked down at the straw-covered floor around the entrance to the livery. His eyes rested on lumps of caked mud that must have fallen from the boots of a considerable number of men. Some of the clods were not yet dry.

AGAIN Reed's eyes searched the darkness beyond the feeble yellow glow of the lantern. He could see nothing. But he was convinced that men crouched silently in the shadows, waiting for whoever would claim the sorrel mare.

"Here yuh are, mister." The stooped man had emerged again into the sickly circle of light, this time leading the big black horse that Reed had glimpsed being brought into the barn by pleasant-voiced Bob Larrimore. "Don't tell me this'n ain't yers, because it's the only other horse left here this evenin'."

Reed hurriedly saddled, paid the man, and rode out of the stable. He swung the horse up the street in the direction of the hotel. Once he had secured his money pouch from its hiding place, and settled his hotel bill, he'd lose no time getting out of town.

As he approached the hotel, the doors of the saloon next door swung wide and a man stepped into the street. A shaft of yellow brightness filtered through the doorway of the saloon where the batwings still swung slowly back and forth. It knifed

through the darkness and fell sharply on the man's features. It was Bob Larrimore.

Reed cursed savagely, and driving in his spurs, plunged past him down the street. Tiny clumps of mud flew through the air as the horse's hooves dug into the muck and mire of the street.

The big black swung past the hotel at a wild gallop and headed out of town. There was no chance of stopping now to recover the money pouch. Glancing back over his shoulder, Reed saw Larrimore still standing in the light from the saloon doors. But even as he looked, the young man turned and started to run in the direction of the livery stable.

A moment later as the thought struck him, Reed reined up. He sat his horse for a moment staring back at the brightly lit section of town. After a moment he made up his mind, swung his horse, and moved cautiously back in the direction of the hotel.

There was a good chance that he need not fear immediate pursuit. Larrimore had caught only a fleeting glimpse of the big black. He could hardly be sure that it was his own horse he had seen. He would go first to the livery to make sure that his horse was gone.

Reed had a feeling that it would take some time for the black's owner to convince the men hiding in the shadows of the big barn of the truth of his story. And a few minutes was all Reed needed to settle his business at the hotel.

He dismounted a short distance from the hotel, and leading his horse cut through an empty lot until he reached the rear of the row of frame, false-fronted buildings. Quickly he made his way to the back of the hotel, tied his horse, and edged along a dark areaway until he reached the street. A glance up and down its length assured him that as yet everything was quiet.

He slid hastily around the corner of the building and darted up the hotel steps. As he stepped across the lobby and mounted the stairs to his room, he forced himself to move without too great an appearance of haste. It was hardly a minute later that he came back downstairs, and halted beside the desk.

He was settling his account when heavy boots thudded on the porch, and a man lunged hurriedly into the room.

"They got the ornery varmint thet killed

Jesse!" he called exultantly. "Walked into a trap they sot fer him at McLeod's livery!" He turned and hurried out into the street again.

"Hear that, sir?" The clerk's eyes were shining. "They caught him! Now that cowardly murderer will know how it feels to stretch hemp!"

Excited shouts were sounding in the street. Reed Harker stepped from the hotel just as the doors of various saloons and dance-halls along the street were flung wide. Quick-moving shadows danced across the lighted areas as men poured through the doors. Loud voices lifted in inquiry. Heavy boots made soggy sounds in the mud as men plunged past.

Fifty yards up the street, in front of the livery, a crowd was forming. Light pouring through the open doors of the dance-hall opposite lent an eery effect to the scene. It threw the faces of some individuals into the brightest glare, while others a foot away were buried in deepest shadow.

The crowd grew in size, packing the street. By this time, the buildings were emptied of people. Reed glimpsed dance-hall girls and entertainers huddled curiously at doors or windows. Lamp-light fell garishly across their rouged features.

It came over him suddenly that this was more than he'd dared to hope for. Larrimore had walked into the trap set for him. That meant that he had merely to return to his horse waiting at the rear of the hotel, mount, and ride away without fear of pursuit.

By the time the mob discovered its mistake—if it ever did—the man they sought would be safely out of their reach on Kansas soil. Reed remembered what the hotel clerk had said about hanging. If they didn't discover that they had the wrong man, it would be tough on Larrimore. But that was hardly any of Reed Harker's concern.

HE MOVED down off the hotel porch and was on the point of slipping back to where he had left his horse when a roar went from the crowd. It was an angry, brutish sound.

A little knot of men had pushed through the wide door of the livery. In the harsh glare streaming from the dance-hall across the street, Reed glimpsed Bob Larrimore.

His Stetson was gone, and his damp, dark

hair dangled before his eyes. A trickle of red crawled from one corner of his mouth like a bright-colored worm. He struggled angrily in the grip of several men.

"I tell you I had nothing to do with Murdock's murder," he protested loudly. "You men know who I am—Bob Larrimore. You know I live with my mother and sister on a farm north of here. What reason would I have for killing Murdock?"

"How d'we know yuh ain't a damyan?" Reed recognized the voice as that of the stooped man with the glittery eyes. As he caught a glimpse of him now, standing beside Larrimore, he had the impression that those eyes were gleaming fiercely. "As fer as I know, yuh ain't never rode with Quantrell or any of the others that's been fightin' fer the Confedrac'y!"

"That's right, Frake," called a voice from the crowd. "I never seed him with us!"

"An' then yuh give yerself away when yuh come to the stable after yer horse," continued Frake.

"But I tell you—the sorrel's not my horse. I brought in a big black with white about the muzzle. You can ask McLeod."

"Fetch McLeod," directed Frake. "Not that his word means much around here. We all know he's a damn yank-lover!"

The huge liveryman was brought out. His powerful wrists were tied behind him and he was gagged.

"It's like Larrimore says," he insisted when the gag had been removed. "His horse was a big black. The sorrel was brought in earlier by a stranger. I have no idea who he was."

A gravel-voiced southerner in the mob shouted, "Y'all air crazy if'n yuh take his word!"

"What's all the talk?" demanded a second voice. "String up the dirty son is what I say!"

Reed had seen and heard enough. He drew back to the dark corridor between hotel and saloon, cast a quick glance about to make sure he was not observed, and slid into the darkness between the two buildings.

He groped his way back to the spot where he had left his horse. He untied him, leading him along the rear of the buildings, back across the empty lot and into the street once again.

They emerged at a point some distance down the street from the crowd before

the livery. The angry voices came fainter to him now, and he could no longer make out the faces of individuals.

There was a sudden tightness to his lips, a grimace to his face as he stood staring up the street. Then he swung up into the saddle, and drove in his spurs. The big black headed for the outskirts of town.

As he rode, he found himself cursing softly. He kept seeing Larrimore's face as he had last glimpsed it, with blood trickling from the mouth, black hair spilling down across his forehead. And remembering what the man had said about the farm north of town and a mother and sister, who would be waiting his return.

Abruptly, for the second time in an hour, Reed Harker brought his horse to a halt at the edge of town.

Then, after a slight moment of hesitation, he turned his horse and galloped back up the street. He knew he could not sleep well nights if he didn't remain to find out how things went with Bob Larrimore. Not that there was anything Reed Harker could do about it. He was not fool enough to consider taking on an entire town.

As he rode up, angry voices were still arguing loudly. But this time, Reed recognized that the voices were those of Frake and a new arrival on the scene. He arrived in time to hear the new voice shout:

"Damn if I care what yuh do to this yere gent; Hang 'im or not, as yuh please! All I know is—he ain't the one who rode the sorrel into town this afternoon!"

"Clay," broke in Frake's voice impatiently, "Yuh're ten diff'rent kinds of a fool! He's got to be the same man! Everybody that seed him says he's the same!"

The new arrival snorted. "Wal, he's got dark hair jest like the other, and his build's about the same. But I'm tellin' yuh, Frake, he ain't the one! I gave thet gent a good look when he rode in and I'd know 'im anywhere's!"

It seemed he had some supporters in the crowd. One of them called out, "Clay's right! Larrimore ain't the man who was ridin' the sorrel. You boys has made a mistake!"

Frake took a dragging step forward, and his face, sharply limned in the yellow flood of light from across the street, was twisted into a snarl of rage. His eyes were worried.

"Men," he shouted, "are yuh gonna let a pair of half-blind hoot-owls talk yuh out of givin' this dirty murderer his just deserts?"

A MURMUR went up from the crowded street. But there was a note of uncertainty about it. Reed sensed that it would take very little to swing the issue either way. He spurred his horse forward. The densely packed throng had to fall back to avoid being trampled.

"What Clay says is right!" he heard himself shouting. The words spilled out before he was aware of their possible consequences. "I'm just up from Claymore. That's not the man who killed Murdock!"

Faces turned, peered back at him. Clay swung around, and Reed experienced a queer sensation in the pit of his stomach as he glimpsed that bearded, deeply-lined face. Clay was the man who had scrutinized him so closely as he had been dismounting in front of the stable a few hours earlier!

As yet the man gave no sign of recognition. But as the black stirred restlessly, light from the dance-hall fell momentarily across the features of his rider.

Clay's eyes widened. He gave an excited shout. "That's him, boys! That's the feller rode the sorrel into town! Don't let him get away!"

Reed swung his horse and dug in his spurs. As the black leaped forward, there was wild confusion in the street. Men scrambled away from the plunging hooves. A woman screamed in fright. Reed cursed savagely and pulled his derringer.

A man flung out of the mob, tried to halt the charging black. The derringer in Reed's hand cracked, and the man fell back with a cry of pain.

Then the street was suddenly open before him. He bent low in the saddle, urged his horse forward at a reckless clip. Mud and water flew behind him as the big black responded, plowing through the heavy muck underfoot.

Now guns began barking at his rear. Bullets whined close to the plunging horse and rider. But he had left the lighted section of town behind him, and was now scarcely more than a deeper shadow in the blackness.

For a moment it seemed that luck was

with him and that he would get clean away. But then something rammed into his right thigh close to the hip. It was like the thrust of a red-hot ramrod.

He rode on, his whole body numb from the shock. Dimly he was aware that the last of the town's dark frame structures had fallen away behind him. The big black lumbered gallantly down the road.

Even now the pain and weakness started to set in. He locked his arms around the big black's neck and hung on desperately. And all the while, he was thinking how simple it would have been if that bullet had missed him.

Bob Larrimore's big black was a horse to win any man's admiration. Ordinarily, mounted on his back, Reed could have out-distanced any pursuit, and arrived at Belman's Crossing in plenty time to be ferried across before the pursuers came up. But, wounded as he was, Reed knew there was little chance of his being able to stick in his saddle until the river was reached.

As the big black drove through the night, Reed Harker felt himself growing weaker. In the back of his mind he had a picture of himself sliding from his saddle as consciousness slipped away.

With fumbling fingers he removed his belt and wrapped it around one wrist, leaving a little play. Then he locked both arms around the horse's neck and forced his other wrist into the leather loop.

Thus he rode on, pain jolting fiercely through his body with every movement of the horse. His trouser leg felt wet, soaked by blood running down his thigh. It was only by sheer determination now that he kept the blackness from closing in around him. And after a while even that did not avail. . . .

When Reed Harker opened his eyes sometime later, he felt a vague astonishment. He was in bed and his leg was bandaged. He managed to turn his head on the pillow and gaze about the large, well-furnished bedroom.

For a moment it almost seemed that he was back in his own room in the Harker house in Laurence. For a moment he almost believed that the raid, the murder of his father, the destruction of their home, were parts of a night-marish dream.

But then the door opened, and a girl stepped into the room. Reed knew that it

wasn't his room, after all. That the nightmare hadn't been a dream.

The girl was slim and lovely. She had russet hair and turquoise eyes and when she smiled he thought she was more beautiful than any girl he had ever seen.

When she saw that Reed's eyes were open, she motioned to someone in the next room. A man came through the door and stood beside her at the foot of the bed. He must have noticed the amazement in Reed's eyes for he began to chuckle.

"No," said Bob Larrimore, "you're not looking at a ghost. They didn't hang me—thanks to you!"

"But how—how did I get here?"

"Old Hickory brought you."

"Old Hickory? Oh, you mean the horse."

Bob Larrimore continued to grin at him. "You must have fainted from loss of blood. Naturally the horse headed for home."

Of course. When the big black had been left to his own resources, he had returned to his home stables. But what of the pursuit?

At the thought, Reed stirred restlessly, and the pain made him flinch.

"You must lie still," said the girl. "You're safe here."

"But they'll be hunting for me."

"No need to worry," Larrimore assured him. "They figger you've slipped across the river into Kansas by this time."

"That was my intention."

"Where did you figger on crossing?"

"At Belman's Crossing."

Bob Larrimore gave a sharp whistle of astonishment. "You *have* played in luck!"

Reed Harker asked, "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean they were waiting for you at Belman's Crossing—half a dozen of Quantrell's men. Just as they were at a dozen other likely crossings up and down the river. You're best chance was to lay low and wait until they gave up the search. Which was, as luck would have it, just what you were forced to do. Man! You've been loaded down with horseshoes!"

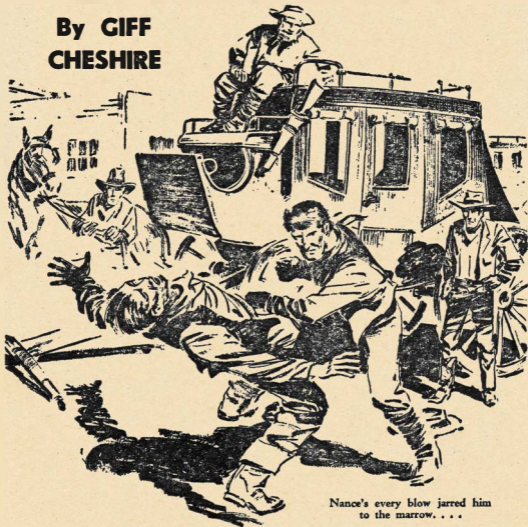
"Bob," broke in the girl, "haven't you got some chores to do in the barn? I think you two have done enough talking."

Bob Larrimore grinned. "This is my kid sister, Ellen. You'll have to thank her for finding you and putting you to bed.

(Please continue on page 92)

YELLOW-BACK'S BLUFF

By GIFF
CHESHIRE



Nance's every blow jarred him
to the marrow. . . .



Link Indy, division super of the Rocket Stage Line, knew he was making a big mistake in keeping his deadly six-shooter holstered—and using his fists on burly Brian Nance.



LINK INDY knew that the showdown could be put off no longer. For days Brian Nance, knowing it too, had been crowding toward this moment—with every whipman, hostler and stable hand in the Sandstone division of the big Rocket Stage Line knowing it.

Brian Nance, an open sneer on his handsome face, now confronted Link. Nance's big, beautifully muscled body was spring-tight and eager, his brown eyes glinting in ill-concealed triumph.

Link Indy regretted the stupidity of his hot-headed threat the day before. Yet he

had climbed into the division superintendent's job through just such belligerence. A man had to be tough and quick and hot-spoken to hold the job. Rocket hired the best hands in the staging game, and it took a good man to boss them—a man who could dominate a moment like this.

"You heard what I said yesterday, Nance," Link said, his voice low but tight. "I promised to whip the daylighters out of the first driver who brought in another beat-up string. Them spans of yours look like they sure took a lacing."

Brian Nance's hard stare never changed. He shrugged. "What do you expect? Rocket's got to set record schedules. But it don't dare touch a rump with rawhide to do it. How do you think us whips're going to cut it?"

"With good driving," Link's voice still held a false calm. "Rocket whips are hired because they're supposed to be aces, and they're paid according. I was just over in the stables. You hid blood outta your leaders, coming in this afternoon."

Nance shrugged. "Mebbe I did. So I reckon I got your first whipping coming." He grinned openly.

Link moved in fast. He feinted for Nance's belly and, when the man reacted, drove a cracking right to his head. Nance hadn't expected it to be so savage and rocked back on his heels before he recovered. Yet it cost him no confidence. Nance was fifteen or twenty pounds heavier than Link, a born fighter, and he loved it. He was grinning as he retreated, shifted balance and surged back.

Link knew from the start that he was going to be licked—and what it would cost him. Out here a leader stood or fell on his physical supremacy as much as anything else. Those below Link, and those above him in the organization, would feel that way. Brian Nance was making his bid for Link's job.

Link fought it carefully, shrewdly, showing Nance's vicious fists the respect they deserved, trying to outsmart him, to drain off that advantage of skill and strength. Yet he couldn't even shatter the smile on Nance's confident face. Link reached the point where Nance's every blow jarred him to the marrow, putting a numbness in him, a slowness and lack of snap.

Link mustered everything he had for a

last furious flurry. He came out of a tricky retreat to send Nance sprawling in the deep dust of the Rocket yard. The half-dozen watchers gasped. It was the best Link had and, when Nance scrambled instantly to his feet, Link knew what the end would be. He fought stubbornly, defensively. When blackness suddenly boomed through his head, he was not surprised.

When Link regained his senses, he found that he was alone except for old Joe Fisher, a hostler. After a moment's dizziness, Link heaved himself groggily to his feet.

Fisher said gruffly, "He's been making talk for days that he was going to do it. You sure laid yourself open when you made that threat against the whips. I don't cotton to horse-whipping any more than you, but you should've threatened only to fire 'em."

"I can take a licking," Link growled.

"The point's this, bub. Actually, Brian Nance's scared of you. He's scared of your savvy, scared you're a better man than he is. Above all, he's scared of your gun. He'd of crawled on his hands and knees afore he'd of faced you that way. You sure was a knot-head giving him a chance to play his own game."

Link tramped into the office, his anger directed entirely at himself. He knew that Joe Fisher had spoken the truth. For it was widely known that Link Indy was fast and accurate with a six-shooter.

There was more to Brian Nance's ambitions than his hankering to run this division. Lately there had been sultry Bets Gibson. Bets wasn't exactly Link Indy's girl, but lately Brian Nance had been giving her a big play. Link readily admitted that Nance had got in a neat piece of work this day.

IT WAS already late afternoon, and on sudden impulse Link left the office. The sun still beat heavily on Sandstone's littered streets. On the main street, he paused as he sighted Jean Saladin of the Slash S on the opposite sidewalk. Grimly aware of Brian Nance's marks on him, Link turned across to the girl.

Jean Saladin's greeting was mild, though he knew she had noticed. She said, "Hello, Link. Have you seen Phil?"

Link shook his head. "Wetting his whistle, probably. How're things out at the Slash S?"

"They're fine, Link. Just fine," Jean turned toward her horse. "If you see Phil, tell him I went on."

"I sure will." Link watched her swing up lightly, nod to him and ride slowly down the street, and in the moment his hatred of Brian Nance was a dangerous thing. Brian Nance had thrown over Jean when he took a sudden interest in sultry Bets Gibson. As much as Link appreciated Bets Gibson's attractiveness, he had felt a deep, secret sympathy for Jean. Extremely pretty, herself, she was as devoted and loyal a person as he had ever met.

Link paced on down the sidewalk, thinking about her. The Slash S was a prosperous spread. Old Barney Saladin could have afforded to hire a special nurse in his last, paralyzed years. Yet his daughter had refused to hear of this. For six years, while other girls of her age were beguiling their days with suitors and finally marrying, Jean had remained a virtual prisoner out on the ranch.

Brian Nance had seen her on the streets of Sandstone shortly after he transferred to this division. He had paid open court to her, and nobody had doubted that he was sincere. Everybody had been glad for Jean who had made no secret of her happiness. Then, hardly a month after Barney Saladin died and left her free, Nance transferred his affections to Bets Gibson. This, too, had been in Link's mind when he had challenged Brian Nance to a fist fight.

Link went to his hotel room, scrubbed his battered face and changed to fresh clothes. He ate his supper calmly, aware of the buzz of talk about him in the background. A man might be well liked, but when he was whipped—there was a mark against him. This was a perverseness that he himself had felt about others. He did not blame his neighbors. But he began to realize that he was going to send his resignation in to the head office in Bligh City tomorrow morning.

In the early evening, Link rode out to Gibson's Place which was a mile below town on Cricket Creek. Pete Gibson ran his log-cabin saloon beyond the reach of town law and, cynically, he made no bones about using his dark and sultry daughter for customer bait. He ran games when the trade demanded, and the place had a long and unwholesome record.

Bets Gibson was alone in the taproom

when Link strode in. Her quick glance dwelt on his battered features. And as she did not comment, he knew she had already heard. He grinned at her, and she smiled back slowly.

"Evening, Bets. How's my future wife?"

There was an amused light in her dark-brown eyes. "I could sure start some shooting around here, if I up and married one of you proddy jiggers. This makes three proposals lately. That is, if you are proposing."

"Sure I am. Why not try it, tonight? I wouldn't mind a little shooting, mebbe."

Her grin was impish. "I hear you *are* a good man with your gun, Link." She was instantly contrite. "That sounded worse than I mean it, Link. Honest."

He let it go, studying her. Though Bets Gibson saw mostly the seamy side of life, out here, it had not touched her. For Bets could defend herself in a lions' den. That was what had gotten into his blood, this quick shifting from fire to sweetness. Dark-haired, tall, slender as a willow sprout and as supple, Bets knew how to capture a man and hold him while she goaded him.

For some strange reason Link remembered Jean Saladin, and said, "Say, Bets have you seen Phil? There was something his sister wanted me to tell him, and I forgot."

"Why, he was here a while ago, and said he'd probably be back later." Her eyes were mocking. Phil Saladin was likely one of the men who had flattered her by proposing again.

Link drank a beer, reflecting on what Joe Fisher, the out-spoken old hostler had said not long ago. "You're a fool to get taken by that wench out at Gibson's, Link. That kind's bad. Once they got a man's scalp, they're done with him." Link Indy was no callow boy. He recognized the coquetry that extended from Bets' pert head to her animated toes. Yet she was a fire in his blood, and he couldn't help himself.

He said, crowding her, "I reckon I'll be drifting on about tomorrow, Bets. Want to come with me?"

She studied him. "Now, that's a proposition I wouldn't want to use snap judgment on, Link."

A horse clattered up and stopped in front. Then Phil Saladin came in. He was a large, slow moving man with moody eyes that turned on Link with a hard gaze.

Link said, "I saw Jean. She told me to tell you she was going on home."

Saladin nodded without speaking.

Without waiting for instructions, Bets ran him a glass of beer.

Saladin drained it slowly.

The rivalry over Bets Gibson had been so widespread that there had been no personal issue between Phil Saladin and Link Indy. Yet Link thought that, tonight, there was a new edginess in Saladin.

Saladin asked, as he put down the empty glass, "Where's Pete?"

"Back in the living room," said Bets. "Go on in, if you want."

Saladin tramped through a rear door and disappeared. A group of riders from Pot Hook came in then, surrounding Bets and keeping her busy at the bar. Link took a whisky bottle to a table and sat there, alone. Once she came by him, smiling intimately, and his pulses raced. He decided that this night he would press her for a decision.

Night came. Bets lighted the two lamps that hung by rawhide thongs from the rafters. Others came in. Now a couple of card games were going, with the bar crowded.

Link knew a thing or two about elusiveness, himself. He waited until she passed his table again, then said calmly, "Well, so long, then, Bets. Mebbe I'll be seeing you."

She looked at him in surprise. "Oh, you're leaving so soon?"

"Got some packing to do."

Bets looked around hesitantly, then abruptly said, "Come back here a minute, Link. I want to talk before you go."

GRINNING slightly, he followed her into a small storeroom. It was private, though light fell into it from the main sal-

oon, and there was a doorway closed off by a cloth curtain that led on into the Gibson's living quarters. There Bets whirled and abruptly clung to him.

"Link, I don't want you to go."

Before he realized what was happening she was in his arms, embracing him fiercely. A pulse exploded in his ears, and he bent to meet her hungry lips. He heard the tread of a foot too late.

The curtain on the door to the quarters was slapped back by an angry hand. Link looked up with a sheepish smile, expecting to see Pete Gibson. It was Phil Saladin, and in his eyes was an ugly look of danger. Abruptly Link realized that he and Bets had made a shadow on the curtain, in their embrace, that had been seen by Saladin in the room beyond where he'd been talking to her father.

The girl had spun away with a guilty little cry. "He says he's going away, Phil!" she gasped.

The man's eyes were bitterly amused. "Do you send all the boys off like that?" He spun on his heel and went back into the quarters.

Bets turned and ran into the main room before Link could speak to her. Link followed, shaken and suspicious but uncertain. She could have embraced him sincerely, because she did not want him to leave the country. Or she could have done it deliberately, knowing that Saladin was apt to see their shadow. She had already mentioned how easy she could start gun trouble. Maybe her thirst for flattery had led her to try it. In any event, there had been pure hatred in Phil Saladin's eyes.

Before Link had reached the door a group of Rocket men came in. Link scowled when

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he saw that Brian Nance was among them. Link turned away from the door and toward the bar, deciding against departing immediately, for fear that it would look like cowardice. He saw Bets' eyes upon him; they were masked and mysterious, and he thought that a certain strain had come into her beautiful face. Then he saw Bets flash Brian Nance a look that was strangely freighted. Nance responded with an almost imperceptible nod.

Phil Saladin came out from the back presently. Link saw at a glance that a vicious mood held him. Saladin avoided the girl's eyes and responded sullenly to the greetings of the others. He studiously avoided a vacant place next to Link at the bar.

Link knew that he should leave at once, yet he realized that he could not. Saladin was drinking too fast. At a table in a back corner Brian Nance was laughing too frequently and too loudly, in a keyed-up pitch, as if he was still spoiling for trouble. The makings were in this room for bad, blood trouble.

The others knew it. As the minutes passed, the tension in the air seemed to settle upon them, making them talk either too much or too little.

Suddenly Brian Nance shoved back his chair with a scrape and climbed to his feet. Link swung around as the man paced the distance between them. Yet Brian Nance's handsome, heavy face wore a smile as he carried his big body with a panther's grace. Without preliminaries, he said, "Link, I'd like to buy you a drink."

Link stared at him.

"I guess I was spoiling for trouble," Nance said evenly, his voice almost silky in its gentle friendliness. "I'm a poor loser. You see, Bets turned me down last night and told me that you're her man. I sure hate the way I blew my cork. I'd like to buy you a drink and congratulate you."

It was not until he again saw the look of pure hatred flow into Phil Saladin's eyes that Link detected the whole evil design. He said evenly, "Nance, there's only one way for you and me to talk. That's with guns. Back up a few paces, damn your double-crossing hide, and fill your hand!"

The stunned surprise in Nance's eyes almost made Link laugh. Nance took a backward step, then halted hastily, realizing that it looked like compliance. He held his

hands carefully away from his body and his gun. Stark fear flowed into his big eyes. He said, in what was almost a squeak, "Why, blast you, Indy. I come to you like a man—"

"All right. Keep on like a man!" The tightness around Link's eyes lent them a deadly cast. "Fill your hand or pull the shirt off that yellow streak up your back!"

"I don't want no gun trouble!" Nance jabbered.

Bets spoke. "Why, you crawling dog!" Wildly, Nance said, "You've crossed me up, Bets! If I knew for sure, I'd—"

The girl's voice was cold and vicious. "You'd what? You'd better drift, Brian Nance! You had me some fooled, all right! You love to beat up a man you know isn't in your class. You almost had me. I'm glad I found out in time."

After a long moment, Brian Nance turned and stumbled for the door. A long silence followed his departure.

Phil Saladin's hard gaze was on Bets Gibson. "Last night you told him Link Indy's your man. Tonight I catch you in Indy's arms. Yet this afternoon you promised to marry me. I'm just in the mood to see if your Link Indy's as good as he just let on."

"You'd get yourself killed, Phil," the girl told him coldly. "I know it. Brian Nance knows it. Everybody here knows it. Don't play the fool." She smiled at Link. "But that's the truth, Phil, no matter what I told you this afternoon to help that yellow Nance—Link Indy's my man."

Link's answer was like a slap to Bets. "He might've been, ten minutes ago, lady—but he isn't now."

Bets' smile was bitter. "Look what a kicking around I'm getting. Well, Phil, do you still like me?"

"Like I'd love a rattlesnake," Phil Saladin said, and walked out.

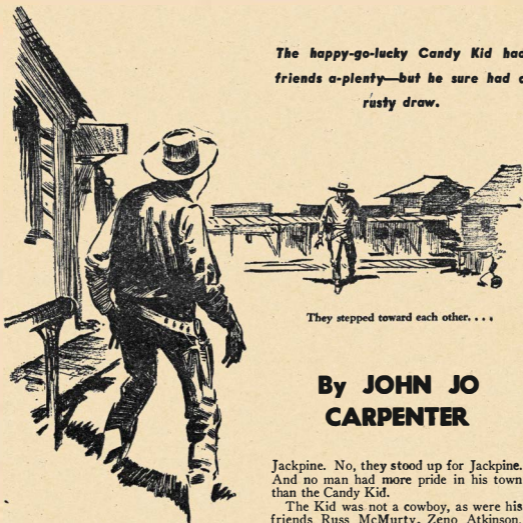
Link caught up with him on the moonlighted road back to town. Saladin hipped around in the saddle until he saw who it was, then he said, in relief, "Well, I reckon you and me took the cure together, Link."

Link's voice was like a sigh. "I reckon so. That yellow-backed Nance was trying to start a backfire, Phil. It took me too damned long to tumble. Everbody's been expecting you to climb his frame for the

(Please continue on page 92)

Lemon-Drop Gunhawk

The happy-go-lucky Candy Kid had friends a-plenty—but he sure had a rusty draw.



They stepped toward each other. . . .

**By JOHN JO
CARPENTER**

HEHAD friends, did Lee Swain, the "Candy Kid," and for some things they were the right kind of friends, and there were plenty of them. Wild young rowdies they were: trouble-makers once in a while, hell-raisers all the time, but good workers when they were on the job, big spenders when they had it to spend.

All they lacked, of course, was good sense. That would come, the more tolerant older folks around Jackpine hoped, with increasing years. For the Candy Kid and his rowdy crew had friends among the oldsters. When they wrecked a town, it was not

Jackpine. No, they stood up for Jackpine. And no man had more pride in his town than the Candy Kid.

The Kid was not a cowboy, as were his friends Russ McMurty, Zeno Atkinson, Newt Hoe, "Fremont" Smith, Jim Dudley and the fellow known only as "Alaska Sam." The Kid came to Jackpine a cowboy, and except for two one-eyed men he would have remained a cowboy. The two one-eyed men changed his mind.

They were one-eyed jacks, and they came to squat in his hand beside the pair of two-eyed jacks on which he had opened. That was Lee Swain, the Candy Kid, for you. Across the table sat Frank Holliday, with a big stack of chips and a bottle at his side. Frank took a nip now and then, and bet his cards as he saw them. Swain had a bag of lemon jawbreakers at his side—that's how

he got his name—and he took a jawbreaker now and then, and bet his cards as he saw them.

The Candy Kid sat down at the table a cowboy, and he got up the owner of the Jackpine Furniture and Hardware Company. Frank Holliday sat down a furniture and hardware merchant and got up from the table busted. All because Lee Swain, in between lemon jawbreakers, bet his four jacks as though he had never seen their likes before.

Which he hadn't.

Holliday laid down his full house—threes and queens—and kicked back his chair. He was a big, two-hundred-pounder, without an ounce of fat on him. He had a lean, long, blue-stubbled face and a pair of small, close-set black eyes, and it was said by those who remembered when he came to Jackpine that he had come out of Texas with a price on his head.

But Montana is a long way from Texas. Holliday had more or less settled down since then, and what had happened in Texas was nobody's worry. If greed and ambition mark the coming man, they should have seen Frank Holliday a long ways off. But they didn't.

So Holliday had shucked off his guns, and begun talking about town lots and the need for pasture seed that wouldn't winter-kill, and in no time at all he was a Substantial Citizen. He drank, yes—but so did everyone in Jackpine. Played cards, too, and won, but somebody had to win, so it wasn't held against him.

Respected, you see, and feared a little, but not liked. That was Frank Holliday. With the Candy Kid it was the other way 'round. Everybody liked him. Nobody respected him much. Fear him? Now how could you fear a man who dissipated on lemon jawbreakers?

Frank looked at those four jacks, and he counted them—jack of spades, jack of diamonds, jack of hearts, jack of clubs. Then he looked down at his full house. He licked his lips. The whisky had his cheekbones flushed a little. Now they got red as a spanked baby's bottom. Folks next to him said he groaned when he breathed, like a windbroke horse.

"Looks like you ain't got enough cards, Frank," said the Kid, reaching for the pot. "You holding *four of a kind*?" said Hol-

liday, in a kind of unbelieving voice. "You going to claim you win my furniture store on that there hand?"

"Pears as how I did," said the Candy Kid, reaching for another lemon jawbreaker. "Doggone! I'm a business man! And look at all the cash money I got."

He turned around to the barkeep and waved a fistful of money.

"Everybody drinks!" he yelled. "Drinks on the new owner of the Jackpine Furniture and Hardware Company! Tomorrow I'll be a tight-fisted merchant, so tonight you better wet your whistles while I'm still a mangy old cowpoke!"

Then the table shoved against him—hard—and he turned around and saw big Frank Holliday reaching for him across the green felt top. There was murder in Frank's eyes. Come out of Texas a wanted man, he had, and buried his past in Jackpine, while he built up a fair-sized fortune, and here he had lost it to a kid who sucked lemon candy.

SOMEbody grabbed Frank by the elbow and tried to pull him back. Frank turned and lashed out with his big fist. It was Russ McMurty. The bone crunched like crumpled cardboard when Frank's fist hit his jaw, and Russ looped over backward and pitched into the sandbox by the stove. Somebody else reached for Frank. It was Newt Hoe. He came in dodging and he didn't try for a good grab.

Thus he took Frank's fist on his shoulder, but he did manage to throw the big one off balance, so Zeno and Fremont Jim and Alaska Sam could swarm over him. They were too much for him. They were killing mad over the lick Russ took, and it would have gone hard with Frank, had not there been some of Frank's friends there. They saw these cronies of Frank's, and Zeno's long head came to their rescue.

"Beat it, Candy!" he called, ringingly. "We'll holt him until you're out of the door. We don't want to start no shoot-'em-out in here."

"Oh, pshaw, Zeno!" said the Kid. "Let him up. I won fair and square. I'll shake his hand. I ain't mad."

"*Vamos!*" Zeno snarled. "Look what he done to Russ." He turned pleadingly to the crowd around the upturned table. "Get the fool out of here, somebody, so we can turn Frank loose. You want a killin'?"

Some of the steadier heads took hold of the Candy Kid, but he wouldn't go until he got the key to Frank's Store. There were plenty of witnesses to the betting, and to the honesty of the deal and draw. As a matter of fact, it was Frank's own deal that cost him his store! And though he fought like a chained bear, and kicked when he couldn't hit and bit when he couldn't kick, they took the key off his chain and gave it to Lee Swain, the Candy Kid.

"All right, I'll go now," said the Kid. He looked down at Frank Holliday. "I'm not an overbearin' winner. But I win fair and square. I want you to come around tomorrow and shake my hand. Be a man!"

Frank suddenly grew quiet. They had him flat on the floor, with a man or two on each arm and leg, and plump Alaska Sam sitting on his belly. Frank squinted and blinked, and licked his lips, and twitched the side of his mouth a time or two, staring back up at the Kid with hatred glittering from him.

"I'll be a man," he said at last, in a kind of a low, sobbing voice, "and you ain't never seen the kind of man I can be, Kid. I'll be a man, Kid. I'll see you again, Kid. But it won't be tomorrow, and I won't shake your hand, Kid."

"All right," said the Kid. "I don't care."

"I'll be a man, Kid," Frank repeated, whisperingly. "You remember that. You ain't going to have that store."

"I got it," said the Kid.

"You ain't going to enjoy it!"

"I'm already enjoyin' it," said the Kid.

"Get him out of here, please!" begged Zeno.

They hustled the Kid out of the room and into the street, and in a few minutes his buddies came out after him, carrying Russ McMurty. Russ was still unconscious. They found the Kid just opening his newly-acquired furniture store.

"Bring him in here and put him on the sofa," said the Kid, who had been in the store enough to know where things were, "and run fetch Doc Hill. My, my! Look at all I own! Great day at sunrise, I'm a rich man."

He touched a match to the lamps and took charge of getting Russ ready for the doctor. The Kid had a gentle hand that way, and something of the reputation of a

cow-camp surgeon. But he shook his head when he touched Russ' jaw with his fingertip.

"Fractured," he said. "Have to be wired up for a while. Only hope he don't come to until Doc gets him spliced. How did Frank behave when I left? I never figured he'd take on so."

"That's it, Candy," said Alaska Sam, earnestly. "You ain't got a lick of sense sometimes. He's boilin' mad, crazy mad. That Frank's a floater, and I think a gunnie, and this is the first time he's ever been respectable. Now you and your four gentlemen wipe him out at a stroke."

"Luck," said the Kid. "It could have been me that lost."

DOC CAME in then and went to work on Russ McMurty with his forceps, silver wire, pliers and antiseptic. Russ awakened when it was all over with, but Doc had shoved a spoonful of tincture of opium between his teeth. He swallowed that because he couldn't open his mouth to spit, and shortly he was asleep again.

"But how did he take it?" the Kid repeated.

"Quiet," said Alaska Sam, "and that's bad—bad! Kid, you better leave town for a while until things level off. If you ride out, we'll watch the store, and Frank'll stand it a few days, and then he'll get drunk and blow up and the town'll take care of him. I know how his kind behave. My old man was his kind—mean, crafty, sly, but not able to stand people watchin' him and talkin' behind his back very long. Frank'll make a pest of himself, give him time. You got to leave town."

"No," said the Candy Kid. "Sure as my name's Swain."

"Sam's talkin' sense, Kid," Zeno urged. "You can't shoot and you said yourself, many's the time, that you never owned a gun 'cause if you did, it'd only get you in trouble. You're too spindlin' to fight Frank, with his heft. Just ride out for a few days."

"No," said the Kid. "I'm goin' to stay here and take care of Russ. You boys ride out and tell Shorty he's laid up and needs a month off. Don't draw his pay—I got money now—I'll see he's got funds. If you leave Shorty holt his pay, there'll be a job for Russ when his jaw is well."

They argued, but it was like arguing with

the wind. The Kid had them move Russ into the living quarters at the rear of the shop. He emptied the bureau of all of Frank Holliday's stuff, and wrapped it in a big bundle, which he set out in front for Frank to pick up.

"I wouldn't," he said, "if he'd acted white, and if Russ didn't need the bed. Now come over to the hardware side, boys, where there'll be things you like, and pick out something."

Zeno took a twenty-gauge shotgun, Newt a fine pair of side-cutting wire pliers, Fremont a dingus for holding a horse's mouth open for administering medicine, and Jim Dudley selected a hunting knife.

"What I want is on the other side of the store," said Alaska Sam, flushing a little. "I'd like to have something to give to Elaine Dorset's ma. That big mirry, for instance."

He led the way back to the furniture side and pointed to a full-length, plate-glass, bevel-edged mirror. The Candy Kid took a piece of candy out of his pocket and popped it into his mouth.

"Sam, that's the one thing in the house you can't have," he said, regretfully. "Pick out something else. Two things—three things—anything. But don't ask me for that mirry."

"It would sure please Elaine's ma." Sam's voice was wistful. "I don't see what you want with no mirry. You ain't got a girl."

"Anything else but that, Sam," said the Candy Kid.

Sam settled for a pink-enamelled rocking chair, with blue satin rosettes and a little drawer in the bottom, opening to the right.

"A sewing chair, the tag says. The drawer's for buttons and shears and the like," said the Kid. "My, there's a lot to learn about the furniture business!"

"Ten dollars will get you one that old Iry Dorset has his pipe tobacco in that drawer in a week," said Zeno.

"Over my daid body!" exclaimed Sam, shouldering the chair. "It's her ma I'm worried about, and this chair is for her ma, and I'll tell Iry so. I'll be danged if I know how I'm going to get it to her, though. My buckskin'll never stand for it tied on behind the saddle."

"Leave it here and I'll have it delivered," said the Kid. "Remember, there's a team

and spring-wagon goes with the business—and the tail goes with the hide!"

They went out, urgently advising him to watch his step if he wouldn't leave town. They took their gifts, which were pledges of friendship if such pledges ever were made anywhere, and went back to their twenty-a-month jobs without a bit of envy in their hearts. No one ever had more unselfish friends than did Lee Swain, the Candy Kid.

If only they had had a little sense! That's what the oldsters always added when they got to talking about that happy-go-lucky crew—the Kid and Russ and Zeno and Newt and Fremont and Jim and Alaska Sam. Good workers, wild, faithful, honest—lots of fun, but they just didn't have any sense.

FRANK HOLLIDAY'S bundle of duflie was still on the board sidewalk the next morning, but Frank was gone. No one saw him leave town, but the Indian night man at the livery stable said he came in about three of the morning, got his horse, and rode out of town. Just rode out, without a by-your-leave or anything. No, he wasn't drunk. No, he didn't rave and swear and carry on. Just tossed the Injun a two-bit piece, saddled up his horse, and rode away, leaving the horse's board-bill to be settled, along with the spring-wagon's team, by the new owner of the Jackpine Furniture and Hardware Company.

One Lee Swain, Esq., to call him by the name his new dignity deserved.

Luck is a funny thing.

It was luck that lost Frank Holliday the store, and it was uncanny luck which brought to the sheriff's office the next day a bale of "Wanted" dodgers.

They came by U. S. mail, and since the sheriff was out of town, the postmaster took the liberty of opening them. Most of them were from Southern Texas—towns along the Rio and the Pecos, towns known only to Montanans through the gossip of the drawl-voiced, drifting riders whose restlessness drove them this far north from the sunny border land.

The Candy Kid, now a respected merchant, was in the post office when the dodgers came, and he heard the postmaster's sharp exclamation as the top picture caught his eye.

WANTED FOR MURDER! ! !

Dead or Alive
CLINT OLIVER.

Yes, the name was different, but it was Frank Holliday's face, Frank's description to the smallest detail. The bulletin went on to warn peace officers that Holliday was dangerous with a gun under any circumstances, that he had shot and killed two deputies in Texas who unwisely gave him an even break. A killer, a notch-gun murderer, a sure-shot hired gun-hand who had learned his trade south of the border.

Thus his passion for "respectability" was explained to those who knew him. Frank Holliday—or Clint Oliver, whichever his name was—could make money anywhere. But never before had he done so by means which would call forth respect from his fellow men.

The oldsters saw Lee Swain pull his lip as he studied the bulletin, and then he went out without a word to them. And the next time they saw him, he was wearing Russ McMurty's worn Colt forty-five. It looked strange on him. He had discarded his range clothing for a sober blue suit, although he still wore his hand-stitched boots and his pearl-gray sombrero. And the gun, which had fitted McMurty's sturdy middle perfectly, sagged down on Swain's right leg exactly like a Southwestern gunman's.

It was the oldsters who sent word to Swain's friends, and Saturday night they came pounding in again, to condemn the Kid for his idiocy. A gun, they said, was the worst kind of suicidal foolishness. If Holliday came back, he would know now that he was outside the law. If he saw the Kid was armed, it would be an invitation to kill.

"What's he got to lose, you fool?" yelled Alaska Sam. "Frank's not going to go very far, I'm thinkin'. He's got something wrong in his haid. He'll be back! That furniture store will draw him like a lodestone. If you won't leave town, at least don't coax him to kill you by wearin' that gun."

"If he's goin' to kill me," said the Candy Kid, "it'll be just plain because he wants to, and not because I've got a gun. Besides, I just hanker to stand up for what's mine. I'm a man of prop'ty. I won it fair and square, and I'm runnin' the business better'n he ever did. Man just can't lay down the way you want me to."

Russ McMurty was sitting up then, but with his jaw wired shut he couldn't talk. He tried to. He made "*M-m-m-m!*" sounds at them, pointing to the gun at the Kid's side, but they could understand nothing. And there they were stopped, because Russ had never learned to read and write.

It may have been the advertising, or it may have been that the Kid, after painting the place inside and out, ordered a lot of new merchandise and settled down seriously to business. But anyway, business picked up. He hired another clerk. Then he hired another one. He hired a girl to keep his books, a respectable, nice-looking girl, who, gossips predicted, would wind up Mrs. Candy Kid if she minded her p's and q's. And if Frank Holliday didn't get back before it could happen.

It looked funny to see the Kid going around with that worried pucker on his forehead, figuring the price of chairs and wagon-bolts and similar goods, and with that big hog-leg forty-five of Russ McMurty's hanging at his hip. They heard him practicing with the gun, nights, in the big second-story loft above the store. Eight, ten shots a night was all he took, and it was agreed that this was hardly enough for Frank Holliday.

Particularly when Frank Holliday ran into a deputy sheriff over at Scofield and shot it out with him, and then stood off a posse which had him "cornered" and made his escape. Frank was next heard of north of the border, but he was a wise old gunnie—he knew better than to prank with the Royal Mounties, and he was next reported in Opheim.

THAT WAS just a few miles south of the line, but it was getting closer and closer to Jackpine. It was by mutual agreement of all the boys that someone would remain in town, along about then, until the thing was settled one way or another. Winter had slid in on them, and work was slack anyway. They could be spared from their jobs, and it was doubtful that the Candy Kid ever knew he was being "guarded."

To him, it was the most natural thing in the world that his friends should stay in his store when they were in town. It never occurred to him to question why they stayed there one at a time. He still had Russ McMurty there, with his jaw wired up, and

when the Kid could spend time from his bills and books and invoices. They played pinochle or seven-up or pitch, or odd-man checkers.

They never went to the saloon any more. You see, the Kid had sworn off poker and gambling entirely. He had seen one man lose that very furniture store that way. It wasn't going to happen to him.

First it was Jim Dudley, and then Fremont Smith, and then Newt, then Zeno, each of them staying from one to three days. And it was Alaska Sam, the somewhat chubby one, the most eager to fight, the one who was engaged to Elaine Dorset, who had the last turn.

It was Sam who was staying with the Candy Kid when Frank Holliday came back to town.

They were in the back room playing pinochle, Russ on the edge of the bed, Sam on a chair and the Kid on a box. Russ could wiggle his wired jaw enough to mutter his bid—that's how long it had been since Candy Kid became Lee Swain, Prop.

They were sitting there, pounding down their cards on a hard-fought two-fifty bid of Sam's, when Avery Lowe stuck his head in the door. Avery was a little foolish; his chin was always wet, and he was allowed to hang around town and eat at the cafe at the expense of the town merchants. Avery's mind was not strong, but there was nothing wrong with his curiosity.

"Hi, Avery," said Sam. "What's in the air?"

Avery giggled and said, "Frank Holliday's back in town. Going to kill the Kid. Said so. He dares you to come out."

"Now, Kid!" Sam called stridently, jumping up. He put his hand against the Kid's chest. "Set still! You're not going to get no ideas."

"I've got a gun," said the Kid, quietly, reasonably. "That's all he's got."

"He said he was goin' to kill you," Avery giggled. "Said if you don't come out, he'll come in after you."

"I'm coming out."

"No you ain't!" said Sam. He cursed the Kid as no other man would have cursed him. "Look, you fool! You been wearin' a gun three-four weeks now. I been wearin' one all my life. Mebbe I ain't no Pecos shark, but I ain't drunk either, and that's what Frank's going to be. I'll go out."

"I'll go out," said the Kid. "It's my fight."

"Russ is my side-kick, same as yours," Sam shouted. "That's what I'm sore about. That's what I'll fight him about. Look!"

He stood up and dropped his arm. His gun came out and leaned unwaveringly down at the Kid's stomach. The Kid got up.

"That's fast," he said, "but not fast enough for Holliday, if it's a question of speed. I'll drop around and see him. I ain't got no Elaine Dorset. You have."

Sam went white, and his chin dropped, and before he could catch his breath, the kid was past him. Sam could have handled the Kid easily, but that mention of Elaine's name weakened him momentarily. He was crazy about Elaine, and he didn't want to hurt her, and he knew what *she* would say about him going up against Frank Holliday, alias Clint Oliver.

The Kid shucked off his blue serge coat and buttoned the vest, the bottom three buttons. He reached for his fine, light-colored hat and put it on the back of his head. He patted Russ McMurdy's gun. He threw back his shoulders and said:

"Well, I sure don't think this is any way to do, but how's a man goin' to be looked on if he don't defend himself?"

Then he walked out of the back room and through the long room of furniture and out on the street.

It was just growing dark. Sam and Russ followed him. They stopped in front of the store and watched the Kid mosey up the street with his thumbs hooked in his belt. His white shirt sleeves and light hat were gay, bright spots besides his sober blue serge, and the quiet *thud. . . thud. . . thud. . . thud* of his bootheels was a funeral tattoo on the hollow planking of the sidewalk.

"*M-m-m-m!*" said Russ McMurdy, pointing down the street, and clutching Alaska Sam by the arm with his other hand.

"I see it. Shet up!" Sam snarled. "Oh, the fool, the fool!"

FRANK HOLLIDAY came out of the saloon and whirled to face the Kid. They were at least two hundred feet apart, and Frank had never seen the Kid in the blue-serge-and-white he wore since becoming Lee Swain, Esq. and Prop. To Russ

and Sam, Frank looked bigger than they remembered—and leaner. His face was wolfishly thin. Adversity, thin living, had pared the big fellow down to pure bone, muscle and concentrated malice.

Holliday whirled as old Avery Lowe giggled. Avery had followed Sam and Russ out, but he had walked unnoticed on down the street. The giggle died in his throat as Holliday turned, and as the bleak, insane hatred which emanated from his face soaked through the mists around Avery's mind.

"The Candy Kid!" Holliday said, gently, nervously, tremblingly. "You come out, didn't you? Well, I'm back."

"I see you are, Frank," said the Kid.

"I said you'd never enjoy it. I said I'd be a man, Kid. I don't like you, Kid. I'm going to put one right in your guts, and you're going to do it the hard way, Kid. I said I'd be a man, didn't I, Kid?"

"You said that, all right," said the Kid, sauntering on toward him, slowly, with a *thud. . . thud. . . thud.*

Holliday stood there. At the saloon the windows were full of white, tense, horrified faces—faces of men who had learned to know the Kid in his new guise, and liked him. The two men drew together. Holliday began walking sidewise, like a scorpion. His right hand flexed itself. The kid took his thumbs out of his belt.

"Don't do it, Frank," he said softly. "Won't get you nowhere."

They stepped toward each other. . . .

Suddenly Frank's hand flashed down, and the sidewise walking stopped, leaving him in a twisted crouch. The faces at the saloon window vanished as the onlookers threw themselves on the floor. Sam dived back into the furniture store, pulling Russ McMurty with him.

It was incredible, the speed with which Frank Holliday's gun came out. He seemed

to be leaning forward against the wind, the gun at his crooked hip, and the horrified eyes of Alaska Sam seemed to behold the slugs coming out of the man himself. The Pecos way. The professional way.

But the Candy Kid stood there and he did not seem to move at all, but suddenly he was leaning forward too, and the big forty-five he had borrowed from Russ McMurty was in his hand. It was squirting orange flame down the street, pounding big leaden slugs into Frank Holliday's chest and stomach, driving the big man backward, crumpling him, letting his blood and life and malice out.

They saw Frank fan one slug past the Kid and one into the board sidewalk as agony twisted his body. The gun dropped from Holliday's nerveless hand. His face contorted. His hands became claws, gripping at lost life. He fell forward on his face.

"You—you beat him to the draw, Kid," said Sam. "You fool, you killed him!"

The Kid came back down the sidewalk without a backward glance at the dead man. He handed the bun gack to Russ.

"You can have that mirry now, Sam," he said. "I'm through with it. Needed it for a while, to practice drawin'. You draw against yourself, against the imaginary gunman in the glass, you see what you're doin' that's wrong. Then you do it right. Five hundred times a night. That's what Russ has been tryin' to tell you."

"You planned that? From the first?"

The Kid nodded wearily.

"Figgered winnin' the store was all the luck I was entitled to. Had to have some sense from then on." He put his arm on Sam's shoulder. "Take the mirry, Sam. Ain't no more gunmen in it. Elaine will like that glass, Sam."

"Yes," said Sam, "I reckon she will."



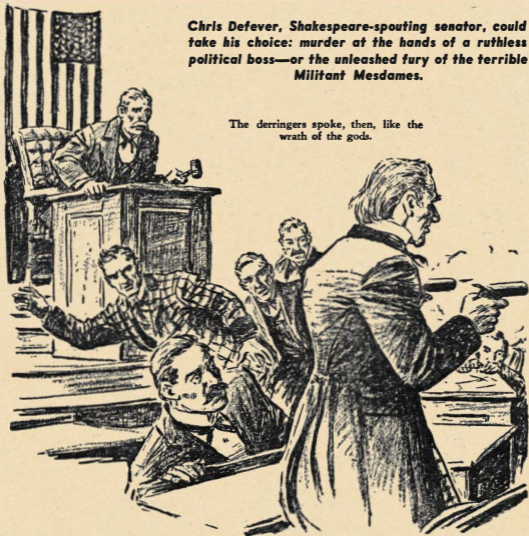
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DERRINGERS

Chris Defever, Shakespeare-spouting senator, could take his choice: murder at the hands of a ruthless political boss—or the unleashed fury of the terrible Militant Mesdames.

The derringers spoke, then, like the wrath of the gods.



CHAPTER

The Cur Yeps

1 The Honorable Christian Defever, State Senator by the grace of God, the generosity of luck, and a legal vote of a misguided constituency, lolled in sumptuous ease in his luxurious suite in the Granite Palace Hotel. Beyond his windows sprawled the lusty infant, Grass City. And beyond the confines of this roistering metropolis—already twice too big for its breeches and tolerably cussed, withal—spread the vast

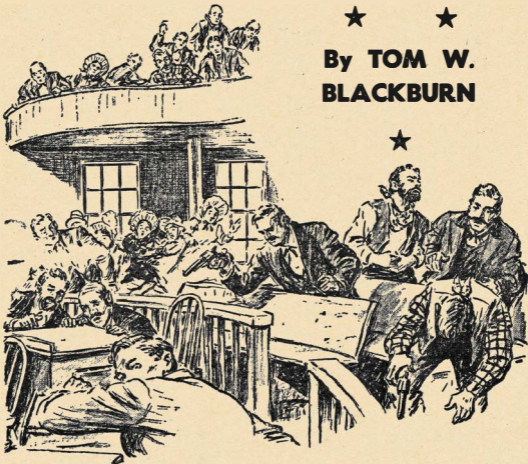
expanse of mountain and plain, mining claims and timber camps, cattle ranges and lawless badlands, which comprised the newly created Longbow State.

A zephyr tinged with the invigorating chill of the tall mountains to the west carried sound to Defever's ears, a sort of orchestration — an overture — setting the keynote of life in Grass City and presaging the greatness the new state must certainly achieve. The rumble of heavy wagons. The popping whips of teamsters. The swift, drumming roll of coaches rocking on their

for DEMOCRACY



By **TOM W.
BLACKBURN**



through-braces. The shouts of charlatans, peddling worthless wares along the walks. The arguments of bull-voiced men accustomed more to airing differences in the vast spaces of the frontier than within the confines of a city. Hammers beating rhythmic obligato to the snoring of saws. Shouted orders. Invective.

And occasionally, like a cymbal crashing a climax to the phrases of a symphony, the harsh sound of a gun fired in anger or exuberation.

This was Chris Defever's world, his challenge. It gave him peace, comfort, and satisfaction. And it would also call forth

from him a titan's effort for the good of mankind. For unsought as it had been and unwanted in the beginning, the laurel of a legislator lay weightily—if becomingly—upon his broad brow.

Such were Defever's thoughts. He lay supine upon the feather tick of his bed, clad only in undershirt and gaitered trousers, flexing the long toes of his bare feet luxuriantly. Occasionally he caught a tuft of the elegant quilt pieced for him by the ladies of the Militant Mesdames Society between a great toe and the digit next to it and pulled idly at the fluffed yarn. Thrust between the fingers of his left hand



Smashing Chris Defever Novelette



was a long black cigar from the box of elegant Habanas donated respectfully by the Grass City Business Men's Association. And the while, grandiloquent dreams of oratorical virtuosity and legislative legerdemain added to his tranquility of soul.

Not a bad berth for a boomer, an exactor, a man of varied talents and often questioned principles. Not a bad berth, indeed!

While he lay thus in a heaven of his own making, a knock sounded at his door. Loth to shatter his mood, Chris spoke without moving.

"Come in."

The door swung open, then closed again. Chris rolled his head. A man stood in the room. A man on the shabby side, with a thin, hatchet face, an austere manner, and a sheen of respectability which refreshingly failed to hide what Chris immediately judged to be a marked rascality of character. The fellow stood hat in hand, staring at Chris.

The pink cloud upon which he had been floating disintegrated and Chris sat up regretfully, aware that his costume and posture were not those prescribed in *Roberts' Rules of Order* for a duly elected representative of the Third Estate.

Senator Defever. At your service, Sir," he said.

"Ah!" the hatchet-faced man remarked, in a scholarly search for proper terms in which to express himself. "Ah—you— you weren't expecting callers?"

The faked embarrassment did not set well with Chris.

"Nonsense!" he snapped. "Of course I was. A servant of the people part of the time, a servant of the people all of the time. Something like that. But a man must have his ease. And this, I remind you, is a democratic state. What better, then, than for a legislator to receive his constituents informally? You have business with me, perhaps?"

The hatchet-faced man found a chair and sank into it, keeping his back very stiff indeed."

"I am Gideon Thayer—Professor Gideon Thayer. Perhaps the name explains my business. I come to you on behalf of the unlettered tots of this city: the children of careless parents who run the streets, undisciplined and untaught. Poor waifs—"

Chris cut the fellow short. He had a dislike of male teachers, be they professors or plain schoolmasters. They were impractical. What a man learned when he was grown he learned from a woman. Why not start, then, in infancy with such a teacher? Classrooms were, Chris was convinced, for women, if for no other reason that there was a charm about a woman behind a teacher's desk. There was no charm about a man with a birch rod in his hand—no charm at all.

"You mean," he said bluntly, "that you've come to see me about that piece of state property on Arapahoe Street."

PROFESSOR THAYER looked somewhat uncomfortable, but he stood his ground. "In a manner, yes," he conceded unwillingly. "I understand that there is some uncertainty in the State Assembly over that piece of ground."

Chris recalled a debate or two on the subject in the Senate. He nodded.

"Some. The Public Lands Commission—of the state, that is—has been in the habit of selling state-held land to a high bidder where it seemed wise and there was a demand for it. The Militant Mesdames Society—a local organization of voting women—has been demanding that the Assembly deed this Arapahoe Street property over to their society with the understanding that on it the women will erect a public school, built and maintained at their expense. At the same time, some speculator in town, here, has filed a claim on the piece, and he's bid it up to an amazing figure."

"Exactly," Professor Thayer agreed. "I am acquainted with the Militant Mesdames. Also with Cate Barrett, the man who has filed the bids on the Arapahoe property. As an educator, I have come here to assure you that Mr. Barrett also plans a school on that property. Not a public institution, supported in a makeshift fashion by irresponsible women, but a first class center of learning supported by tuition charges like any other commendable scholastic enterprise.

"The women and their demands have delayed the approval of Mr. Barrett's bid. Meanwhile, the childhood and youth of this fair city become more and more unruly and unlettered. I urge you to work for approval of Mr. Barrett's bid!"

Chris swung his long legs over the edge of the bed and sat there, chafing his toes together.

"This—ah—work you suggest. Like all other work, a recompense is involved?" he suggested.

Professor Thayer smiled agreeably and with considerable craft.

"I have personally found Mr. Barrett to be a generous man," he admitted.

Chris stood up.

"You, Sir," he remarked gently, "are a scoundrel of the first water—a blot upon the escutcheon of education—a veritable tumor upon the flesh of society!"

As he spoke, he advanced on the professor. His large hands reached out with a somewhat hungry crooking of long fingers, as though the hands were eager for the work to which he was directing them. Professor Thayer grew tolerably pale in the region of the gills and came up out of his chair with energy.

"Do you think so august a body as the Senate of this state cares for the petty chicaneries of individuals?" Chris continued. "Do you think a man of honor sworn to defend the rights of his fellow beings can be corrupted with a few tarnished pieces of silver? In short, do you think I give a damn for Cate Barrett, yourself, or the property on Arapahoe Street?"

Professor Thayer backed hastily toward the door, his eyes jumping shiftily and anger mixed with the alarm on his face.

"No harm in asking, Senator. No harm in asking," he protested.

"As the Great Bard saith," Chris murmured, "*When the cur yaps, put him out.*"

And with the words, his hands closed upon the cringing professor.

Chris had measured his man. He now discovered he had done so erroneously. Professor Thayer's hang-tail manner disappeared. So that his austerity and his sheen of respectability. In their place he exhibited more practical talents. A surprising muscularity, for instance, which enabled him to twist free of Defever's grip. A quite creditable speed of movement. And an obvious acquaintance with the so-called seamy side of life, where dexterity and a skill at violence were a man's guarantees of continued existence.

Breaking free, Professor Thayer stomped

viciously with the heavily shod heel of his boot upon the flat, splayed arch of Defever's bare foot. A treacherous move, and painful in the extreme. Dignity fled. Chris howled like a singed lion, lifted his injured foot, and cradled it in both hands. The Professor produced a long-barreled Remington revolver from under the tail of his coat, measured his moment, and struck calculatingly with its barrel.

Chris barely saw the blow coming. He loosed his foot, fought for balance, and tried to swing his head clear. But he was only partly successful. The iron bore rapped against his skull above his ear and dumped him gracelessly onto the carpet, bereft for a moment of both breath and control of his sprawled body.

It had happened with incredible speed, the whole thing. With stunning swiftness. The professor backed to the door and jerked it open. Chris heard his words through roaring ears.

"Be smart, you long-beaked old goat," the professor snapped with fluent inelegance. "Cate Barrett wants that piece on Arapahoe Street. If he doesn't get it, he can be a sight rougher than this!"

The door closed. The self-styled educator was gone—obviously satisfied he had just completed a well-taught lesson. Chris came shakily to his knees, wracked alike by consternation and a galling humiliation.

CHAPTER *"Briskly, Sirrah!"*

2 Chris returned to his bed, but the luxury was gone from it for him. He dressed with care, despite the furies at work within him. Since his exaltation to a place in the government of this commonwealth, pride had combined with a natural vanity to make him most fastidious of toilet.

When shirt, waistcoat, cravat, and frock coat were hung upon his frame to suit him and his feet were encased—the left one somewhat gingerly—in highly glossed boots, he crossed to his bureau and dragged open the top drawer. From a velvet-lined box there he lifted the two friends whose loyalty he had never doubted—his paired derringers. He dropped these into the especially enlarged upper pockets of his waistcoat and tore the lid from a fresh box of shells for the weapons. He dumped a

sizeable handful of this fresh brass loose into a side pocket of his coat, and lifted his tall, deeply napped, carefully brushed stove-pipe beaver hat from its peg on the back of the door.

Thus, completely attired for whatever could befall a man in Grass City, he quit his room and descended broad stairs to the lobby of the Granite Palace and thence moved on to the street.

As he moved, Chris considered matters. He had been remiss, he felt, in following his duties in the Senate closely. He had been aware of the Arapahoe Street property, of Mr. Barrett's bid upon it, and of the Militant Mesdames Society's request for a gratis deed to it. He recalled some debate and uncertainty in the house of government over disposition of the property—debate which apparently leaned generally a little toward favoring Mr. Barrett's bid—since a bid meant cash in an empty treasury.

But beyond these things, he knew nothing. Nothing of the desirability of the land. Nothing of Mr. Cate Barrett or his associate, the pseudo-scholarly Professor Thayer. Furthermore, he knew no vestige of a reason for Thayer to single him out of the number of legislative gentlemen in residence in Grass City during sessions of the Assembly. These were things with which he must acquaint himself forthwith.

Arapahoe Street traversed the heart of Grass City. At its northern and southern ends it penetrated areas which men of the city were already beginning to call solid residential sections. In mid-length, it bisected a block or two of attractively inexpensive saloons, less attractive cheap hotels, dance halls, and assorted two-bit museums of natural and unnatural wonders. A sink-hole of lustiness, strife, and iniquity—but profitable, and probably necessary, Chris thought. A man had to be practical in such matters. So long as the devil must work in a town, it was best that his work be centralized and prevented from spreading to every section. He judged the devil was kept busy enough in these few blocks through which he walked.

The state property, owned by the commonwealth but governed, quite naturally, by the municipal fathers of Grass City, lay to the south of this bawdy area. A square block in area, it was attractively situated. The streets that radiated from it were lined

with raw new homes which were already acquiring a look of stability. It was a valuable piece of ground, one on which a canny speculator might make a modest fortune. Also one upon which a civic enterprise of lasting worth might be erected.

Thus acquainted with the real estate, Chris turned back toward the center of the mud-rutted, humanity-crowded town and jostled his way into Shamus McGuire's Crescent Saloon. As head of the Grass City Business Man's Association and husband of the energetic woman who headed the Militant Mesdames Society, McGuire was possessed of vast stores of information concerning Grass City and its inhabitants. In addition, the Crescent stocked the best whiskey in the Longbow State.

An obliging bouncer plowed a deferential furrow through the trade jammed before the Crescent's bar, the furrow being achieved in part by the jostling of his shoulders and in part by the bellow which issued from him:

"Make way for the Senator! Make way for Senator Defever!"

Chris found such adulation pleasant. So, also, did he find the unopened bottle of Roanoke which a barkeep set before him. He broke the seal, pulled the cork, and poured himself a glass to a level which caused mild comments of astonishment among those near to him. He emptied it with a flourish, appreciatively traced his lips with his tongue, and poured another.

"Tell Shamus I want to see him," he directed the barkeep.

The man ducked away. Chris drank his second Roanoke more slowly, savoring that excellent distillation of Kentucky corn to the fullest extent. The barkeep came back with Shamus McGuire trailing him.

"What's on your mind, Senator?" McGuire asked.

"Curiosity," Chris said. "I would like, my Irish dispenser of heavenly nectars, to know the identity of a Mr. Cate Barrett. A sort of thumb-nail dossier, Shamus, including his connection with a certain Professor Gideon Thayer and a brief digest of their illegal activities before arriving in this youthful metropolis."

McGuire looked most uncomfortable. Considerable sweat appeared on his florid brow. His eyes rolled uneasily. Chris was aware that a number of men near to him

were watching Shamus with about the same attention they would give to a sizeable charge of fused powder, to which someone had touched a match. One of these, in particular, caught Defever's attention. A man of considerable height, with a square, solid body, a wind-tanned face wholly lacking in expression, and a pair of slaty eyes of an uncommonly unpleasant brilliance.

"Never heard of Barrett," Shamus said, ignoring the fact that such a statement was as incredible as an admission by a gossip that she knew nothing startling about a new neighbor. "Professor Thayer stays at your hotel, Senator. A teacher, I think. Interested in seeing Grass City get a school. Something like that. See Ella. She could maybe tell you more. Sure. See Ella."

McGUIRE turned away without his usual friendliness. He hurried down across his saloon as though in haste to put distance between Chris and himself. Peculiar behavior. Chris frowned. Shamus had repeated his instructions about seeing Ella. Repetition for emphasis, Chris thought. And the instructions were strange, in themselves.

Shamus and his wife, Ella, lived a happy and blameless married life. Their home was a haven of tranquility. But beyond its doors, Ella McGuire was opposed to virtually everything her husband backed. Shamus headed the Business Men's Association—men grouped together to attack the problems of a new city and a newer state from a practical angle—willing to make a trade when an outright concession could not be secured, and willing to accept a little devilry to accomplish a larger good.

Ella, however, was the spearhead of the Militant Mesdames Society, the thunderous suffragettes who had been rendered a political force by the Longbow State constitution, granting women a vote. There was no compromise with the ladies. Right was right and wrong was the work of the devil. Shamus and his friends were vacillating weaklings, dodging important issues. The road to victory must be carved, even if the whole way must be hewed out with a bloody axe. Chris found the women a trifle terrifying. Shamus found them downright irritating. And it was not like him to send a state assemblyman to his wife on any pretext.

Realizing, however, that he could get

nothing more from McGuire, Chris had a third Roanoke, virtually finishing the bottle, and returned to the street. Some distance above the Crescent, the street made a jog around a large freight corral which had not been recently used. Its gateway gaped open. As Chris approached this, a voice behind him spoke quietly, but with compulsion. It was not necessary for him to turn for Chris to realize the man behind him held a gun centered on his back.

"Into the corral there, Uncle," the man said. "Quiet and peaceably."

Chris stepped through the gateway of the corral. He walked some distance into the high-walled enclosure. He stopped and turned. The man who had been standing near Shamus McGuire in the Crescent saloon stood a yard away, in the act of restoring a large pistol to its holster. The man with the slaty eyes.

"What in hell did you want with me, Defever?" the man asked.

"You?" Chris returned. "Then you're Cate Barrett?"

The man nodded. Chris thought about the roughness of Professor Thayer and his eyes turned unkindly.

"I understand you are determined to acquire some real estate from the Assembly."

The man nodded again. "And at a fair figure," he agreed.

"For the erection of a school?"

"For a school." The man paused. "We might as well understand each other clear on through, though, Defever. If the school didn't make a profit, I'd have to turn my investment to some other business to make the property pay."

"A saloon and gambling hall, perhaps?"

The man smiled thinly.

"Can you think of one that'd pay better interest?"

"No," Chris agreed. "Just one more thing—Gideon Thayer is one of your men?"

"My best," Cate Barrett agreed. "When I give him an order, he carries it out—rough or smooth—whichever seems best—"

Chris smiled with singular unpleasantness.

"*Desiring a thing well done, send not another to labor on't,*" he quoted glibly.

"Thayer failed with me, Sirrah. Perhaps you should learn why."

Barrett fell back a step, smiling easily,

and reached for his gun. The move halted abruptly. Two heavy derringers had seemingly leaped of their own accord from Defever's waistcoat to his hands.

"Turn around," Chris directed. "It grows late and the Assembly sits today. Down the street toward the State House—briskly, Sirrah!"

Barrett's face was dark with anger. The knowledge that he had been made a fool obviously rowelled him unmercifully. He moved with great reluctance. One of Defever's derringers thundered. Barrett's hat kited from his head. A fine, clean shot which filled Chris with satisfaction. It would not do for a man to permit the sedentary life of a legislator to rob him of hard-acquired skills. Barrett moved with more willingness, once he had retrieved his perforated hat.

Emerging from the corral, Chris marched his man down the street. A crowd began to fall in behind them. And as always when a crowd was about, his years on the stage and his thirst for an appreciative audience overwhelmed Defever's scant sense of caution. He began to grin expectantly.

At the State House Chris gestured Barrett up the step of the uncompleted building. At the top of the flight he ordered a halt, turning Barrett to face the crowd. Striking a pose—slightly behind Barrett so that he could watch the man—Chris cleared his throat and delivered himself of an extemporaneous oration.

"Friends!" he declaimed. "Citizens! The integrity of these pristine halls shall not be assailed. Neither violence or bribe shall shake the broad foundation of justice for all, upon which they rest. This man would have bought my not inconsiderable influence with gold or a threat. This, then, is my answer—delivered where all may see!"

Chris took a backward step and swung one long leg with a force surprising in one past the lustiness of youth. The toe of his boot connected unerringly with Cate Barrett's backside. The man was driven helplessly into space and he rolled down the steps to the level of the walk. Chris dusted his hands with a fine, large airiness and turned to the doorway at his back. Barrett came to his feet, roaring savagely.

"You've made your last bray, you old jackass!" he snarled. "You picked the game. By hell, you're going to play it!"

Barrett turned and shouldered swiftly through the crowd. Chris saw many eyes filmed with concern follow the man's passage. But the vitriol in Barrett's tones left Chris unscathed. That he had played a neatly turned act out to an appreciative audience outweighed any danger Cate Barrett and Gideon Thayer could contrive between them. At least for the moment.

CHAPTER

3

The Squeeze

Joining his brothers of the legislative branch, Chris discovered that the general assembly had already been adjourned for the day, work having been divided among various committees. Inquiry elicited the information that he had been assigned to the State Land Committee. Seeking the chamber in which this body was convening, Chris found three mild, troubled, somewhat fearful men who viewed his entry without enthusiasm.

Chris dropped into a wire-braced chair, raised his elegant boots to the conference table, and bit a leaf from a fresh cigar.

"Ah, Gentlemen," he said expansively. "A quorum now being present, let us on to business."

The trio of committeemen looked at one another. The boldest of the three, a senator from the mining section about Twin Peaks, hawked uneasily.

"We watched that performance outside, Defever," he said. "A crazier thing I never saw. But we're not crazy. We're not going to do any business. Not with State Lands. Not while a member of our committee is snarled up with Cate Barrett. We're going home, by thunder!"

Chris put his feet on the floor.

"Perhaps I did permit an insult to my integrity to drive me a little far," he conceded easily. "Just who is this Cate Barrett?"

The committee chairman clapped a hand to his forehead.

"Who—?" he choked. "You'd kick a man downstairs without knowing who he was? Jehosephat, Defever, this integrity of yours goes a mighty long ways!"

Chris sucked on his cigar.

"Go ahead, tell me," he invited. "I'm dying of curiosity. I couldn't guess. Maybe

this Cate Barrett's the Devil incarnate!"

His mockery did not set well with the others. The chairman frowned.

"That's not so far wrong," he said. "Enough of a devil so that there's no sense pulling his tail. Barrett's the richest man in the state. Made it in construction—building camps, mills, and the like. Got a lot of property and is a big taxpayer in the south. The kind of a gent you ride along easy with."

The chairman paused.

"In other words, Defever," he went on. "There was a quorum present in committee before you showed up. We took a vote between the time you came in the front door and the time you found us. We're judging you blew your powder because Barrett suggested he'd like your vote in favor of the bid he put in on that state block on Arapahoe Street. We're not giving him the chance to do any suggesting to us. Maybe Ella McGuire and her blasted women could do more with that hunk of ground, but they want it for free and they can't turn as nasty as Barrett could. We've voted to recommend tomorrow in session that the assembly approve Barrett's bid!"

The chairman stood up and snatched his hat from the coat-rack. One of the other members stabbed an accusing finger at Chris from the doorway. Chris cut him short.

"You rob me of my birthright!" he charged. "You make light of my sovereign vote! You make a travesty of our sacred duty! Gentlemen, I appeal to your responsibility as mere servants of the public weal—"

He was winding up. The chairman spoke shortly.

"Save it, Defever!" he snapped. "No matter how good it sounds when you spiel it, it isn't worth our hides!"

The man in the doorway finished what he had started to say over his levelled finger.

"At any odds, you ought to be grateful, Defever. This'll save your neck—if you're smart enough to get hold of Barrett in a hurry and tell him you've thought it over and can see his point."

The committeeman filed out together. Chris sucked long on his cigar. This had all the earmarks of a tempest in a teapot—being invoked as it was in a single block of questionable land in a city growing with

great speed. The value of the Arapahoe Street property seemed scant justification for this storm. Yet there could be no doubting that teapot or no, a full gale of violence and skullduggery was in the offing.

Chris presently also quit the committee room. Thinking of Shamus McGuire's counsel, Chris turned out toward the southern end of town, where lay the modest cottage which was at once home to the master of the Crescent Saloon and the headquarters of the Militant Mesdames Society.

ELLA MCGUIRE was at tea with a number of other ladies of like enthusiasms and light-headedness. Perceiving this, Chris would have passed by the house. He, who lived by the adulation of the masses, found the conspiratory cooing of politically-minded women a trifle strong for his stomach. However, he was most curious over the matter of the property on Arapahoe Street, and curiosity in Christian Defever was a powerful persuader, indeed.

"Why, Senator! How pleasant, how kind, how thoughtful of you!" Ella McGuire cried when she answered his knock.

There was a period of chatter when he entered the McGuire parlor in which he could not get a word in edgewise. Wearyed and somewhat desperate, he finally took advantage of the splendid volume his voice had acquired during his years on the stage.

"What," he said in a tone which shook the windows, "is the significance of the state property on Arapahoe Street? Dear ladies, kindly tell me that."

The women immediately fell silent. With one accord, they turned to Ella McGuire as spokesman for them. She sat down beside Chris, a sudden look of utmost earnestness on her face. In fact, he thought he detected a hint of moisture in her eyes.

"Dear man!" she breathed soulfully. "Blessed knight of justice! Brave warrior—to think you would stand against Satan himself!"

Chris blinked. Very pretty phrasing. But he had a hunch. A hunch that he had kicked the backside of a man who possessed astonishing prestige.

"Are you, by any chance, referring to Cate Barrett when you name Satan?"

He thought Mrs. McGuire was going to cross herself. That, or pop a button.

"That despicable scoundrel! That ruthless oppressor! That high-handed enemy of the good and the decent!"

Ella McGuire stopped for breath. Her tea-mates took up her diatribe. In desperation, Chris raised his voice again.

"Granted!" he bellowed. "Conceded! But what does the lot on Arapahoe mean to him?"

Ella McGuire leaned forward.

"Nothing!" she said. "It means no more to him than it does to us. It is token, merely a token, that's all. An excuse to oppose the women of this state. You see, now that we have secured a vote, now that we are politically free, we don't feel we should stop fighting. The next great thing is education for our children."

Chris thought this was reminiscent of Professor Thayer's talk in his hotel room. He wondered if it would lead to as much fireworks.

"We are practical," Mrs. McGuire went on. "Women are always more practical than men. We know that we can't have an education system in a brand new state, right off. But there has to be a beginning. And Grass City is a likely place. We feel, too, that an organization of women—with the welfare of children at heart—is better qualified to manage schools than any government of men. We want free land—in Grass City, at first—then in the rest of the state when the time is right. We want state money. With these things, we'll manage real schools. This block on Arapahoe Street is the piece we want for our beginning in Grass City."

"And Barrett also wants it?"

"He claims he aims to start a school, also. With that disgusting Professor Thayer at its head. A blind. Nothing but a blind. Professor Thayer is a low kind: a gambler, a ne'er-do-well, a hireling. What Cate Barrett wants—right in the heart of the best and most fashionable part of town—is a raucous house. Let his call it a gentleman's club. Let him promise that it will be decorous on the outside. Let him call it a civic improvement. He does not fool us. And if the things he promised were true, still we'd have to stand against him. What power would the Militant Mesdames Society have left if it was known that we had been defeated at anything—and by one man?"

Chris pried himself out of the McGuire

parlor. With his head reeling a little, he made his way back to the Crescent Saloon. When the barkeep came up, Chris spoke somberly to him.

"*Oh, brave new world, that has such people in it!*" A Roanoke, Sirrah, and a bottle to take with me."

The barkeep brought two bottles and a glass. Chris opened one, poured a manly tot, and drank it. He eyed the barkeep darkly.

"A conundrum, good fellow. If you had a judgment to make which would anger one or the other, which would you choose—the devil or a party of women?"

The barkeep grinned.

"I thought that was going to be a hard one, Senator," he said. "A man can usually make a deal with the devil. But who in thunder can square up one woman, let alone a mess of them? You got that kind of troubles?"

A kindly question. But it did not sit well with Chris.

"Tell Shamus—and you better do it on the quiet, too, seeing as he's been so jumpy the last couple of days—that I want to see him at the hotel when he can make it."

With these instructions, Chris picked up the unopened bottle of Roanoke and quitted the saloon. He held the bottle carefully, as though his peace of mind rested on its safe arrival at his room. But, he knew sadly, he had come once again to one of those times in his life when a sea of whiskey would not improve the complexion of events. It was doubtful, now, that he could make peace with Cate Barrett, even if he were to attempt it. The man had been publicly humiliated. And with the State Land committee already voting to recommend approval of the Barrett bid on the Arapahoe Street property at tomorrow's session of the Assembly, Barrett no longer needed the De-fever vote.

But even if peace with Cate Barrett would restore all to harmony, Chris knew he could not attempt it. For if he did so—in fact, if the Barrett bid was approved—Ella McGuire and her women would hold Christian De-fever solely responsible. He was, therefore, committed to defeating Barrett when he had no personal interest. Grass City, the committeemen, and Shamus McGuire might fear the construction man. But they, alas, were not noble knights up-

on shining steeds, from whom the Militant Mesdames Society expected the impossible.

It was, in all, a fair evening in which to become drunk.

CHAPTER

The Devil Himself

4

As Chris had feared, the bottle of Roanoke failed to improve his mood. A large repast at the hotel also failed, likewise. He quit the dining room and climbed lugubriously to his room to await Shamus McGuire's arrival. The saloonman was a jovial kind and uncommon clever. Even so, his own spirits being so low, Chris had scant hope that Shamus could cheer him. He waited impatiently. The evening advanced, but McGuire did not appear. Defever's impatience increased to a point where it began to chafe his already uncertain temper. Finally, unable to restrain himself longer, Chris clapped on his hat and strode back down the stairs.

The streets of Grass City were astir with traffic. Chris thought a flavor of unrest was in the air, but since he was not a man who held with the psychic mysteries of those who read minds and claimed to know the temper of their fellow men in advance, he accounted this unrest a reflection of his own troubled state of mind. It occurred to him, however, that there were a godly number of quiet men about whose faces seemed unfamiliar to him and he regretted that both the briefness of his stay in Grass City and the size of the town had made it impossible as yet for him to recognize every face.

There was a deal of trade about the Crescent. As a concession to caution, since both Gideon Thayer and Cate Barrett were about the town and could be within the saloon, he sought McGuire's private entrance on the alley rather than the main doorway. This private entry gave directly into McGuire's office. The saloonman was within, hunched at his desk. He raised his head as Chris closed the door, thereby giving Chris a shock. At first glance, it was difficult to gauge whether McGuire had fallen afool the wrong end of a goaded mule or whether he had come off second best in an argument with his wife.

He had a plaster over one ear and a need for several more to hold the battered fea-

tures of his face together. He looked out from slitted eyes set amidst a swollen mass of contusions, bruises, and assorted marks of violence.

"Get the hell out of here!" McGuire growled with a deal of venom. "Ain't this enough to suit you—or do you want to see me dead?"

A strange query from a supposed friend. Chris got his drift if not the reason for it.

"You intimate you have come to this pass because of me?" he inquired.

"Intimate—thunder!" McGuire yelled. "I know I did. I went into the Granite Palace and asked the clerk if you were in. You were. I started up the stairs. At the top landing a regiment jumped me. They worked me over, dumped me into a clothes basket, carried me out the back way, and dumped me off on my own doorstep. 'Keep away from Defever,' one of them says. So I'm trying to and you plow right in here. You're crossways of Barrett and as unhealthy as a sidewinder with a toothache!"

"Barrett did this?" Chris murmured. "Why?"

"Because I was on my way to see you."

"And what crime is that?"

"Hell, man, are you blind?" McGuire exploded. "Haven't you got ears? Or a head to guess with?"

"The question of the school your wife wants to build on Arapahoe Street?" Chris suggested.

McGuire swore roundly.

"Barrett's got his sights a mile higher than a mere crossing up of Ella of a question of whether we have a school in this blasted town or not. He's using this Arapahoe Street school thing as an excuse. He aims to have the Assembly take his bid and authorize him to build his own school—not because he gives a damn for education, or that gun-hand Professor Thayer does, either—but because he aims to run this state and he thinks now's a high time to get a good rein on the Assembly and break its members to harness."

"He does not, however, hold for education of the masses?" Chris persisted.

"Who does, this session of the Assembly?" McGuire retorted. "The point is, Cate Barrett figures you're a cog with too many teeth to fit in the machine he's planning. So he'll make life a rocky road for you till you're out of the State House. And

to make you fold faster, he'll ride any of us that'll play with you into the dust, too. I've learned my lesson. Most of the others won't need as much teaching as I did. You'd be more popular if you had the measles from here on out. Now, slide out of here the way you came and for the love of heaven, don't let anybody see you going!"

This was indeed a cruel blow. Chris had come to count nearly as much upon McGuire's friendship as he had the saloonman's excellent supply of Roanoke whiskey. He let himself out the private door and sidled up the alley, out of courtesy taking elaborate care that his departure was not seen.

This, then, was democracy. This was the clean tool of freedom forged from the vasty rawness of the frontier. This was the land where a man walked unafraid upon his two feet, covering before no one.

The hell!

CHRIS had thought he would soon weary of the interminable monotony of Assembly meetings. He had thought his restlessness of spirit would move him onward from so dull an existence as this to which he had been condemned by a free and fair election. He had thought the time had not yet come when he should sit back and grow himself the rounded belly of the affluent and the circumspect and that assuredly he could do only this if he remained an incumbent senator.

It was not so, he saw.

Elation rose in him. A pricking at the roots of the hairs on the nape of his long neck. A pulsing of the blood. Ha!

Alone, he was. Friendless. Bearing upon his shoulders alone the integrity of an American institution. Besieged by the lawless and the unprincipled. The last firm foundation upon which rested the whole structure of a democratic society!

He sucked in his breath. He chafed his hands together with a pleasure reminiscent of the thorniest days down his long back trail. Commencing to whistle, he strode joyously up the street. In a small saloon which in no way compared with McGuire's Crescent, he found three assemblymen from the northern counties. They were in their cups and jovial. It pained him to see his arrival dampen their spirits.

"Here comes trouble!" one of them com-

plained. Chris smiled benignly at him.

"Only if you are foolish enough to vote in favor of accepting Mr. Cate Barrett's bid on the Arapahoe Street property tomorrow," he said easily. "Only if you permit personal fears to soil the clean linen of your responsibility to the sacred public. In such case, Gentlemen, I will be forced to take steps!"

An edged threat, delivered conversationally. It had its effect. The three lawmakers looked most uneasy. Chris bid them a pleasant good evening and quitted the saloon. In the next hour, he located several other groups of convivial solons and delivered himself of like ultimatums—each time, he saw, creating exactly the right impression. The impression that there was, in Grass City, an opposing force which would view agreement with Cate Barrett was as much unfriendliness as Barrett, himself, would view opposition.

In all, Defever's circuit of the town was a very sly piece of business which raised general hell with the sound vote Barrett apparently had lined up. And it was a source of deep satisfaction to Chris that his own reputation was already such that a threat from him was nearly as effective as a threat from Barrett. A pleasing measurement. Senator Defever was one man, alone. Barrett was a score—a hundred—depending upon the current size of his payroll. The odds, at any rate, were flattering.

Judging that he had shaken the Barrett bloc sufficiently to make it unstable when the vote came up in session tomorrow, Chris turned from the lower end of town up toward the Crescent in order to satisfy the mild thirst his efforts had induced. In the vicinity of the abandoned corral, men materialized out of the shadows. Chris was caught unprepared. Shillelaghs, bludgeons, gun barrels, and a stray fist or two rained upon him. Like a lion at bay, he roared once and braced his feet to defend himself. But the odds were too heavy. He was hammered to his knees. A boot, hard and polished, which he thought might belong to Cate Barrett himself, landed against his chest and knocked him flat. The boot and its mate worked on him further. As the last of his breath was driven from his body, taking with it his sliding grip upon consciousness, Chris heard a man's angry voice:

"That squares the toe-prodding he gave

me! The shag-headed old fool, trying to throw a bigger scare than ours into the Assembly. Take him over to the house, Thayer, and keep him there till after tomorrow's session."

Perhaps there was more. Chris wasn't sure. The night became a void of rumbling thunder, followed by a silence into which he spilled gratefully.

CHAPTER

5

The Unkindest Cut

Arousing was most painful. An experience similar to an awakening following an indiscreet and overdone bout with a bottle, save that the agony of remorse and hammering aches was not confined to the head alone. Defever's entire body was a pulsing hangover of bruises, contusions, and battered flesh. He moved gingerly and found that by some miracle his limbs yet functioned in spite of the torture which accompanied movement. He was, he discovered, imprisoned in what was likely a store-room, since it had no windows. He had been stripped of his derringers. His belongings were otherwise intact. His watch rested still in a lower vest pocket, its chain anchored in the opposite pocket by the gold plated combination tooth-pick, cork-screw, and cigar knife he had lately acquired. He even found his tall beaver hat, somewhat the worse for careless treatment, dumped in a far corner. He tried the door, shrugged when it did not give, and sank down on the box which appeared to be the room's sole piece of furniture.

It was difficult to know how long he had been sitting thus, scanning in his mind's eye the bitter plains of defeat, when a key rattled in the lock and the door opened. Cate Barrett, Gideon Thayer and sundry others entered the room. Barrett was most businesslike.

"You crowded me into this, Defever," he said. "You boys at the State House are going to learn who's boss, every man jack of you, and the beginning is a good place to start. If the treatment's a little rough, I'm sorry—"

"As the Great Bard saith wisely," Chris growled, "*To show a false sorrow is an office the false man does easy.*" A wager, Sirrah! Your schemes will come to naught—"

Cate Barrett grinned without humor. He winked at Professor Gideon Thayer.

"See if you can't find some milk and mush in the kitchen for this toothless old grizzly, Gid. And keep him snug till I get back from the morning session at the State House. If he's still got enough steam to make bets left at noon, we'll let it out of him and ship him out of town after dark. If he's gotten smart enough to see sense by then, maybe we can work out a way to let him keep his seat in the Assembly. If he gets out of hand, quiet him. But be gentle, eh, Gid? Be gentle."

The professor nodded with enthusiasm.

"As a lamb," he agreed.

Barrett spoke to the others and they quit the room. Thayer reached into his pocket and produced Defever's derringers. He glanced them with some skill, and his smile increased.

"Cate's got a long think coming if he's got a notion you'll ever pull his harness, eh, Defever?"

Chris grunted assent.

"That's what I figured," the professor murmured. "You'll not only cross up this fake school deal Cate's tackled but you'll keep on shoving that long beak into everything else. So there's only one out. There's got to be a vacancy in the State House, a seat to which Cate can get his own man elected. An accident could happen to a senator. . . ."

The professor balanced the guns again.

"I'd like to see what one of these cannons would do to a carcass about your size and heft."

"Keep hoping," Chris counselled sourly. "You may yet be party to such an experiment—with yourself as subject matter!"

The professor chuckled. He backed out of the room, still balancing the derringers.

"I could sure save the boss a sight of trouble," he taunted.

Chris pinned him with a look.

"You could try," he corrected. "Trot, knave. And bring me no old man's pap from your scullery for breakfast. Inform the chef I'll have nothing but an inch steak, brown on the edges and cold in the middle."

Chris sat back down on his box. He set his hat onto his head. It felt good there. He tried restoring its shape. And presently an idea struck him. A proof of the old adage that a good man was never without

weapons. He set himself to waiting for the professor's return with an enthusiasm which had nothing to do with his desire for food. However, Thayer was long in returning, and Chris wrestled with vain impatience. At the State House a grave injustice, foreshadowing more and graver attacks upon the public weal, was in the process of enactment. And the while he must sit on a box in a dark room, waiting for a stroke of luck he was not sure he deserved—he, upon whose shoulders rested the Longbow State's one hope of escaping eventual political enslavement.

However, in midmorning, Thayer did return, carrying a small tray. He entered the room, carrying the tray in one hand and a ringer in the other. He placed the tray on the floor just inside the doorway and grinned at his prisoner.

"Converted yet?" he inquired. Chris shook his head, raised a hand to his head, removed his hat, and scratched his scalp. Thayer shrugged. "Cate'll be back pretty quick. You'll convert soon enough then—to a Barrett man or a corpse. Cate's good at that kind of work when he puts his mind to it!"

CHRIS scratched his scalp more vigorously. Thayer turned toward the door. This was his mistake. Chris came off of his box like an unleashed spring. His long legs carried him across the room, his tall hat held out high before him in both hands. Thayer pivoted. Before he could line Defever's derringer, Chris brought the hat down with savage force. Defever men ran to big head sizes. And Chris had a marksman's eye. The hat jammed down over Thayer's head, its brim going down past eyes, nose, and chin, clear to his shoulders.

The derringer fired, but Chris had already leaped aside. He caught the blinded man's arm before he could fire again and calmly broke it over his upraised knee. As the derringer spilled from nerveless fingers, Chris caught it and beat upon the crown of the hat encasing Thayer's head until there was no doubt the man was thoroughly *hors de combat*. As the professor dropped, Chris snaked the other derringer from the man's pocket.

He tried to pry the tall hat from his victim's head, but it was firmly jammed and so disreputable now from hard usage as

to be hardly fit to grace a solon's head. Ducking out the door, Chris took the stairs. Another Barrett man was on guard at the foot of these. Chris dispensed with him by vaulting the railing of the upper landing and dropping through space to land with two large feet on the nape of the fellow's neck.

Bursting from the door of Barrett's house, he sprinted up the street toward the bare, unpainted pine cupola of the State House. Not the charge of a plumed and mounted knight, but something akin to it. Not a pace in keeping with the decorum of a senator, but a rapid way of covering distance. Defever's long shanks and angular lines were without grace at high speed, but they could cover ground when need be.

Idlers on the steps of the State House scattered as he clattered up the wooden treads. If there was a Barrett man among them, the sudden appearance of this loping apparition threw him into confusion long enough to permit unchecked passage. Thus Chris found himself in the sacred halls of legislature, standing outside the slightly gaping door which led into the main assembly chamber.

One of the three assemblymen he had accosted in the small saloon the night before had just risen from his seat. He drew his watch from his pocket and placed it on the desk in front of him. Chris watched him narrowly through the partially opened door.

"Gentlemen of the Assembly," he said. "Citizens. Friends." At this juncture the assemblyman's eyes swept the spectators in the crude, box-like galleries. Spectators equally divided between Ella McGuire's determined women and Cate Barrett's well and openly armed hirelings. Chris saw Barrett, himself, in the front row of his hired guns. Very impressive. Between the guns and the women, the entire assembly was caught in a squeeze.

"I speak strongly for the acceptance of Mr. Barrett's bid on the questioned property," the assemblyman on the floor went on. "Mr. Barrett is a public-minded citizen. He has secured the service of a noted educator, Professor Gideon Thayer, for the school he proposes on Arapahoe Street. The state's first school. And what do the women propose—merely something else they can run as they see fit. When in doubt, I say, always vote for a man!"

The assemblyman picked up his watch and sat down. Cries rose from the women. Indignant cries. They were drowned in an ovation from Barrett's section. Chris perceived this was the cue for his entry. He shouldered the door wide and stepped through it. So great was the uproar within the chamber that he reached his seat before his entry was noted. The uproar died as suddenly as it had begun. Cate Barrett came up out of his seat. He signalled with his head. Two or three of his men edged up to the rail separating the business section of the room from the spectators.

Chris was aware of the threat. But steeling himself, he smiled pleasantly. He had already aped his predecessor by placing his watch on the table before him. He now deliberately, one after the other, also placed the two derringers from his vest handy to his hands there. His smile widened.

"Dearly beloved friends," he said in a great bell of a voice, "I have a few words to say on this matter, the floor, I believe, being mine?"

The chairman looked at the derringers and nodded. Barrett looked at the derringers and sat down. Barrett's men backed to their seats.

"Duty, my friends, demands that a legislator take always a larger view," Chris said impressively. "Not of the good of an individual or a faction—petty and self-interested grains of sand in the structure of this commonwealth. We do not now discuss a piece of land, a political party, or the designs of a moneyed man. We talk of generations—of history yet unborn. The gentleman before me made light of Mrs. McGuire's woman's school. Just comment, so far as it went. So, also, is the complaint of the women that Professor Gideon Thayer is incompetent. A charlatan, a veritable thug, masquerading in the garb of wisdom. But, as the Great Bard of Avon wrote so wisely, these are *'tales told by idiots, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.'* They must not be permitted to cloud the real issue.

"Think, I beg you, of babes in mothers' arms. Let lullabies fill your ears. Recall the sorrows of your own misspent youth. Our children are our sacred duty. Let them have schools—aye! But let them live first in a state of which they can be proud!

"We here, within these sacred halls to-

day, fight for our very lives as legislators; we battle to determine whether free government is to exist within the confines of our commonwealth or not. Let us gird our loins and eagerly to the fray. Members have been intimidated, threats and tarnished silver freely offered. I have twice been approached. Courage, comrades; we will scotch the serpent. I will name you names. . . ."

THIS was potent magic. This was oratory! Chris quivered in a transport of artistry. Never had his delivery been so superb. He was enthralled by the sound of his own voice. But he was also watching the Barrett bloc. Those boys had cost Barrett a lot of money. They would have to deliver. They would have to try. At the promise of naming names, Barrett paled with fury. Chris saw his lips move. He saw a concerted upsurge begin among Barrett's men. And while his final syllables were yet ringing under the roof of the hall, Chris switched his brand of persuasion.

To say he scooped up his guns is inelegant description, yet the effect was the same. A graceful sweeping motion which lifted the two Allen and Thurbers from the table in front of him. A hasty Barrett man fired. Sacrilege in a chamber of the law, but a silencing vote more potent than any ballot. Death brushed lightly past Chris and scarred the fresh plaster of the far wall. Two others were swinging their guns upward. A third and fourth had iron clear. Chris held his fire, making certain of his marks. This was not clean shooting. The women, the gallery of spectators, the assemblymen themselves—these had to be considered. A man had not only to tag a mark, but he had to be certain he did not go on through his target and nail an innocent behind. Another Barrett gun fired. A huge splinter leaped out of the table in front of Chris and slapped him a stinging blow an inch above his belt.

The derringers spoke, then. Like the wrath of the gods; like pronouncements from the Seat of Judgment. A drumming roll of fire which shook the walls of the chamber and set the spectators and assemblymen diving for shelter. Yet they might as well have sat motionless. The first Barrett man to fire sat quietly down in his own seat, shoved his legs under the row ahead

of him, and slid under it after them. Another turned around, stumbled over a seat between himself and the aisle, and banged his face down hard on the carpeting of the passage. A third embraced his own belly with a look of acute discomfort and folded gracefully over a seat back. The fourth, as though in accusation, turned on Cate Barrett and spilled down heavily into the man's lap. A window was gone. There were fresh scars in the plaster. But no other person in the room had been touched.

Standing on widely planted legs, his head thrust a little forward, Chris surveyed his handiwork. Satisfied with it, he lifted each of his guns and blew them clean of smoke. He turned a little then, addressing the president of the chamber in a voice which echoed in the awed silence of the room.

"Mr. Chairman, I request a brief recess in order to eject an undesirable spectator."

Voiceless, the chairman nodded. Chris strode purposely forward. Others rose from their seats to follow him. Cate Barrett scrambled out into the aisle and headed for the door, obviously misunderstanding the purpose for which Chris advanced. A natural enough error, in view of the fact the derringers were still gripped in Defever's hands. Realizing this, Chris pocketed them and lengthened his stride. He overtook Barrett in the hall and clamped long fingers into the man's shoulders.

"The money-changers shall be flung from the temple, Sirrah!" he murmured.

He shoved Barrett through the outer door and paused at the head of the street steps. The crowd from within the chamber poured out after him. Townsfolk gathered on the walk below. Angry mutterings began to arise from them. Barrett was white of face. He tried to protest to Chris, but Chris jerked him around to face the aroused citizens of Grass City.

"Friends!" he said sonorously, "Dearly beloved constituents, I give you a man too big for his britches!"

Barrett knew what was coming. He tried to dodge. But he was too slow. Defever's long leg swung again in a swift arc. His well-shod toe struck with excellent timing and marksmanship. Barrett was again propelled into space. He landed on the steps horizontally, rebounded, and rolled with awkward gracelessness among the legs of

those waiting below. The angry murmur rose to a low roar. He was seized. Good citizens bunched tight about him. The crowd started moving, carrying Barrett with it. Someone was going to lose a length of fence rail. Cate Barrett's last ride in Grass City would be a rough one.

The assemblymen filed back into the chamber. Chris regained his own seat and sank into it. The meek assemblyman who had made the speech preceding Defever's oration did not wait for the chairman to rap for order.

"I withdraw my motion concerning Cate Barrett!" he shouted in a transport of enthusiasm. "Instead I move the creation of a State Board of Education. I move the deeding of the Arapahoe Street property and one thousand sections of other state lands to the board. And I recommend the appointment of the Honorable Christian Defever as Chairman of the Board. God bless the children of our happy land!"

Ella McGuire, still in the spectator's section, blew her prominent nose loudly into a purple kerchief and shouted a second. A tumultuous demand for an immediate vote rose in the hall, spectators as active in their cries as assembly members.

The vote was called. Like a landslide, it rolled to a unanimous poll. Chris sank back into his seat. Let a man fear death or the devil or the connivance of others. But these could not sicken him as Defever was sickened now. A law was fashioned before his eyes. A law which made Christian Defever, who could tolerate tykes but had no love for them, the protector and instructor of the Longbow State's rising generations.

Horrible prospect! A Calahad in an Ichabod carcass. A veritable senatorial Don Quixote. A knight of lost causes forever. And the while obliged to engage in political nose-wiping of a myriad puling infants!

With a heavy and bitter heart, Chris rose at last from his seat, thinking to slink unnoticed from this hall where he had overdone his artistry at oratory and gunsmoke. But midway back in the spectators, plainly prodded by fluttering adults, a brat climbed onto the back of a seat and yelled:

"God bless Grandpa Defever!"

Chris clapped a hand to his head.

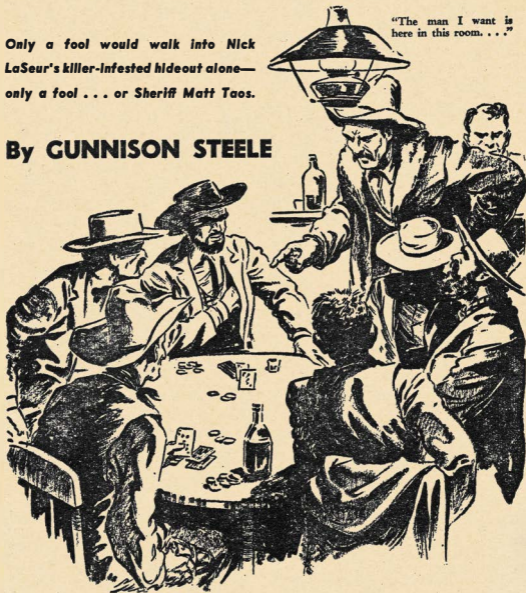
"Grandpa!" he murmured. "Odds-bodkins, 'this is the unkindest cut of all!'"

NEST OF VIPERS

"The man I want is here in this room. . . ."

**Only a fool would walk into Nick LaSeur's killer-infested hideout alone—
only a fool . . . or Sheriff Matt Taos.**

By GUNNISON STEELE



IT WAS well after dark, with a wintry wind brawling out of the north, when Sheriff Matt Taos reached Nick LaSeur's river station there on the upper Missouri. He made no effort at stealth, even though he was trailing a cold-blooded killer and knew that the killer was likely at LaSeur's post.

As he dismounted before the big, two-

story log structure, Matt Taos noticed several other saddled horses at tie-bars. Lamplight glowed inside the post building. Unbuttoning his sheepskin coat so that his holstered gun was within easy reach, the sheriff went to the front door, pushed it open and stepped through into a warm, lamplighted room.

A big, rugged-faced man, he shoved the

door to with his shoulder and stood with his back against it for a moment while his eyes accustomed themselves to the sudden flare of light. He had been here before, many times, and so knew the layout. It was a big room, containing chairs and several poker tables. At the back of the room was a rough pine bar, and behind the bar was a big shiny mirror which Nick LeSeur had imported from St. Louis. A sheet-iron stove in the middle of the room glowed red with heat.

Above the bar was a swinging kerosene lamp. Another lamp swung over a table between the bar and the stove. Seated about this table, drinking and playing poker, were half a dozen men. Matt Taos knew most of them. They were bad ones, without exception, men whose names had been linked with various crimes along the river.

A quick, tense silence had gripped the room when the sheriff entered. The men at the table froze motionless, watching him warily, hands near gun-butts. In this silence, and after looking them over deliberately, Matt Taos strode to the bar.

"Howdy, Nick," Matt said affably. "I'm cold clean through. You got somethin' to fix that?"

"Sure have, sheriff. Guaranteed to kill or cure."

Nick LeSeur heaved his huge bulk from the padded chair behind the bar. He was an enormously fat man, with round little eyes and dark, oily features. He always kept a huge .45 strapped about his paunch and a sawed-off scattergun under the bar. Now Nick sat out a glass, poured white whisky into it from a stone jug. Nick's home-made whisky, the sheriff knew, was raw and potent, but warming. He took a swallow of the stuff and felt it make a fiery trail into his stomach.

Then Matt turned slowly and placed his back against the bar, glass in hand, his gaze returning to the men at the table. They had made a pretense of returning to their game, but they were watching him furtively, wondering what business had brought him there. They knew he hadn't just happened to stop here, fifteen miles from the town of Tom's Ferry.

Matt Taos studied them, openly and deliberately. He knew that coming here had been a big gamble. These men were bad, most of them wanted by the law, with hide-

outs in the surrounding badlands. They were here because they knew that Nick LeSeur was "safe," that the law seldom came here. They came here for supplies and whisky, to drink and gamble.

There was "Black Sam" Radd, a gaunt, dark man, wanted for robbery. And Joe Pitt, red-haired, with slanting wicked eyes, who had a run-down little outfit ten miles to the west; and "Seneca Bill" Scaffa, buck-toothed and dull-eyed. The others were gun-belted, tough-looking. Matt Taos knew that, if he wanted to cut things thin, he could rake up a charge against any one of them.

But he was after one certain man.

Draining his glass, he crossed and stood near the table. The players got still again, their eyes narrowing down.

"Go ahead with your game," Matt said coolly.

"We're kind of particular who watches us," Black Sam grunted. "You lookin' for somebody?"

"Since you ask, I am," Matt admitted.

"Who—and what for?"

"To answer the last question first—I want this gent for murder and robbery. I aim to see the polecat kick at the end of a rope!"

There was a quick tensing of bodies. Hands slid from table-top to hover near guns.

"Sheriff," Joe Pitt said with a hard grin, "We're all honest men here. We don't know anything about any robbery or killin'."

"Maybe not, and maybe so. It's my opinion that the man I'm after is here in this room."

Pitt sneered, "Then why don't you take 'im?"

"Because I'm not sure, yet, who he is."

"Then what makes you think he's here?"

"Because I trailed him here. His horse's tracks led right up to this buildin'."

The dull-eyed Seneca Bill Scaffa asked slowly, "Who was killed, and where?"

"Happened at Tom's Ferry, a little before noon today. I got there a little after it was over and heard about it. A masked man stuck up the bank, gettin' away with nearly twenty thousand dollars. That wasn't so bad, only there wasn't any call to shoot down the cashier while he stood with his hands raised. The bad part happened after he left the bank."

"Shootin' down a man in cold-blood is pretty bad," muttered a tow-headed youth.

"Shootin' down a woman in cold blood is worse!" Matt Taos said coldly. "As this masked bandit headed away from the bank on his horse, headed for a clean getaway, Frank Bain's wife happened to be crossin' the street. He didn't have to run her down. Frank's woman would have made it across, if this sidewinder hadn't swerved his horse toward her, knockin' her against a hitch-rack. Then he looked back at her, and laughed, they told me. *That* was a bad thing—murderin' a woman."

FOR A moment there was stark silence in the room, with the wind mauling and shouldering roughly at the building. The men at the table glanced furtively, suspiciously at each other.

"And this gent got clean away?" Black Sam asked.

"Yes. I took up his trail, which made a circle out through the roughs. But I stuck to it, and it led here. The man I want is here in this room—and I think I know who he is!"

"But you said the killer was masked—"

"He was, but he rode a dun horse. And the cashier, before he died, said something that gave me a clue. I'm givin' that woman-killin' son a chance to surrender, right now!"

Nobody at the table moved or spoke. Black Sam Radd sat at the far side of the table. Joe Pitt sat to Jeff's right, Seneca Bill to his left. The sheriff's cold eyes played over them impartially. Tension was like a bad odor in the room.

Nick LeSeur stood with his enormous belly against the bar, with, Jeff knew, the scattergun in his hands. He wasn't afraid of Nick. Nick sold supplies and whisky, catering to honest man and thief alike, taking no part in the endless fight between law and the lawless. He was interested only in profits.

"All right!" The sheriff's voice was like a whiplash. "The guilty man knows who I'm talkin' to. You had your chance to surrender peacable. I'm gettin' another drink at the bar, then I'm takin' you—dead or alive!"

He turned his back abruptly and went back toward the bar.

Then suddenly he leaped to one side. Smoke and flame spouted from a scorched hole in the back of his coat, up under his left arm-pit, and a gun blasted.

Joe Pitt snarled with pain and surprise, and his half-drawn gun clattered to the floor. Pitt whirled sideways in his chair, went to his knees, and in this position started clawing about on the floor for his gun.

Matt Taos had whirled back, and there was a gun in his hand.

"Let it lay, Joe!" he snapped. "I thought it was you, but I couldn't be sure. That's why I turned my back, watchin' you in the mirror behind the bar, figurin' you'd make a play if you was guilty. I could have killed you, but I want to see you hang."

He went forward and took Joe Pitt's gun. The others had leaped to their feet. They stood with hands on gun-butts, tense, indecision on their faces as they watched Matt Taos. But Matt ignored them.

"You—I didn't even see you draw. . ." Pitt whimpered.

"That hide-out shoulder gun has come in handy a few times before," Matt said grimly. "Get up. We're headin' out!"

He dragged the cowed killer to his feet and pulled him toward the door. Pitt struggled in his powerful grasp, twisting about to look pleadingly at his henchmen.

"Don't stand there, damn you!" he snarled. "Can't you see this gent's a sheriff—that he's takin' me out to a hang-rope?"

Nobody about the table moved or spoke. Nick LeSeur spat loudly, sat back down in the padded chair. Joe Pitt cursed them, his voice shrill with terror and despair.

"You—you can't let 'im take me," he said frantically. "We're all the same kind—the law wants all of us. I've got money—twenty thousand dollars, the bank money, in a belt right here on me. I'll split it with you, if you'll help me. Money's what you want, ain't it? It's six to one—drag yore guns and cut this lawdog down!"

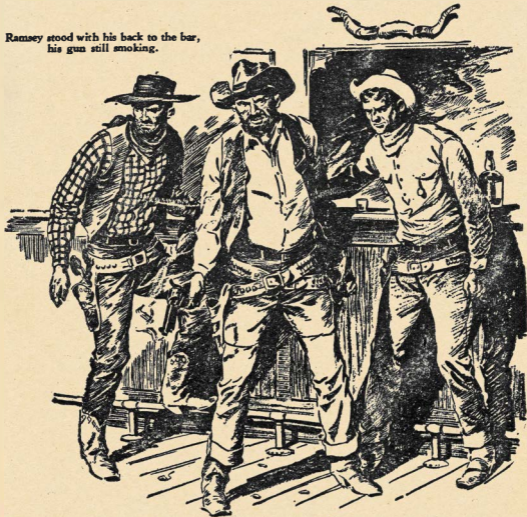
Black Sam's lips curled, and his voice, bitter with contempt, was almost inaudible: "Filthy woman-killer!"

Then, deliberately, they turned their backs on Joe Pitt. They heard the door open and close, followed by the sound of receding hoofbeats as Joe Pitt headed out on his last ride. Then there was only the wild, rushing voice of the wind in the tumultuous night.

When a man's on fire with California gold fever, nothing will cool him off
except a—

SIXGUN CURE

Ramsey stood with his back to the bar,
his gun still smoking.



FOR SIX months now, Wes Calton had watched the wagon trains move through Independence, headed for California and the gold mines. Had watched them, and in his blacksmith shop had hammered out iron rims for the wagons and fresh shoes for the horses. And now, standing in front of the shop and watching a fresh line of wagons pull into town, he was thinking it was time he packed up and

followed them. What man could stay at an anvil when adventure and fortune called over the hills?

"Day dreaming, Wes?" He turned to find Jeanne studying him, her hazel eyes reflecting the glare of the forge, her neat figure trim in a smooth print dress. "Getting

By RAY HAYTON

the itch to pack up and follow after them?"

"What if I am?" he asked. "There's wealth and fame waiting over the hills for those that have the courage to go after it."

"And take their women with them?" Jeanne asked. Sudden weariness showed in the set of her shoulders, "I thought we'd argued that out, Wes. You're making money here. You're establishing yourself in something that has a future. Why give up security and peace for a future that may bring nothing but trouble—and death?"

"Other women follow their men." He jerked a thumb to where a golden-haired girl was climbing out of a battered prairie schooner. "They trust their men. Don't you think I can make a go of it out there, Jeanne?"

"You might," she said. "But it goes deeper than that. You came in here a drifter, Wes, fresh from Nevado, Arizona and Texas. Itching feet and a nose for adventure. You only stayed because of me. I want a home, Wes, when we get married. I don't want to spend my life following you over the hills to something better."

Around them now was the chatter and shouts of the men as they unhitched their horses, and the singing of the women as they began to prepare the evening meal. Voices came to them, talking excitedly of the latest strike, of gold spread so thick they used it to pave the roads; of Indians and the long trek; of the hills, and the California that lay beyond them.

"There's wealth out there," Wes turned away from her to watch the golden-haired girl labor over the kindling of a fire. "I want you, Jeanne. I love you. But there's the hill ahead. I've got to see the other side, this one time more."

There was a long silence. A man's voice whipped across the air, shrill and excited, as he chased a beevie. Then Jeanne said in a small, tired voice:

"Go if you must. See the other side of the hill. Of this hill, and all the others you want to see. But I'm staying here where I know the future. And Wes, don't bother to come back—no matter how much wealth you find out there."

And when Wes turned to plead his case, to try and make her see the way he felt, he found he was looking after her retreating back. He took a step after her; then abruptly his jaw muscles clamped tight, and he

picked up the heavy sledge to pound away on a red hot shoe.

Security and a home. He wanted those, too. After ten years of drifting, living on the scraps of the land and the kindness of ranchers who gave him jobs to fit his youth, Wes wanted security and a home, too—wanted them bad. Sure, he was making a living here. They could be married, and maybe make a go of it. But why settle for small house, hard work, long hours—and little future—when wealth lay over the hills. Lay waiting to be found.

In sudden disgust he tossed the battered shoe aside and dropped the sledge. As he turned away from the anvil he collided with a small soft figure, and had to hold onto her tightly to keep them both from falling.

AS HE drew back with a startled apology he saw she was the golden-haired girl. She was pretty—very pretty—about twenty, with a firm figure and deep blue eyes. Her creamy skin was smudged with soot, and her eyes filled with anger, and a hint of tears.

"Could I borrow some coals from you?" she asked in a soft voice. "I just can't seem to get the fire started."

"Sure," Wes said hastily, "I'll fix it for you." He got a pan, scooped out a panful of hot coals, and followed the girl to the fire. In a few moments he had it burning brightly, and as he stood erect the girl gave him a warm smile.

"Thanks," she said. "I'm afraid I'm not used to this kind of work."

His eyes went to her hands, saw that they were blistered and red with irritation. "Going west?" he asked.

"After gold," she said. "My husband says it can be picked up by the bagful."

Wes looked around, wondering why her husband wasn't there to make the fire and help with the heavy work. The girl saw the look and said: "He's gone. Trying to find out more about California."

"Thinking of heading that way myself," Wes said, "I'd like to speak to the wagon boss. Know where I'll find him?"

"With Jack—my husband—most likely," the girl said. There was bitterness in her voice. "At a saloon. Mike Ramsey lives in a saloon, or from a bottle."

"Doesn't sound like much of a wagon boss."

"He isn't. He was a last minute choice. Chick Sanders was killed in a gun battle last night." She looked up at him, studying him carefully, then said: "There's talk that one of Ramsey's men killed Chick so Ramsey could take over."

"Why?"

"There's talk—Jack says it's drunk talk—that Ramsey is going to lead the wagon into an ambush on the desert, so he can share in the loot the Indians will get. There isn't much talk like that, of course. Ramsey is seeing to that."

"Sounds like trouble ahead."

"I'm afraid so," the girl said. Then she added bitterly, "I've tried to talk Jack out of joining this wagon train. But he's in such a hurry to get to California he won't listen."

"We're all in a hurry," Wes said. "I'll go look up Ramsey. I may be joining you."

The girl took in his tanned face, his muscular shoulders, the hard, stubborn set to his mouth and jaw. A faint smile curled her lips.

"Hope so," she said. "We may need you."

* * *

Wes found the four of them in the Red Bull. Mike Ramsey, a brawny giant of a man, with a flowing black beard and a paunchy stomach; his twin guns crisscrossed over faded and patched levis. Bart was a tall man, with thin lips and eyes that looked everywhere but carried no expression. Joe was skinny and small, with a cold, hard face and pale, restless hands. The three of them stood with backs to the bar facing the young blond-headed man who was braced on unsteady feet, waving a bottle.

"To California," the blond man said, "and to gold. May we get it by the bagful!"

"We'll get it," Ramsey said. There was a sly grin on his whiskered face. "Especially if you throw in with us. We can use a man like you. How about it, Jack?"

Some of the drunkenness left Jack's face. He lowered the bottle, reached over carefully to set it on the bar. Then he rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth.

"Got a wife," he said. "Don't want her messing with your crowd. Gotta idea about you and your crowd. I'll play it alone."

"As you say." The grin was still on Ramsey's face. "Makes no difference to

us." He saw Wes standing a few feet down the bar, turned to him with a sudden scowl replacing the grin. "What's your trouble, waddy? Hard up for conversation?"

"Just waiting," Wes said, "for a talk with you. I'm heading California way. Got room in your outfit?"

"Got a wagon?"

"No. Figured maybe I could pay for passage with someone who has room."

"No spare room," Ramsey said. "We're carrying our limit now."

"I got room," Jack said. He looked Wes over. "Room for one. Got a wife?"

"Single," Wes said.

"Think I can make room for you. You pay in advance?"

"Half," Wes said.

"Deal," Jack said. "I can use the money. I'll talk to the wife." He turned and left the saloon, and at an almost imperceptible nod from Ramsey, Bart turned and followed him out. Ramsey eased the guns on his hips, looked Wes up and down coldly.

"Just a word," he said. "It should be enough. Wait for the next outfit. We don't need you in this one."

"I think maybe you do," Wes retorted. "You've got lots of wagons—most of them manned by old men, or young kids. You need more men with guns—and guts—to help you get through. There's lots of trouble between here and California."

"We can handle trouble," Ramsey said.

"We're used to it. We even make some of it ourselves sometimes. Let's go, Joe."

Wes stood at the bar until the batwing doors closed, a frown puckering his forehead. Trouble. He smelled it all over the place. Maybe that talk the girl had been hearing wasn't all drunk talk after all.

HE SHRUGGED and left the saloon. If it meant trouble he'd meet it when it arose. He'd been raised on trouble, and he knew how to handle it. He went on to the little shack beside the blacksmith shop and began to pack his belongings. He had almost completed his packing when the door opened and he turned to find Jeanne standing there. Her eyes were faintly red, and her cheeks bright.

"You're leaving?" she asked.

"In the morning," Wes said. He stood there, his hands feeling big and clumsy, his

throat tight and his mouth dry. "Come with me Jeanne. There's a big land over there. We can find happiness. Trust to me."

"There's happiness here," Jeanne said steadily. "Or was, until you got the drifter's itch. It's not that I don't trust you!" she cried. "It's just that you've got to quit giving in to your impulses. You've got to start thinking of me, as well as of yourself. You've got to quit being a kid. Now's the time to grow up. *Now*, not later. Not when it's too late."

He wanted to stay. He wanted to stay and to do as she wished—but then anger overrode emotion, and he spoke through dry lips. "It's a test for you, as well as for me. Either you love me and will follow where I lead, or you don't. It's up to you, Jeanne."

She turned and groped for the door latch, swung the door open. "I'll be at home, Wes—waiting for you. Until the wagons pull out."

The door closed gently. Wes swallowed, rubbed his hands together, then viciously kicked at the leather bag, and began to cram more stuff into it. He closed it with a bang, stuffed the old .45 in the waistband of his levis, and left the shack.

He found the blonde girl sitting in front of the fire, stirring it with a stick. A pot hung above it, bubbling and simmering and giving out savory aromas. She smiled at him, and waved a hand at the ground.

"Have a seat," she said. "You're just in time for supper. Jack said you'd be traveling with us."

"Thanks." He sat down, took a plate of beans she offered, and played at it with his fork. After a moment he looked up to find her studying him.

"My name's Shelia," she said. "And you're Wes Calton, the village blacksmith. Why the urge to see California? Especially when it makes you look so sad to leave?"

"Not sad to leave," Wes said. He set the plate aside, and drank the coffee she gave him, swallowing in big gulps, "Sad for what might have been. Where's Jack?"

"Back at the saloon." Weariness crossed her face again. "When do men grow up, Wes? How long must they chase rainbows?"

That brought the tightness back, made him feel suddenly that he was living the same moment twice. He set the cup aside, got to his feet with abrupt harshness.

"Until they lose the ability to dream," he said. "Until they cease to hope. I'll go find Jack."

He strode through the night, the gentle wind cool on his face, trying to make his mind a blank. Were all women the same? Did none of them know the meaning of a dream? Did none of them know the thrill of chasing a dream, and maybe, now and then, seeing it come true?

He was crossing the boardwalk to the door of the saloon when he heard the sound of the shots. Two of them, close together, loud on the stillness of the night, blasting the ear with ragged violence. He flung through the doors of the Red Bull and halted, hand on the butt of his gun, frozen by the sight that greeted him.

Ramsey stood with his back to the bar, flanked by his two cronies, his gun still smoking. His whiskered face was creased with a hard smile, and he hefted the gun, blew casually down the barrel, then began to punch out the empties.

"Self defense," he said. "He went for his hardware. Anybody arguin'?"

There was no comment, no dissent. Nothing but silence as Wes strode across the floor, bent over the crumpled figure that lay with arms outflung, face white and twisted with pain. He felt swiftly, located the two wounds, high in the chest. Smoothly, easily, he gathered the limp figure up in his arms and stood erect.

"You're a liar," he told Ramsey flatly. "Jack's gun's still in his waistband."

"He's slow," Ramsey's face clouded with anger. "Too slow to live. Take him and get."

Warm blood dripped down to stain Wes's shirt. He looked over the blond hair into the furious eyes of the paunchy bearded man. His gaze swept over to meet Bart's expressionless eyes, to watch the way Joe's pale hands fiddled with the cartridges on his belt. Without a word, Wes turned his back on them and walked out.

SHELIA gave a startled, heart-rending cry as he stepped into the circle of the campfire, and her face went chalky white. Then steel seemed to brace her figure, and she went to work helping with gentle efficiency. They made Jack comfortable, stopped the flow of blood; then Wes walked through the night to the Doc's small cabin

and brought him back to care for the wounded man.

"Bad shot," Doc said after the examination. "He's powerful bad shot. One thru the lung; one just missed the heart. Up to him as to whether he'll live or not. Any comfortable place we can bunk him down, aside from the wagon?"

"My shack," Wes said. "There's a bunk there. Move your stuff over there, Shelia."

They moved the wounded man carefully. They had him bunked down when he opened his eyes wearily, squinted through the lantern light at Shelia and Wes.

"My fault." There was a bloody spume on his lips. "Got too drunk. Talked too much. Stop Ramsey."

"Don't talk," Shelia pleaded.

"Stop Ramsey." His voice was barely audible. "Going to take wagons out, rob them, leave them stranded. Indians finish them off. Stop him." There was mute pleading in the eyes that stared up at Wes.

"Be quiet," Wes said. He knelt by the bunk, lay a hand over Jack's bloody lips. "Rest—and get well. I'll handle things from here on. Believe me."

Jack met his gaze, and under Wes's hand his lips moved faintly. Then peace stole over the twisted face, and the eyes closed. Shelia gave a cry, but Wes felt the warmth of the labored breath on his hand and gave her a reassuring nod.

"Out," he said, "but still alive. Watch him Shelia. Keep him quiet. He'll live. He has so much to live for." He stood up, checked the load on his ancient gun, slipped another cartridge in under the hammer. Then he put it back in his waistband and turned toward the door.

"Be careful," Shelia said from beside the bunk. "Get some one to help you. Don't tackle them alone."

"No time for that," Wes threw back from the door. "I've got to get them before they get me. And they'll try to get me now. They don't want me standing in their way. I'll finish it. Alone."

He found several small kids hanging around outside the Wagonwheel saloon, and motioned one of them to join him in the shadows. He pulled a silver dollar from his pocket, flipped it into the air.

"Need some help," he told the kid, who deftly caught the coin. "Go to the Red Bull. Start talking to someone there you

know. Let it be known Jack is alive—and not too bad wounded. Got it?"

"I hear you," the kid said. "What for?"
"For that dollar," Wes said. "Need any more reason?"

The kid studied him in the shadows, then shrugged and pocketed the dollar.

"You've got a reputation," he said, "for doing what's right. I can use the dollar."

After he was gone, Wes went back to the blacksmith shop.

Standing in the shadows beside the cold grey ashes of the forge fire, he took out the .45, hefted it in his hand. His mouth felt dry again, and the gun too small for his big, gnarled hands.

It was only ten minutes later that he saw the tall, slim figure of Bart easing through the darkness toward the window of the shack. Wes stepped out of the shadows into the weak light, the gun held dangling by his side.

"Over here!" he said, his voice harsh. Bart whirled, the gun in his hand glinting brightly, then blossoming flame that flicked toward Wes, caught him a plucking blow on the shirt. Then his own gun roared, once, and Bart stumbled, stiffened, tried to grapple for support against the air—then collapsed toward the ground like a loosened rope.

Wes stood there for a moment, the thunder of the shots still in his ear. Before he had time to think or to react, he began to run toward the Red Bull saloon, two blocks down the street.

He stopped running when the door loomed in sight. All was peaceful. The tinkly noise of a piano sounded; a girl's voice was raised in a tinny song. He went across the boardwalk, his heels heavy on the timber. Then his gun still dangling in his hand, he pushed through, and let the doors flop closed behind him.

THEY were facing the bar now, their elbows resting on the damp surface. At the sound of the squeaking doors they both half turned, Ramsey grinning, Joe with his usual set expression. When they saw him, with the gun glinting naked, Ramsey's lips folded back in a tight, hard frown, and Joe's hands slid off the bar, moved toward his guns.

"I met Bart," Wes said. "He won't be coming back. And Jack talked."

"Drunk talk." Ramsey stepped carefully away from the bar. "No need pointing guns. We can talk this over."

"No need for talk," Wes said. He let the gun dangle loosely in his hand. Joe's hands twitched nervously, and slid toward his guns. Wes tightened his grip on the gun, brought it up, as Joe's guns cleared leather, and Ramsey flung himself headlong toward the floor.

Slowly, unhurriedly, as though he had all the time in the world, Wes drew bead on Joe, triggered the gun twice, and caught the skinny gunnie with his hammers triggered back. As the white-faced man folded, Ramsey's gun boomed from the floor, sent Wes spinning back against the doors, which gave, spilling him into the street. Ramsey's gun roared again, sending chips flying from the doors as they swung in again.

Wes rolled over, shot through the space under the doors, steadied himself, and shot again. Ramsey got to his knees, his face still frozen in a tight, hard frown. He tried to raise the gun, to trigger it again. Then all strength oozed from him, and he slid back to the floor.

Wes got to his feet, pain harsh and burning up his right side. He dropped the gun onto the boardwalk, and began to weave toward the blacksmith shop, stumbling now and then over pebbles or stones.

It seemed hours later that he leaned against the door, banged on it weakly with hands that were damp from the dripping blood. It opened, and quick, sympathetic hands pulled him in. Then a woman's voice—Jeanne's voice—came through the fog.

"He's hurt! Shelia, he's been shot!"
"Here," Shelia said. "Let me help. There's another bunk. Go get the Doc."

"Not hurt bad," Wes managed to say, as they helped him into the bed. "Just a scratch. Ramsey—he's been taken care of." Then with her hands cool on his forehead the fog thickened, and he let it envelope him in a cool mist of forgetfulness.

* * *

She came to see him often, during those days of recuperation, while his wounds were healing and Jack was slowly recovering from the brink of the grave. They talked little. There was so little to talk about. Until he was well enough to stand, and to

walk outside into the sunshine and the brightness.

They sat in the sun, his body soaking up the heat, and at last Jeanne said: "The wagon train leaves in three days. They've found a new trail boss. A good one."

"Jack doesn't want to go," Wes said. "He wants to stay here. He says he can't take another chance of making Shelia a widow."

"And you?" Her voice was low.

"I get lots of business here," Wes said.

"Jack would like to help. If I stay."

Jeanne said nothing. Looking sideways at her, he could see that her face was set in a tight mask, that her eyes were staring carefully at the building across the street.



"A man likes to chase dreams," Wes said, having trouble speaking. "He likes to feel that he's free to make his dreams come true in any way he wants."

"I understand," Jeanne said. There was a break in her voice. She turned her face away so he couldn't see it.

Wes got to his feet and stood over her. "Sometimes a man gets so used to chasing dreams he don't know when he's got one cornered."

Jeanne looked up at him then, sudden hope shining brightly in her eyes. Wes grinned, swallowed back the dryness of his throat; then held out his good arm to her, to help her erect.

"Once you realize you've already got one come true," he said, "you don't feel the need to chase no more."

They walked in the sun, her hand lying light on his arm. Wes was grinning to himself, his heart suddenly feeling light and full of peace. California? A nice place, maybe. But the dreams there, they belonged to someone else. He already had his.

ALL THAT GLITTERS

*From Frisco to London the great news flew
—somewhere in the desert was a diamond
mine!*



He couldn't believe his eyes. . . .

IT WAS high noon in San Francisco, and the few persons on the street took little notice of two shabby old prospectors leaving their hotel on Sutter Street. Had the passersby known the contents of the grimy sack the two men carried, they would have been utterly amazed. But, typical of the prospectors of that year 1871, Philip Arnold and John Slack, poorly dressed and with bearded faces, seemed Desert Rats from the word go. And as such they didn't even rate a second glance as they trudged down the street to the Bank of California.

**By FORD N.
NEWMAN**



Inside the bank they hesitated a moment, their eyes meeting in a look of mutual confidence; then shuffled over to the teller's window. The teller looked up from his counting to ask what they wanted. John Slack mumbled in his beard that they had something to deposit, only it wasn't money. The teller, whose name was John Waite, was curious.

"Well, what is it?" he asked, a bit impatiently.

"Diamonds," Slack grunted, lifting the sack from the floor.

"Diamonds!" Waite blurted. "Is that sack full of diamonds?"

"Well, no," Arnold put in, "There's some sapphires and rubies and emeralds, too."

Waite stared at them, speechless. Then, still speechless, he led them to the office of Cashier George Beckwith.

"Two gentlemen to see you," he told Beckwith. Beckwith nodded and invited the men to tell him their errand. They told him what they had in the sack, and opened the neck and let him take a peek at the contents. Astonishment, disbelief and suspicion were all intermingled on Beckwith's face when he finally shifted his gaze from the glittering gems to the faces of the pair.

"Where did you get them?" he asked abruptly.

"Out there in the desert," said Arnold, waving a hand vaguely, in the direction of what might have been Nevada.

Thoroughly aroused, Beckwith continued to question the pair in the hope of finding a flaw in their fantastic tale. They had been prospecting in the desert for gold and silver, they said. One evening, as they were making camp, they noticed some brightly colored stones on the ground. They hadn't given it much thought that night, but the next morning when the rising sun revealed a carpet of stones, glittering with white, bluish and redish lights, they had taken the time to gather a sackful of them. When sometime later they had returned to Reno, Nevada, for supplies, they had taken the stones to a jeweler for examination, and so had learned the true value of the gems.

Why, Beckwith wanted to know, hadn't they gone back for more? They replied that they were tired of the wild country; country so wild, they said, that if it wasn't for what they had found there, they would

never return. Furthermore, they wanted to have a good time for a while; and Frisco was just the town. Beckwith was shocked at the thought of all of those stones lying out there unguarded, and said so. They assured him that it wasn't likely anyone would find them in that wilderness.

Unable to get any further information, Beckwith gave them a receipt for the sack and they left the bank. Arnold and Slack had hardly reached the street when Beckwith bolted for the office of William Ralston, president of the Bank of California.

Trying not to show his excitement, Beckwith told Ralston every detail of his conversation with the prospectors. Ralston was frankly skeptical, but greed overcame judgment and he ordered Beckwith to bring the men back to the bank. A messenger was dispatched to the hotel on Sutter Street. Neither of the men seemed inclined to return. All of their business, they said, had been taken care of by Mr. Beckwith. After some more talk with the messenger, however, they agreed to call at the bank the next day.

The next day Ralston heard substantially the same story he had heard from Beckwith; but after hearing it from the lips of the prospectors themselves, his interest grew by leaps and bounds. Why, the famous Comstock Lode, in which he had a large interest, would dwindle into insignificance beside such a great discovery as this!

The men seemed simple enough, but try as he would Ralston couldn't pry any more information from them. At last, irked but determined, Ralston said:

"Are you willing to sell your interest?"

There was a pause. The two men looked at each other and shook their heads.

"No, Mr. Ralston," Slack said. "We don't have to sell."

Ralston laughed. "Of course you don't, but you'll need money to get back there."

Slack grinned. "We can sell a few diamonds."

Ralston leaned back in his chair. "Maybe," he said slowly. "But before anybody will buy them they'll want to know where they came from. However, I believe I can provide funds for your return trip whenever you're ready to go."

It was Arnold who got to his feet first. "We'll let you know, Mr. Ralston," he said reluctantly.

Ralston smiled. "Fine," he said. "And if there is anything more I can do for you, just let me know."

AS SOON as the men had departed, Ralston hired a detective to check on their every move. The detective could find absolutely nothing wrong with their actions, either at their hotel or on their frequent trips about the city. He questioned mining men and learned that Arnold was well known and respected, and that he had, on various occasions, been retained by large firms as an engineer. Slack, though not so well known, was given a clean slate because of his association with Arnold. Ralston was baffled but satisfied.

Ralston had been waiting impatiently for several days for Arnold and Slack to announce their intention to return to their diamond claim, when they surprised him by calling at the bank and announcing their decision to sell a half interest in their claim. Ralston was jubilant but still cautious. In fact, he went so far as to give them the impression that he had lost all interest in the proposition; he contended that a surplus of gems, as indicated by their story, would glut the market and bring prices down, and then again, if there were too few it would not pay to invest in the scheme. He was promptly assured that there were enough stones, but that they had to be careful about whom they chose for a partner.

After considerable discussion, it was decided that Ralston should select a man to investigate the claim. The prospectors agreed to take the investigator to within fifty miles of the claim, where he would be blindfolded for the remainder of the trip. Ralston chose a friend, David C. Colton, who was something of an expert on precious stones. The three men then made a twelve-day inspection journey. When they returned, Colton was elated. He told Ralston he couldn't believe his eyes; there were diamonds, sapphires, rubies and emeralds lying everywhere. As proof he produced a pocketful of the stones he had picked up. Ralston immediately took the stones to a jeweler for examination. The jeweler confirmed the fact that the stones were genuine.

Ralston's next step was to cable a friend who had previously helped him swing some big business deals, and who was in London

at the time. The friend, Frank Harpending, struck by the urgent tone of the cable, caught the next boat for America.

He was greeted by Ralston upon his arrival in San Francisco. Ralston took him to the bank where he showed him the sackful of gems and gave a complete resume of the prospector's story.

Harpending, though ordinarily conservative, became highly excited at the prospect of buying into a diamond field. He had had previous relations with Arnold, he said, and knew that he was reliable. He wanted, however, to know more about the extent of the field before making any cash payment. Arnold and Slack, however, refused to agree to further investigation until some payment was made. After several days of bickering, Arnold came up with the suggestion that he and Slack return to the field and pick up two more sackfuls of stones. These would be given to Ralston and Harpending as collateral for any subsequent payment to be made. This solution was acceptable, so the two men again departed for the diamond field.

As the days passed, Ralston was busy inviting wealthy friends to invest in the venture. The prospectors had been absent twelve days when Ralston received a message from Reno, Nevada, instructing him to send some trustworthy person to meet them at Lathrop. Harpending himself decided to make the trip. He met the men the next night at the stage station in Lathrop. They led him to a lumber pile and produced a sackful of stones. Both men were bedraggled and weary. They had had a lot of trouble, they said. No, they said, in answer to a question from Harpending, they hadn't had any trouble getting the stones, but on the way back they had run into a cloudburst and had lost one of the sacks. They told Harpending that he might take the remaining sackful into San Francisco, and they would return to the field for more. Harpending was satisfied with the one sackful, however, and asked the men to accompany him back to San Francisco.

When they arrived in Frisco, they found Ralston and a group of guests awaiting them. The sack was emptied of its contents. Thrilling to the sight of the glittering gems as they spilled upon the tabletop, the guests were eager to invest their money at once. Conservative Harpending, however,

proposed to the group that they have the stones examined by some New York experts.

Upon his arrival in New York, Harpending went directly to Tiffany's. It was agreed that he should bring the stones around the next morning and Mr. Tiffany himself would inspect them. When Harpending returned the next day, Mr. Tiffany informed him that there was no doubt in his mind that the stones were real but he would like to have his experts pass judgment on them. Harpending left the stones for several days and returned again. This time he was told the samples were first class stones.

NOW, with all doubt removed, Harpending hastened back to San Francisco, and urged Ralston to negotiate some financial arrangement with Arnold and Slack at once. Arnold and Slack were contacted and after some discussion agreed to sell a half interest for the sum of \$400,000.

Harpending, who seems to have taken over the leadership in the deal, then engaged the services of one Henry Janin, a conservative but well known mining engineer. Janin made a survey of the diamond field, and stated in his report that a dozen men could wash out gems to the tune of \$1,000,000 a month.

Ralston's associates were so pleased with this report that they urged Ralston to do everything in his power to obtain control of the remaining half interest in the field. Arnold and Slack were reluctant, but finally agreed to dispose of their interest for an additional \$260,000.

About this time, a government survey party was working in the vicinity, and one of the party happened to be a scientist who had had considerable experience in the diamond fields of South Africa. The scientist, Clarence King by name, requested and received permission to inspect the field. King found the stones easily enough, as they were scattered on top of the ground and over a large area. Assuming that they had been washed up from below the surface sands, he decided to do a little digging to check his theory. Not a one did he find under the surface.

Since the whole setup was most unusual, King retraced his steps around the field,

examining closely the position of each stone he found. He discovered that, not only were most of them above ground, (a few were found in holes and ants' nests) but some were lying on top of leaf mold. Furthermore, upon closer examination, some of them showed definite signs of having been cut. After spending several days examining numerous stones, King concluded that the diamonds were all of a very low grade and worth very little commercially, while the other stones—sapphires, rubies, and emeralds—were of a grade that could be bought by the pound in London or Brussels. He also concluded that they had been "planted"—strewn about like grain.

King sent this information along to Ralston, stating that the gems were not worth a fraction of the \$660,000 that had been paid for them. Ralston and Harpending, in the throes of despair, hastened to a local jeweler for confirmation of King's opinion. *The jeweler agreed with King!*

"No! No! No!" Ralston screamed. "It can't be true!"

But it was true; they had been bilked out of \$660,000.

Ralston immediately instituted a search for Arnold and Slack, but they had checked out of their hotel on the day of the final \$260,000 payment and couldn't be found.

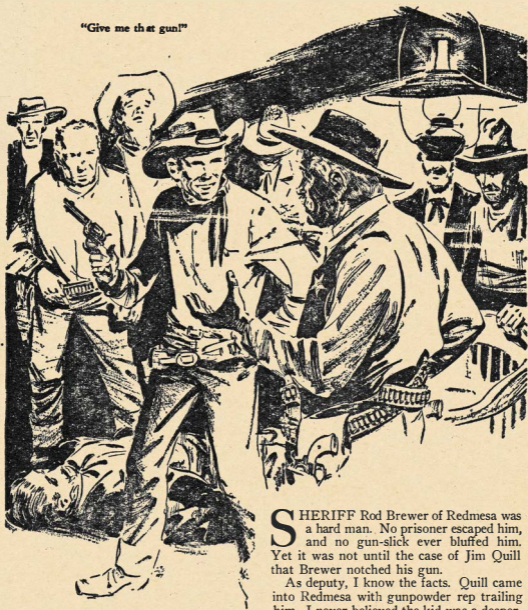
Ralston reimbursed his associates, but his luck had run out, and in 1875, he lost the presidency of the Bank of San Francisco. The loss was too much for his ego and he decided to end it all. He went for a swim in the Pacific one day and waded out too far. When the tide came in his body was washed ashore.

Later, Tiffany's, in an effort to clear their name, explained that, when the stones were left with them for appraisal, they had been turned over to a new employee who had claimed to be an expert appraiser. The man was subsequently discharged when it was found that he actually knew very little about gems. Furthermore, Mr. Tiffany had merely said the stones were genuine—he had not made any statement as to their value.

Whatever the truth of the matter is, it must be acknowledged that Arnold and Slack played their parts to perfection, especially in view of the fact that they chose as their victim one of the greatest and shrewdest financial tycoons of the time.

GUN-WHELP'S NEMESIS

"Give me that gun!"



No killer ever escaped Sheriff Rod Brewer—or was thrown to the blood-thirsty mercy of a lynch-mad mob.

SHERIFF Rod Brewer of Redmesa was a hard man. No prisoner escaped him, and no gun-slick ever bluffed him. Yet it was not until the case of Jim Quill that Brewer notched his gun.

As deputy, I know the facts. Quill came into Redmesa with gunpowder rep trailing him. I never believed the kid was a desperado, but that he was wild and quick on leather-slapping went without question.

Redmesa lay in the shadow of the bluffs, the single street bending like an ox-bow around the bottom of the mesa, with the

By W. C. HARDING

two saloons at the east end and the stone jail and some Mexican shacks at the other. A two-rutted trail led from the shacks to the top of the mesa, and there, in a clearing of pinions, was boothill.

Brewer was over in Cartillo, checking on some cases, when Jim Quill hit town. Aside from a few fistfights and some harmless powder bumming, there was nothing I could throw him in the *calabozo* for; then, just as Brewer returned, Quill and Lafe Willingham, the gambler, got in a gun game for keeps. The result was one dead gambler and a cry among his friends that the kid had shot an unarmed man.

I was in Pappy Hendricks' restaurant the night the shooting occurred. The sharp, deadly silence after the shot and then the low animal growl of men's voices told me plenty. I plunged into the street to see Brewer swinging down from his horse in the starlight. We reached the door of the dark Monahan Saloon at the same time.

Some fool had slapped out the lamps when the fight started. Now Monahan, the proprietor, lighted a match. In that flickering light as Quill stood there slightly bent, gun in hand, I had a feeling I had seen him before. However, when a restored lamp glow went over the room, I figured I was mistaken.

The kid had a thin face and pale, mocking, blue eyes. His unshorn, yellowish hair curled around his ears and collar, setting off his twisted grin until he looked as hostile and belligerent as a catamount.

Brewer took charge of the situation at once. His eyes rested for moments on Quill's face, and his jaw set until the muscles stood out in knots. The kid's pale eyes didn't falter, but his twisted grin slowly faded.

Brewer said: "Give me that gun!" It was like asking a rattler to hand over its fangs, but Quill obeyed. "Feel him for a spare gun," the sheriff ordered me, "then lock him up and see that he stays locked up."

That took me out of the main picture for the time being. I had no trouble with the kid. He marched sullenly ahead, and in five minutes he was safe in a back cell. I tried to prod him with questions, but he wasn't talking.

It was an hour before Brewer came down to the jail. He had a tired, worried look plus a dash of anger in his eyes. "Lafe

wasn't packing a gun," he stated as he dropped into a chair.

"The hell he wasn't!" came from the back cell.

"You think up another story," returned the sheriff dryly. "This time you've bought a lot in boothill."

Quill buttoned his lip at that; and Brewer went over the case with me. Frank Jocelyn and Fred Peters were at the table with Quill and Willingham, and Perry Horton had been watching. All swore Lafe was unarmed; but Jocelyn was the curly wolf of Redmesa and the others took their nod from him. Anyway, they'd all been in a clique with the dead gambler. My guess was that someone got Lafe's weapon in that moment of darkness and disposed of it. I think the sheriff was of the same opinion. It made murder out of what would have been an ordinary gun scrap, and Brewer was worried.

The next day Lafe should have been buried. In fact Tio Manizar and his boy had dug the grave; but someone remembered that Willingham had a wife in Plata City, so his body was loaded in a wagon and sent down there. We were left with an unfilled grave up on the bluff among the pinions.

Late the second evening Frank Jocelyn button-holed Brewer in front of the stage station. "What's the play on Quill, now you've got him?"

"District court meets in Cartillo in about three weeks," answered the sheriff. "I figure Quill will be tried then."

"Maybe," returned Jocelyn dryly. "If Redmesa don't kill its own snakes in the meantime."

The tension in town grew. Plainly Jocelyn and his pards were building the citizens up for a Judge Lynch session. I never questioned the courage of Rod Brewer, but he was mighty worried. He had a lot of pride, and to lose his prisoner to a mob would be unforgivable disgrace in his eyes. He took on queer manners. At times on my returning from scouts about town I'd find him stepping back from the cell corridor as if he had been talking with the kid and was hiding the fact; and at times he would stand for minutes holding his hunting-case watch in his hand, a far-away look clouding his strong, hard-bitten features.

ON THE fourth day after the shooting, I was alone in the front office. Brewer was out feeling the pulse of the town himself. Quill had maintained a dogged silence with me, and that is why his sudden yell sent me half out of my chair.

"How long is that damn bell going to ring?" he demanded.

"What bell?"

"The one that's ringing, you fool! Some kid squawking all night so I couldn't sleep, and now a bell ringing all day."

I'm a reasonably light sleeper myself, so I knew none of the Mexican kids had cried loudly the night before; and there was no bell ringing now. I began to think the kid was loco. He was pacing up and down the cell, pulling at his fingers, and looked very nervous.

When Brewer came in I told him. If I had slapped him in the face with a cold towel, he would not have looked more amazed. He stared at me for a moment and then strode back to the cell. He gazed at the nervously pacing kid. No words were exchanged between them. Then he was back in the front office again.

"I better handle this end of the job," he told me. "Have Pappy Hendricks send me my supper. You keep an eye on the east end of town. If I want you for anything, I'll send for you."

It was something past ten o'clock when the last act of this affair shaped itself. I was in the Monahan bar, dallying over a little watered whisky, when there were very faint reports like a couple of shots in the west end of town. Some of the boys looked up, but Perry Horton mentioned the way Pappy Hendricks slammed his doors, so they went back to their playing again. In about ten minutes a Mexican kid tugged at my sleeve and said Brewer wanted to see me.

I knew now that something had gone wrong. I lit out for the jail, and my quick departure attracted Frank Jocelyn's attention. Before I was halfway to the jail, I knew others were following me.

When I stepped into the sheriff's office, Jim Quill's body lay upon the floor and Brewer was throwing a blanket over it. The prisoner had gone down near the rear door, and his gun was a couple of paces from him. In addition there was a bullet hole drilled just beside the front entrance. The

sign was easy to read, but Brewer went ahead to explain, and I thought there was a tired flatness in his voice as he spoke.

"I stepped out to see Manizar for a moment. When I came back, Quill had got out of the cell and got his own gun from the drawer. He had somehow looped my keys from the desk there. He fired as I stepped into the room. I had to let him have it."

I pulled down the blanket far enough to see the spot of blood on Quill's shirt front. His blank, wide open, staring eyes chilled me. His skin had turned almost blue. Already his body was stiffening.

Frank Jocelyn and half a dozen men came stamping into the little office. Jocelyn's hard eyes were at first incredulous as he stared at the body, and, even after listening to Brewer's short recital of the shooting, he stepped over and prodded the stiffening form with his boot. In the dim light of the office lamp the blue skin and blank eyes were ghastly. Jocelyn turned away satisfied.

"You saved us a loop, sheriff, but I'd a liked to see that jasper swing."

"I had no choice," returned Brewer simply.

"Well, whatta we do now?" questioned Perry Horton.

"I'm closin' the deal pronto," replied the sheriff, "and glad of it. We got a grave already dug on the bluff. I'll have Tio Manizar haul the body up on his wagon. Any you boys like to come along?"

"Not me," declared Horton. "I've had two pat hands already this evening. My luck's too good to spoil it with a funeral."

Others made similar remarks. They trooped out with considerable joshing and profanity. They no longer had any interest in Jim Quill.

We hauled the blanket-wrapped body up the double-rutted trail in Tio Manizar's creaky old wagon. The Mexican was muttering and praying and declaring it was all bad without a *padre* officiating. "All right, Tio," agreed Brewer when we got to the top, "I understand how you feel about it. You run back home, and we'll fetch your team and wagon *poco tiempo*." Manizar disappeared with a quick, "*Gracias*."

Brewer lighted a lantern. The night wind sighed softly in the pinons. The empty grave was like a yawning mouth. I

began to feel a cold creepiness over my skin. And then—

There was a grinding of teeth and a sudden movement of the blankets on the wagon. I saw Brewer jump and turn in that direction. My whole body felt watery and cold, and something was pulling at the nape of my neck like an icy hand. I saw Brewer yank the blankets away. The dead man's face was twitching and jerking. The blue color was gone. A moment later he was pawing at the twining blanket. Only the fact that I was leaning hard on the shovel handle kept me upright when I saw that dead man come to life.

Jim Quill sat up shakily. He looked sick and scared; but as he sat there gripping at the wagonbox edge, he got control of himself.

Brewer spoke, and I was surprised at the hard metallic timbre of his voice. "Git goin', you young whelp! This is your last chance. Wash that chicken blood off your shirt. But don't you dare show up in my bailiwick again. You won't get off so easy next time."

"All right, badge packer," said Jim Quill, and he was gone into the darkness without another word.

Brewer threw the blankets into the grave. "Catalepsy," he explained. "My wife had the same disease. Makes you look like dead. When he started hearing things and

acting nervous I figured a spell was coming on. When I found him stiff in his cell, I just arranged the body and fired the shots myself. I gambled that Jocelyn and his pards would act the way they did. And you're keeping your lip buttoned on everything I've said about this whole thing, understand?"

I assured him I did. I knew all along that Quill was being framed dirty, and I was glad that he escaped both the law and Jocelyn, even if I didn't like the young snapper personally. We rounded over the grave, and then, there in the lantern light, Sheriff Rod Brewer carved a nick in his gun.

"I did it for his mother's sake," he went on. "She's been gone these fifteen years. If you'd see the picture I carry in my watch, you'd see there was a lot of resemblance between her and that good-for-nothing gun-whelp."

"Then he's your—"

"That's right. Quill's just an assumed name. He's my son."

I understood then why that glimpse of Quill in the match-lighted saloon had seemed familiar, but until that moment I wouldn't have guessed the reason. Neither would I have guessed that Brewer would make the first notch on his weapon for the killing of his own son. But then, Rod Brewer was a hard man.

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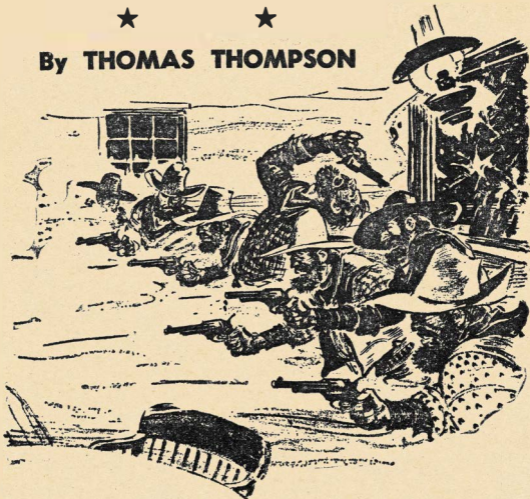
Then the gunfire became a
constant roar. . . .

OUTCAST OF THE FIGHTING CLAN

When young Johnny McGruder hit the owlhoot trail, the other Fighting McGruders vowed to wipe out the disgrace—one way or another.



By **THOMAS THOMPSON**



CHAPTER

"It's a Lie!"

I The hay was past the cutting stage and the mowing machine needed a new pitman rod. Young Len McGruder knew this and it bothered him some. He and his dad and his brother Johnny had always taken a pride in the place. It wasn't like the McGruders to let a place run down. But sometimes when a man gets something on his mind it keeps hammering away and holds him back when he goes to do the

little things. It was that way with young Len and old Bob McGruder, and it had been that way ever since Johnny had left. Len put down the piece of harness he was mending and watched the dust cloud that moved slowly up the lane. That would be the sheriff, he guessed.

The Fighting McGruders, people called the old man and his two boys. Not because they handled a gun better than the next man nor because their fists were something to shy from, although in a pinch it had been proven both these facts were true. But men

Dramatic Novelette of Frontier Justice

called them the Fighting McGruders because there was no way to lick them. They backed down from nothing.

When the creek went dry the McGruders dug a well. They had to dig six wells before they hit a surface seam, but now while the rest of the valley baked and cracked the McGruders had water to check irrigate their alfalfa. It was the same six years back when the fire came through the valley. Most men ran and let it go, but when the smoke-red sun came up that morning the McGruder place still stood and the three McGruders, sore-eyed and blackened, stood there by the smoking barn and silently shook hands. They were the Fighting McGruders, those three, but there were only two of them now. That was the thing that was taking the starch out of young Len and old Bob. They knew it, but they never talked about it much.

They had come from a spot out Texas way a long time back, and some said it was a spot where a man fought for what he got and life was sometimes cheap. It had set up a sense of values in old Bob and young Len. It had made them men. But Johnny had been pretty young and although he had the same set of values, old Bob sometimes said the kid didn't have them quite straight in his head yet. That's why he had taken a pair of buggy lines to Johnny a time or two. It was the best way he knew to set a kid straight. But Johnny still didn't have it right in his head. He figured that because he was six-foot three and chewing-tobacco age, he had a mind of his own.

So finally Johnny had ridden his own trail, and now Len and old Bob missed him. Len missed that habit Johnny had of making up tunes. Johnny would whistle the melody and recite the words. He seldom got the two together, but it never worried Johnny much. That was the trouble. Nothing worried Johnny much. Len thought about that as he squinted into the sun and watched the sheriff riding down the lane.

Old Bob came out of the house and stood by his son. The old man didn't say anything at first, but Len knew his thoughts. He knew the old man realized that the sheriff wasn't just coming to pass the time of day. The silence began to weigh on Len so he said, "Looks like company coming up the lane, Dad."

"The gate's always open," old Bob said.

They were alike, these two. People always said they were alike, and yet no one could tell why. It was a certain set of the shoulders—a quickness and a manner that was present yet not visible. Old Bob McGruder had a splash of white hair and laugh wrinkles that sprayed out around his eyes. Young Len had a lean hard darkness about him and there was no mirth in his level gaze. The sheriff pulled in at the gate and waved lazily at them.

"It's Sheriff Benton Lane," young Len said, returning the wave.

"It is at that," old Bob agreed. "Mornin', Benton," he called.

"Hi, Bob—Len," the sheriff said. He swung stiffly out of the saddle like a man might when aware that someone is watching him closely. He came over and shook hands with the two men.

"Had breakfast, Benton?" old Bob asked.

"Nope," the sheriff said. "Heard tell you killed a hog last week and figgered I'd get in on it. Hams ready yet?"

"If they was you wouldn't get none, you old polecat," old Bob said. "Howsomever you can watch me and Len lappin' up some pork chop gravy if you've a mind to."

"You two get to reachin' like usual you'll get a fork through the back of your hand," the sheriff promised. "I'm hungry."

The exchange fell flat and the silence walled up between the three men. Len felt a queer stirring in his chest. Old Bob had always been able to sit back and wait for things until the time came to act. Len had had trouble learning that. He liked to go to the heart of a thing right off, and he knew the sheriff hadn't just come for breakfast. He glanced at his dad and saw the laugh wrinkles spraying out around his eyes. The wrinkles weren't as deep as usual.

The fire was already going in the cook stove and the coffee had come to a boil. Len took a dipperful of cold water from the galvanized bucket by the window and dumped it in the coffee to settle it. He could see the sheriff was having trouble rolling a smoke. The sheriff kept shifting his weight around on his lean hips like he was afraid maybe his gun showed too much.

Old Bob dumped water into a tin basin and washed his face. He made a great noise about it, and he shook his shaggy head like a wet dog. Len felt that swelling in his chest again. He threw down the dipper and

said, "What the hell's the trouble this time?" Old Bob stopped shaking his head and peered at his son over the top of a ragged towel. The sheriff quit trying to roll the cigarette.

OLD Bob's eyes looked like two bright stones sinking in golden quicksand. After a few seconds he went back to wiping his face vigorously and through the towel he said, "No trouble, son. Just let her set a minute. She'll settle." Len put another stick of wood in the stove. His hands were trembling now. The sheriff looked older. He was wise in a way. He knew there was no use pretending any longer.

The sheriff's voice was tight, like an actor saying the first line of a long speech on opening night. He said, "Guess you heard about the bank."

"Bank?" old Bob said, hanging the towel on a nail. "Can't say that I did. News is slow getting around. What about the bank? Don't tell me old Merve Keele run off with the money? He better not, dern him. I always used to say come quittin' time, 'I figger I'll go home, eat my supper, wash, then count my damn money.' Can't do that any more since old Merve talked me into puttin' my money in his bank. Reckon he figgered it was all in the family since his Bessie and my Johnny got to lolly-gaggin'."

There it was. That was it. The old man had mentioned Johnny. It was like a signal to go ahead, and Len let the air go out of his lungs. His hands were steady now. He turned around and faced the sheriff.

The sheriff's voice wasn't so tight now. He said, "The bank was robbed. Old Merve has got a bullet that don't look good. He couldn't talk yet when I left town."

"Go ahead and say it, damn it," Len said softly. His hands kept clenching and unclenching.

Old Bob said, "Now, son."

"The Vance Sellers gang it was," the sheriff said. "Come in around closin' time last night. Had maybe twenty men with him and treed the whole town. I had a couple of rifles in my ribs before I knew what happened. Wide open and bold about it, they was."

"Vance Sellers is gettin' mighty big in his way," old Bob said. He hesitated as if he wanted someone else to finish for him.

"I saw Johnny," the sheriff said quietly. "Guess everybody did."

The laugh wrinkles had gone from around old Bob's face. His eyes seemed to center on the middle button of the sheriff's vest. Len saw that, and it made him feel better. Old Bob was figuring how close he could group six shots around that button if need be. Old Bob said, "I'd want you to be sure of what you was saying before you talked like that."

The sheriff said, "I've known you McGruders a long time. I'd make damn sure of what I was saying before I talked like that."

A lot of starch seemed to go out of old Bob McGruder. A cold chill ran through Len's body and left a trickle of sweat down the crease of his back. It was one for all and all for one with the McGruders. Old Bob said, "You askin' for a posse, Sheriff?"

There were gray lines around the sheriff's mouth. He shook his head. "I got no right to ask men to get themselves killed off for sure," he said. "There ain't nobody could ride into Granite Gorge with a posse. I ain't askin' for it unless the people in town make me do it, Bob. I was elected to this job and I got to do what the people say."

"You figger Vance Sellers headed for Granite Gorge, eh, Benton?" Old Bob said mildly.

"You know damn well he did, Dad," Len flared. "Everybody knows he's got a regular town there." Old Bob's eyes became cold and the laugh wrinkles went away.

"How you know for sure, Len?" the sheriff asked.

Len McGruder flushed under his tan skin. "Everybody knows about Vance Sellers holin' up in Granite Gorge," Len said.

All pretense was gone from old Bob McGruder now. He seemed to have aged—or rather, the feeling of youth that was constantly around him slipped off and he was now his real self—an old man, worried about his youngest who was in trouble. He said, "Johnny's a good boy, Sheriff. He'd have to be a good boy to have all that music in his heart."

"They're sayin' it was Johnny did the shootin'," the sheriff said.

"It's a damn lie!" Len exploded. "They say it because they know Johnny's name the best. They don't know the names of Vance Sellers' crew so they say Johnny's

name first. That's why they say it."

"They know the name of Sug Welch," the sheriff reminded.

Len felt weak. It was true. They knew the name of Sug Welch, that hulking ape of a man whose mashed features graced oak trees and fence posts all over the valley country. He was a killer without brains—a cold, smashing machine—and it was said he had slit the throats of six Chinamen once, out in California, after tying their pigtailed together. Yes, everyone knew the name of Sug Welch, but still they said it was Johnny.

The sheriff got to his feet. "There won't be no posse if I can help it," he said softly. "It would be like drivin' steers into a slaughterin' chute. But Vance Sellers and his crew will be back, Bob. When they come back they won't catch me off guard. I was elected to my office, Bob. I got certain things to do. I got to satisfy the people, Bob. I wanted you to know."

"I'm obliged to you, Benton," old Bob said. He clung to the sheriff's hand a long time and he looked old. "I'm mighty obliged."

"If you was to ride in to see Merve Keele and his daughter Bessie that would be a good thing," the sheriff said.

"We'll do it, Benton," old Bob said. "Me and Len here, we'll do that."

CHAPTER

2

A Promise

The horses the two McGruders rode weren't the best. They had never been much given to fancy riding outfits, old Bob and Len. With Johnny it was different. Ever since he was a little shaver he had taken to horseflesh and fancy rigging. There wasn't anyone in the country that didn't know that single-footing palomino of Johnny's. Len thought a lot about that as he and his dad rode toward town.

They didn't say a lot to each other, except for Len to remark that it had been a dry year. Old Bob said it had, and let it go at that, but Len admired the way his dad carried a gun at just the right angle.

Len felt back to see that the two canteens were riding all right behind his saddle and he wondered if the cooked meat he had put in the flour sack along with the biscuits would keep all right in the heat. They hadn't talked about it, but they both knew

that they were going a lot further than banker Merve Keele's house in town.

The house stood on a hill, important and solid. It looked something like the people that lived there, Len thought. It was dark by the time they got there, and there was a light in one of the upstairs windows and Doc Tilford's yellow-wheeled rig was standing-out near the big cottonwood there at the left end of the porch. It was hard to tell about Doc Tilford. He was the undertaker, too.

The two McGruders reined up and dismounted and they went across the cool porch to the white front door with its brass horse-shoe knocker. Len raised the knocker and let it fall once. The door opened immediately and a girl stood there, outlined by the dim light from within.

She was not beautiful in the true sense of the word, but there was a goodness about her that lent a prettiness to her tilt nose and wide blue eyes and that was more effective than mere physical beauty. Her blonde hair had been brushed carelessly back. She looked very young in the checkered dress with the square cut neck, but she had a full maturity about her. She had been crying. When she saw old Bob McGruder she ran into his arms and started to cry again. Old Bob held her tight and said, "There, there. There, there." He said it over and over.

Suddenly the girl pushed herself out of old Bob's embrace. Her hands tightened on the old man's arms and her voice was low and throaty. "He didn't do it, did he, Bob? You tell me he didn't do it!"

"Johnny wouldn't do that, Bessie," old Bob said. "You know Johnny wouldn't do that."

She seemed to feel better, hearing it from old Bob. She turned and let her hand linger on Len's arm a second, and he felt a thrill running through him just as he always did when she touched him. She was Johnny's girl—she would always be—and Len would kill the man who tried to stop it. But he thrilled when she touched him that way.

"You'll want to see dad," she said.

She led the way up the dimly lighted stairs to the bedroom on the second floor. Doc Tilford was there on the landing. He pursed his lips and shook his head when he saw old Bob and Len. "Dad would want to see them," Bessie Keele said. The doctor said, "Just a minute." He stepped aside.

Merve Keele looked like one of the pictures Len had seen hanging on the walls of big banks over at the county seat. His hair was white and long, and he wore mutton chop whiskers. His face was gray against the pure white of the pillow. "We want to shake hands, Len and me," old Bob said to him.

The banker moved his hand out from under the sheets. Both men gripped it for a second. The banker closed his eyes and his lips moved slightly. "I'm sorry," he said softly.

"Can you talk a little more?" old Bob asked. The banker waited a long time before he answered.

"That damn palomino," the banker said softly. "Anyone could recognize that damn palomino. Johnny and Sug Welch—they were side by side. Johnny had both guns going—"

Len felt a hard lump form in the pit of his stomach. He thought about Bessie and he thought about his brother. He heard his father say, "You take right good care of yourself now, Merve. I don't want my money should get in somebody else's hands." He left then, and Len followed his father down the stairs. Bessie was waiting there. Old Bob put his arm around her and she took one of Len's big hands in hers.

The girl and the house kept making Len think of Johnny. Johnny had been here to this house often enough. Once Len had thought about coming to this house, but Johnny was a man who acted and thought later. He hadn't been wrong about coming here, though. She loved him, and she was the finest girl a man could ever find. It wasn't right that Johnny should hurt her.

"I've got to see him," the girl was saying. "I've got to have him tell me himself. In all the years ahead people are going to say maybe he did it. If I hear it from his own lips I can stand that, Bob. I don't care what they say."

You'd go through that kind of hell for a man, Len thought. You're that kind of woman. He couldn't keep still any longer, but this time he measured his words when he said, "You needn't worry none, Bessie. If you and Johnny spend the years together there won't be none can talk to hurt you. I promise you that, Bessie." He looked quickly toward his dad, expecting to find that the laugh wrinkles had gone from

around the old man's eyes. Instead he got a nod of approval.

THEY rode out of town together that night, old Bob and Len. They took the mountain trail that cut up through the stunted pinon and dropped over the hog-back into the sandstone spires and lava beds. And by the time the blood-red sun came over the wasteland, the going was rough. Before the sun was an hour old it was beating down against the lava and beating back, and the heat waves danced in devil twists around the horses legs. Len untied one of the canteens and handed it across to his father. The old man drank and gave it back.

There had been a lot of things going through Len McGruder's head during the long night, but he had kept silent. Suppose Johnny was guilty? Suppose he had gone all bad and shot Merve Keele? The fact that he had participated in the robbery was bad enough. He wanted to hear his dad's opinions, and the old man seemed to sense it.

"Sometimes a little shaver does some crazy thing. Ties a can on his dog's tail, maybe," old Bob said. He rode on awhile in silence. "When a little shaver does something like that he needs a talkin' to. If he does it again he needs the back of a hair brush. Recollect that silver hair brush of your mother's?" Len nodded. "You and Johnny was both raised on it," the old man said.

Len kept his peace. He knew that his dad's heart was as heavy as his own and the turmoil within him was just as great. Give him time and the old man would say what had to be said.

"Johnny was a hard one to handle," the old man said. "Had a stubborn streak runnin' through him that made him have to find out things for himself. Like gettin' drunk that night. You and me both told him it was no good, Len. He had to see for himself. Same as when he gambled—" The old man sighed deeply. "I figured I was doin' right, takin' the lines to him that night. You figger I was right, Len?"

"I figger you was right, Dad," said Len quietly.

The old man's voice had a jerky catch in it now. Len turned quickly. There were tears running down the seams of the old

man's face. Len looked away and swallowed against the lump in his throat. "Say what you gotta say, Dad," Len said softly. "It'll make you feel better."

"There's nothing to say, son," the old man said. "When you prove a dog is a sheep killer you got to get rid of him. He can cause trouble to too many other dogs if you don't."

The canyon narrowed, just as their thoughts narrowed. They were not father and son now. They were not human. There was a man up there in the narrow canyon where Vance Sellers and his blood-lust crew held out in the fortress-like remains of a once gold-mad ghost town. That man had done a wrong, and the law would ask his life before it was done. It was better the McGruders handled their own affairs. The McGruders had always been like that, taking care of their own.

They both saw the glint of light that winked through the heat haze. It might have come from a rifle barrel. Len said, "You ride on slow, Dad. I'll meet you there past the narrows."

Len McGruder rode his horse off the trail. He guided the heavy animal between the high rocks that sometimes chafed his legs. When he could ride no more he dismounted and led the animal. It seemed he almost pulled the horse over impassable spots. At last he was on top of the jagged ridge where he could look down. He saw his dad riding slowly up the pass. Jackknifed between two boulders he saw a man who smoked a dead cigarette and took his time about levering a shell into his rifle.

Len left his horse then and started working his way slowly toward the man who was jackknifed between the two rocks. It seemed to take a long time and again Len felt that rebellion surge up within him. It made him want to take out his gun and get to the heart of things, but his dad had trained him for a long time. So he kept his eye on his dad riding into the lookout's ambush and he worked his way forward, closer to the man in the rocks.

The lookout had raised his rifle and called out a challenge before Len got to him. Len answered that challenge with one quick chop of his fist against the back of the lookout's neck. The man slumped forward, rolled, half turned, and Len struck again. His heavy fist made a sound like a sledge against

a bull's skull. The lookout lay still. When Len got his horse and joined his dad down on the trail he had a new rifle with him. The old man looked at his oldest son and for a second the laugh wrinkles were back.

"You was always the dependable one, Len," the old man said.

It was a short way then to Vance Sellers' hideout in Granite Gorge. The warped remnants of frame buildings stood like waiting ghosts, rising out of the dust of a town long dead. Only the Eagle Saloon, built of native stone, stood the way the miners had left it when the gold ran out. The two McGruders headed their horses that way. A man came out to meet them.

He was a hulking, misshapen brute with a senseless stare in his battered eyes. The pictures of Sug Welch that Len had seen in town were a good likeness. The man wore two guns, tied uncomfortably low, but he only had a hand for one of them. His left arm was bound tightly in a sling and there was a brown fan-shaped smudge where new blood had seeped through. Sug Welch stood in the middle of the single street, staring stupidly. His right hand rested on one of his low-tied guns. He said, "What the hell you doin' here?"

"We come to see Vance Sellers," old Bob said. "We ain't aimin' to waste time talkin' to nobody else."

"How in hell I know you come to see Vance?" Sug Welch said. He said the name 'Vance' rather proudly, like one who amplifies the fact that he has a speaking acquaintance with someone great.

"Your lookout let us through, didn't he?" old Bob said. "You want to make Vance mad by doubting the word of his lookout?"

"No, I don't want to make Vance mad," Sug Welch said. Then, as if realizing he had admitted his inability to think for himself he added, "What the hell do I care? If you ain't on the level I'll gut shoot you before you can take a step. What the hell do I care?" He led the way toward the Eagle, keeping just to one side, his hand on his gun.

The Eagle remained just as it had been built in the boom days. What little had crumbled away Vance Sellers had repaired. It was like Len had remembered old-timers describing it: "The finest saloon west of the River."

Inside its batwing doors the sun made little difference. There was a whiskey-sour coolness about the place that came like a breath from the huge mirror that had been packed in on mule back, and the coolness seemed to settle on the winding, smooth-worn stairway that had been the Eagle's greatest pride. At the top of this stairway was a balcony, and along the balcony, rooms. From one of these rooms Vance Sellers stepped now to gaze down on his subjects and ascertain the cause of the quick silence that had swept the bar. The two McGruders stood there, and Len's quick eye failed to find his brother among that crew.

VANCE SELLERS was a short man—too short. He made up for his height by bellowing his words and keeping a place at the top of the stairs where he could look down on men half again his height. He bellowed now, and old Bob McGruder answered his questions. Len made it a point to keep his hand away from his gun.

"We're McGruders, this boy and me," old Bob said. He said it as if that was all that needed be said, then he added, "We come to see Johnny."

For a long second Vance Sellers stood there at the top of the stone stairs, one thin hand resting on the polished bannister, the other across his chest. He looked like a monarch who had just listened to some distasteful petition from a couple of disgruntled serfs. Then the look of a despot left his face and in its place there was a cruel, sadistic cunning that twisted his mouth and lighted up his amazingly protruding eyes. "McGruders, eh?" he said. The men at the bar laughed—deep rumbling sounds in their throats that welled up and suddenly died. Sug Welch started working his loose mouth. Len McGruder felt a clamminess on his back as if a grave had been suddenly opened behind him.

"We want to talk to the boy," old Bob said, still looking up at Vance Sellers. "After that we'll go along. We ain't interested in what you do or how you do it."

Vance Sellers threw back his head and shook with laughter. "You damn old fool," he said, catching his breath. "You ain't interested in what we do? Who in hell cares what you're interested in? There's

twenty guns in this room to take care of you if I give the word." His voice rose to a piercing shriek and his eyes bugged as if they must pop out of his head. He beat his chest like a mad man. "I'm boss here, see?" he screamed. "You talk when you're spoken to!" Len McGruder felt the perspiration break loose and run down his back. He knew he was watching a maniac, drunk with his own power.

In a second that mood passed, and Vance Sellers stood there, leaning against the bannister, panting from his own exertion. The men at the bar stood with hands on guns, waiting for the signal from their leader.

Vance Sellers did not give that signal. Instead, a wide smile came over his face. He leaned forward over the bannister and waved with his free hand. "It's all right, boys," he said softly. "We'll entertain the McGruders. It ain't often we have company." The men laughed dutifully.

"Sug!" Vance Sellers' voice rose in a command. "Take good care of the McGruders. Take them to see Johnny. That's what they want. Let 'em go see Johnny."

Again Len had that clammy sickness sweep through his belly. It left him trembling. He had partially recovered when the hulking Sug Welch rammed a gun unmercifully into the middle of his back. "The boss says you should go see Johnny," Sug said. He seemed to slobber over his words.

Sug herded them across the saloon toward a door at the back. As they walked along the men at the bar turned their heads to follow. There was a half-smile on each of those bearded faces, but there was no comment. A dozen guns were out of leather now, hanging loosely in hands long trained to snap into action.

At the little door there at the back of the room, Sug stepped halfway around the two McGruders and kicked with his foot. The door swung open and they saw Johnny.

He was hanging by his wrists, his toes barely touching the floor. His shirt had been stripped off and there were ugly welts across his back and chest. Blood dripped from a dozen places where the flesh had been torn. His head was dropped forward on his chest and he tried feebly to raise it. His voice was barely audible as he said, "I didn't know it was to be the bank, Dad. So help me I didn't know. I tried to stop it.

... They beat me. . . ." He raised his head and stared with bloodshot eyes at Sug Welch. Len thought he had never seen such hatred in a man's eyes.

The pressure of the gun left Len's back. Sug Welch moved forward, his lips working loosely. He picked up the quirt that was laying in the corner. Slowly he moved toward the half-dead body of Johnny McGruder.

The guttural sounds that came from the throat of Sug Welch as he slashed out with the whip sounded like the noise an animal tearing flesh from bones might make. The whip whistled through the air again and thudded against the bare flesh. "Try to kill me, will you?" Sug muttered. "Doublecross the boss! Break my arm! Yuh didn't stop me from wingin' that damn banker though, did yuh? Interefere with Sug Welch, will yuh?" The whip thudded again, and Len McGruder lost all reason.

He didn't make a sound as he threw himself at the towering shape of Sug Welch. Animal instinct made him reach for the weak spot, and his fingers caught in the blood stained sling of Sug Welch's wounded arm. Len ripped and twisted, and Sug howled with pain.

The outlaw turned and slashed the whip across Len McGruder's face. Len rolled away from the blinding pain and brought his ham-like fist from the floor. It struck solid, and as Sug Welch stumbled back Len followed and beat at that misshapen face.

He had forgotten the guns at his back, held by the men just outside that door. He had forgotten his father. All he knew was that his kid brother was in trouble—bad trouble—and he needed help. Johnny was a good kid. He hadn't shot Merve Keele, the banker. Johnny had tried to stop the shooting. . .

 CHAPTER

4

Fighting McGruders

Len's senses came back. He was kicking the body of Sug Welch aside, untying the thongs that bound Johnny's wrists. He realized now that he had been saying these things aloud to Johnny. A single shot rocked through the old Eagle Saloon. Len remembered old Bob then. He handed Sug Welch's gun to Johnny; then drawing his own, he went to the door,

keeping covered as best he could. Old Bob was weaving unsteadily across the floor, a smoking gun in his hand. A dead man lay near the bar.

One man stepped from the bar and slashed his gun across old Bob's wrist. Old Bob's gun fell to the floor with a clatter. The man stooped and picked it up. He cocked it and held it against old Bob's chest. Len's finger tightened against the trigger. From the top of the stairs came the voice of Vance Sellers. "Hold the old man there," he said softly. "I'll take care of this McGruder."

The men at the bar saw Len now, and a couple of guns centered their bore on his belt buckle. Len stood there helplessly, watching, as Vance Sellers came down the stairs. He descended slowly, like a monarch at a coronation. He kept his left hand on the bannister. His right went inside his coat and brought out a derringer. He said, "At close range this is effective, McGruder."

He came straight across the floor. He was shorter than Len had imagined, and there was a broad grin on his face. "I make the rules here, McGruder," Sellers said softly. He had cocked the derringer. He was less than three feet from the old man when the blast of a gun shook the place. Vance Sellers stopped. He stood there, the smile still on his face. Then he turned and walked back toward the stairs.

He climbed those stairs, each step a little slower than the last. Every eye in the room followed him. He reached the top, and he stood there, one hand on the bannister, one hand across his chest. From between his outstretched fingers blood began to seep, then drip. He eyed the men below him with a disdainful sneer on his face. He said, "I'm the boss here," and there was a pink froth on his lips when he said it. He swayed for a minute, then he crumpled and fell. His body rolled over and over, down the stairs. Not a single eye left that crumpled body, and in the little back room Johnny McGruder tried hard to hold up the weight of the still smoking gun.

It was the reflexes of Len McGruder that acted first. He threw himself at the man who stood slack-jawed, holding the gun on old Bob. They went down together, the outlaw's weapon skidding across the floor. Len's fists flailed, he kicked with his

OUTCAST OF THE FIGHTING CLAN

boots as he regained his feet. He saw his dad scoop up the gun from the floor. Then the gunfire became a constant roar, and the smoke was thick in the room.

They dove at the door of the little back room together, old Bob and Len, and together they pulled Johnny out of the way and slammed the door. It was splintered by a dozen bullets, but a scattering of cases and barrels gave them the moment's protection they needed. Johnny pointed to a back door, and in a lull in the firing they plunged through it, dragging Johnny with them.

There were rocks behind the saloon, just as there were rocks everywhere in this boxed-up hell-hole called Granite Gorge. They hid themselves as best they could, and they grinned at each other. The laugh wrinkles were deep around the eyes of old Bob. They were the Fighting McGruders. Three of them.

Two or three of Vance Sellers' men tried that back door, and they fell there, blocking the way. Then the firing died, as one, smarter than the rest, figured that all they would have to do was wait. The McGruders had only the ammunition in their guns and belts, but more important they had no water. The fever was burning in Johnny now, and in an hour or so the sun and the excitement would do things to the thirst of all three. So the firing stopped.

But the silence did not last long. From down the canyon came the crack of rifles and the sounds of men on horseback. Lead whistled around the Eagle Saloon and painted bright splashes on the granite where the McGruders hid. They ducked low and let the battle rage, and they could hear the voice of Sheriff Benton Lane calling his orders to a citizens' army grown tired of Vance Sellers' reign of terror. And when it was silent the McGruders came from their hiding place. Old Bob and Len walked upright, and they carried Johnny with them.

They came straight to Sheriff Benton Lane, and old Bob, always the spokesman said, "It wasn't Johnny done it, Sheriff. He was with them, but he tried to stop it. Sug Welch is in a back room there. He'll be ready to talk now."

The sheriff blew his nose. "Like I said, I didn't have no right askin' men to ride

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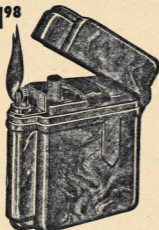
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in here," he said. "But I figured I knew you McGruders well enough to know you'd try it on your own. I sort of mentioned it around, and the people that elected me they wanted to come along. I got to do what the people say, Bob."

* * *

Old Bob decided that Johnny should go and see Bessie first thing, and for that Len was glad. He was glad too that Johnny could come home for a while before he started serving his six months sentence. It would be a good thing for old Bob to have a talk with Johnny.

They were sitting there on the porch, old Bob and Len, when they saw Johnny coming down the lane. He was coming home. He took his horse to the corral and turned him out, then he went in the barn. When he came out he was carrying something in his hand. He came slowly across the yard and stopped in front of his dad. He handed his dad the buggy lines.

The old man took the lines from his youngest son and looked at them a long time. Finally he said, "I guess you got things straight in your head now, Johnny. We won't be needin' them." Then as if nothing had happened, "You and Bessie made plans, Johnny?"

"She wants we should get married now, Dad," Johnny said softly. "She wants to come stay here until I get out, then we thought we'd build down there in the hollow. All she says is that I saved her dad's life. She's that kind of girl, Dad."

The moonlight caught old Bob's face for a second, then the cottonwoods swayed and it was dark again. Len thought he had seen a bright line of silver down either one of the old man's cheeks. The old man said, "Johnny, recollect that song you was makin' up about Bessie?"

Len McGruder was happy. He liked the way his kid brother whistled those tunes he made up.

THE END



THE WHISTLER KID CALLS QUILTS

(Continued from page 26)

Over her pretty shoulder was strung a heavy saddle bag. She called, "Mr. Carey . . . here's your bank securities. He was going to escape with them, I guess."

Leb Mueller, in the grasp of willing hands, said, "That worthless stuff?"

Willy caught that, too. He wheeled and snapped, "Worth a hundred thousand anywhere, you fool! George Cape meant to keep them, too!"

Downey whined as Leb Mueller bit his lip. "The dirty, double crossin' thief!"

Willy said, "Go through them. We got part of a burned bill from the bank. You'll find the other part on 'em. Bud seen a gauntlet on the arm which came through the window and kilt poor Mike. . . . The chestnut hoss I killed at the bank robbery was the one Downey rode outa town that mornin'. . . . I recognized George Cape's voice at Glory Mine. . . . Put them all together, they spell murder, Dick. I donno what more a cowman jury would want."

Cape spat out a tooth and moaned, "It's a lie. . . ."

Downey struggled with his captors. "It's the truth. He meant to steal a hundred thou from us!"

The man was drunk, Willy saw. He almost felt sorry for Cape and Mueller. Downey was drunk and he was bellowing the truth, asserting that he had been forced to do wrong by such as Cape and Mueller and the dead Keller.

It occurred to Willy that he had not even fired his gun. Bud had shot Keller as he would a mad dog, but Willy had only punched Cape. His knuckles hurt. He sucked them reflectively and saw Pru waiting for him.

Well, Bud would share the reward money for Mueller. Willy's part would go toward the house. He and Pru would have their own place when they were married, he thought fiercely, come what might. He whistled, a gay little tuneless whistle, going toward her.

THE END



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(Continued from page 35)

And ever since, she's been busting around like a cow with her first calf. You might also be interested to know she's a good cook and she likes you."

"Bob Larrimore!" The girl glared at her brother furiously. "You get out of here!"

After he had gone, Ellen Larrimore smiled at her patient through her blushes. "You mustn't mind anything Bob says. He's an awful tease."

Reed lifted his head on the pillow a little. The girl looked lovelier than ever with the added color in her cheeks. "Are you a good cook?" he grinned.

The girl appeared flustered. "Well—" "And do you like me?"

She gave him an angry stare. "I declare, you're as bad as he is!" She turned and marched out of the room, head held high. Reed Harker watched her go, smiling.

He eased his head back on the pillow. He felt at home in the big bedroom. He decided it was very much like the old one back in the Harker house in Laurence. Very much like it. . . .

(Continued from page 40)

way he treated your sister—and if you ask me Jean's plenty lucky. Nance figured he had my job and Bets. He knew that if he could draw you and me into a gunfight, I'd probably kill you, then clear out, myself."

"But Bets?" "She's a little animal!"

"I guessed some of it, all right," Phil Saladin admitted. "Where I was wild about her one minute, I found myself hating the looks of her the next."

"I know. That's the way I felt. I guess a man's got to fall for a woman like that once to appreciate the real ones."

A soft breeze came up, and they rode against its warm pressure in quietness for a time. Link Indy found himself thinking of a girl who had only a depthless loyalty and devotion to offer a man rather than possessing the affections of a will-o-wisp. Suddenly he spoke. "Pretty early yet, Phil. What say I ride home with you and have a couple of games of checkers and a drink?"

He heard Phil's soft chuckle. "I reckon we ain't the only ones that'd be good for, Link."

TINHORN SAMARITAN

By
JIMMY NICHOLS

TOO MANY people owed Alf Chapman money. He had been six months in Tucson, and by the middle of May he was the biggest creditor and the most unpopular man in town. It was dangerous, to be unpopular in Tucson in 1873.

At night when he sat in his customary seat at the green baize table in the Golden Owl, his long, incredibly slender fingers caressing the cards as he dealt, the expression on the faces of the men watching him had changed from admiration to hostility.

Last winter, they had murmured, "He shore is lucky, ain't he?" Now they shook their heads and muttered, "He can't be that lucky!" As a matter of fact, Alf Chapman had never cheated in his life. It wasn't his fault if the high cards had a habit of finding their way into his hand. He was always just as surprised as anyone else, and it had been some years before he was sufficiently convinced of his natural talents to leave his job as an apprentice in a gunsmith's shop in Ohio and turn to gambling.

The civic storm gathered swiftly. That night, he took \$900 in I.O.U.'s from two players who agreed to meet him at dawn near the old city walls with cash in hand. Alf stepped briskly to the appointed place, shivering in the early morning cold, and waited, silk hat in hand, for the arrival of his debtors.

They came promptly, but in their hands was not cash but a fistful of pebbles. The gambler heard the swift steps and turned to meet the attack, but he was too late and far outnumbered. Ten minutes later he was sitting, stupefied, on the cold sands outside of the city. His silk hat was jammed down over his ears, his dapper malacca stick snapped off at its silver hilt.

Slowly, he raised his shining topper until he could see around him. At his back lay Tucson, and death. Before him, only endless hillocks of crusty desert sand, roll-

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ing away toward Santa Fe. Alf stood up briskly and brushed the dust from his striped pants.

"This," he said, in a magnificent understatement, "is going to be a long walk!"

From a peddler's wagon the dispossessed gambler bought a wooden water flask and a pound of jerked beef. He also bought the peddler's sturdy high marching boots, souvenirs of the Civil War, and, tying his own patent leathers around his neck, he struck out boldly toward what he hoped was the general direction of Santa Fe.

Fortunately, Alf was a good walker. Miles fell behind his untired soles. At night, he lay down on the desert and slept like a baby. No one could say the sleek, town-bred gambler wasn't adaptable.

On the morning of the third day, he found himself thinking, unaccountably, of Indians. Suddenly, the beautiful, lonely desert was no longer friendly, but filled with menace. He imagined that there was a veined film of blood across the silver ball of the sun, and the sideburns on his cheeks bristled warningly just as they did when an opponent had drawn an ace.

He tried hard to get his mind off the subject of Indians, and just as he had at last succeeded, he saw some. They were far away, riding swiftly over the horizon on perhaps two or three dozen fast horses. Apaches, he judged. He made himself as small as possible behind a mound of sand. They passed on.

On the next ridge, he saw their handiwork. It was the remains of the slaughtered wagon train of the Bristol party, overdue in Tucson by about ten days. A mound of blackening ashes showed where each wagon had gone up in smoke. Dead men and dead mules were everywhere.

The gambler stood silent, hat instinctively in hand, his stomach churning at the carnage. He had seen death many times before. Nothing like this. A faint noise behind him made him whirl. A woman had crawled from under the steel brace of one of the shattered wagons and was now lying on the ground, beckoning faintly.

Alf bent over her. She drank gratefully from his flask, then pushed it away. "You'll need that," she murmured. "I won't." The gambler smoothed her forehead awkwardly, helplessly. He knew she was dying.

TINHORN SAMARITAN

She knew it, too. There was nothing to say. Alf wished he were a minister, just for five minutes anyway.

The woman's cracked lips worked painfully. "The children," she murmured.

"Your children?" asked Alf gently.

"No—yes—all the children. Twelve. The Indians took them away." Her worn hands clutched at the card player's broadcloth sleeve. "Save them. Promise me, you'll save them." Then she died before Alf could either accept or refuse.

Sadly, Alf turned his slender hands to the unaccustomed labor of digging. As the sun set, shallow graves, in a neat row, marked the tragic remains of the Bristol party. He noticed that there were no children's bodies among them. The woman must have been right.

He stood over the graves with bent head. In his right hand pocket his fingers curled over the smooth metal of a derringring. He smiled, amused at his own flighty courage. In close combat, with one or two opponents who would be fumbling with a heavy six-gun, it was an ideal weapon, especially the way he had learned to file it down back in that gunsmith's shop. But against a whole tribe of blood-streaked Apaches—it might as well be a child's toy.

It was useless, hopeless, to think of rescuing the children singlehanded. The sensible thing to do was to go back to Tucson and get help. And that's what he planned to do. He started back the way he had come.

A FEW minutes later, Alf was surprised to find himself having an argument with his feet. They were good, strong feet,

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a little sore now, but always obedient. Never before had he experienced a revolt in his shoes. He had turned himself around and set his face toward Tucson. And here were his feet carrying him in the opposite direction—toward the ridge where he had seen the Apaches riding that morning.

"Look," he told himself desperately. "I'm practically unarmed. I don't savvy Apache. These redskins are on the warpath—they've just killed thirteen men and women. I need an army, and a couple of cannon, to get those kids back. Don't be so silly."

But his feet kept right on walking, and by the time Alf ran out of breath, he heard the noise and saw the firelight of the Apache camp. If he was frightened when he walked calmly into the circle of painted braves around the main campfire, his trained poker face revealed nothing. And the Indians, traditionally expressionless, were dropped with astonishment. They recovered quickly from their momentary paralysis, however, and surrounded him in a menacing circle, meanwhile staring nervously at the circle of hills within which they had foolishly camped. It gave Alf an idea.

Somewhere, he had heard that Indians respect the dumb. He wasn't sure if he had the right tribe, but he decided to try it. Majestically, he made the universal sign across his lips to indicate that he was unable to talk. Then he proceeded in gestures.

A hand held knee high indicated children—twelve fingers told how many. They got that right away, he saw. With one hand he made a sweeping circle of the hills, and tapped the places on his chest where brass buttons might go. He indicated a bandolier, heavy with ammunition. Then he raised his fingers rapidly fifty times. Five hundred Federal troops were in the surrounding hills, he was trying to say. Last of all, he pointed boldly at the chest of the chieftain and then drew his finger slowly across his throat.

"Ugh!" the chief jumped back from that menacing finger and looked worriedly at the gambler.

Alf held his breath. If this worked, it would be the biggest bluff in gambling history, and the stakes were higher than they had ever before.

Then a bronze hand snaked out, dipped

TINHORN SAMARITAN

into his bulging pocket, and came out with the derring. The gambler waited patiently to be drilled through. The savage looked at the miniature weapon, ridiculously small on his huge palm. He turned it over reflectively, the metal gleaming in the firelight. Then he laughed. It was a great snort of scornful laughter. Still chuckling, he handed the gun to the gambler and stepped back.

Around the Apache's waist was a white man's gun belt, holster, and heavy .45, probably filched from a victim of the wagon train. Now the .45 was out. In quick succession, the Indian fired at the gambler's high silk hat. It was magnificent shooting—all of his four shots passed through a single hole high up in the crown. The gambler bowed, expressing his admiration for the Indian's shooting. The savage pointed again at the derring, laughed once more, and turned his back and marched away.

Alf knew when to play a card. It was dark, the firelight was flickering and deceptive, the Indian already many yards away. But in an instant, Alf had pressed the hair-trigger of his tiny weapon and sent two bullets at the Apache's head. Each shot passed just below an ear, neatly severing the two swaying silver earrings he wore suspended from the lobes. They dropped, jangling, to the ground.

The man swung, startled, to face the gambler. His hand flashed again to the heavy gun at his side. But the old chief raised a commanding arm. Alf looked at him. A gleam of wintry amusement was in those evil, coal-black eyes, and the younger braves were frankly rolling on the ground with laughter at their discomfited comrade.



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A few minutes later, Alf left the camp, and behind him, strung out two by two and holding hands like very well-behaved children on their way to school, were the twelve scared little orphans of the Bristol party. This time, the gambler's feet carried him gladly back toward the walled city of Tucson.

That Tucson welcomed them with open arms is not quite the truth. That the citizens of Tucson were too stunned with astonishment to resist as the banished gambler and his twelve small, weary charges trooped back into the city is closer to it. Promptly, he went to work to earn money, in the only way he knew, to buy the pitiful orphans clothes, food and shelter. Eventually relatives in the East claimed two of the children, but when no guardians appeared for the remaining ten, Alf Chapman adopted them all.

His clever, slender fingers earned them a good living. They trailed along with him, all over the Southwest, a familiar and yet always startling sight. On his death in 1882, he left enough to provide the fanciest of Eastern educations for them all. And no one, ever again, accused Alf Chapman of being a gambling crook. How could they, when he had made such a sensational display of humble, human charity?



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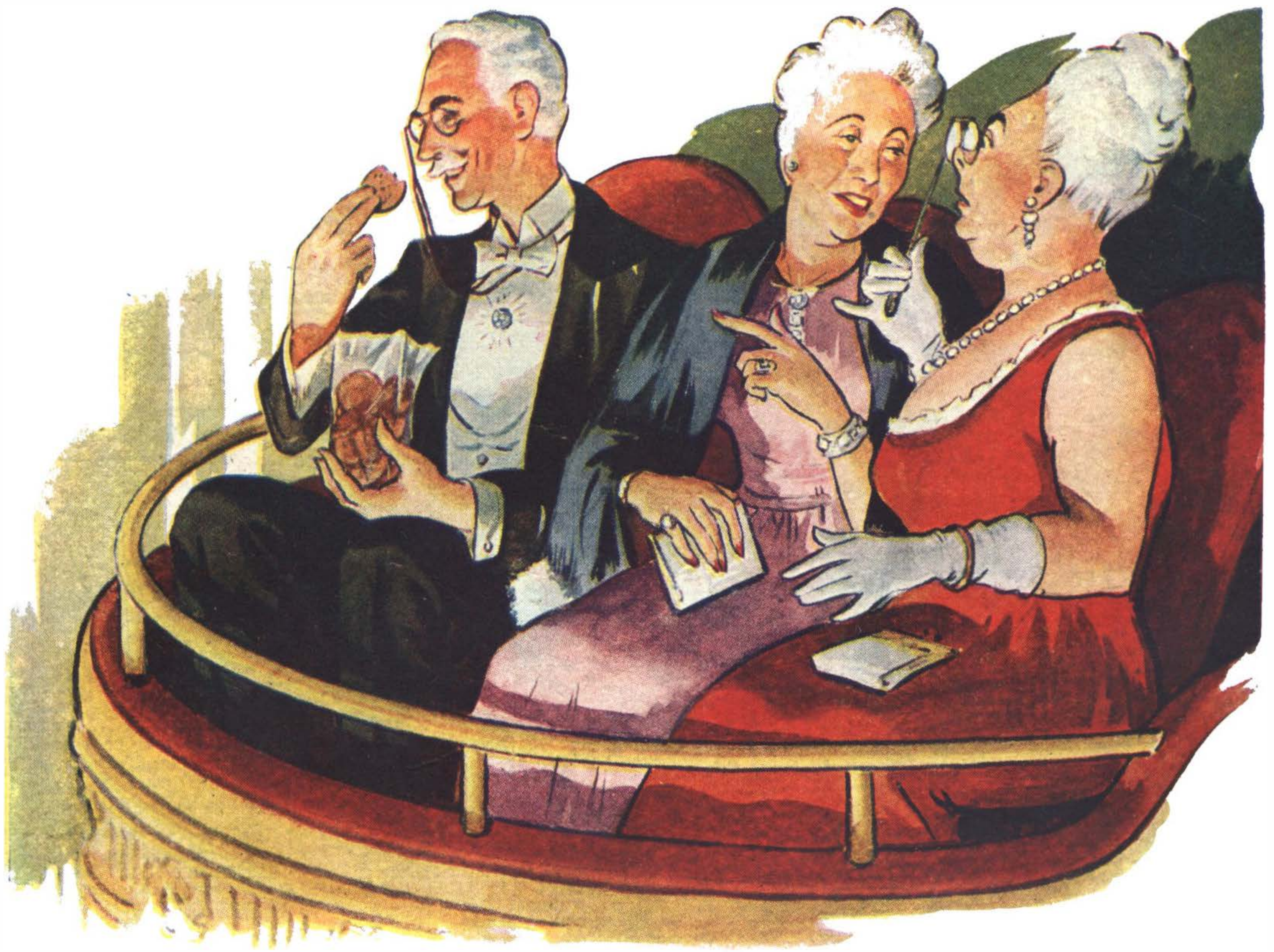
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