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Novel and Short Stories

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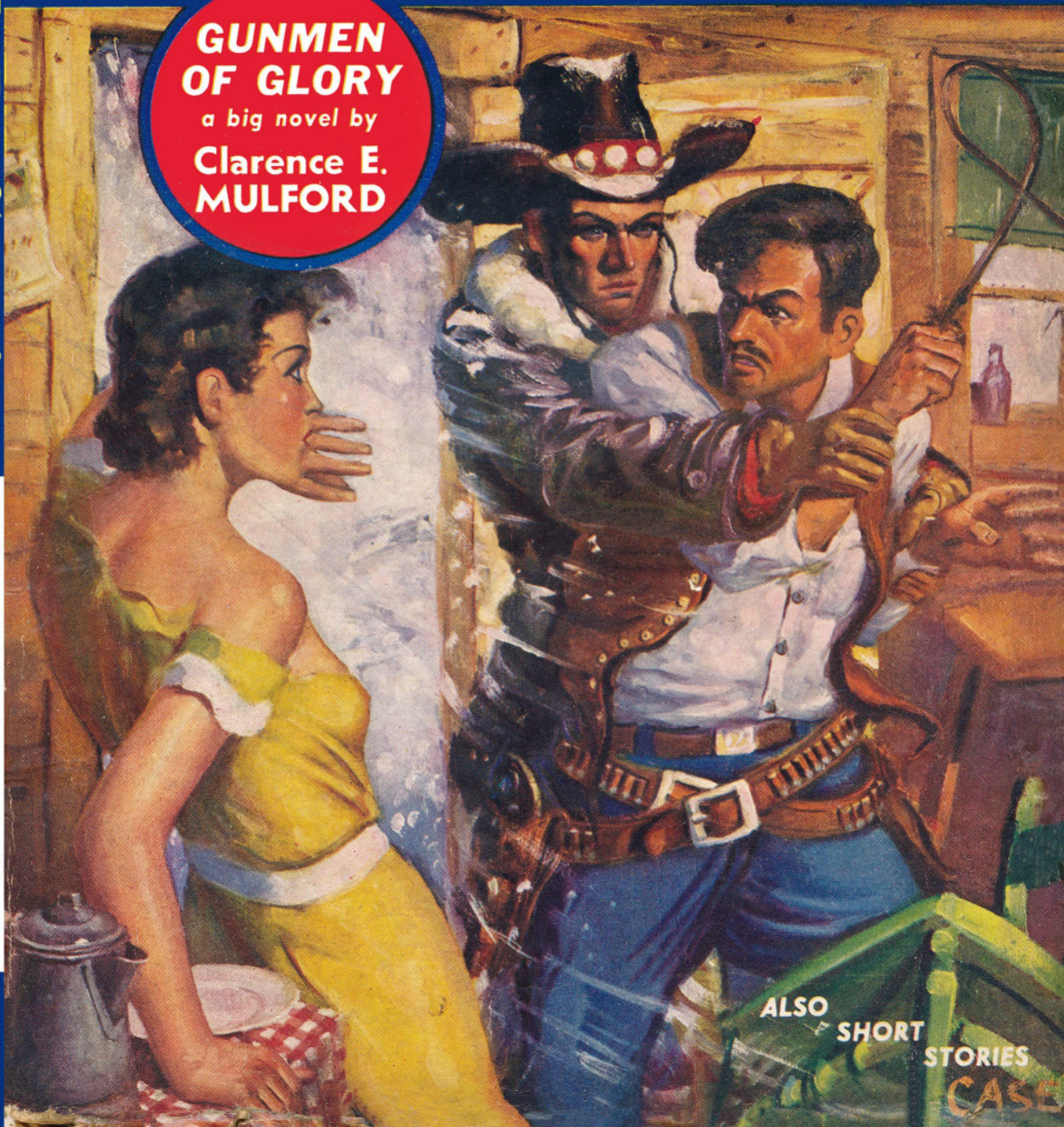
WESTERN

Novel and
Short Stories

A BIG
NOVEL
by CLARENCE E. MULFORD

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**GUNMEN
OF GLORY**
a big novel by
**CLARENCE E.
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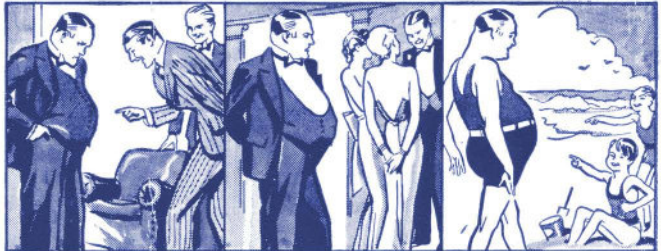
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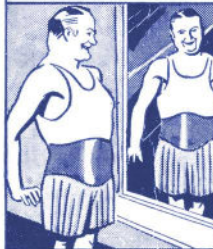
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Novel and Short Stories

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June, 1936, Issue

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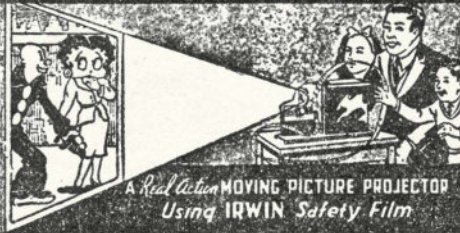


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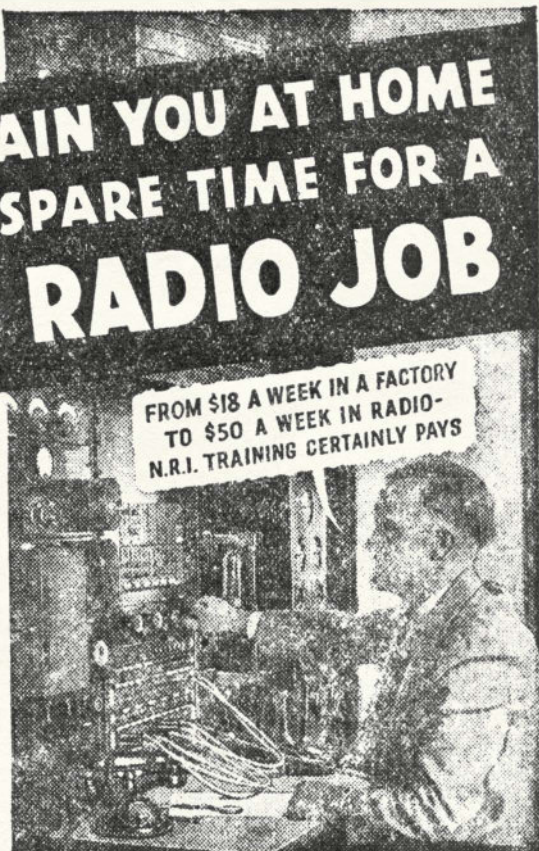
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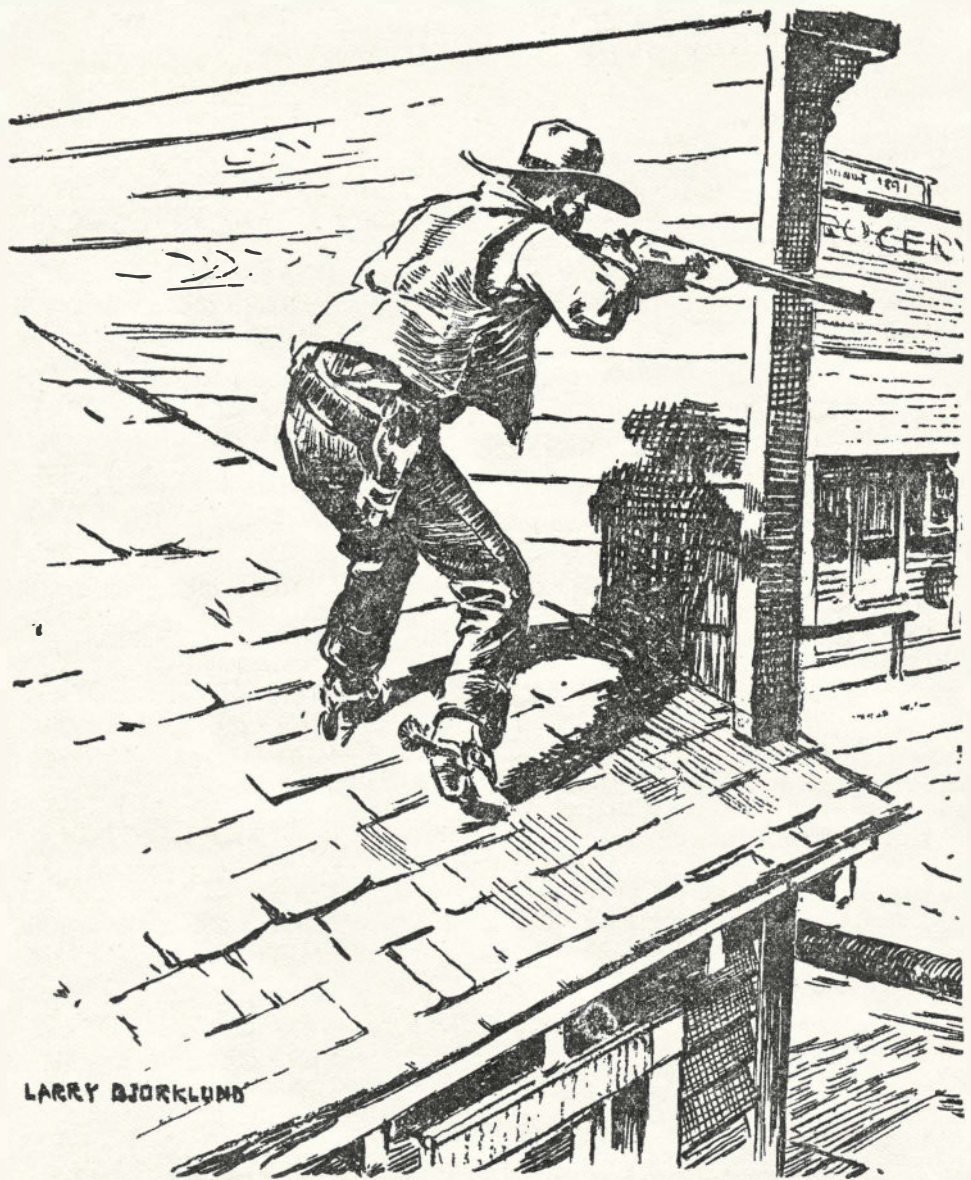
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Gunmen of Glory

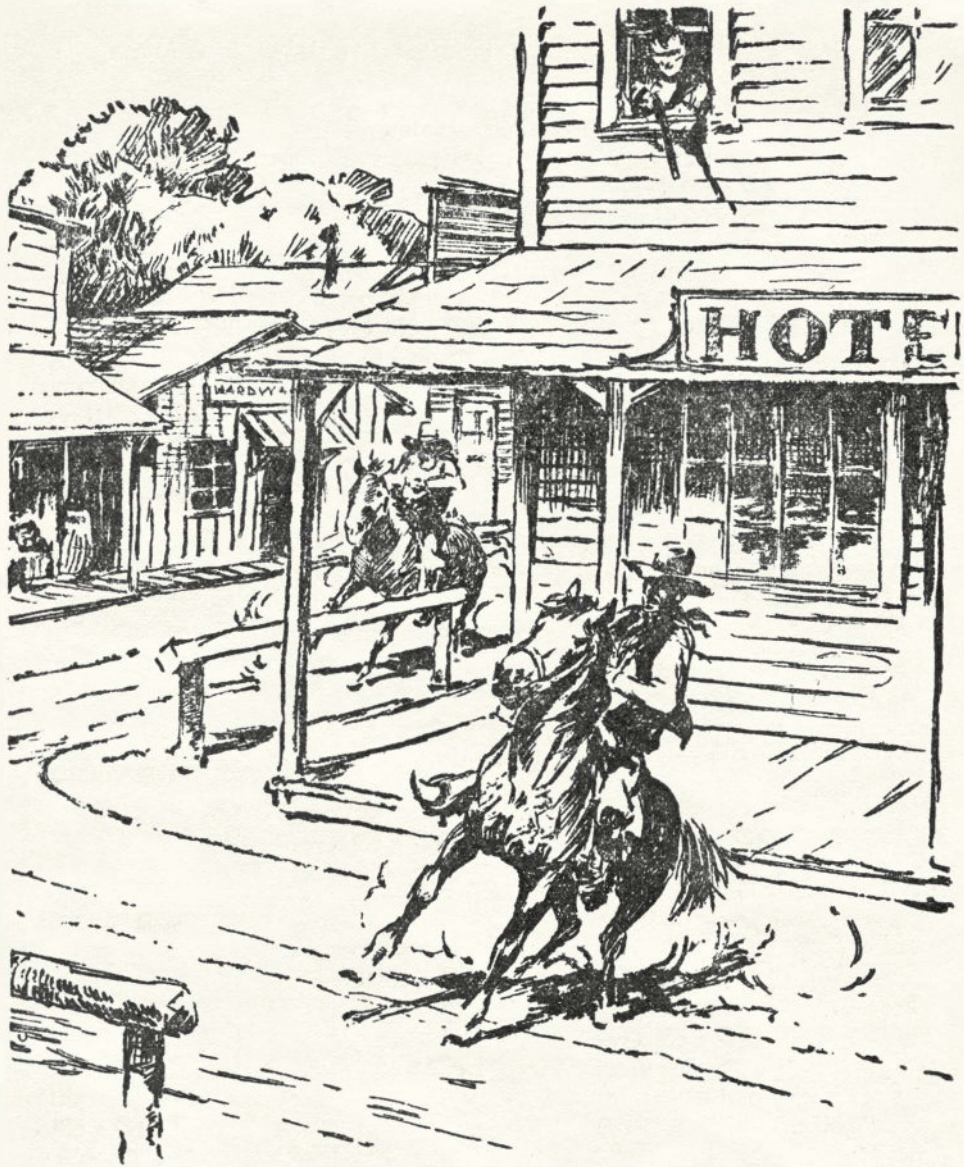
by CLARENCE E. MULFORD

CHAPTER I

A LINE of frame buildings stood shoulder to shoulder along one side of the street. Before them lay the more unregenerate part of the town, its southern limits the river. Between the two, acting as a dead-line, were the railroad tracks; a main line and several long sidings. The former led westward and eastward; the latter, to the

shipping pens and freight platform. Back of Railroad Street sprawled the rest of the town, made up of two score or more private dwellings, several boarding houses, a frame schoolhouse of two rooms, a few scattered stores, and Boot Hill.

On Railroad Street the heat was as pitiless as elsewhere, but low-hung awnings made their hypocritical pretenses, and the dry interiors of weatherbeaten



and sunbleached shacks provided havens of discomfort for the idle. There were, at this comparatively early hour, but few of these; the town was, generally speaking, still asleep, except in that more respectable section north of the tracks, whose citizens followed the common custom and used the night for sleep, thus preserving a balance. While one section ebbed, the other flooded, and when ebb and flood currents meet there is likely to be friction and rough water. While one worked, the other slept; while one slept, the other gambled, drank, and rioted; but in these latter days the rioting was much subdued.

The morning train which rumbled west was poorly attended in the matter of curious idlers at the station, and the

stop at Bulltown was not one to engender memories or to mark the town; but the evening train, rumbling east, was another story. This eastern train was the favorite, and its stop was well attended. If personal feelings chanced to coincide with its arrival, shots might arouse the weary passengers, and they might even see, if they were fortunate, some quick duel on the street almost under their windows, and take home with them a vivid memory of frontier lawlessness. For the moment we will ignore the evening train, and turn to meet the west-bound in cheery expectancy, for on it there will be persons in whom we have interest; and we now watch them come out of the smoking car, each carrying a sacked saddle, pause on the platform, and

then move lazily across it and toward a faded shack which served as a hotel.

All hotels on Railroad Street gave over their lower floor to a bar and its accessories. This hotel is no exception, and we follow the strangers, noting that one of them limps a very little, and that the thin hair below his huge hat is a faded red. Having entered the lower story of the building, let us sluice the top layer of dust from our mouth and throat, seat ourselves in a far corner of the room, between two windows, and watch the newcomers and the doors. Somehow, instead of marking us as strangers, this double watchfulness will tend to indicate that we are not strangers, but thoroughly cognizant of the present surroundings, even though it is broad daylight. Boot Hill, behind us and north of the tracks, is full of those persons who became careless of doors, windows, and newcomers.

While we watch, let us consider our position geographically. We are at the crossing place of two great trails; here, too, we have the meeting place and the parting place, and far too often the *crossing* of men from many sections, and men of many sorts. Should a cattleman remain in Bulltown a whole year around, there were few acquaintances he might not meet there.

Fate is tricky, delighting in the unexpected. One must admit that coincidences occur: to deny it would be to admit being blind in the face of facts. It is the theatricalness of effects which strikes through to our skepticism and arouses our ridicule, unless we understand the causative phases, the reasons underlying the course of each individual trend; and then we are struck by the coincidences of the causes, although they may be, and generally are, very dissimilar in their real natures. Now, having prepared ourselves for a strange and at first sight unusual series of coincidences, let us look variously over the map, covering great distances instantly and in the span of a short glance.

TWIN RIVER is a far cry from Gunsight; McLeod a long way in miles from Los Altos; and Cottonwood Gulch is far enough away from McKenzie to arouse our comment, especially if we were to cover the distance on horseback. Yet the occasion arises when these six

towns were to meet, in the persons of individual representatives, at one common center. That center is Bulltown, not to make use of its real name.

The time is about even with the dying out of the Great Western Cattle Trail. Dates are irksome, and time has a way of spreading itself without sharp definitions; innately, it has none, for they are made by consciousness, by the flow of thought, by the rhythm of physical functioning, by the stressing of some certain actions in a steady flow of action. To something without consciousness there is no time. To say that this old cattle trail died in this year or in that one is to mislead or to be misled, since it died through several, and no one year bears the stigma alone. Also, dates chafe and restrict, like hobbles; and to hobble the imagination while depending upon it is foolish: it is almost to commit a crime.

We have to consider the meeting of seven men, arranged by Fate, and to see what came of it. All came to Bulltown for reasons sufficient for the making of the journey. One wanted to buy cattle; another, to sell. Two of these seven came for the sake of friendship, after considerable misspelled correspondence. One came again to taste the flavor of a hectic cow town in the height of its convulsions, to sniff memories from the dust of that northbound trail, and on the off chance of meeting old friends up from Texas. One came hopelessly out of the West, from a land of arid plateaus and frowning mesas; from the accursed proximity of a great lava desert; from the scene of his loss, his heartbreak, and his failure. Thrown off the rear end of that eastbound train where the main cattle trail crossed the tracks, and without the knowledge of anyone in the smoking car, he had limped dispiritedly along in the dust of the parallel but much older highway, his mind morbid and fast reaching a deadly state, his body weak from fasting; but since he does not arrive until night, we'll leave him for the time.

Since the foregathering of these seven men make up our story, we will have done with forewords, and watch the doors—aye, and even the windows!

* * * *

The hotel clerk, deftly twirling the register with one hand, offered the freshly dipped pen with the other. The blank line having been forever ruined by

the heavy scrawl, the book was whirled around again and the clerk put down a number. Glancing at the scrawl, his brows puckered while he struggled with it, and he bent down over it; and then he suddenly appeared to be hypnotized, for the letters seemed to be written in fire. He raised his head and looked with deference at the seamed, tanned faced in front of him; and when he spoke it was with a curious reverence.

"I'm givin' you th' corner room, Mr. Cassidy," he said, swiftly changing the figure. "Number Six, sir; an' th' best in th' house!"

"Much obliged, Bub," said the puncher, stepping to one side and waving at the bulging sack on the floor as the bellboy showed signs of life.

Again the register twirled, stopping exactly in the right position for a right-handed man. Again a blank line was everlastingly defaced, and again a number was placed at the end of it. The clerk seemed to doubt his senses as he looked up.

"I'm givin' you Number Four, Mr. Saunders," he said, and nearly bowed as Mr. Saunders stepped back to make way for the third man.

The third man moved along the desk, irretrievably ruined the appearance of another line, and also stepped back; but his eyes had flashed to those other signatures, and now they flashed at the first man to sign. He saw that Mr. Saunders, also, was looking at the red-haired gentleman in the dusty black suit.

"Number Three for you, Mr. Skinner. I'm putting you three gentlemen on th' same floor, close together," said the clerk, handing out the third key. Then he glared at the bellboy, who had more ambition than good sense. This was shown by his fruitless attempt to carry three heavy stock saddles at once.

"Take up Number Six first!" ordered the clerk brusksly. "You can come back for th' others."

Mr. Cassidy brushed the boy aside and gripped the top of the sack.

"You play guide, Bub, an' let me do th' wranglin'," he said, smiling broadly.

THE other two gentlemen nodded, and followed Mr. Cassidy's example; and the procession was forming when a shadow darkened the doorway and the town marshal stepped into the room from

his customary beat for his customary scrutiny of the train's addition to the town's population. He stopped short, his mouth opening in surprise.

"Well, well, well!" he exclaimed, stepping forward with his hand extended. "Hopalong Cassidy, or I'm a liar! An' Dave Saunders! An' Matt Skinner! Damn' if it ain't like old home week in Bulltown! How are you, boys? Lord, but I'm shore glad to see you ag'in! How are you?"

He shook hands in turn, wrinkles of delight on his habitually cold, appraising face. "Heard that yo're th' new sheriff of Twin River, Hopalong! Matt, you old cow thief, somebody told me that yo're th' boss of a bang-up fine ranch! An' Dave, we've shore heard aplenty about you! You ain't aimin' to lynch nobody down here, are you? This ain't Cottonwood Gulch, an' I've got her fair peaceful."

"Glad to see you, Bat; right glad," said Hopalong, resting a kindly hand on the shoulder of a great peace officer. The fingers gripped the fabric of the black frock coat and bit into the flesh under it.

"I can give you a right good job punchin', Bat, at sixty a month an' found," chuckled Matt Skinner. "Damn yore ornery hide, but it's good to lay eyes on you ag'in!"

"Well, Bat," said the boss of Cottonwood Gulch, stepping back for a better look at the marshal, "if I start any lynchin' down here I'll shore start with you. Yo're a sight to cure sick eyes!"

The marshal took a step backward, so as to group his friends into a more compact picture.

"Well, this is great!" he said. "You boys know each other?"

"I've heard some gossip along th' trails," admitted Hopalong, with a broad grin. "I'd say Matt Skinner wasn't exactly a stranger to any of us; an' as for Saunders, he's about as famous west of th' Mississippi as General Grant."

"Grant is near a stranger in this country, compared to you, Cassidy," said Saunders, gripping the lean, hard hand.

The clerk puffed out his cheeks, let his breath go in a little *pop*, and frowned at the stunned immobility of the bellboy.

"Take them saddles up where they belong, an' don't get 'em mixed," he ordered, waving toward the stairs; and he was to be treated to a miracle: never be-

fore had his youthful assistant accomplished a task as quickly as he did his present one. In almost a wink the boy was back again, staring fixedly at the four men in the easy chairs, and hoping that no duties would take him away from that room.

"Why, I came down here to meet Johnny—Johnny Nelson," the redhead was saying in answer to the marshal's question. "Last time I saw him was just after that Snake Buttes gang was cleaned out. He was purty well shot up then. He wrote up to me that he had some business to 'tend to here, an' he wanted to know why I couldn't come down an' meet him, for old time's sake. Tex is a-visitin' him—Tex Ewalt. Tex an' his wife kinda have to run a honeymoon every year—an' this year they're spendin' it on th' SV, with Margaret an' Johnny. There's another reason why they like th' SV, aside from Johnny an' his wife. Well, Tex is there; an' since Johnny is headin' this way, I wouldn't be a heap surprised if Tex sorta slipped away an' come with him."

"I'd shore like to meet th' pair of 'em," said Skinner. He glanced at his companions. "I came down here to sell some cattle, if you city boys don't rob me. We're doin' so well that our range is kinda gettin' crowded. Mrs. Hollister wanted to get rid of me, anyhow, durin' th' spring housecleanin', an' I wasn't right set ag'in bein' missin' durin' *that* ruckus. Well, here I am."

"By th' way, Matt," said his friend the marshal. "What are we goin' to call you, anyhow? Hollister, or Skinner?"

"I just signed that book as Skinner, from force of habit," said Matt, chuckling. "Nobody would know who you was talkin' about if you called me by my right name. I wouldn't, myself. Call me Skinner, like everybody else does."

"**M**EBBY we can do some business, Skinner," suggested Saunders, turning to the last speaker. "There's a new railroad goin' across th' country up my way, an' I've got thunderin' big beef contracts for feedin' its construction gangs. I got three sections to supply an' it's got to th' point where I've got to buy before I can deliver, because that contract came right on top of some herds for delivery on th' open range. I wrote to a friend of mine, name of Duncan—

Wyatt Duncan—an' he wrote back that he had some good critters to sell. I don't believe he can come anywhere near fillin' my needs. He'll come first, of course, seein' he was first come; but I'm right shore I can take a lot of head off yore hands, Matt, at a fair price to us both. What you say we wait for Duncan, an' then talk it over three-cornered?"

"Wyatt Duncan," murmured Hopalong, thoughtfully. His mind was racing back and reviewing trail gossip. "He ain't that Wyatt Duncan that raised so much hell over in th' Black Buttes country, is he?"

"He shore is just that person," answered Saunders. "You heard of him, Skinner?"

"Yeah; I've heard about Duncan. He did a right good job over in th' Buttes. Say, Bat," he said, chuckling, "sizin' us up, an' figgerin' in them that are comin', we're goin' to be a right law-abidin' body of citizens if you say it quick. There ain't one of us but what has had to clean up some part of th' country. Every one of us has been through some reg'lar little wars. Ain't that right?"

The marshal laughed.

"Yes; I was just thinkin' about th' same thing when you said it.

The eastbound limited stopped at Bulltown, which was the end of a division. Here a fresh engine took up its own lap of the transcontinental journey.

From the usual crowd heading for the depot, four men stepped out of the semi-darkness and loafed toward a baggage truck on the platform. As they stopped, there sounded far off in the west a pure, deep, vibrant tone. On she came, an imperious monster glaring with Cyclopean eye and breathing fire. The earth trembled, the rails clicked stridently and then, with hiss of steam, the whistle of air and a rush of cinder-filled wind, the long-tailed monster slid past the platform, slower and yet more slow. There came a grinding and squealing, a clash of brake chains, and the monster stopped, while various litter fluttered about the platform to settle slowly.

Lanterns swung down from car steps, and from the lighted door of the smoking car three men emerged, two of them talking and laughing.

"There he is!" called the foremost, raising an arm. "Hoppy! Hey, Hoppy!"

"Damn' spavined old good-for-nothin'!" chuckled the second, hastily following his running companion.

The third man followed close to their heels, to meet and shake hands with his old friend from Cottonwood Gulch. Bat then took them all in charge and introductions followed.

Even from the rear they made a picture. Seven hewers of law and order, dressed in wool and leather and vast hats, Bat being the only exception to the last, for Bat wore a low-crowned derby, the last word in dog of that day. Seven hewers, their knees bending outward, their thighs hung with soiled scabbards, in which nestled walnut-handled arbiters of fate. Seven two-gun men, the cream of their various localities; seven men tested in flame and smoke and thundering stampedes; seven men without a flaw in courage. Stern and ruthless; yet kind and sympathetic; seven men who typified the better spirit of the old frontier.

CHAPTER II

SEVEN men sat around a table in the best saloon in Bulltown. Three of them—Saunders, Duncan and Skinner—were engaged in cattle deals. On the other side of the table, Johnny Nelson, Tex and Hopalong reviewed the past and questioned the future.

The marshal sat between the two groups, his smiling face turned first toward one and then toward the other.

He looked closely at one, studying the seamed, rugged face; the faded, thinned red hair; the squinting, cold eyes, the cold, blue eyes of the gunman; the straggly mustache, the corded neck. He was looking upon the peer of his friend Hickok in physical reactions, in speed and certainty of hand.

A movement at the front door caught the marshal's eye, and he turned his head quickly as his hand dropped down, sensing that the conversation at the table had abruptly ceased. Such an instant hush was a danger sign, but this time it was harmless.

A young man staggered into the room, headed for the nearest chair, and collapsed when within two steps of it. An outraged bellow from a bartender was

checked by a warning, upflung arm, as the limping redhead, his chair crashing to the floor behind him, sprang forward, his friends at his heels. He picked up the youth, carried him to the chair, and took the glass which Matt Skinner already had obtained. Empty, he handed it back again.

The youth was white of face, where dust and dirt and cinders would let the skin be seen. Blood streaked face and neck, and oozed from his torn and lacerated hands. His clothing, ripped and rent, was spotted with grime and dust. He was almost inert, but the second glass of liquor was beginning to have its effect. No one had seen the marshal's gesture or heard his whispered order, but in a remarkably short time one of the bartenders returned with a doctor. His practiced hands took charge of things. First he wanted room and breathing space: seven backs arched quickly, seven pairs of legs pushed against the floor: and the room and the breathing space was had.

"Take him over to th' hotel, up to Number Six," said Hopalong with quiet authority. He turned to the marshal. "You ever seen him before, Bat?"

"No. He's not a bum," said Bat, stating the fact professionally.

"He needs food an' rest," said the doctor to the marshal. "His nerves are all gone to hell, seems like. We'll put him to bed, an' he'll come 'round all right, I reckon."

The youth stirred, tears gathering in his eyes; tears of weakness, of despair, and of something else. He looked around slowly, scanning the circle of kindly faces.

"Weak as hell, an' all ripped to pieces," muttered the doctor. "Pick him up. I'll go along an' do what I can. Anyhow, I'll guarantee him a night's rest. It's all right, friend," he told the stranger, smiling down at him. "We're goin' to fix you up slick as a button."

Strong hands took hold of the youth, strong backs straightened. Matt Skinner picked a partly filled bottle from the bar, flinging a coin down in payment. It flipped back at him, and he nodded his apologies to the red-faced man behind the counter. Then he looked around curiously, and suddenly realized that two of his new friends were missing:

Nelson and Ewalt. As he passed through the door he saw Nelson slip around the corner of the building, and Ewalt moved forward out of the deeper darkness of a wall.

SKINNER grunted, and smiled with sudden warmth: he was in damned good company. It looked like the stranger was in good and capable hands. He thought that Ewalt was slipping something into a holster, and his smile grew. He was glad that he had made the long and tiresome trip to Bulltown. Yes, sir, by God; he was glad he had come.

"Looked to me like he's been manhandled," said Nelson. He turned to Ewalt, who once had studied medicine. "You reckon he was dragged from a train?"

"Yes; looked that way," replied Tex, thoughtfully. For a moment he was silent, and then spoke again. "We'll get him on his feet, chip in, an' send him on his way rejoicin'."

They stopped in the hotel office, just inside the door, waiting. The stairs creaked steadily and regularly, and Dave Saunders came into sight, from the feet upward. He joined the little group in the doorway, his eyes on the bottle in Skinner's hand.

"They got one of those upstairs," he said, holding out his hand. "Might as well empty yourn, here an' now." He took the bottle, drank deeply, and passed it on to the next man, wiping his mouth on the back of a hand. "I've heard just about enough, an' seen about enough in th' last few minutes to appreciate that drink. I saw hell, with th' doors wide open, an' th' chutes all greased. Dead wife, stolen cattle—damn such a world!"

"Dead wife?" asked Johnny.

"Blowed all to hell with a six-shooter," said Saunders, his voice a growl. "Let's go sit down an' wait for th' boys. It don't look like I'll be headin' straight for home, like I figured on." His face was like a thundercloud: dark, with threatening patches of white that came and went.

"Meanin' th' Kid's wife was murdered?" asked Skinner, holding the bottle up to the light and idly speculating upon how many drinks remained in it. It looked like there were at least two good ones.

"Yes; an' damnably!" snapped Saun-

ders. "Th' killin' was th' most decent, most merciful part of it! There's a gang out in th' Kid's part of th' country that's a stench on th' face of th' earth. By Gawd, I ain't goin' straight home!"

Skinner was cursed by a vivid imagination, and he forthwith emptied the bottle and placed it on the floor near his chair. How a man's plans do get all upset!

"What's th' doe say?" he asked. "About th' shape th' Kid's in?"

"He said he would get along a damn' sight better if he had th' wish to get well. Cassidy's got th' first trick tonight. Here comes th' others now."

The doctor, followed closely by Duncan, joined the seated group.

"Food an' rest—they're easy to give him," he said, a scowl on his face. "What he needs more than anythin' else is a brand new spirit; an' that ain't easy to acquire. He wasn't dragged along th' railroad track: he was just kicked off th' eastbound limited tonight, an' rolled along th' track. Few miles west of town, beyond th' cattle crossin'. How he ever got here, I don't know. Bruised, cut, scraped; shocked, starved, wants to die, an' can't. I'll drop in tomorrow an' look him over. An' I'll ante up right now to make a jackpot to pay somebody to kill that — — brakeman! Good night, gentlemen!"

They watched the indignant medical man stalk from the room, his chin out and his shoulders high, with a chip on each of them; and then Wyatt Duncan glanced at the stairs.

"Bat's talkin' it over with Cassidy," he said. "He'll soon be down. Speakin' of jackpots an' killin' somebody, I'm almost tempted—" he broke off suddenly and reached for tobacco and papers. His expression was not a pleasant thing to look upon.

"Boys," said Saunders, "as I reckon it, our little cattle deals are all done. If we had to, we could leave open th' dates for th' startin' an' delivery of th' herds. We'll see what Cassidy has to say."

BAT moved toward them like a feline, unconsciously revealing in his smooth, alert movements the thoughts which were stirring him. He nodded to the group and sank gratefully into a chair, finding all eyes upon him.

"Cassidy's holdin' a war dance by hisself," he said, placing his precious

derby on one knee. "It might be a good idea for you boys to start tyin' some scalp loops, in case you need 'em. There's blood on th' moon."

Nelson laughed suddenly. It was almost like a bark.

"I knew it!" he exclaimed. "I *knew* it!"

Ewalt looked at the clock, and figured a moment.

"Nine o'clock," he said. "Breakfast at seven. That's ten hours. There's five of us, down here. That's two hours each. Let's draw straws for our turns upstairs."

He took five matches out of his pocket, and broke them into different lengths. Closing his hand over them with their heads protruding, he held them out.

"Shortest takes th' next shift, an' so on," he said.

Nelson drew one, and held it in sight while the others took their turns. Comparing them, they accepted the verdict. Duncan felt to see that he had plenty of tobacco, nodded to his companions and walked to the stairs. A few minutes later Cassidy came down, moved slowly toward the silent group, and seated himself. His face was set and forbidding, and his blue eyes smoldered with anger. The others remained silent, waiting for him to speak.

"You boys feel like listenin' to a story?" he finally asked, glancing around the circle, and quiet nods answered him.

He sighed, dropped his hat down at the side of his chair, waited a moment and then continued, unfolding to the waiting ears of his companions a story so horrible that the youngest of them blanched. Yet Cassidy told it, all at once, in a flat, monotonous voice. A story of doors broken in at dead of night—the rush of an overwhelming masked mob—the screams of a young wife tortured to death while the youthful husband prayed and cursed and struggled vainly against the strong ropes that bound him. Such stories had not been uncommon during the Indian days. But these were white men.

Skinner cleared his throat raspingly, and felt a little ashamed of himself.

"Now I got to write a letter home. I didn't figure to stay away so long." He arose apologetically and walked toward a table, on which were writing materials.

"I allus hated to write letters," admitted Saunders, slowly getting to his feet and glancing at the table. "That reminds me that there's a telegraph line runnin' to th' Gulch, an' there's a friend in th' Gulch to ride out to th' ranch. Only wish I'd brought my rifle along. Oh, well: I need a new one, anyhow."

Nelson cleared his throat.

"There's rifles an' other things on th' SV," he said apropos of nothing. "There's an old Sharps buffalo gun there, too, that belongs to Hopalong. You remember it, Hopsy?"

"Gawd, yes! I never should have forgot it, Kid. It's better than my new one."

Ewalt nodded, and let a thin smile play across his lean, tanned face.

"All of which means that you an' me, Johnny, can take our own news in person," he said. "I reckoned that you'd figger out some way to get out of writin' a letter. Margaret an' Jane can keep each other company, an' that's a right good thing. We've got th' luck with us so far."

Hopalong was looking from one to another in a mild surprise. The coldness went out of his face, and his eyes kindled. A little thrill went through him, engendered by the thought that some of the old breed still lived; and he now began to take even a keener interest in his new friends, to appraise them anew.

CHAPTER III

BREAKFAST was a silent affair, and when it was over the group left the room and returned to the chairs in the front of the big window. This tacitly was the rendezvous, the club, the forum; and it was here that would be determined their actions for the future.

The marshal joined them, a toothpick projecting from under his jet-black mustache. He was about to seat himself when the doctor appeared.

"Everythin' goin' well," reported the gentleman of medicine. "I was afraid of somethin' bein' wrong inside of him. Bein' throwed off a movin' train ain't what you might call healthy. Then there was th' dirt in all of them cuts an'

gashes; but they look right good now. It's goin' to take time, though, to get back his strength. Couple of weeks, I'd say. I'm teklin' you boys that that kid has had one hell of a session; an' he wasn't none too strong to begin with."

"Two weeks!" growled Hopalong, shaking his head in stubborn disagreement with any such interval.

"Yes, two weeks," replied the doctor, turning to the grumbler.

"I wasn't questionin' th' time from yore point of view," said Hopalong, "but from mine."

Bat flipped the toothpick toward a sandbox cuspidor and nodded reassuringly to his old friend. There was a knowing smile on his face.

"I'll see that he's taken care of, if you boys want to go about yore business," he said quietly. "There's a couple of girls here in town that mebbly won't be buried with Christians, but I'm bettin' that old St. Pete will let 'em slip through his corral gate. If that kid ain't got any money, an' I reckon he ain't, I'll pass th' hat around th' poker tables an' get him a real stake. This town shells out free an' easy. He was headin' east, back to th' part of the country where he was born an' raised. Th' question is, which way should he go after he gets able to travel?"

"West," growled Cassidy. "Back to th' place he just left unless I send you word to send him somewhere else. Come to think of it, that's somethin' that can't be decided now. Reckon mebbly he don't never want to see that place ag'in: I wouldn't. You send him on east, Bat, if you don't hear from us by th' time he's able to travel. I don't know what kind of a layout he had; mebbly it ain't worth goin' back to. He won't have no cattle left, anyhow."

Skinner had been fidgeting and now he took quick advantage of the pause in the talk.

"No need to pass no hat, Bat," he said with the hesitation common to men who like to deprecate their good deeds. "I reckon none of us are paupers," he added, glancing around the circle with a certain satisfaction. To be a moneyed man among moneyed men was a pleasant situation; and as wealth was rated in that country in those days, every man of the six was wealthy, or close to it.

"No," said Saunders, decisively,

sensing the drift. "We'll pass th' hat, an' pass it now. It's a sorta family affair, I reckon."

"Can't have that," objected Bat, and meaning it. "I can't go with you, but I aim to do my share; an' Bulltown aims to do hers. Th' boys will take care of that kid, an' that's flat." He considered for a moment. "Tombstone ain't so very far from that lava country. If you need any more help, I got some right good friends out there. That Earp feller don't play no second fiddle when it comes to usin' a gun, an' he's got his crowd with him."

Cassidy chuckled and rubbed his chin energetically.

"If we need any more men, I can put my hand on a half-dozen that would yank th' devil outa hell."

BAT grinned, exchanged a few words with the doctor on the way to the door, and returned alone. He dropped into his chair, hung the precious derby carefully on a knee, and looked around. "Seems to me there oughta be a head to any kind of an expedition," he suggested. The question he raised was one of great interest to himself. He had been wondering about this for some few hours. Every man a leader, accustomed to giving orders: would they willingly subordinate themselves for the good of the cause? He hoped so, but experience told him otherwise.

"Saunders is a good man to take hold of this," said Cassidy, swiftly reviewing what he had heard of the vigilante days of Cottonwood Gulch.

"Be too much like a pupil instructin' his teacher," said Saunders, chuckling. "I don't know how th' rest of th' boys feel about it, but by age, experience, an' general cussedness I'd say that Hopalong Cassidy was boss of this young an' self-supportin' outfit. That's my honest opinion."

"Right," said Duncan, smiling as he settled back in his chair.

"It'll mebbly give us all a chance to learn somethin' worth while," remarked Skinner, his face beaming. "I string along with Saunders, an' vote for Cassidy."

The affirmations were explosive and sincere, and the question seemed to be settled.

Hopalong nodded without enthusiasm,

and looked slowly from man to man.

"All right; I'll go through with my end of it," he said. "But any time th' majority figgers that we need a new boss, we'll hold another election. First, I want to talk to that kid ag'in, an' learn all that he can tell me. He's beginnin' to talk easier—gettin' a little more confidence in us, I reckon. We'll leave town just as soon as we can; but there ain't no sense wastin' time. Johnny, you an' Tex hop th' first train west, an' get everythin' ready for us on th' SV."

"Highbank is my railroad station," said Johnny. "If we take to th' hosses at th' ranch we'll have hundreds of miles to ride on them, when we might just as well cover that distance by rail. Suppose me an' Tex get rifles, blankets, an' things like that, pile 'em on th' platform of th' railroad station, an' climb aboard when yore train comes along? We can get th' hosses where we leave th' train. How does that look to you, Hoppy?"

"Th' same as it does to you," replied the leader, his face crinkled with a smile. "I figger that we'll take th' limited in th' mornin'. Seems to me that there's a slow train west this afternoon. Is that right, Bat?"

"Yes; there's an accommodation—we call it th' dog train. Leaves at one-twelve this afternoon. It's a local as far as Wickiup; an' then runs th' whole night through without a stop."

"That's ours," said Johnny, and Tex nodded.

Hopalong turned to the marshal.

"Bat, you said somethin' about knowin' that country, out where th' Kid came from. Suppose you tell us about it?"

"I didn't understand th' Kid right when I said that," replied the marshal. "It ain't buffalo country. I thought it was, or had been, I should 'a' said. I been checkin' up cases on it, an' I find that it's too far south an' west. I ain't never been within near a thousand miles of it, except that time I visited in Tombstone, an' that don't count."

"That's kinda tough," said Hopalong, shaking his head regretfully.

"Not very tough," said Bat. "I know a town that ain't so very far away from it, an' I know th' name of th' sheriff that lives in that town. It's in Cactus County, an' only last week that sheriff telegraphed here for us to keep our eyes

open for any BHB cattle that came east along th' old wagon trail. His name is Corson, an' he ranches near Willow Springs. I'd figger that yore best play would be to hunt him up an' get him talkin'. If he can't tell you what you want to know, then you might go out of yore way an' try my friend Earp, down in Tombstone. Still, Corson is nearest an' handiest, an' that makes him yore best bet. Shall I wire him to expect you?"

"Yes; but you'll have to tell him to expect us when he sees us," replied Hopalong. He got up. "I'm goin' upstairs to talk some more with th' Kid. Where'll you boys be when I come down ag'in?"

"RIGHT here," said Matt, lazily. "Reckon mebbe we can find a deck of cards, an' if we all gang-up we'll mebbe have some kinda chance to get some Ewalt money. Five to one is fair odds ag'in him, I reckon."

Johnny laughed and his eyes twinkled.

"It's fair odds till he figgers that somebody ain't playin' accordin' to th' Bible, in which case you'll mebbe need five more in yore gang." He laughed again, wholeheartedly, as he looked at the grinning faces. "In this crowd I reckon five will be about right."

"I was taught that honesty was th' best policy," remarked Skinner. He chuckled. "Right now I'm admittin', free an' frank, that I believe it is."

"Count me out," said the marshal, getting to his feet. He was accustomed to heavy play, and these friendly games lacked sting. "I'm goin' to pass th' hat to a couple of fellers that won't be in town when th' crowd comes to life tonight. They oughta be good for near fifty dollars each. I reckon five hundred will see him through: if it won't, then we'll raise th' ante an' build up a bigger pot."

"It'll be enough unless some tin-horn gets th' Kid into a game," said Duncan with a frown.

"In that case th' whole town will turn out to plant th' tin-horn, an' he'll shore be planted with his boots on," retorted Bat, his eyes glinting ominously. He watched Hopalong as that person paused for a moment at the desks. "Hey, Cassidy: I'll go down to th' station an' send that telegram to Corson. If there is any

answer that you ought to have, I'll forward to any place Nelson tells me to."

"Good," granted the leader, heading for the stairs.

"Send it to Highbank, Bat," said Johnny, thoughtfully. "Send it there if it comes in th' next two days. We'll get it."

"All right, Johnny. See you boys later," said the marshal, and left the room.

"Well," said Johnny, looking around the circle, "we got some time to kill, an' that poker suggestion sounds like a good one. What you say about playin' a little poker for pocket money? Just a friendly little game to make us better acquainted?"

The answering nods made him face the desk to ask for a pack of cards, but he found the bellboy placing a deck on the table at his elbow. It was not a new deck, but that was of no moment in this crowd of friends and in so small a game. Not a man present would miscall two pairs or take any unfair advantage of his friends.

"Good for you, sonny," said Johnny, smiling at the youngster. "Let's see if I've got a two-bit piece handy."

"No, sir!" replied the boy, his eyes as big as saucers. He backed away hastily. "I don't take no tips from my friends."

The afternoon train came and went, and with it went Ewalt and Nelson, making the first move in the campaign of skunk-killing.

CHAPTER IV

ON the sun-scorched platform at Highbank there were piles of impedimenta, rolled blankets containing things thought necessary for a campaign in the open country on horseback. Tex Ewalt and Johnny Nelson stood near them, watching the heavy train slow down; and they swore gently when they saw that they had guessed wrong as to just where the baggage car would stop. Before they could do anything more than bend over the piles of belongings, their freinds swarmed down to the platform and gave them eager aid; and then, the job finished, they all hastened into the eating station to make the best of the remaining twenty minutes.

"All aboard! All aboard!" sounded outside. Footsteps came nearer and a blue-clad trainman poked his head in at the door. "All aboard!"

There was a scramble, the sigh of released airbrakes, and a complaining of coupling rods and pins. Slowly the little station platform and its group of curious idlers moved backward; slowly the train gathered headway up the grade, and the clicking of the rail joints came at steadily decreasing intervals.

Next morning three men sat in the washroom, depressed by a night almost devoid of sleep. They were not accustomed to sleeping-car berths or to sleeping in a roar of sound.

"Feel better, mebby, after breakfast," growled one of them, turning from a basin. "I'd rather sleep in a saddle, any time."

"I'd near as soon sit up all night in a day coach," replied the second. "An', man! There shore was two champeen snorers fightin' it out last night! I'd call it even-up, an' let it go."

The third man was looking over a railroad map, and now he folded it up and tossed it aside.

"We had our choice of gettin' off at th' breakfast stop, or goin' on to Carter, where she stops for dinner. Either one is a hundred miles out of our way, but I figgered that Carter was th' best. Now I reckon we'd 'a' saved ourselves a lot of misery if we'd picked th' first."

"Better chance to get hosses at Carter," said Tex, remembering the deciding factor.

Dave Saunders nodded, and turned a smiling face to the third man.

"We shore can stand a little more bulldoggin', Hoppy," he said.

"You young fellers oughta be able to if I can," said Hopalong, sighing in resignation, and glancing suspiciously at Tex's sudden snort of derision. Then he moved over and made way for a newcomer, a stranger.

The washroom began to fill, and the three friends decided that they might better give others a chance at whatever comfort might be found in the arrangements of the room. They moved swayingly down the narrow aisle, side-stepping the porter, his ladder, valises, and a string of moving passengers; and they sighed with relief when they discovered that their berths had disappeared and

that they could sit down in comfort.

One by one the other members of the party made their appearance and went back to their own cars, pausing only long enough to exchange grouchy greetings.

Breakfast, and a good one, did much to lessen the gloom, and the six travelers began to take a renewed interest in the swiftly moving scenery, and of that there was plenty. So the morning passed, and then came the stop for the noon meal, and freedom. Three hours later a little cavalcade left the town behind, well mounted, well supplied, and cheerful under the prospect of cooking their supper in the open, sleeping on a stable foundation, and having room to move about. Three days were passed on the trail, and then a sprawled-out village loomed up on the horizon.

"Willow Springs," grunted Hopalong.

"Fair grazin' country," said the man at his side, "but not nothin' like we got up north."

Careless conversations were going on about them, and here and there a good-natured laugh told of high spirits.

"Cheyenne, wasn't it?" asked Saunders, scanning the signboards ahead in search of the saloon.

"Yeah; an' there it is," replied Hopalong. "An' there's a human bein' outside of it that's even longer an' thinner than Skinny Thompson. He's a deppety, too, by his badge. It flashes th' sun almost like a lookin' glass."

THE long, skinny deputy with the badge was regarding them with a close interest, for their rigs suggested visitors from another part of the country; and for two days he had been waiting to welcome expected visitors. He pushed out from the wall, stuck his head in at the door, and said something; and thereupon Bob Corson, sheriff of Cactus County, stepped to the street. The two officers studied the leader of the cavalcade, nodded triumphantly to each other, and grinned their welcome as the cavalcade stopped.

"Glad to see you, Cassidy, an' all you boys," said the sheriff, conscious that men were stepping to the street from every building in the town. The fame of these riders had gone on before them.

"Glad to get here, an' to see you, Sheriff," said the leader.

"What you say about washin' down

some of th' dust, an' then head out for th' ranch? Or, mebby, you'd rather stay here in town?" said the sheriff.

"It ain't fair to dump this hungry gang onto no willin' host," replied Hopalong, chuckling. "But before we go any farther, Mr. Corson, let me name th' boys," and the introductions were duly performed.

"I didn't know for shore if you was real," Matt Skinner was saying to Nueces, the long, skinny deputy. "You shore didn't cast no shadow."

"That's because I was a-standin' edge-ways to th' sun," chuckled Nueces, owing to a sudden liking for this free-handed insulter of deputies. "Listen! I just heard Steve pull out a cork; let's go an' take a look!"

They did, and Steve became a little flustered by the line-up at his humble bar; but he slid three bottles to their fate and let his customers look after themselves.

The conversation became general, and round followed round: but Steve noticed that the strangers, and Corson and Nueces as well, were careful not to cover the bottoms of the glasses too deeply. He nodded: perhaps that was one of the reasons why they all were alive at this late date. Steve sold liquor as a business, but in his heart he was always ready to commend the reasonable use of it.

". . . eat you out of house an' home," Hopalong was protesting.

"But we got a round-up cook," replied Corson. "He don't scare at nothin' short of a regiment; and, besides, he's been makin' a lot of fancy fixin's. I reckon he might feel a little put out if you boys don't eat 'em."

"Then I don't see how I can stick it out ag'in you any longer," said Hopalong. "I'd feel th' same way if things was turned around. Well," he said, turning to face his companions, "you boys ready to drift along?"

They were, and they did.

The next day found the talk settling down to the real business of the visit, a talk open to any man on the ranch who cared to listen or to take part. It seemed that the marshal of Bulltown had been somewhat detailed in his correspondence with Willow Springs, for the local sheriff had anticipated several contingencies. Proof of this developed after supper on the second night, when the sounds of a

walking horse neared the bunkhouse and ceased just outside the door.

In a moment a splendid example of Mexican manhood, dressed in the height of fashion, stepped into the big room, and removed his sombrero with a flourish. His bearing was that of a prince of royal blood.

"Eet ees my pleasure to come en person, Señor Corson," he said, his white teeth gleaming under his trim mustache.

"Why, that's downright kind of you, Señor Chavez," exclaimed the owner of the JC and the sheriff of the county. He leaped to his feet and extended a hand. "I expected to send my friends to you."

"Then I would have been honor', señor; but I thought eet best to talk fir-rst her-re. No one saw me ride. No one knows. There ees no, what you call—leenk?—to cause regret later, no?"

"Gentlemen," said Corson, smiling around the room, "let me make you all acquainted with Señor Chavez, who has ridden up here from Old Mexico to aid us in deciding some points, if he can. Señor, this is Hopalong Cassidy."

The Mexican did not raise a hand while he looked into the faded blue eyes, or while he spoke.

"Señor Cassi-day, I hav' heard many theengs of you; ver' many, indeed. Some I liked; some, not; but I have never hear-rd that you ar-re not a man and a gentleman. Weel you honor me weeth your hand?"

HOPALONG was looking closely at the speaker, and now he slowly extended his hand.

"Every man is entitled to his own opinion," he said, quietly. "We can't all figger things alike."

"Dave Saunders," said Corson, turning to the Cottonwood Gulch man.

"I am honor' to know you, señor," said the Mexican, bowing.

"Tex Ewalt," continued Corson, his smile growing.

"Hah! Do you know, Señor Ewalt, I once met a man who sat all day weeth the pack of car-rds. He e-shuffle, cut; e-shuffle, cut—all day. At the end of a week I ask heem; 'What you do weeth those damn' fool car-rds?' You would laugh, Señor Ewalt. He says: 'To be like Tex Ewalt.' I say to heem: 'You damn' fool: Tex Ewalt, he was bor-rn weeth a geeft. Eet ees not to be acquire'.

I am honor', señor, to e-shake your hand."

"Th' honor runs both ways, Señor Chavez," said Tex, laughing heartily.

"Matt Skinner, señor," chuckled Corson, turning to another of the group. The sheriff was very much relieved, for things were going smoother than he thought: to introduce a first-class cattle thief to men like these—well, they didn't know it yet.

"I am beatin' you to it, Señor Chavez," said Matt, holding out his big, bony hand. "You've never heard of me."

"Then I can onlee ask you, ees Baldy well?" replied the Mexican, grasping the outheld hand.

"Great Gawd! You win!"

"Meet Wyatt Duncan, señor," said Corson, laughing outright. He was surprised, although he knew that if he had heard of these men, there was no reason why the Mexican should not have heard as much. As a matter of fact, remembering the Mexican's organization, Señor Chavez might well know more than he did.

"Bet you ten, even money, you never heard of me," said Wyatt, extending his hand.

"Shall we ask my fr-riend to hold the e-stakes, Señor Duncan; my fr-riend who once leaved near the Black Buttes?"

All eyes were now on this Mexican, frankly and suspiciously on him; but he gave no sign that he was conscious of it. He could have spoken of Saunders' activities had he wished, far away as they had been; but he was a bandit, and found vigilante activities distasteful. He followed Corson's gesture and bowed as the last name was mentioned.

"I am glad to meet weeth you, Señor Nelson. I understand that the Snake Buttes ar-re ver' tame."

"Thanks to my friends," said Johnny, shaking hands.

When all were seated again, Corson looked around the circle and let his gaze rest on Hopalong.

"Th' Bulltown marshal told me quite a lot, Cassidy," he said, slowly and thoughtfully. "From it I have been able to make a pretty shrewd guess why you boys are in this part of th' country. In sympathy I am with you; but, as that section is well out of my jurisdiction, I cannot join you, officially and in person. You wanted directions, an' what infor-

mation I could get. That right?"

Nods and grunts of affirmation answered him.

"I reckon so," he continued. "But there is another side to th' matter. You are concerned only in one definite affair: finding just one gang of cut-throats, and nothin' else. That right?"

"You've put a name to it," said Hopalong. "Just one gang, an' nobody or nothin' else."

THEN, if you should run up against other people, who are not connected with yore gang a-tall, an' they let you alone, you will let them alone?"

"Shore: why not?" replied Hopalong. "What has all this got to do with us?"

"Quite a lot, Cassidy; quite a lot," answered his host, with a glance at the Mexican. "If you went blundering down into that country without knowing the conditions, you would get mixed up fightin' people that have nothin' to do with your affairs. You might be so busy fightin' th' wrong men that th' others would get away, or join hands in a common war ag'in you; an' th' fellers that you are after are only a few, many as they are, when compared to the other crowd. From what I have heard about you an' yore friends, if you give yore word, you keep it. That right?"

"Shore!" said Hopalong, somewhat shortly.

"Th' Bulltown marshal says you are after Big Henry's gang. I'm right glad that somebody wants 'em bad enough to go in after 'em. But you don't want El Toro's crowd, do you?"

"Who's he?" asked Hopalong, curiously.

"He ees not so well known as you, señor," said Chavez, smiling.

"Hell he ain't!" snapped Johnny, leaning forward in his chair. "He's that —"

"Excuse me, Nelson!" interrupted Corson hurriedly. "Let's not say anythin' about persons that don't touch this present matter. You boys want Big Henry an' his gang. You don't want nobody else. Let's have that understood before we go on. Am I right?"

"Yes. Nobody else counts with us," replied Hopalong, beginning to find a good and sufficient reason for Corson's attitude. He glanced out of the corner of his eye at the Mexican, just a flash

glance, and then he was regarding Corson steadily. "We'll pass you our word on that, Corson; eh, boys?"

Affirmations answered him, and Corson sat back with a gentle sigh of relief.

"Good," he said, and turned toward the Mexican. "Señor Chavez will talk from now on."

"I theenk I know the theeng that you ar-re interest' in," said Chavez. "Eet ees a theeng that I deed not like. Eet was so—so on-necessary. I e-spik for Señor El Toro. Eef you do not bother heem, who had notheeng to do weeth that r-rottenness, weeth w'at happened, then you may do w'at you weesh weeth Beeg Henry. That ees a bar-rgain, señores?"

"We've already said it was," replied Hopalong.

"Ah, yes; so you deed; so you deed," admitted the Mexican, bowing. "Eef you weel do me the honor to leesten, I weel teel you the standing of matters een that par-rt of the countr-ry. Eet ees emportant that you should know of thees."

"Th' more we know, th' better off we are," admitted Hopalong.

"That ees so," said Chavez, and he looked around the circle of faces, smiling at each in turn.

"Señor El Toro," he continued, placidly, "ees a Mexican bandit, hees hand against hees bastar-rd government. He mus' leeve, an' hees men, they must leeve. Hees hand eet r-reaches out over a great section of the countr-ry. Een that countr-ry he ees w'at you call boss. But ther-re ar-re par-rts of eet een wheech he has small interest. Beeg Henr-ry ees een that par-rt.

"Beeg Henr-ry, he knows hees beans, as you say. So he sends wor-rd to El Toro weeth a beezeeness proposition. There ees a line he weel not cross. Ther-re ees a sum of money he weel pay. He weel not meddle weeth El Toro's affairs; El Toro weel not meddle weeth Beeg Henr-ry's. They both agree on that. They ar-re not friends, and they ar-re not enemies. Beeg Henr-ry ees an Americano; all hees men ar-re Americanos. El Toro ees a Mexican, an' all hees men they ar-re Mexicans. Ther-re weel be no confusion; each side ees marked by the good God; each side, by eets race. Thees ees plain, señores!"

MORE nods and grunts of affirmation answered him. His auditors were

interested, to say the least, and they were following him with the keenest attention. Some of them had begun to confuse identities, and their minds were working much the same as was that of their leader.

"Eef you fight weeth Beeg Henr-ry, eet ees not El Toro's fight: he ees not for you, or against you—openly. But eet steeks een hees craw, as you say, that theeng Beeg Henr-ry did, he and lees men. *Madre de Dios!* How eeny man could do such a devil theeng—"

"We know how—but not why," cut in Cassidy shortly. "There was something back of it, certainly—no man, except perhaps an Apache, would torture a woman like that. There was something they were trying to find out. What it was, even the Kid didn't know. If we get our hands on Big Henry, though, we'll find out."

"*Bueno.* Eet was one devil thceng—the devil mus' pay. Though that countr-ry ees El Toro's countr-ry, you geeve hecm your word that you make no tr-rouble for Mexicans—and eet ees yours to do with as you weesh."

"We shore won't make any trouble for Mexicans," said Hopalong, thoughtfully, "unless, of course, they make trouble for us."

"I can promise you no Mexicans will annoy you," said the tall lithe caballero. A second later he left the room. Carson followed him.

CHAPTER V

NUECES drew rein at the edge of the lava desert, his companions following suit and bunching around him.

"I've never been farther than this," admitted the horse-faced deputy, looking out over the forbidding and grotesque stretch of rock and sand, with its gray-green vegetation and thrusting cacti. "Never had no need to," he grunted.

"Sorry we have," said somebody behind him.

"Somewhere near th' middle of this devil's playground," continued Nueces, "is a town, an outlaw town, without an honcst man in it. Up north it's Jackson's Hole; down here, Hell's Center. There are several ways in to it, if you

know 'em: I don't. We'll go to th' water hole, an' stay there till mornin'. It's a right good place, an' th' water is good."

In a moment the cavalcade was under way again, riding slowly and silently, and when it stopped it had reached Tinaja Verde, the only known potable water for eighty miles of riding north and south. The water oozed out of a stratum of rock and was sweet and cool.

The deserts of high altitudes, once the sun goes down, cool rapidly; a brisk, sputtering fire baffled the darkness of the desert night and gave a grateful warmth to the circle of men seated closely around it. Two of their number were missing, standing guard somewhere out in the darkness, stolidly waiting their turn at the fire and blankets. Grotesque shadows loomed on the rock wall, and the reflection of the fire on the rock could be seen for a fair distance.

"Who comes? *Quien es?*" rang out a challenge from the north, and the circle at the fire stirred and became alert.

"*Amigo.* Fr-riend," sounded the instant answer.

"Then head for th' fire, an' keep in my sight till you get there," ordered the sentry, moving so that the newcomer stood silhouetted against the distant light.

"*Si, si, señor;* I onderstand."

The Mexican advanced into the circle of light, his white teeth shining in a friendly smile.

"Ah, Señor Nueces! I am glad to fin' you so soon."

"Hello, Felipe! There was only one place to look for me. You headin' for San Ignacio?" asked Nueces, motioning for the visitor to seat himself in the circle, and looking at his complacent friends. "This is Felipe," he explained. "He's El Toro's eyes an' ears. I can vouch for him. Sit down, *amigo.*"

"*Gracias,*" replied Felipe, sitting cross-legged in the space provided for him. "Yes, I go to San Ignacio."

Nueces chuckled.

"Curious layout, this desert," observed Hopalong, his eyes on the lithe, brown-skinned guest.

"*Si, señor;* eet ees ver' curious."

"You ever cross it?"

"*Si, si;* many time. I deed not car-re, mooch."

"Reckon not," replied Hopalong.

"Cross it from different directions?" he persisted, carelessly.

"Si, Si; but most fr-rom the south."

"Any water holes on it?" drawled Skinner, getting the drift of the questions.

"Si, si: ther-re ar-re oh, *thees* number," answered Felipe, thrusting out both hands, with two fingers curled back. "Ocho."

"Eight," muttered Nueces, nodding his head.

"Ever been in Hell's Center?" asked the deputy, feeling for tobacco sack.

"Twice, Señor Nueces, et ees well name'." The black eyes glanced around the circle, and their owner smiled. He was here to give information, but not eagerly, not to volunteer it. He would answer questions.

"Th' town very far from here?" asked Duncan, idly breaking a greasewood twig in a very casual manner.

"A day's ride eef you know the way."

"Hum!" said Duncan, tossing the bits of greasewood on the fire, where they flared up swiftly.

"You know th' way?" asked Hopalong, curiously, looking the Mexican squarely in the eye.

FELIPE shrugged his shoulders and paused in the making of the second cigarette.

"Seex, eight, ten ways, señor; there ees even one from here, close by."

"Figgered there would be, seein' this is a water hole," grunted Hopalong. "Most trails lead to water in this country."

"Once you find it, th' rest is easy," suggested Nueces. "In a place like that lava hell there won't be much strayin' from a single trail. It oughta be purty well marked, back from th' edge, once you locate it."

"Si," said Felipe, exhaling a lungful of smoke. "The beginning ees many ways, and not well to be seen; but een less than one mile, the many ways they come together, and go on as one."

"Uh-huh," grunted Nueces. "Supposin' you was figgerin' to visit th' town: where'd you start, from here?"

"Eef you weel ride weeth me a short ways to-morrow, I weel e-show you," replied Felipe. "I weel e-show you the other tr-rails eef you weesh."

Wyatt Duncan shifted his position for

better comfort, looking at the Mexican. Then he glanced around the circle and cleared his throat.

"One trail oughta be enough; but it might come in handy to know some of th' others," he said, suggestively.

"That depends considerable on another question," said Hopalong, thoughtfully. "It depends on whether we should ride in in a body, or straggle in, a man or two at a time, an' from different directions. What you boys think about it?"

"That's something we'll have to talk over," said Matt Skinner, glancing sideways at the Mexican. "There's mebbly a lot of things we'll have to talk—"

"*Quien es?* Who comes?" sharply rang out the voice of the southern sentry, cutting Skinner's words off short.

There was no answering voice, and the circle around the fire, making a series of beautiful lighted targets, arose as one man and melted into the darkness.

A gun crashed, and again. Lead screamed from the rocky ridge above the fire. Again a gun crashed, this time from the west. Twigs snipped and sifted down. Rustlings sounded here and there, interspersed by low words of caution. There came the sudden creak of leather, the pounding of hoofs and two more shots.

A horse burst out of the darkness, running and plunging and kicking; and something weighty dragged from a stirrup, jerked heavily by the frantic animal. A shadow rose out of the darkness along the ground like a jack-in-the-box, and leaped for the head of the panicky horse. In another moment two more shadows joined the first and subdued the frightened animal.

". . . tore past me in th' dark an' like to run me down," one of the shadows was saying. The voice sounded as if it belonged to Tex. "Fired point blank at me. If th' hoss hadn't shied at me, I'd be on my way to hell, right now. Once was enough, so I let him have it. I knowed he wasn't none of us: he was mounted."

"Mobby, Nueces or that Mex. will know who he is—or was," said the second shadow. "Looks like th' pot's opened—for th' limit."

"In a table-stake game," said Tex.

"Shore does," said the third shadow. "Untangle him, an' we'll carry him in to th' fire," and the speaker aided in pull-

ing the foot of the dead man back through the stirrup, where it had slipped and locked. He straightened up suddenly.

"Looks like that gang ain't waitin' for us to call. Wonder how they learned anythin' about us?" he asked.

"Saw th' fire, scouted up close enough to see that we was strangers an' to hear us talkin', an' then tried to get away with th' news."

"Mebby: sounds reasonable. If he was alone, there's no harm done," said the third shadow. He raised his voice carelessly, and other shadows appeared.

At the fire the carriers laid down their burden and Nueces and the Mexican bent over it. They straightened up at the same time, looking across at each other, and gently nodding.

"Black Jim," said Nueces, squinting thoughtfully.

"Si," said Felipe, nodding again.

"An' who's he?" asked Hopalong, curiously.

"One of Big Henry's gang," answered Nueces. "Fast work, fast work."

"Then that makes one less," grunted Skinner complacently.

"Which don't cut 'em down very much," said Nueces. "Still, every little bit helps." He turned to the Mexican. "I've heard all kinds of rumors, Felipe: how many are in that gang?"

"Mebby twenty, mebbly thir-ty. They come and they go. When all are together, mebbly thir-ty. Beeg Henry, Black Jeem, Geor-rge White, E-steve Smeeth, Tom Walters, Paso Frank--thy ar-re the beeg ones; but ther-re ar-re many others. Beeg Henry: si, but not so beeg as El Toro!"

As Felipe called off the names, his companions nodded at each one: they were the names which had been told to them back in Bulltown, the names they treasured. Toward the others of the gang they bore no strong animosity in advance of events which might, by their pressure, arouse equal feelings of hostility against the lesser and unnamed members of the gang.

A general discussion now took place around the fire, but Hopalong remained out of it. He was sitting cross-legged just outside the circle, silent and contemplative. At last he threw away his dead cigarette and felt for his beloved and

odorous corn-cob, as a better aid to thought. Minutes passed and the pipe was smoked out. He took it from his lips and mechanically knocked out the dead ashes.

"Well," he said, suddenly, looking around the circle of friends. "Twenty or thirty kinda changes things. I had hoped to ride in, ask some questions, spot our men, an' start shootin'. No use to waste a lot of time when it ain't necessary; but now I reckon it's necessary. We got to use our wits as much as our guns: mebbly more."

"Split up," suggested Skinner, picking Nelson's tobacco sack from its pocket.

"Yeah; split up," echoed Hopalong. "It's th' best thing we can do. We'll learn some of th' other trails in, an' use 'em. If anythin' goes wrong, or we get divided, an' want to come together, this will be th' place to meet. Chances are we'll be leavin' that town in a hurry, an' mebbly will have trouble gettin' supplies for th' outward trip. We'll take care of that before we leave here, an' cache plenty of supplies right near here: canned goods, ca'tridges, things that will keep. That will let us go in light, leave light, an' not have to worry about grub after we get out."

"I can cache 'em so an Injun can't find 'em," said Duncan.

"Good," replied Hopalong. He rubbed his chin. "Split up: yeah. Tex an' I can play our parts easy: we'll be just plain gamblers. You fellers will have to figger out yore own plays, an' pair up to suit yoreselves. I reckon we don't want to get in there at th' same time, either. Splittin' up wouldn't do us much good, if we did."

They were all around the fire now, the guards tarrying a while before going back on duty. The same thoughts were in the minds of all: split up into ones, twos, or even threes, and work in from different directions; and this led, almost automatically, to the thought about companions, to the thought of whom they would select.

SAUNDERS looked across at Duncan, grinned, and nodded at the sudden knowing expression on his friend's face.

"Reckon me an' Duncan can figger out somethin' that'll suit us," Saunders remarked, thus indicating his choice of companion.

"Reckon that hitches us up double,

Nelson," said Matt Skinner, chuckling and looking expectantly at Johnny. He laughed with poorly concealed pleasure. "Us young an' good-lookin' fellers oughta stick together, anyhow. I reckon we oughta get along real well if nobody picks a fight with us."

Nelson pretended to look frightened.

"You don't want to scare me to death before we start, Matt," he replied, a broad grin wreathing his tanned face. The grin was wiped out by a sudden thought. "Half of our troubles will be over if we don't know or associate with th' rest of this crowd."

"More'n half," said Matt, quickly. "We'll make us some new friends in Hell's Center, an' start out with a brand-new deck."

"That's th' play for us all, of course," said Tex. "We might just as well ride in there in a bunch as to know each other right off after we get there. I think Hoppy's right about me an' him goin' in together: we're both able to earn a fair livin' at poker, an' we won't have to play any parts in that respect. It's th' natural thing for both of us."

He arose, deftly adjusting his belts, and turned to leave the fire.

"I'll stand my watch, boys. Up there on th' top of that ledge. That means that I can see th' whole layout, an' that means that there won't be no need for th' second sentry."

"I'll go with you," said Hopalong, getting to his feet. "We can talk things out while these boys do th' same thing right here."

Nueces cleared his throat.

"I'll stand th' watch after you, Ewalt," he volunteered. "I can sleep all day to-morrow, if I want to, while you boys will have to keep ridin'. I'll go on duty when you come back, Tex; an' then stay on all th' rest of th' night." He chuckled at the expostulations which met his announced self-sacrifice, and waved the argument aside.

"I can't go with you, but I shore pine to do what I can. It's all settled when th' deppety speaks. As a matter of fact, I'd just as soon start right now, an' run th' whole trick. *That's th' idear*, Ewalt! You an' Cassidy stay here with th' gang an' talk everythin' over with 'em, while you got plenty of time. I'll go up on th' ledge right now."

"I weel go weeth you, an' e-sleep while

you watch," offered the Mexican, thus effacing himself with graceful tact. "Then you e-sleep while I watch, no?"

"Shore! That's th' idear, Felipe. Me an' you will guard these tenderfeet an' listen to their snores. Set right down ag'in, Tex; you, too, Cassidy. You boys ain't got much time to arrange things before you split up." He laughed and shook his head, and stubbornly held to his purpose; and at last they let him have his own way and watched him and the Mexican fade into the night.

CHAPTER VI

BREAKFAST was eaten, supplies were cached, and everything was cleared away by sunrise. Nueces led Hopalong and Tex northward along the edge of the lava desert, following detailed instructions which he had obtained from Felipe during their watch of the night before. It had been agreed that Hopalong and Tex were to go in first along the northern trail. Nueces would put them on it and leave them, himself returning to Willow Springs.

The Mexican and the others rode southward along the trail toward San Ignacio on their way to other routes leading in to Hell's Center. It was about noon when the guide drew up and waved a hand toward the west, nodding significantly.

"Wheech of the señores go een fir-rst?" he asked, expectantly.

"Don't make any difference as far as I can see," said Saunders, glancing inquiringly at his partner in the venture. Duncan nodded his agreement, and his companion continued. "We're ready to start, Nelson, if you an' Skinner are satisfied."

"Makes no difference," replied Johnny, his eyes on Skinner's placid face. Matt nodded.

"We won't say so-long yet," remarked Saunders. "As soon as Felipe shows us th' trail we'll come back ag'in. We've got to wait a couple of days before we start in, so as not to get to Hell's Center at th' same time Hopalong an' Tex arrive. We'll hole up somewhere not far away from here. We can allus get water back where we camped last night. Go ahead, Felipe."

The Mexican swung his horse toward the lava sea, and in a few moments the three men were lost to the sight of their waiting friends. The high and broken lava ridges swallowed them quickly.

"Great place for a hide-out, or ambushes," growled Nelson, squinting at the lava waste. "A couple of men that knew this layout could stand off a dozen."

"Bad as th' Modoc country," grunted Skinner. "Reckon mebby it's even worse."

In a little more than a quarter of an hour Felipe and his two companions emerged and soon joined the waiting pair.

"We got her figgered," said Saunders, pulling up. "Found th' main trail. We'll wait here two days an' then start in."

They shook hands all around, and Felipe again led the way southward at a distance-eating lope.

"We've got to wait a day or two on our own account," said Nelson, breaking a half-hour's silence. He glanced at the guide. "Hope you can locate us not too far away from water."

"We go to San Ignacio, señores. That ees wher-re you weel e-stay onteel time for to r-ride een. San Ignacio ees wher-re Hell's Center gets supplies. The tr-rail fr-rom ther-re een ees not so har-rd to follow, and eet ees not so long. Eet ees well travel'."

"Suits me," grunted Matt. "I'd rather wait in town than out here."

"Ain't so shore," growled Johnny. "From what I've heard, San Ignacio is hell on wheels."

"Dark streets an' doorways, huh?" muttered Matt, thoughtfully.

"Eet ces mebby hell to e-strangers," said Felipe, nodding and smiling. "But eef e-strangers mind their own bcezeness and ar-re known to El Toro, eet weel be different. Of that we weel e-spik more w'en we get ther-re."

"Keno," grunted Matt, loosening his neckerchief.

"Yeah," growled Johnny, glancing out over the lava desert on his right.

Mile followed mile. Night came slowly on. From a ridge they at last looked southward across a low, wide valley, where man-made glints of light shone under the magnificent blazing of the stars. Down the slope, across a stretch

of level sand, and then they splashed through the shallow, turgid boundary river, to emerge on its farther bank. They were in Mexico, and the kerosene lamps of San Ignacio beckoned them on.

"*Quien es?*" rang out sharply from a scrubby patch of chaparral.

FELIPE answered the challenge, speaking swiftly in Spanish, and led the way again after the momentary pause. They came to and passed the first scattered adobe houses, stray dogs snarling at them and slouching out of their path.

They had reached San Ignacio, one of the worst of the border towns, where the length of a man's life was often determined by the contents of his pockets. Here they were to wait, marking time before following the lava desert trail northward to Hell's Center.

The three riders dismounted near the door of the cantina and entered. The big room was filled with the hum of a melodious language, through which sounded the thin but lively notes of stringed instruments. Everything was bathed in a blaze of light.

As they entered the door the two Americans looked sidewise and over their shoulders. An armed man sat on each side of the door, against the wall. Whether they were there as guards, or just chanced to have dropped in that position, the strangers did not know; but they exchanged significant glances and continued after their guide, careless of the frowns which met them on all sides. They went, as straight as the layout of the tables would permit, toward a slightly raised platform in the far corner of the room. On this two men were seated. One of them was the Mexican whom they had met in the JC bunkhouse. If this proved to be El Toro, then they had been right in their guess up in the bunkhouse.

El Toro regarded their approach with a welcoming smile and he raised a hand in salutation, whereupon the scowls throughout the room became effaced, their places taken by apologetic smiles.

"Welcome to San Ignacio, señores," said the bandit, waving the upraised hand in a gesture which seemed to include everything. "The town, eet ees yours. Thees ees Federico. Federico, meet the American señores Juan and Mateo. You weel notice—no?—that Fed-

erico ees enough of a name for a man; that Juan and Mateo ar-re enough for names. Ther're ar-re many Federicos and Juans and Mateos in the wor-ld. One name ees enough for one man een *thees* country. Ees eet not so?"

"*Si, Excelencia,*" answered Federico, grinning.

"One's enough for me," chuckled Matt, "an' that one ain't my own."

"Deed you have tr-rouble? Were you pursue'?" asked the bandit, one eyelid twitching downward.

Johnny thought so quickly that he answered without hesitation.

"Only at first," he replied. "We lost 'em a hundred miles back."

"I figger it nearer eighty," corrected Matt. "But what's twenty miles when that river is behind us?"

"Hah! Either ees enough," laughed El Toro. "*One* would be enough, now that you ar-re her-re. Gringo sheriffs do not cross the river eento San Ignacio. Her-re ar-re two chairs for you, *amigos*. Rest yourselves."

"I'm figgerin' that it's time for a drink, after all that ridin'," said Matt, his gaze settling on two tough-looking Americans who sat at a table halfway along the side wall. He raised his hand, beckoning to the bartender; but the bartender saw only the swiftly raised hand of El Toro, and he obeyed the bandit, hastening to the platform, where he stood at attention.

"You ar-re my guests to-night, *amigos*," said El Toro. "Say w'at you weel dreenk." He followed Matt's gaze, and nodded swiftly. "You have seen two of your countrymen, *si*? We weel have them her-re."

He raised his voice and hand, speaking swiftly in Spanish. The two hard-looking Americans arose and moved toward the platform.

"Fellow-countrymen should dreenk together. Say w'at you weel have, señores." He chuckled. "Wheesky, wheesky all the time; nothing but wheesky! Well, ther-re ar-re wor-rse dreenks, and also better. Wheesky for me, too; een honor of our guests. And also for you, Federico? *Si*, that ees right."

THE order given and the bartender on his way to fill it, El Toro smiled at the four Americans.

"Señores Juan and Mateo ar-re

str-rangers een *thees* town," he said. "Eet ees well that Americans een a foreign countr-ry should know each other. Shake han's weeth Tomas and Beel."

He chuckled as the four men shook hands.

"Señores Tomas and Beel, they look for gold een the lava countr-ry," he continued. "Señores Juan and Mateo blessed the waters of the Rio Grande after they had passed eets middle. We weel dreenk together, and then you Americans may go off by yourselves eef you weesh."

In a few minutes the four Americans were seated at the table halfway along the side wall, two of them remembering and cherishing the word "lava," which El Toro had uttered; the other two, smiling to themselves on the bandit's comment about blessing the Mexican side of the boundary river.

Johnny ordered another round of drinks. He and Matt could drink glass for glass with the other two and have the best of it, since Tom and Bill had been punishing the liquor quite steadily for the last hour or more. And so they passed the time away and began to get acquainted, and when they parted Bill was weeping on Matt's shoulder and swearing eternal friendship.

They met again the next day and spent most of it in each other's company; and again the day after that, and the following day. And then it came out, a little at a time, that Johnny and Matt, having reached Mexico and safety, could not remain south of the line indefinitely: they had to get back to the United States, but dared not follow any of the established trails. Having planted this thought as a seed, they waited for it to sprout, which it did swiftly.

Bill and Tom, having idled away as much time as they dared, were forced to leave not long after the seed was planted, and they invited their new friends to go with them along a trail which was safe at every point; and from the end of which they could fare forth with a large degree of safety. So thus, having prepared the way for an unsuspecting entry into the lava country and Hell's Center, the two friends waited upon the pleasure of their guides; and, one morning, saddled up and again crossed the river, heading toward their goal, and heading toward it as fugitives from justice.

CHAPTER VII

HOPALONG and Tex were moving along a faint trail which dipped and wound over and around the lava ridges and boulders. Seasoned as they were to desert heat, they found the blazing sun so powerfully thrown back at them from the sprawled lava that they had all they could do to endure it. They had other things to worry about, however: their horses were unshod, and they knew that a day or two of this kind of footing would wear the horn of the hoofs to the quick; and that would mean that they would be afoot in a place where such a condition would be serious, indeed.

Hopalong turned in the saddle and spoke over his shoulder.

"I think a lot of this saddle, Tex; but right now I think a heap more of this cayuse's hoofs." He leaned over and glanced down. "Barefoot hosses ain't got no business in here."

"It might not come to that, Hoppy," said Tex, referring to his friend's remark about the saddle. "There'll be time enough later to make moccasins out of saddle skirts. Anyhow, as I remember it, that Mex. said th' lava was bad only on th' outside of this hell hole. We oughta be gettin' over th' rim, an' in another hour or two have sand to travel over. After that, it'll be sand all th' way."

"Shore hope it ain't much farther," growled the leader, scowling at the bleak and threatening prospect about him. "An' I shore hope there's horn enough left to hold a set of shoes; an' a blacksmith at Hell's Center to put 'em on."

"There'll be one; an' if there ain't, there'll shore be a forge an' shoe iron; an' that's enough for most cow-punchers."

Hopalong's anxiety regarding the wearing away of the hoofs of their horses was needless, for they soon left the greater part of the lava field behind them and followed the trail that wound over the sand between the upthrust blocks and ridges of the threatening igneous rock. Some of the horn was, indeed, worn away, but not enough to cause any real apprehension. In time lava appeared only occasionally, where the winds had swept the sand from it; and

then, shortly after noon, in the bottom of a very shallow but wide depression, appeared a faint, gray-green patch. From the near edge of this patch a ragged ridge of lava and obsidian thrust up a hundred feet or more above the plain, and shut off the view of the northern part of the depression.

"Creek," muttered Hopalong, peering ahead. He saw no water, but the color of the gray-green patch promised it.

"Yeah," replied Tex. "Water an' a little range of grass. Th' town had ought to be somewhere over yonder. Behind that ridge, probably."

"We're gettin' close," said Hopalong after a moment's silence. "You figger you can break th' habit of years, an' quit callin' me Hopalong?"

"You figger you can break th' habit of near a lifetime, an' answer prompt to any other name, without bein' prodded into it?" countered Tex, grinning.

"Yes," answered Hopalong.

"Yes," said Tex.

"Call me—call me Doc."

"Be all right if I counted ten before I spoke to you," growled Hopalong. "There might come a time when I wouldn't want to waste so much time countin' up that high. I got it: Tex is one name, but Texas is shore another, th' way they are used in th' cow-country. You are Texas." He chuckled. "Tex often has another name hitched onto it; but Texas is usually enough by itself."

"Well, mebby; but if yo're wrong, it might mean some quick an' hard shootin'."

"That's what we're here for, ain't it?"

"Good Lord! Ain't there goin' to be any finesse about this game?"

"Any what?" demanded Hopalong, turning in the saddle.

"Trickery, artifice, cleverness, acting, mental sleight-of-hand."

"Shore; shore there is. *All* of 'em, I'd say."

"OH, is there? Well, from th' way you spoke I figgered mebby we was goin' to walk into th' main saloon an' just start shootin'."

"Yo're loco!" snapped Hopalong.

"Am I? Hell, man: I've seen you do it!"

"But this ain't one of them times,"

protested Hopalong.

"I'm obliged for th' information: I know it, *now*. All right: have it yore own way. My name is Texas. Lord, but it shore is a big name! It covers so much that it's damn' near an airy nothin'. It'll make me feel right prominent, especially if I happen to be dealin' from th' middle of th' deck, or switchin' a cut. Let's shrink it a little, an' get away from th' sound of it. It's th' sound of it that bothers me. How about Panhandle: that's Texas, an' it's easy. *Pan* is my *handle*. When you think of Texas you naturally think of th' place where you was born an' crawled around lookin' for rattlesnakes to play with. Every time you think of Texas, you don't think of it a-tall: you think of one corner of it. As shore as hell, if you start to say Texas, you'll end up by abbreviatin' it, an' what you *will* say is 'Tex—an' me mebbly shapin' up th' deck to suit us at that very time."

"All right, all right, all right!" retorted Hopalong. "Name yoreself: if I had my way you'd be a number. Panhandle she is."

"Keno, Bill. Well, well, well: looks like we're gettin' somewhere," said Tex, pointing ahead.

The course they had been pursuing for the last mile or more had shifted them laterally, in relation to the great pile of igneous rock; and now they saw the corner of an adobe shack slowly emerging from behind the ridge and moving steadily into their field of vision.

"Yeah," grunted Hopalong, with satisfaction. "I reckon we've arrived."

Five minutes later they were certain of it. The squat buildings of the sprawled-out town were now revealed. The gray-green patch which they had noticed some miles back now became a large range of poor grazing land. A faint-hearted creek slunk along over its gravelly bed on the far side of the town. Blacksmith shop, general store, a harness-maker's shop, two saloons with two-story false fronts, and a so-called hotel made up the town. In the distance, on the farther edge of the gray-green range and at the head of a narrow rill, was a small, adobe house. When this caught the eyes of the newcomers it made their jaws tighten.

"I reckon that's it, Bill," said Tex, scowling.

"Reckon so, Panhandle." Hopalong's eyes were studying the cluster of buildings thoughtfully. He turned his head and swept the surrounding country with a quick appraising glance.

"Reckon th' blacksmith shop is our first stop," said Panhandle.

"Shore: hosses first, humans second, in th' cow-country. Best have 'em put in good shape: no tellin' how soon we'll need sound hoofs."

They stopped in front of the shop, and Bill led his horse in after him and made his wants known.

"Barefoot all around, huh?" inquired the smith, and then looked closer. "Barefoot all his life, too. Keep his muzzle around in front in case he gits hungry for human meat, while I just fix this strap on his heavy artillery. All right. Huh! You must 'a' rode in from Tinaja Verde: horn's in good shape, though it's wore considerable. You waitin', or will you come back?"

"Be back later. My friend Panhandle wants his hoss shod, too," said Bill, wagging his head in the direction of the second horse, standing out at the tie-rail.

"So they get 'em all wore down, comin' in from th' other directions, huh?" said Panhandle conversationally as he loafed in the door.

"From th' west, yes," replied the smith, pumping the big bellows. "Have to dish th' shoes to bridge 'em over th' sore spots, when any barefoot hosses come in from that direction. It shore is hell on horn, out that way. Strangers, ain't you?"

"Yeah," answered Bill.

"Doy't see many of 'em in here," said the smith, peering closely into Bill's calm blue eyes.

"Reckon mebbly yo're right," said Panhandle with a knowing chuckle. "You wouldn't 'a' seen us, only we met Black Jim over east, an' he tells us how to get here. I'm almost sorry we met him, for that was one hell of a ride."

BILL added his own chuckle to that of his companion and looked wise.

"There oughta be plenty of loose money around nights, if no strangers get in here to take it away," he said.

"There be plenty," said the smith, nodding; "an' it takes a growed-up man to git much of it. What's yore line? Three-card?"

"Draw an' stud," said Panhandle, ignoring the unintentional insult. "I'm namin' my favorites, with stud-hoss comin' first. Bill here likes draw better. See you in an hour or so."

"Well, you won't have no trouble doin' that, I reckon," sighed the smith, turning toward the forge.

Bill nodded affably to the horseshoer and followed his companion into the street, where he walked closely beside him.

"That Black Jim card was a good lead," he muttered softly. "Yo're right in yore stride, an' all warmed up, right at th' start."

"Figgered it would be a good play. But just how well do we know this Black Jim, Bill?"

"My Gawd, Panhandle! Not well a-tall! We did him a favor once, an' he happened to remember us when we ran into him at Tinaja Verde. Th' less we know about him, th' less questions we'll be expected to answer, an' answer right!"

"Yo're reachin' out right strong for a cold start," chuckled Panhandle. "Not knowing him to amount to nothin', we can't answer no questions about him: true enough, an' a bull's eye. Bill, I'm shore goin' to enjoy this."

They turned and entered the first building, and found themselves in a rough saloon and gambling hall. The bar ran across a side wall, and behind the counter was a man with a twisted jaw and puffed up ears, who squinted at them as they moved forward with the blazing outside light behind them. He carried the left shoulder high, and Panhandle humorously thought that he would have been much wiser in his younger days, judging from his appearance, if he had carried them both high, kept one glove continually in front of his jaw, and left both ears outside the ropes.

"Howdy," said the bartender.

"Pour out three drinks an' make mine rye," said Bill.

"Corn for me," said Panhandle. "I want somethin' that'll take off th' skin. First, however, I'll have a big drink of water."

"Me, too," said Bill. "That's a dry ride."

The bartender filled the glasses, slid out two smaller glasses and two bottles, and selected a cigar for himself out of a

wide-mouthed bottle in which was a piece of damp sponge.

"Don't nobody live in this town but you an' th' blacksmith?" asked Bill, wiping his lips with the back of a hand.

"They mostly sleep till afternoon," replied the bartender. "Yo're strangers here," he said, making a statement and not asking a question.

"Yeah," said Panhandle, sighing gratefully. He picked up the bourbon bottle, poured out a generous drink and tossed it down, and blinked. "B-r-r-r-r! That's rough! Well, I like it that way, sometimes." He watched his friend toss down the rye, and raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

Bill nodded, answering the wordless question.

"Good frontier liquor," he said, tossing a coin on the bar.

"Have another," said Panhandle.

AFTER the second round the two newcomers leaned lazily against the bar, idly talking. The invitation from the man behind the counter was accepted in silence, and now it was all square.

"How come you managed to find this town?" asked the bartender carelessly; but his carelessness was simulated, and the simulation was a little overdone.

"Oh, we just follered th' trail in from Tinaja Verde," answered Bill, changing feet on the rail.

The bartender looked at him closely, his expression a combination of surprise, suspicion, and incredulity. He was wondering if the trail had become as plain as all that. It was a matter worth investigating.

"That so?" he inquired. "Usually it's blown over purty much with sand, an' right hard to find."

"We didn't find it drifted," said Panhandle, helping him out. "We couldn't 'a' found it a-tall, only we were told where to look."

"Oh," said the bartender. He put the bottles back on the shelf behind him, rinsed out the glasses, and fell to polishing them with a soiled cloth. "There don't seem to be many folks that know about it," he added, fishing.

"Se we heard," said Bill, with great satisfaction. His face fairly beamed. "That suits us; an' we figger to forget all about it when we get out ag'in."

"Some of th' boys yore friends?"

asked the man behind the counter.

"Not exactly; but we know one of 'em, a little," said Panhandle.

"Yeah? Who's that?" asked the bartender without particular interest, one man's name in his suspicious mind.

Panhandle knew that he was being cross-questioned and therefore began to enjoy himself.

"Feller called Black Jim—don't know his real name," he answered.

The bartender cogitated for a moment and a sly look crept into his eyes. He slid the bar cloth over the counter and looked up carelessly.

"Was he comin' in or goin' out?" he asked.

"Just seemed to be hangin' around, waitin' for somethin'."

The bartender smothered a curse and changed the subject.

"Some of th' boys will be driftin' in purty soon," he said, and wiped off the counter again. His attitude implied that the conversation, so far as he was concerned, had come to an end.

The two strangers pushed away from the bar, espied a deck of cards on a table, and moved toward them. They were idly playing California Jack when the first townsman appeared. This person strode to the bar, put his back against it, and looked steadily at the two card players. At a word from the bartender he moved his head sideways, but did not take his eyes from the strangers. After a moment he sauntered toward the table.

"Howdy," he said, nodding carelessly. "Strangers to town?"

"Yeah," answered Bill, favoring the questioner with a glance. "Yore deal," he said to his companion, and sat back, his eyes on the deck.

The dealer's hands grew quiet for a moment as he looked up.

"Set in?" he invited.

The townsman shook his head.

"No," he answered, and returned to the skirmish. "We don't see many strangers in here."

"SO I heard," replied Panhandle. He slid out the deck for the cut, but his own hands were close to his side of the table when his companion reached out for the cards. Their questioner seemed to be somewhat hostile.

"You did, huh? An' who told you that?"

"Black Jim."

"You boys friends of his?"

"Nope; but we once met th' gent."

"Where was he when you met him this last time?" persisted the townsman.

"Hangin' 'round that water hole over east—Tinaja Verde, he called it," answered Panhandle carelessly.

"Was he there when you left?"

"Shore," said Bill, breaking into the conversation. This was the exact truth, but he did not feel that it was necessary to explain that Black Jim was two feet under the sand and covered over, not too conspicuously, with a layer of rocks to baffle coyotes.

"What brought you in here? How did you come to hit Tinaja Verde?"

Panhandle dealt the last card, placed the deck on the table near his hand, and turned slightly in his chair, which let his right leg drop down so that the holster would be lying straight up-and-down.

"An' what was yore grandmother's middle name?" he asked gently.

"What you say?"

"I said I allus did like curious hombres," answered Panhandle, slowly and evenly; "but it seems to me that yo're too damn' curious. Is there anythin' else you'd like to know about our own personal affairs?"

"If there is, I'll ask you, an' don't you forget it!" retorted the townsman in some heat. "Why are you in Hell's Center, an' how well did you know Black Jim?"

"Speak up, strangers," said the friendly voice of the bartender.

"Why, I once loaned Black Jim a hoss to get away on," said Panhandle. "I never saw him before, an' I never saw him ag'in, till early this mornin' at that water hole. I didn't know him then, first off; but he knowed me. He asked me where I was goin'. I told him San Ignacio. He warned me to stay away from there. After a little talk he showed me how to get in here; an' here I am. I play poker for a livin'. He said lots of poker was played in here: so here I am, me an' my friend. If you've got any more questions to ask, answer 'em yourself."

"Oh! Pair of tin-horns, huh?" sneered the townsman.

Panhandle slowly reached into a pocket and brought out a sizable roll of big bills.

"There's six thousand dollars in that roll, an' you can count it if you want. That look like a tin-horn's layout?" He picked up the deck and placed it on the edge of the table nearest to the townsman. "Six thousand, even money, that I can cut a higher card than you can, aces bein' one-spots. Put up or shut up."

"An' if you win that," said Bill, pleasantly, also producing a big roll, "I'll double or quit you for it. Ain't sick, are you?"

The townsman looked from one cold face to the other, opened his mouth to speak, changed his mind, and turned on his heel. He strode to the bar, ordered a drink, and turned his back on the strangers.

The awed bartender handed out the wrong bottle and had to correct himself; and after the townsman stalked from the building, he wiped off a dry counter and then, making up his mind abruptly, walked around it and to the card table, where he dropped into a nearby chair.

"That was Big Henry," he said, warningly. "He's boss of this town. You don't want to roll no spurs on him."

"You must 'a' been easy as hell for a right cross," observed Panhandle, grinning. "Is he a friend of Black Jim's?"

"Gawd, no!" exclaimed the ex-pugilist. "Big Henry run him out of here. Was fixin' to shoot him; but Jim got wind of it, an' slipped out yesterday. What was Jim doin' at Tinaja Verde?"

"You startin' in to ask questions, too?" demanded Bill.

"No! No! I was just wonderin', that's all."

"Well, as long as you wondered out loud," said Panhandle, smiling, "Black Jim looked like he was out gunnin' for somebody. He was holed up on th' top of that little ridge just behind th' water hole, with his rifle stickin' out over th' edge."

"Yeah?" said the bartender in a whisper. "Yeah! By Gawd, I *thought* so!"

A noisy group entered the room and stamped to the bar, and its custodian hastily got up and went to serve them.

PANHANDLE looked knowingly across the table at his friend, and they both smiled. They had been provided with a chart and they would be fools, indeed, if they could not steer a more or less straight course from now on.

The men at the bar were listening to the low words of the man behind it, and they glanced from time to time at the two card players. One of the group, hurriedly tossing down his liquor, turned on his heel and hastened from the building; the others gave more attention to the two strangers. It was not long before the departing man returned, and with him came Big Henry. The latter walked slowly over to the card table and seated himself in the chair which had been vacated by the bartender.

"You say that you saw Black Jim, back at Tinaja Verde?" he asked, conversationally.

Bill looked at him and found no hostility in the ugly face. The man spoke pleasantly enough and earned, therefore, a friendly answer, despite what Bill knew about him.

"Yes," said Bill, tossing his cards on the table with a weary gesture and pushing them aside with another. It appeared that this was going to be another period of questioning and, if so, he would help to make it a short one.

"We had been follerin' tracks," he said, "which we figgered would take us to San Ignacio; an' to water, too, on th' way. When we got to that water hole th' tracks were all milled about an' mixed up. Looked like quite a gang had spent th' night there. We could see th' signs before we got there, an' we were just about in th' little hollow itself when a feller calls out for us to raise our hands. We looked up, an' shore paid attention to what he said. His rifle was plumb on us, at short range. Then he swore, an' laughed; an' told us to put 'em down ag'in. He knowed my friend's name; an' Panhandle, here, soon knowed who th' jasper was. They had met before."

Big Henry looked from Bill to Panhandle, his brow puckered in thought.

"Black Jim have anythin' to say about us here in Hell's Center?"

Panhandle chuckled, and nodded briskly.

"He shore did! I don't reckon he left out anythin' about you, so far as cussin' is concerned. Bartender says yo're called Big Henry. That's th' feller Black Jim was layin' for. He was shore disappointed when he saw who we was.

"We had been movin' around th' country, playin' poker," Panhandle continued; "an we reckoned we'd go on

down an' cross th' line. Black Jim talked us out of that, an' says there's quite some easy money right in here; an' a lot of fellers that only think they know how to play th' game. Them's *his* idears, an' not ours." He laughed again with genuine enjoyment, and included the line-up at the bar in his quizzical scrutiny.

"You boys," he called, addressing them, "may be easy, but you shore don't look it." Then he faced Big Henry again, serious and earnest.

"Now, we don't care nothin' a-tall about Black Jim's troubles, or yourn," he said with a smile. "He's no friend of ourn. I helped him out of a bad corner once by lendin' him a good hoss; an' I never got th' hoss back, nor one cent in place of it. I hated to see a man lynched. I'd do th' same for anybody, if I had th' chance, in th' same circumstances."

Big Henry nodded, but said nothing, and Panhandle continued.

"Jim killed a bully in a fair fight; but th' bully's friends owned th' town, an' ran things to suit themselves. That was th' last I saw of Jim, until we met him at th' water hole. We came away an' left him there. That's all there is to it. If any of you fellers would like to play a little poker after while, say so; if you don't, we'll stay around for a few days, an' then pull our stakes. That's a long speech, all together: let's have a drink, all around."

"Black Jim was all right till he got so that he wanted to run things," said Big Henry. "This place got so small it wouldn't hold us both. Jim pulled out an' figgered, mebby, that I'd go after him. When he left, that settled th' trouble. I don't care where he is, or where he's goin'; but if he ever comes back here he'll have to shoot it out with me. I reckon you'll find plenty of poker in this town, an' you might find more than you can handle. I'll take corn, for mine."

THE bartender got busy, and the first round was followed by a second, and a third. After the third, Bill and Panhandle took cigars, as did Big Henry. Time slipped past, and then Bill arose.

"We left our hosses with th' blacksmith," he said. "Reckon it's time we got 'em. Where'll we put 'em, an' where will we sleep an' eat?"

"Put 'em in th' corral, out back," said Big Henry. "You can sleep down th' street, an' eat at th' Virginia House, two doors south; or you can sleep in th' Virginia House if you want to pay more than it's worth. An' you can eat at a lunch room, if you wants. This ain't a big town, but it's got most of th' fixin's. Th' bartender will look after yore animals."

"You needn't come unless you want to, Panhandle," said Bill as his friend started to arise.

"All right," said Panhandle, sitting down again. He looked at Big Henry, sighed with content, and slowly puffed on the cigar. "Who's this here El Toro coyote I've been hearin' so much about?"

Big Henry relighted his cigar, stretched out his legs, and began to talk on a subject in which he was interested; and so the time passed, uneventfully.

CHAPTER VIII

AFTER a mediocre supper Bill and Panhandle drifted along to the Palmer House.

Bill and his friend paused inside the door, looking the place over. Neither was dressed as a gambler, nor wore the full regalia of a cowpuncher; but there was no mistaking the openness with which both wore their guns. An uncertain but hearty invitation to drink, bellowed like a blast in the room, and the two friends smilingly accepted. They raised their glasses in a polite gesture, and the three heads went back as one, Big Henry slobbering a little. The treat was made three-square, and the drinkers shifted, and leaned with their sides against the edge of the bar.

"Hell's Center shore is comin' to life, ain't she?" asked Big Henry, with unconcealed pride. He smiled at the answering nods, and hooked a huge thumb in his sagging belt. "This here's *my* town," he announced, and glared around in search of some doubter. "I made 'er. Everythin' was packed in on th' hoof. I *made* her, an' by Gawd, I *run* her!" The boast was only partly true, for the town had been made and deserted long before he saw it.

"Looks like you got a tight rein on her," commented Panhandle, admiringly.

"You shore got her well broke and gentled," said Bill, nodding.

"Yo're shootin' straight, friends," said Big Henry, scowling again as his questing gaze swept over the room. The gaze stopped and rested on an unfortunate inebriate, who had the bad fortune to be laughing immoderately at this particular moment. Big Henry stiffened, stood erect, and waved as straight as he could go toward the mirthful one.

"What's so damn' funny?" he demanded, swaying a little as he stopped in front of the other. "What you laughin' at, you—?"

"I dunno; dunno a-tall," replied the other, blinking to adjust the focus of his independent eyes. He raised a slow arm and pushed Big Henry back a few inches. "Yo're standin' right'n my way," he complained in drunken gravity, the mirth swiftly dying. "How can I go any place with you standin' right'n my way?" he demanded, and a burst of unreasoning anger swept through him. He pushed again, and as Big Henry pivoted, the hand slid off and its owner staggered forward and almost fell. To save himself he grabbed at Big Henry: and the fight was on.

It was not a pleasant fight, even for the brief time it lasted: gouging, biting, and strangling serving as a reminder of the old keelboat days. Sober friends interfered and tore the combatants apart, dragging them toward opposite ends of the room.

The faces of both were suffused with rage, and both were shouting curses at the top of their lungs. Big Henry was not so drunk that he did not realize that his leadership over such men could ill afford a draw: to remain boss of Hell's Center and the gang, he had to emerge victorious; and as the restraining hands let loose of him, he moved as swiftly as a striking snake. His big right hand fell and rose, eluding a frantic grasp at it; and the roar of the big-calibered gun filled the room.

French George jerked forward spasmodically, strangled horribly, and pitched sidewise to the floor, a ghastly lesson for others to profit by.

The big gun swung from side to side, waist high, and above it glared hot eyes from a rage-contorted face.

"Anybody else want to go somewhere?" he shouted.

Placating voices arose, condemning the course of the dead man, flattering the victor, the speakers caring only to get the gun back into its sheath and its owner into a better mood. One voice rang out above all others, its timbre as penetrating as that of a cornet, and its invitation was one which usually was accepted. There was a rush toward the bar, Big Henry carried along with in it, and when the last empty glass slammed down on the counter, the boss of Hell's Center was restored to good humor. What remained of French George had been whisked away, and now the room was much the same as it was before the tragedy.

BIG HENRY pushed back from the counter and moved unsteadily along the line-up, stopping when he found the two strangers. He steadied himself by resting a hand on Bill's shoulder, and peered curiously into the pale blue eyes.

"You got to keep a tight rein in a place like this," he said. "You keep a tight rein. You got to break 'em, an' keep 'em broke. Ain't that right? Ain't that right, friend?"

"Reckon it is," said Bill, controlling himself by an effort.

"What *you* think?" demanded Big Henry, looking closely at Panhandle.

"I think yo're just th' man to do it," enigmatically answered the cold-faced gambler.

"Right! Yo're right! I'm goin' to like you boys! Have a drink with me, friends!" said the boss of Hell's Center. He slapped the shoulders of the two men in sudden friendship and bellowed to the hurrying bartender.

Two men now moved out of the silent crowd and pushed in between Big Henry and his new friends, nodding almost imperceptibly to the latter. They linked their arms through those of the boss, their hands close to his guns, and both began to talk to him in low and soothing voices. At first he resisted, but gradually began to yield to them, and in a few moments he was weaving toward the door under the guidance of his two guards and henchmen. As he was lost to sight in the night outside, a sigh ran around the room and men began to move about and to talk again.

Bill and Panhandle made for a round table in a rear corner of the room, where

a poker game was already under way. Exchanging perfunctory nods with the players, the two strangers drew up chairs and settled down to play the part of audience, to enjoy the play and the conversation, the latter being largely about the killing of French George.

Suddenly the topic was switched and the talk became purely incidental to the game; and, looking around for a clue to explain the change, Bill and Panhandle saw the two guards entering the room. The two friends let their gazes wander casually on and drift back to the game before them. The play had again claimed their entire attention when a stir announced another arrival.

"Hey, Steve," called one of the players to the newcomer. "Come on over an' take a hand with us."

"'Lo, Smith," said another, inching his chair sideways to make room.

Panhandle and Bill looked up at the newcomer, each mentally checking another name on the list, and nodded casually.

Steve Smith returned the nods, regarding the strangers with apparent suspicion, and abruptly wheeled and strode to the bar, where he carried on a low-voiced conversation with the ex-pugilist. He had a drink, and then wandered about the room for a few minutes, finally stopping near to the poker players.

"Thompson got back yet?" asked the dealer, looking up and flashing the strangers a glance.

"Ain't time yet," growled Smith, dragging a chair up to the table. He glanced across at the two strangers. "You punchers?" he asked.

Bill smiled and shook his head.

"Not reg'lar," he answered. "Gambler's more in our line."

"Hum!" grunted Steve, watching the cards as they fell in front of him. He glanced at them, put them down again, and passed when it came his turn. Suddenly he looked back at Bill.

"You see French George reach for his gun?" he asked.

Bill frowned, and nodded slowly.

"Thought I did; but I might 'a' been mistook."

"You wasn't," growled Smith, looking at the other stranger inquiringly. "How 'bout you?"

Panhandle regarded him levelly.

"He made a motion, an' I would 'a'

read it th' same as Big Henry did," he replied.

SMITH was studying them both and passed on the next two deals; and then, apparently having made up his mind, he looked across at two of his companions, nodded his head and then jerked it sideways. The two men finished the play and then rose, cashed in their chips, and wandered over to a game just starting in the other end of the room.

"Set in, strangers," invited Smith, his voice holding something of a command in it. "Gamblers make their livin' playin', an' you fellers can't make nothin' by settin' out an' lookin' on. If these stakes ain't big enough, all you have to do is to say so."

"They suit me," grunted Bill, changing chairs.

"They'll do for a warmin' up, anyhow," said Panhandle, buying chips.

If Smith wanted to test them and find out if they were really what they claimed to be, he had no cause to complain when the verification proved to be expensive. The game ran on for a few hours, and then died a natural death. Panhandle had most of the chips, and Bill was not a loser. "Hell, let's end this!" growled Smith, pushing back from the table. "I'm through. You boys don't have to stop, though."

"I've had plenty," growled another player. "I reckon you fellers don't have to worry about eatin' reg'lar," he said, looking at the two strangers.

"Only when luck's ag'in us," replied Panhandle, smiling in good nature.

"Luck!" sneered the third outlaw.

Bill regarded him with strong disapproval.

"Before precedin' with more of them kinda remarks, you want to be shore you can back 'em up," he warned, and glanced swiftly at Smith, who was standing at the back of a chair waiting for developments.

"We're strangers here, Smith," continued Bill, watching the other man. "That don't mean that we ain't got th' right to take our own parts. Still, we can't very well buck a whole roomful."

"Nobody cuts in on personal matters that don't concern 'em," said Smith. He glanced around the room, which had grown suddenly quiet, and then looked at the sneering player.

"If you got anythin' to say, *say* it; if you're only guessin', keep yore mouth shut," he ordered.

"I got my suspicions," retorted the third player, frowning.

"Name 'em," said Bill, looking the man in the eye. "Or shut up!" he added after a moment, breaking a tense silence.

"I will, when I'm ready," came the low reply, and the speaker moved slowly toward the bar.

Smith watched him for a moment, and then turned his eyes on the waiting strangers, and laughed sarcastically.

"Every time Powers loses a few dollars he's ready to accuse th' whole world," he said. "Don't pay no attention to him," he added, and pulled out a battered silver watch. Studying it for a moment, he grunted something under his breath and walked toward the door without a backward glance, leaving the strangers to find two chairs against the wall and to occupy them. Half an hour later a dust-covered rider pulled up before the door and hastened into the room.

"Where's th' boss?" he asked, looking around.

"Where he usually is this time of night," answered a voice.

"Had a headache, an' turned in early," said another laughingly.

"Smith was here half an hour ago," said a third, "waitin' for you. You find anythin'?" A sound made the speaker look toward the door. "Here's Smith now."

"You made good time," said Smith. "Find anythin'?"

"Yeah; saw where he lay on th' top of th' ridge," answered the newcomer. "Wind had blowed th' sand around considerable, but I could make out his ashes. Others have been around there recently, too."

"You scout around?"

"Yeah. Oh, he was up there, all right; but he pulled out before I got there. There's no tellin' where he is now."

SMITH glanced at the two strangers, unconsciously nodded confirmation of their tale, and went over to them. He drew up a third chair and leaned back against the wall between them.

"Damn ' ambushin' snake," he growled, and then led the conversation into casual subjects.

The second card game broke up, and

the same suspicious player, having gotten into it, raised another tense moment by making an ill-advised objection. The quarrel flared, died down, and Powers slouched to the door, swearing under his breath. Smith laughed outright as the man disappeared into the night.

"There he goes ag'in, bellyachin' as usual," he said, and raised his voice to ask a question.

"Hey, Lefty! How much did Powers lose?"

Lefty turned a grinning face to the questioner, and held up the fingers of both hands.

"Ten dollars," he said, "an' you'd reckon he'd lost a fortune. He accused us all of cheatin'! An' he was near right, because everybody was, except me!" He laughed at the humorous objections to his statement, jerked one man's hat down over his eyes, playfully poked another in the stomach, and then ordered drinks all around. After the last glass had been emptied, Lefty sauntered swaggeringly over to the three men leaning back against the wall, and gravely regarded the two strangers.

"You two boys had easy pickin' to-night," he said cheerfully; "but there's a couple of fellers that are due in right soon that'll make you both pull leather, an' sweat like hell. I'll set in to make her five-handed, an' be th' little burr under th' saddle," he boasted.

"For Gawd's sake!" roared the expugilist. "Ain't you fellers never goin' to bed? I'm closin' up, an' I'm closin' now! Lights out!"

CHAPTER IX

BILL and Panhandle slept until after noon, and then loafed around, killing time until supper called them. They became better acquainted with the blacksmith, who had little to do and seemed in no hurry to do it. Evidently the man did not depend upon his trade for his living. They loafed for a while in the general store and noticed that the shelves were well stocked: indeed they were better stocked than the shelves in many of the stores in the larger towns along the trails. A dozen or more pack mules, grazing over the bottoms along the creek, showed how

the supplies came in to Hell's Center. This desert store could outfit large parties on no notice whatever.

After supper the Palmer House filled slowly. Two or three of the men who had been present on the previous night were not to be seen, and several new faces were in the crowd.

Big Henry, with his two henchmen near him, remained sober; and the air of uneasiness present the night before, when he had drunk too much, somehow seemed less than it was to-night. Trouble was incidental with Big Henry when he was drunk; but reluctant sobriety seemed to be more of a cause for apprehension. Evidently he remained sober when he had a job to do; and from the looks on the faces of the men in the room, to-night's job was something for the crowd to worry about.

The men at the tables and in the chairs along the walls exchanged questioning glances and watched the door more or less furtively. Midnight came and went and nothing out of the ordinary had taken place. By this time the tension had died down, evidently on the belief that if trouble was in store for anyone, it was for someone who was not present. A game or two got under way, some of the men had drifted out and disappeared. Steve Smith and two of the players of the night before moved toward the large round table, looking inquiringly at Big Henry, Panhandle and Bill.

The former shook his head, growling a refusal, his eyes on the open door.

"Not to-night," he said. "Go ahead: I'll look on."

Bill replied to the inquiring looks by dragging a chair up to the table, but Panhandle smiled, shook his head, and leaned back against the wall to keep the boss company.

"Whyn't you play?" asked the boss, curiously.

"Rather think of other things an' talk. I'm too lazy to keep my mind on th' cards."

"Thought gamblin' was yore business?" said Big Henry, quickly.

"It is; but's a man don't allus feel like 'tendin' to business. You got a snug little town here. It's out of th' way, an' hard to get to. Bet there ain't many people, outside of them that's here, that know th' town is in here."

"Prospectors started it, an' left it

when th' boom died," replied Big Henry, forgetting his boast of the night before. "As a matter of fact you couldn't call it a boom. It was more like a hysteric. Half a dozen locoed desert rats got th' idear there was gold in th' crick. They were all friends, an' they tried to keep th' idear to themselves. At that, th' news didn't leak out very much; but enough people got wind of it to flock in and make quite a town. I stumbled onto it by accident—I was takin' a short cut across the country an' travelin' fast, an' by God here she was."

Panhandle silently rated Big Henry as a possible first-class liar; but knowing that there are numerous abandoned towns in the West, tucked away in gulches, canyons, and even on the flat of deserts, he nodded agreement to the statement and slowly rolled a cigarette. He was wondering what it was that his companion awaited; what it was that had caused the earlier tension in the room. This was something he never was to know because Big Henry would have no interest in that matter, whatever it was, after this night. He thought it was time to start a lead of his own.

"Bill an' me are kinda tired of boardin' out," he said, after a moment's silence, during which he had thought deeply. "We like to fuss around an' do our own cookin', an' we like to eat our own cookin'. When we rode in we noticed a little shack over on th' bottoms across th' crick. Looks like it would make a good camp. Who owns it?"

BIG HENRY looked searchingly at the speaker from under bushy eyebrows. His face was slanting forward as it had been a moment before when he had been studying the floor.

"I own it, an' it ain't for hire," he growled, his gaze flicking about the room and catching many furtive glances directed toward himself. He threw back his head and looked directly and threateningly at his companion. "What th' hell ever put that idear into yore mind?" he demanded ominously.

"Why, I don't know, exactly," answered Panhandle in surprise. "Nat'ral thought, I reckon, secin' that our idears happened to run that way. It's off by itself, th' crick is right handy to it, it's got a little corral, an' me an' Bill like to keep camp. Reckon that's why."

"Well, you can get them idears plumb out of yore head!" retorted the boss angrily. "It ain't for hire or use, an' it ain't healthy to go pokin' 'round it. Let's you an' me set in that there game, an' show them fellers how it oughta be played."

"All right; that suits me right up to th' hilt," said Panhandle, tipping forward and dragging his chair after him. "Move over," he laughed, "an' let a couple of experts sit in."

Evidently the boss had given up expecting the arrival of the unknown man, for he not only gave his attention to the game, but he called for whisky and began to drink as if making up for his earlier abstemiousness; and it was not long before he showed signs of its effect. He grew surly and ugly, and more and more his eyes sought Panhandle's face. His scowl deepened and he began to sit out hands, watching Panhandle more and more. Trouble was in the wind, but the calm gambler gave no sign that he sensed it.

Panhandle had just won a sizable pot and was pulling it toward him, both of his hands out on the table, when Big Henry, loosing an oath, jerked out his gun and covered the reaching gambler. It was so quick and unexpected that it caught them all flat-footed.

"Let 'em lay, you!" snapped the boss. "Why are you so damn' interested in that 'dobeshack over in th' bottoms?"

Panhandle relaxed and let his forearms rest on the table as he looked slowly into the scowling face. He was surprised and he showed it; but he was not quite as surprised as it appeared.

"Just wanted a camp," he answered, and again reached for the chips.

"Let 'em lay! I'm talkin' to you! Let 'em lay, an' listen!"

"All right," placidly replied Panhandle, sensing Bill's utter relaxation, and knowing what it meant. "You shouldn't go on th' prod like this, Henry. An' you should ease up in yore liquorin'. It ain't reasonable to act like this, when nobody means you any harm."

"You mind yore own damn' business!" retorted the boss, his face flushing to a deeper color. "My liquor is my business. You peel right down to th' truth! Why are you so interested in that old shack?"

"I've already told you that," replied

Panhandle patiently. "If you own it an' don't want to hire it out, all right; then I don't want it. Let's see: I reckon it's yore deal, Henry."

STEVE SMITH'S hand and arm moved gently and with deliberate slowness. His fingers touched the leveled gun, closed over the barrel, and turned it aside, whereupon a man in front of the room jumped lively to get out of line. Smith looked calmly into the blazing eyes of the boss, and he shook his head in gentle reproof; but in his heart was murder. Big Henry was becoming too eager with a gun.

"Take yore hand off my gun, Smith!" ordered the boss, ominously.

"Put it away, Henry," urged Smith, speaking softly. "This man didn't mean nothin' a-tall. Liquor allus makes you suspicious. Put it away, an' deal th' cards. Yo're holdin' up th' game."

"Take yore hand off my gun!" repeated Big Henry with a curse. "I'll give you ten seconds to let loose of it! Cope!" he cried, and one of his henchmen stepped forward, hand on gun butt.

"Smith, you let loose of that gun!" growled Cope, his jaw squaring.

"Better let loose of yore own," said Bill gently. For a moment he had been overlooked, but no one was that careless now. In each of his big hands a long-barreled Colt rested, gripped gently, balanced nicely, with big thumbs hooked over the cocked hammers. One of the evil muzzles centered on Cope's suddenly contracting stomach; the other, on Big Henry's soiled vest.

"I don't know what all this damn' nonsense is about," said the man with the drop, in an aggrieved voice; "but I'm havin' a run of good luck, an' nobody's private quarrel is goin' to interfere with it. If you fellers got to fight, go outside an' do it, an' let this game go on. Cope, you let loose of that gun; an' you Henry, put yourn back in its sheath, an' deal them cards!"

"You put them guns back, stranger; or I'll have you blowed apart!" shouted the boss, white with rage. "Wilson!"

The other henchman moved like a striking snake, with unhesitant and magnificent courage in the face of almost certain death. He was within Bill's range of vision, but he went for his gun in a blur of speed.

The building was filled with crashing roars of sound, and the onlookers threw themselves on the floor, seeking safety. With the first crash, Panhandle leaped backward toward the bar, both guns out. Smith, realizing that he was squarely in the center of the storm, slid under the table; and there he did a very queer thing: his gun jerked upward toward Big Henry's stomach and exploded.

The smoke cleared. Bill had his back to the wall, both guns balanced and covering the room. Panhandle was now at the end of the bar, with the bartender in his sight. Smith crawled out from under his shelter and slowly stood up, his hands innocent of weapons. He glanced from Wilson's huddled figure to that of Cope, and on to where Big Henry sprawled lifeless in the chair, his head and shoulders against the edge of the table. Then he look at Bill, and at Panhandle, and nodded.

"All right, strangers; you can put 'em away now," he said. "I'm th' new boss of this camp. That—— —," glancing at the table, "was drivin' with *too* tight a rein. It was gettin' so no man's life was safe."

He looked around the room, where a dozen or more men had forsaken the floor and were now on their feet.

"Put it to a vote, boys," he ordered. "Am I boss?"

Sensing the change due in allegiance, both Bill and Panhandle now nodded grimly, their guns covering the voters.

"Get goin'!" snapped Bill. "Vote on her!"

"Pronto!" barked Panhandle.

The vote was instant and unanimous, and Smith turned a smiling face to the two strangers.

"Put 'em away, friends," he said. "You don't need 'em no more."

The two men slowly obeyed and pushed forward toward the table.

to make trips to the rock-hedged spring not only on their own account but also for the sake of their horses. These journeys were made after dark, and they always swung their courses to the eastward, where the up-thrusting rock ridges were kept free of sand by the winds; and each journey meant careful scouting around the spring.

Nothing untoward occurred, and they broke camp on the morning of the third day, anticipating the rise of the sun by an hour. They soon found the trail pointed out to them by Felipe, and pushed forward into the lava wastes.

"Cassidy an' Ewalt ought to be purty well located by this time," said Wyatt, "an' have th' town well sized up. They're a couple of right good men, I'd say, from what I've seen an' heard."

"None better, I reckon," replied Dave, his restless gaze shifting constantly under the shielding brim of his big hat. He found the heat almost unbearable, for while he was desert-born, he had spent the last half-dozen years on far northern ranges.

They plodded on, and after awhile they, too, began to worry about the abrasive effect of the sharp lava on the hoofs of their mounts; but, like the two friends who had gone in two days before along a more northern trail, they found the sand more and more covering the lava, and their newly born apprehensions slowly died.

The sun was at the meridian when Dave's restless glance flickered back to settle on a point well into the southwest. He regarded it steadily, studying it.

"Little wisp of dust crawlin' along over yonder," he said, gesturing with his free hand. "Movin' steady an' reg'lar. We better pull up, Wyatt, an' get cover. I don't like that sign worth a damn."

"Comin' right along, an' comin' this way," muttered Wyatt. "If he holds like he's headin' he'll pass ahead of us, an' not cut our trail."

The little streamer of dust grew steadily plainer and steadily nearer, and the two friends watched it closely, peering out through the brush which edged their position. A sugar-loaf sombrero moved past a dip in a distant lava billow, disappeared, showed again, and again disappeared. Then for an instant it appeared again through a thinning of the sage along the top of a ridge.

CHAPTER X

DAVE SAUNDERS and Wyatt Duncan, true to their word, waited the agreed-upon two days, making a dry camp far back in the sage and down in a deep depression of the desert floor. Sparing with their water as they were, they had

"Mex. hat," grunted Wyatt; "but that don't mean nothin' definite."

"No," growled Dave without shifting his eyes.

The hat showed again, and then the head of a buckskin pony pushed out into sight, and a Mexican rode into view. He was looking steadily ahead, his gaze on the ground, and as the faint trail came into sight, he nodded and drew up. For a moment he studied the sands, glanced swiftly up at the sun, and pushed on again, riding along the trail and bound east.

"Comin' our way, damn him!" growled Wyatt. His thumb moved gently, and a swift series of sharp clicks sounded under it as the rifle moved forward and upward.

"Don't!" whispered Dave. "Remember what El Toro said? This man is a Mexican."

"Uh-huh. Won't do no harm to have him restin' on th' front sight."

The oncoming rider espied the fresh tracks at a distance, which spoke well for the keenness of his eyesight, and he drew rein again, looking searchingly around him. One hand went slowly up, palm out, in the old, universal gesture of peace. After a moment he rode on again, the hand still upraised. Reaching the place where the fresh tracks turned from the trail, he stopped and looked along them until they were lost to sight. He smiled, and slowly lowered the hand.

"*Amigos!*" he called, and reached up to his hat band for a corn husk to make a cigarette.

DAVE stood up, knowing that he was amply covered by his companion's rifle.

"*Amigo!*" he called. "Who are you?"

"Manuel. El Toro he e-spik of thees."

"Huh! He did, eh?"

"*Si.* Een three, four mile hav' a car-re, señor."

"Yeah?"

"*Si.*" The Mexican, finishing his cigarette, lit it and drew slowly on it. "Thees tr-rail, eet go str-aight. Beeg r-rock of lava, like thees!" He thrust a finger straight up in the air. "W'at you call needle r-rock, *si?*"

"A needle rock three or four miles farther on," said Dave. "We want to look out, huh?"

"*Si.* Hav' a car-re, señor." The Mexican kneed his horse and pushed slowly on again, still heading eastward, out of the desert. "*Adiós, señores.* Go weeth God."

"Same to you," said Dave, sinking back into the cover. "Well," he growled, glancing at his companion. "Have a care, huh?"

"Circle," grunted Wyatt. "Sentry, mebby. Question is, shall we go 'round him an' let him alone, or—"

"We'll circle him, anyhow; th' rest will mebby decide itself. If he lets us alone, why—"

"Uh-huh. North or south?"

"Don't know th' damn' country. It's a toss-up."

"Th' Mex. came from th' south," cogitated Wyatt. "Wonder if he is square?" He thought for a moment. "Might be sendin' us in to somethin'."

Dave shook his head.

"He wouldn't 'a' bothered to hunt us out in that case. As soon as he saw we were headin' right on along th' trail he could 'a' just laid low an' let us go. North or south: want to toss for it?"

"Mebby. How you figgerin'?"

"Well, th' Mex. came from th' south an' th' sentry might 'a' seen him. In that case he might be extra vigilant. I vote for th' north."

"Right. North she is," grunted Wyatt. He carelessly let his wrist touch the barrel of the rifle, and swore wholeheartedly. "Can fry aigs on this damn' gun!"

"Wish we had some to fry," chuckled Dave, going to the horses.

In a moment they were in the saddle again and riding on, but this time they had abandoned the trail and were swinging into the north, with a westward drift. Then they swung west with a northward drift.

"If we pass that sentry without bein' seen, an' get into town," said Wyatt thoughtfully, "how will we explain th' fact that th' sentry didn't see us?" He paused for an instant, and continued. "Of course, I know of a couple of answers to that; but we shore want to be able to tell th' same story."

"Shore do. Seems to me we lost th' trail from sand driftin' over it, or th' sentry was asleep. I favor th' first."

"This wind wouldn't drift a trail except on lightly sanded rock," objected

Wyatt. "We lost th' trail, I reckon: got kinda confused an' panicky."

"Not panicky," corrected Dave. "They'd know we was lyin'. We ain't tenderfeet, an' we don't look it. We just plain lost th' trail an' went right ahead on a gamble."

On they rode, keeping off of skylines. Then Dave, drawing rein, dismounted on a clean-swept floor of lava and walked up the slope. He removed his Stetson and peered over the rim of the ridge. After a moment he retraced his steps and joined his companion.

"Looks like th' needle rock, off yonder about half a mile," he reported. "We ain't been raisin' much dust, but we have been makin' some. What you say we hobble th' hosses, move aside a couple of hundred yards, an' wait a little while? Give him time to make his play in case he's located our dust?"

"**YEAH.** I'll keep on goin' with th' hosses, to keep th' dust a-risin'. Say two hundred yards. Then I'll circle 'round an' 'round. If that don't make him curious, I don't know what will. You keep me covered, an' take care of him."

"He'll mebby let loose at you at long range, before I can get sight of him," objected Dave.

"Th' way these heat waves are wigglin', he'll shore as hell miss me at long range," replied Wyatt. "Anyhow, you cut in on foot, between me an' that rock." He chuckled. "It strikes me that we're takin' a lot for granted; we ain't shore that there's anybody out here but us."

"Or how many," countered Dave.

"Hum! Or how many," repeated Wyatt. "*Damn!* That's different; I ain't ridin' 'round in no circles, Dave. I'll cache th' hosses an' take to th' brush, west of you. We both watch south, but we don't get too far away from th' animals. I ain't hankerin' to hoof it into Hell's Center, not even in th' cool of th' night. High-heeled boots was never made for this kinda footin'."

"All right: go ahead. If there's anybody down there, an' he saw our dust, he'll likely be halfway here by now. Jump into it!"

The sand was hot, but the lava was hotter, and unbelievably sharp and cruel. Dave wriggled through the sage and the

greasewood, careful not to brush against the stems to set the upper twigs to sway ing. He had covered perhaps two hundred yards on a southwestwardly course when the faint clatter of a rolling stone somewhere ahead of him made him freeze.

"Damn' greaser's wanderin' about out here," came a growled protest. "An' I would 'a' swore he kept on goin' east."

Dave could not see the sentry, but he did get a quick glimpse of Wyatt crawling along the bottom of a lava billow; and a sudden grunt of surprise and satisfaction in front of him told him that the sentry had seen the same thing. Wyatt could not be missed at that short range, and Dave, to distract the sentry's attention from Wyatt and center it on something nearer at hand, coughed loudly, heard an exclamation in front and a sudden snapping of a twig behind him, and whirled to look into the muzzle of a gun.

"Got him, Bill," called the outlaw. "C'mere!" He scowled at Dave. "Drop that gun!"

Dave had one chance: Wyatt evidently had not been seen. He pretended anger, and raised his voice loudly enough to carry to the ears of his friend.

"What you mean, throwin' down on me like this?" he demanded, the rifle falling from his hand. With Wyatt loose things were not as bad as they might be.

"What *you* mean, prowlin' 'round out here?" retorted the other.

Dave thought swiftly: it was possible that they had cut the trail, and that at least one of them knew that there were two horses. He must account for the extra horse and account for it naturally, if he wished to keep Wyatt's presence from them.

"Prowlin' hell! I'm packin' in, prospectin'," retorted Dave, still angrily. "If that hoss gets away in th' brush, an' spills that pack to hell an' gone, you'll shore wish you'd minded yore own damn' business! Askin' me what I'm doin' on a desert! Then what *you* doin' in here, for that matter?"

There sounded a rustle at Dave's side, and he glanced around to see the second man emerge from the brush.

"*He* ain't no greaser!" said the newcomer, pushing free from the sage. "What *you* doin' in here, stranger?"

"There *you* go," snapped Dave. "I'm prospectin', if it's any of yore business!"

"It's our business, all right. You've come in so far that we can't let you go back. Sorry, but it's yore hard luck." The speaker reached toward his holster and drew out a gun. "Don't like to do this, a-tall, stranger; but it's got to be did." He shook his head. "There ain't nothin' personal in it: you just horned in where you don't belong. We dassn't let you go out ag'in."

HE raised the gun slowly and reluctantly, Dave watching like a hawk; and then there sounded the vicious crack of a rifle from the brush to the west. The whine of the bullet, striking a rock to the left of the three men, turned into a scream and ricocheted into silence.

It was a precious instant. Just for the merest fraction of a second the rising sun wavered as the attention of its holder and that of his companion was taken by the new threat; and in that bare fraction Dave Saunders showed the quality of the stuff that was in him; the stuff which had turned a lawless gold camp into one of law and order.

Twisting sidewise, his hands streaked downward, and up again. There came two spurts of fire, but only one crash, from his hips, as both guns went into action at the same instant. It was a beautiful draw. He stepped back out of the spreading smoke and peered down searchingly, and then took another backward step as he slid the guns into their sheaths.

The crashing of brush behind him told of Wyatt's frantic and careless efforts for speed, and a panting voice, throwing caution to the wind, asked a fearful question.

"It's all right, Wyatt," called Dave, reassuringly. "That shot of yours was just what I needed; that shot, an' me worryin' about a pack-hoss!"

Wyatt looked down at what lay upon the ground. "Dig a hole or two before we go?" he asked, frowning.

"There ain't no loose rocks to pile over th' holes," said Dave. "Coyotes an' wolves would dig 'em out before midnight. Anyhow, remembering that kid's story, back there in Bulltown, I don't feel like buryin' none of that gang. Come on: let's get goin'."

Get going they did; and it did not take

them long to find the trail again. They found it just west of the needle rock, and they found the prints of two horses at the same time.

"Wait a minute," growled Dave, pulling up. "If those two fellers were located at th' needle rock as sentries, then here's two more that we ain't seen. We got to find out about this, Wyatt. If these tracks were made by two others, then they'll find th' sentries missin', wait for 'em a little while, an' then mebbly go off huntin' for 'em. *That* won't do!"

"No!" growled Wyatt. "It shore won't; an' mebbly these two were goin' out to relieve th' others. This shore looks right scrambled to me, Dave."

"Yeah; an' we've got to unscramble it, an' do it pronto. Cache th' hosses ag'in: this is once more we got to go on foot, an' if we don't do a better job of scoutin' this time than we did last, we better just fold up an' die!"

An hour later they again met near the hidden horses, both smiling.

"Them two wasn't no sentries, I reckon," said Wyatt in relief.

"No. They was ridin' out, headin' for civilization, an' evidently drew up to rest their hosses. Th' Mex. saw 'em, figgered that we'd bump right into 'em, an' passed us th' warnin'. They must 'a' been right suspicious, to see our dust sign an' investigate like they did."

"Well, that's *their* hard luck," growled Wyatt. "If they'd minded their own business they'd be alive, right now."

THEY mounted and rode on again, each turning things over in his mind. They had disposed of the outlaws' horses and equipment, and the trail itself behind them held no menace for their safety.

The hours dragged past with the grudging miles, both very laggard.

The sun had just dipped from sight over a distant range of mountains, and a man could look westward now without being blinded. Wyatt knocked up his hat brim with a quick, abrupt motion of a hand, and peered into the distance.

"There ain't no sign of a town," he growled. "It was supposed to be a full day's ride along *this* trail; but we've lost considerable time, foolin' around in th' brush. Reckon we better make camp, or push on?"

"I vote for camp. We won't wait to

get no breakfast in th' mornin'—we must be purty close to th' end of our ridin'. What you say we push on till near dark, an' then if we don't see th' town, roll up in our blankets an' finish th' ride to-morrow?"

CHAPTER XI

BILL kicked back the thin coverlet which did duty as a sheet, and blew out his breath gustily. He was beaded with perspiration from head to foot. The room was almost insufferably hot; in fact, it would have been insufferable to any but the desert-bred. He sat up, pivoted, dropped his feet to the floor, rubbed his eyes and stretched. Then he glanced down and saw his companion's open eyes, and the two men exchanged grins.

"Hot as hell under this roof," said Panhandle, kicking back his own part of the coverlet. He regarded the board roof accusingly; evidently they never had finished this building, and someone later on had roofed this part over with boards instead of the thick, heat-resisting adobe. "Serves us right for sleepin' so late. If we got up when we should we'd have th' hang-over of some of th' coolness of th' night for dressin' in."

"Then we shore oughta get to bed earlier," said Bill, reaching out prehensile toes toward the nearer sock. The toes could not get a grip on the yielding fabric, and he stretched a little more and dragged it to him.

"Things shore move sudden in this man's town," said Panhandle, sitting up.

"Yeah they do; an' they start with a jerk," replied Bill.

"Yeah," grunted his companion, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "Good Gawd, but it's hot in here!"

"It shore wasn't hot when we turned in this mornin'," replied Bill, dragging the second sock toward him. "I couldn't hardly get my third of th' bed warmed up. Well, that's what altitude will do for you, even on a desert. Wonder if you're as hungry as I am?"

"I reckon it's a dead heat," said Panhandle.

A moment later, fully dressed, Bill reached for his heavy belts and slung

them around him. The guns in their worn scabbards had the look of newness, and Panhandle's admiring eyes rested on their walnut handles.

"They seem to handle all right," he said.

Bill's eyes followed his companion's gaze, and he nodded.

Bill and his companion noticed a marked difference over the day before in the matter of their reception by those of their fellow-citizens who chanced to be astir at the comparatively early hour of eleven a. m. It first became apparent when they stepped into the sight of the lazy man in the barroom on their way out of the building in which they had their quarters. Previously he had grudged them a frowning, reluctant recognition; for while he was a bartender and capable of almost any infamy, he held himself above professional gamblers; a pride of caste unjustified, but in his case held nevertheless. Now a smile split his face, he nodded violently, and suggestively pushed a bottle toward them across the bar.

"Oil up on me," he invited cordially.

"Never drink before breakfast," replied Bill, smiling.

"Never!" said Panhandle, as suspicious of the quality of the liquor as his friend was.

"Which of you gents is Bill?" asked the bartender, his gaze shifting from one to the other.

Panhandle waved gracefully and indicated his companion, speaking with deep gravity.

"He's th' only man livin' that ever made four bad men climb th' same tree at th' same time."

"My Gawd!" said the counter man, in reverent respect, and he remained staring at the open door for quite some time after his two guests had passed through it and become lost to his sight.

THE owner, operator, and food architect of the greasy lunchroom hastened forward to open the door with his own hands when he saw the two friends approach his place of business.

"Good-mornin'," he beamed, led the way to a corner table, drew back the chairs, and dutifully pushed them in under his guests. "An' what'll it be this mornin'?" he asked through a villainous smile which was meant to be friendly.

"Ham'n aigs," grunted Bill. "An'," he added, "this is one mornin' when I want 'em like I tell you: ham well done, an' th' aigs soft with th' yolks whole."

"Yo're goin' to git 'em just that way if th' damn' yolks don't bust an' run!" assured the proprietor. "An' what'll you have, mister?" he asked deferentially, turning to Panhandle.

"Them specifications suits me," growled Panhandle.

"Keno!" said the proprietor, and made speed toward the stove.

The cook made poor coffee, having the thrifty habit of adding fresh grounds to those already in the pot; and he made terrible pies; but his biscuits were masterpieces and served to make passable an otherwise atrocious meal.

Through, they wiped the egg from the corners of their mouths, pried at the stringy ham with hard-working tooth-picks, and wandered down to the Palmer House. Stepping inside, they were greeted with unusual cheeriness by the ex-pugilist, and they accepted his invitation, eager to change the clinging flavor of the eggs.

They wiped their lips and looked casually around. Two men were in a corner, talking in what sounded like low grunts, and as the eyes of Bill and his companion grew accustomed to the poorer light of the room, they picked out the identity of the two strangers. They saw Dave Saunders and Wyatt Duncan.

"—— ham an' —— breakfast!" Dave was saying, scowling at everything within his arc of vision. His eyes settled on the curious faces of the two men at the bar, and his scowl deepened.

"Th' ham wasn't so bad, but —— th' aigs!" said Wyatt. "My teeth are full of fuzzy feathers!"

"Liquor up, strangers," invited the ex-pugilist, waving for them to come forward. "Want you to meet a couple friends of mine," he added as a further inducement.

"Come on, Wyatt," said Dave, arising. "Mebby they can tell us where to get some decent food."

"Gawd, yes!" exclaimed Wyatt, trailing after.

"Meet Bill an' Panhandle," said the bartender, waving to each of those persons in turn.

"Howdy," said Dave, nodding. "You

can call me Dave. Meet my friend, Wyatt."

Grunts and nods rounded out this part of the formality, and four raised glasses sealed it. Dave placed his on the bar, tasted his mouth experimentally, and grinned. The change in flavor was a little improvement.

"Where do you boys eat?" he asked, abruptly.

Bill gravely told him.

"His beans are good, an' he can throw together some right good Mex. dishes," said Panhandle. "Mex. dishes are a good bet down in this part of th' country. As for aigs, me an' Bill have got so we can't hardly tell a mejium fresh aig from a mejium old aig."

"I ain't heard nobody say th' name of this town, yet!"

"Hell's Center," said the bartender, rinsing the glasses.

"An' well named," supplemented Panhandle. "We've been here two nights an' seen four men killed in this room."

"Y'don't say!" exclaimed Wyatt. "What's th' trouble?"

"DON'T know that I can put a handle to it, bein' a stranger," replied Bill; "but I'm right shore of one thing: when trouble starts, an' it starts easy, watch everybody!"

"Huh! Kinda takes a feller back to Newton, Dodge, an' them cow-towns," murmured Wyatt, "in th' days when them towns was towns. Here's where I mind my own business more than ever. What do you say, Dave?"

"I say keno!" answered Dave with emphasis. "Four dead men in two nights! Well, well, well!"

"Bill, here," said the ex-pugilist, jerking a crooked thumb in the direction of the redhead, "got two of 'em last night. I've seen a cat move when it was in a hurry; but Bill makes a cat look slow."

"But I had 'em out when th' others started," expostulated Bill.

"Yeah, you did; but you slipped 'em back in ag'in," said the bartender; "an' when you pulled 'em th' second time, th' other fellers was already movin' toward their own. I was watchin' you close, an' that's what I saw."

"Is that right, Bill?" asked Panhandle in surprise. At that particular moment the night before he had not been

watching his friend, being too busy to do so.

"It's a nice day if it don't get no hotter, an' th' wind don't blow," said Bill, uncomfortably. "Which means, let's all have a drink, an' change th' subject."

"This round's on me, friend," said Dave. "You two boys on th' drift?"

"What you mean?" asked Bill, coldly.

"Not nothin' that I hadn't oughta," quickly explained Dave, suddenly remembering the interpretation that could be placed on the word "drift." "I just thought that mebby you two fellers was like us: tumbleweed in' from one job to th' next. Sorta driftin' *careless*-like."

"Well, we're driftin' *careless*," grunted Bill, holding up the glass in silent salutation. "Me an' Panhandle play cards for a livin', mostly; which is all th' warnin' we aim to give. Here's luck!"

"Luck!" echoed the others, and the heads went back in unison; but there seemed to be a trace of coolness in the words and attitudes of Dave and his friend. Gamblers, especially square gamblers, were not social outcasts in that time and country, but still . . . anyhow, Dave and Wyatt drank the toast, even if they did show a little reserve afterward.

"How come you an' Wyatt got in here?" asked the curious bartender, bluntly.

"We run up ag'in that lava rim, an' got damn' sick of flankin' it," came the ready answer. "We wanted to travel west, an' there it was, mile after mile. Then we got mad, an' struck straight across, an' here we are."

"Meet anybody?" asked the bartender curiously.

"Nobody but a greaser," answered Dave. "He said we was off th' trail, but didn't tell us where it was."

"Blundered onto th' trail later," explained Wyatt, speaking directly to the bartender. "There was fresh signs of two horses on it, headin' east. We hoped it would lead us to water, which they usually do if you foller 'em long enough. This time we was double lucky: we hit water an' liquor, both: but we won't say nothin' about them aigs."

"They shore spoke for themselves," growled Dave. He faced Bill and Panhandle, and nodded casually. "Reckon me an' Wyatt will go out an' look th' town over. See you all later."

Wyatt nodded and followed his friend out of the building.

"Sorta offish, all of a sudden," remarked the bartender, looking out through the open door.

"Yeah," grunted Panhandle, emerging from a moment's deep thought. "Yeah," he repeated, and shrugged his shoulders expressively. "You tell some folks that yo're a professional gambler, an' they get stiff-backed; but give 'em a chance to trim th' gamblers, an' they don't waste no time shovin' in their chips an' crowdin' th' table. Hell!"

THE bartender flashed a quick, guarded look at Panhandle's friend, and saw no particular expression on the cold face. He sighed, picked up the bar cloth, and started to move it gently back and forth over the counter. Then he leaned forward suddenly and spoke in a low voice.

"Seen Steve Smith this mornin'?" he asked.

Bill stirred and looked at him curiously.

"No; have you?"

"No. Steve oughta be in a right good humor," replied the bartender. He regarded the moving cloth for a moment, and then looked up. "Th' new boss ain't as can-tankerous as th' old one; but he's twict as poisonous: an' he *never* gets drunk."

"Huh!" said Bill, thoughtfully. "Just what was th' matter with Big Henry, actin' like he did to Panhandle? Was he a little loco?"

"Mebby—on one subject. You see, him an' some of th' boys—oh, well," said the bartender, suddenly remembering what had happened to certain people who talked too much. "Oh, well: that's somethin' that happened before you fellers got here. Ain't no use to open up no graves; *but*," he said, speaking very earnestly, "don't you start no talk about that little 'dobe shack you was honin' to hire." He squirmed in his clothes as if his thoughts had suddenly become distasteful. "Don't you do it. *never!*"

"All right," replied Bill in a bored voice. "We won't. I don't know what th' hell yo're talkin' about—an' I don't care. Feel like movin' along, Panhandle?"

"Where to?" asked Panhandle, with justifiable curiosity. "What's th' use of

millin' around aimless? I'm in favor of holdin' down a chair an' takin' things easy."

Bill grunted his casual affirmation and led the way to a table, and soon the two friends were idly playing Seven-Up, their thoughts far from the game. Dave and Wyatt were playing their parts without a hitch, and both Bill and Panhandle were glad to know that they had arrived. In a day or two more Johnny and Matt should ride in, and with the coming of these two the odds would be a little more even.

An hour or two later Dave and Wyatt returned, went to the bar, drank by themselves, and sought out a table of their own; and it was the table farthest removed from that of the two professional gamblers.

So the afternoon passed in idleness and low talk, each pair keeping to his own table. Occasionally both groups entered into conversation with the bartender and with each other, but there was no shift in position, no attempt made to fraternize.

This unobtrusive aloofness, despite its unobtrusiveness, was noticed by the bartender who, catching Panhandle's eye, glanced knowingly at the aloof pair, raised his shoulders, grimaced, stuck his nose up in the air, and laughed silently. Panhandle wiped away an imaginary tear, started to thumb his nose toward the other end of the room, and then suddenly gave his whole attention to the cards in his hand.

The bartender, sensing Dave's hostile eyes on him, grabbed up the bar cloth and fell to polishing the counter to the accompaniment of a low and discordant whistling.

Dave and Wyatt had ceased their talking and were now leaning back in their chairs, immersed in thought. The Seven-Up game had died from neglect, and Panhandle had his elbow on the table and his chin in his hand, silent, preoccupied. Bill frankly dozed, occasionally waking up with a little jerk to ease some dawning discomfort or to brush away a pestiferous fly. Behind the counter the expugilist yawned and pattered about, shifting this bottle, rearranging that glass.

A shadow darkened the doorway, and an old man stopped on the sill, his heavily tanned, lined face thrust forward at the end of a long, skinny, and painfully

corded neck. When he slowly and slyly removed his dilapidated sombrero he did not look much unlike an aged vulture. Satisfied that all was right and that he was safe, he stepped forward softly and suddenly raised his voice in a shrill, unearthly yell.

"Hi-i-i-i!"

THE jumping bartender flashed one panicky glance at the maker of the sound, and then looked fearfully and hopefully at the startled strangers; he was all set to burst into laughter, but his expression slowly changed to aggrieved disappointment.

The four strangers acted each in his own way, and their ways were unlike. The doorway lay in the field of vision of three of them, and three of them saw a ludicrous scarecrow by merely raising their eyes. Panhandle was the exception: he not only could not see the door without turning around, but he made not the slightest attempt to look. His level gaze was fixed intently on the face of his red-haired companion who, it seemed, was able to look for both of them. Reassured after an instant's scrutiny, Panhandle then turned lazily and calmly and looked the newcomer over as if he was looking at some strange animal.

"Locoed?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"Locoed," replied Bill. "Th' desert's shore got him."

The thin anticipatory cackle of the newcomer died out slowly, and his sad eyes had an accusing look. He shook his head sadly and sidled toward the bar, where a sympathetic dispenser of drinks shook his own head and sighed.

"They didn't stampede, Loco," he said. "Reckon mebbe they ain't that kind. Don't you care, though: I'll set 'em up for you, an' me an' you'll drink together. To hell with 'em, from their heads to their feet!"

"To hell with 'em," repeated Loco mechanically.

Dave Saunders arose and took a hesitant step, stopped, felt foolish, and then changed his actions into words.

"Was we supposed to jump an' act like a lot of damn' fools?" he gently asked.

The bartender nodded, at the same time tapping his forehead.

"Well, then it's shore on me," admitted Dave, stepping forward again. "By rights it oughta be on me *twice*:"

I was so blame' scared I *couldn't* move!"

"Me neither," said Bill. "An' I ain't right shore that I've got over it yet. Look here, Loco: you shouldn't oughta go 'round scarin' folks half to death! It ain't right! You oughta be ashamed of yoreself!"

"Man!" exclaimed Panhandle, his knees trembling violently. "Right then I shore reckoned th' whole Apache tribe was reachin' for my hair!"

"It's a right good way to get hisself killed," muttered Wyatt, but he fell in with the play, and spoke loudly. "I ain't been able to speak up to now," he confessed; "but now I'm able to say that a round shore is on me. Don't you never do that ag'in, Loco!"

"He-he-he!" chuckled the ancient, jabbing the nearest man in the ribs. "He-he-he! I can allus fetch 'em! I can allus fetch—that is—that is—" his voice hushed as he peered fearfully around—"that is, all 'cept Big Henry." Fear flared up in his pale eyes. "*Big Henry!*" he whispered. "*Big Henry!*"

The bartender's face set, and then a smile broke through. It was a genuine smile. He leaned over the counter and beckoned with a huge forefinger.

"C'mere. C'mere, Loco. Want to tell you somethin'—somethin' special."

The old prospector leered knowingly at the four strangers, and tiptoed along the bar.

"Secret?" he whispered. "Secret?"

"Yeah, a secret. Big Henry's dead. He won't bother you no more. Big Henry's deader'n hell, an' I reckon that's where he is right now."

The old man stood for a moment as if he had not heard, as if the words had no meaning for him; and then, cursing horribly, he whirled like a frightened rabbit and raced for the door, leaving behind him an oft-repeated sentence ringing in the ears of the others.

"G—— d—— his soul! G—— d—— his soul! G—— d—— his soul!"

The bartender found himself the focal point of four level gazes, and he tried to dissemble.

"Pore old feller! He went off without his drinks!"

THREE of the four turned on their heels and walked back to the table; but the fourth, leaning lazily against the bar, maintained the fixed gaze.

The ex-pugilist fidgeted, and then he glared.

"What's th' matter with you, Bill? Bellyache?" he demanded with spirit.

"Did you guess how it would affect him when you said it?"

"No. One of two things was due to happen, I reckoned. *That's* th' one that did. I should 'a' waited until after he had had his liquor; but he'll be back before closin' time, worse luck!"

"Where'll he go from here?" asked Bill purely as a matter of curiosity and to keep the talk going.

"Bill, I'd give ten dollars if I knowed that! I'll lay you ten that he goes to th' old 'dobe shack; or that he don't! Take yore pick."

"What was th' other way that you reckoned he mighta acted?" persisted Bill.

The ex-pugilist looked into the eyes of the stern-faced man across the counter; the gazes met and locked. An observer gifted richly with imagination might easily have substituted, in his mind's eye, thin and slithering blades of steel.

"Bill," said the barman, his hushed voice breaking the silence, "you never in all yore born days saw such a dumb-head as me; but I was kinda figgerin' on Loco laughin' hisself half to death."

"Because Big Henry is dead?"

"Yes. Because Big Henry is dead."

"An' that shack you mentioned: it's Loco's, of course?" said Bill, knowing that it was not.

"No. Yore partner's motionin' to you."

Bill turned his head slowly and looked at Panhandle's back. He waited a moment, and still Panhandle did not move.

Bill turned slowly and faced the bar.

"Much obliged," he said, and sauntered toward the door and the street.

CHAPTER XII

THE bartender watched Bill pass out through the doorway and wondered if the gambler was on Loco's trail; but he was instantly reassured by Bill's reëntry. The gambler walked up to the bar as if he had not just left it, looked the ex-pugilist in the eye, and stated a fact bluntly.

"Panhandle wasn't motionin' to me," he said confidently.

The ex-pugilist wondered if his companion had gone out into the street to discover that, looked humorously at the back of the person in question, and then gravely regarded his confrere across the counter.

"No?" he asked.

"No."

"My mistake, I reckon. You see where Loco went?"

"No. He must 'a' scurried out of sight like a rat."

"An' I hope to th' Lord he stays out of sight," said the bartender with fervor. "Why'n hell he come back to town I dunno. I grub-staked him strong enough to last him all summer. First thing we know, Loco will get killed."

"That so?"

"Yes; damn it!"

"Why?" asked Bill.

"Loco saw too much," replied the bartender. "He was a *little* loco before, but *plumb* loco after. Big Henry was superstitious, an' half-scared to death by what they done; that's why he got drunk so often; but Steve Smith ain't that kind. Some day he'll just pull his gun an' shoot Loco. He hates th' old man like pizen."

"You say he was loco before whatever it was happened?" asked Bill, his face devoid of any intelligent expression.

"Yes; but he's a lot worse since."

"What was it he saw?" asked Bill curiously.

"Panhandle's motionin' to you ag'in," said the ex-pugilist calmly.

Bill's gaze did not shift from the placid face before him, and he certainly did not look behind him to see what his friend was doing.

"Yeah; so I see," he replied. "Let him wave his fool arms off. It's a habit of his. What was it Loco saw?"

"Listen here, Bill," earnestly said the bartender and in a very low voice. "If I answer yore questions I'll be shot before I know it; an' so will you."

"Th' first part of that statement don't worry me much—you mebbly deserve it; but th' last kinda sets crooked on me. I don't like that idear a-tall. By th' way, what's yore name?"

"Call me Spike."

"Spike," repeated Bill. "Loco's just a harmless old feller, ain't he?"

"Yes."

"Then why should anybody want to shoot him?" persisted Bill.

"He was an eye-witness to somethin' that wasn't very nice to see."

"Then why didn't they shoot him then an' there?"

"Because he was lyin' on his belly out in th' brush, an' nobody knowed he was there. Afterward, they all was kinda sick at th' stomach." Spike paused, rubbed at the counter, and shook his head gently. "Big Henry was boss, an' he lost his nerve. You should 'a' seen him!"

"Wish I had," thought Bill, and spoke: "Didn't strike me that he'd lost any, to amount to anythin'."

"Th' very fact that he went around killin' folks that knowed about what he'd done shows that." Spike paused, scowled, and went on with his polishing. "They was all more or less liquored up at th' time—but there ain't nothin' in hell or heaven or in between that'll excuse a thing like that: an' Big Henry knowed it, — — him?"

"So, whatever it was, Loco saw it?" asked Bill, a horrible picture in his mind. For a moment he was back in Bulltown, listening to the awful ravings of a youth who had seen his wife murdered before his eyes. He knew what it was that Loco had seen.

"Yeah, he saw it; an' that's what makes me dead shore that Loco was crazier than anybody thought," said Spike. "If he hadn't been loco he'd shore have opened fire on that bunch of Apaches." He glanced quickly around, fearful of having been overheard. "Listen here, Bill! I ain't goin' to say no more. It's all over, an' nothin' can undo it; but I hope to heaven that every one of them — — pays for it, slow an' terrible!"

BILL was looking at the bartender shrewdly, and he leaned forward a little.

"Just one thing more, Spike," he said. "Was Loco th' only man crazy?"

"I heard there was a feller drove crazy then an' there, an' wandered out onto th' desert. Young feller. Never been seen since."

Bill nodded, a picture in his mind: the picture of a pitiable youth staggering into a saloon in Bulltown.

"A crazy man wouldn't have much chance out on this desert," he said. "Was he mounted?"

"No; afoot."

"No chance a-tall unless somebody found him an' led him off," Bill muttered. It must have been Loco who had acted as that guide.

"None whatever."

"Say, Spike, accordin' to Big Henry, some prospectors built this town, an' then abandoned it. Was Loco one of 'em?"

"Panhandle's motionin' ag'in," said Spike, and then he closed his mouth and kept it closed.

After a few unsuccessful efforts to get Spike to keep on talking, Bill turned away and joined his silent friend at the table. They had not been talking very long before Loco reappeared, and they watched him sidle toward the bar, where Spike gave him a cordial welcome and treated him to a drink. Loco was asking questions in a voice so low that the words did not carry to the table; and Spike was answering them as softly. He appeared to be humoring the old prospector, but his expression was a worried one.

Loco turned and left the bar. He started toward the door, stopped, took a step toward Bill and Panhandle, stopped again, rubbed his head and then, wheeling, strode toward the door with his peculiar sidling motion and became lost to sight outside.

Bill looked from the door to the bar, saw Spike's almost imperceptible jerk of the head, and replied to it by getting up and going to the counter.

"A crazy man, afoot, wouldn't have much chance out on th' desert unless somebody found him an' led him off'n it," said Spike, his eyes boring into Bill's.

Bill recognized the almost word-for-word repetition of his own statement, made just a short time before.

"Wasn't that what I said?" asked Bill, curiously.

"Word for word, as near as I can remember it," said Spike, grave and thoughtful. There was a hopeful, friendly look in his eyes. "Look here: who are you, an' what do you know?"

"I'm Bill; an' I know less every day that passes."

"From what I just sifted out of Loco's

ramblin's, somebody *was* found out on th' desert an' led off'n it. Now, you look here, Bill: I ain't takin' no sides, a-tall. I'm what you call neuter. What I hear spoke, I plumb forget. Remember that, *all* of it, will you? An' if I don't talk to you very much any more, don't hold it ag'in me."

"I got a horrible thought. Spike: either I'm loco or you are; an' I figger it's you."

"You must 'a' been at th' foot of th' 'rithmetic class all yore days!" countered Spike. "Yo're damn' poor at figgerin'."

"What you mean?" asked Bill, curiously.

"What do I mean?" repeated Spike, scornfully. "Here: I'll show you what I mean!" He glanced at both doors in turn, and then leaned far across the counter, and his voice sunk to the barest trace of sound. "Open yore vest!" he whispered.

Bill was looking at him as if he was out of his mind.

"Open my vest?"

"Yeah; open it!"

"What for? You loco, too?"

"Not now; but I may be later. I dare you to open it!"

"You lose some jewels?" asked Bill, jeeringly.

"By Gawd! I've figgered you, an' I've figgered you right!" said the bartender, joy and hope again appearing in his eyes. "If I was a religious man I'd go down on my knees! Listen, Bill: this is no place for United States marshals!"

BILL threw back his head and roared. He ripped open his vest and threw back both wings. He turned forward the lapels of his coat. Still laughing, he removed the contents of his pockets one by one, laid them on the counter and, still shaking with laughter, turned the pockets inside out. Then, having restored his pockets and his vest to their original condition, he leaned against the counter and leveled a big finger at the man behind it.

"I shore agree with you, Spike," he said, his laughter now a rumbling chuckle. "This ain't no place for United States marshals, an' if you see any of 'em headin' in here, slip me an' Panhandle th' word as fast as Gawd will

let you. All we ask is a few hours' start."

CHAPTER XIII

TWO days went by without anything of importance taking place. Loco had disappeared, much to Spike's relief. Spike, himself, had held aloof from the strangers, and had nothing to do with them outside of his duties at the bar.

The first night passed uneventfully, Bill and Panhandle playing poker in one corner of the room, with fairly successful results; Wyatt and Dave, playing at a table in the other end of the room, had become better acquainted with their poker adversaries; but neither pair took much interest in the other, and were never at any time in the same close group.

The obvious reason for not mixing was not the important one. They could have become well enough acquainted in the ordinary course of events to fraternize freely and in such a manner as not to arouse suspicion that they had known one another before their advent into Hell's Center. After two or three days spent in the same saloon this would have been natural enough. This, then, was not the real reason for their aloofness.

Had they become friendly there would have been no innocent reason of excuse for the two pairs to refuse to be found together in the same group. As things were, they did not find each other congenial enough for mixing: and this meant that always the two pairs were separated by a considerable distance, each pair able to see the other; each pair keeping a quiet but efficient guard over the other. And it would not be long, now, before there would be a third pair to complete a triangle of watchfulness.

The second night was eventful. There were sounds in the street, suggesting that a cavalcade of fair size had ridden into town and stopped before the Palmer House. Mysterious activities filled the night outside. The crowd inside the saloon was full of movement: men came and went continually, and when each man returned there would be a smile of satisfaction on his face. Something was taking place which seemed greatly to please every man concerned. Bill and

Panhandle controlled their irritation at the constant interruption of the game, as man after man pocketed his chips, left, and returned to play again. Over in the other end of the room the same thing was taking place. And then, suddenly, there were no more interruptions. The games settled down to the regular, quiet affairs; but at both tables bills of large denominations began to appear.

A group of six men came into the room and lined up at the bar, laughing in rare good humor and talking loudly. One of them was Steve Smith, but the others were strangers to Bill and Panhandle. During the play both Bill and his friend kept their ears open to the talk at the bar, and little by little the identities of the five newcomers were revealed. George White, Tom Walters, Paso Frank, Longhorn and Lefty: the first three names checking with those in their memorized list. The men had re-celebrating its successful outcome. The turned from some foray and were now sudden influx of new money was suspicious in itself; but coupled with the return of these bandits it took on a greater suspicion which amounted, in Bill's mind, to a certainty. Somewhere a bank had been robbed or a train held up.

Ten o'clock came and went, and more strange faces appeared in the room. There were consultations at the bar and in corners, low-voiced and somewhat furtive. Hilarity steadily climbed, and Spike was a very busy man. There was an argument in a corner, which suddenly flared into high-pitched words.

"... split his share equal!" roared a coarse voice. "*Equal*, I say!"

STEVE SMITH raised a hand and pushed the man back, pushed roughly, with force.

"Equal nothin'!" he snapped, his cold eyes glinting. "Th' boss's share goes to th' boss, an' I'm boss now!"

"But you don't git yore share an' his, too!" retorted the coarse voice. "If you take Henry's share, then yore old share gits split up between th' rest of us! Hell! We did th' work, didn't we?"

"Shut yore mouth in here: there's strangers present," ordered Smith. "If you got anythin' more to say, we'll go outside an' say it there. But you ain't got nothin' more to say. You hear me?"

"I only want my rights!" persisted the coarse voice. "If you'd been with us on th' get-away, you'd shore figger I earned 'em!" He growled something about a bullet through his hat, and subsided.

"Bullet through yore hat!" jeered Tom Walters. "Jim got one through th' shoulder, an' he ain't bellerin' about any extra share."

"Jim's a damn' fool, then," growled the other.

The talk died down and went on in voices so low that the words did not carry. Bill and Panhandle took their cards and played them without emotion, apparently giving no attention to anything outside the game; Dave and Wyatt, at their own table, did the same thing; but both pairs watched each other without appearing to do so. The make-up of the room had changed, and turbulent spirits filled the place.

Midnight came, and with it came another outside interruption and four more men. They strode in through the front door in single file. Two hard-faced strangers came first, and then the tired and serious faces of Johnny Nelson and Matt Skinner. Shouts of welcome met their entry, shouts of welcome for the first two; and curious, suspicious, and questioning glances for the second two. Tom Jones and Bill Nolan were old friends, returning from San Ignacio with pack-horse loads of good liquor and other supplies; their two companions were strangers and, therefore, not very welcome.

"Mostly rye, I hope, Tom!" called a man from a corner.

"Brandy, Tom! Huh?" shouted another. "Did you git brandy?"

Tom waved to both friends, a smile wreathing his face.

"Got two loads of each," he reassured them. "Got everythin': mescal, gin, whisky, an' brandy. You boys don't have to worry none. You can drink yoreselves blind, an' stay blind."

He lined up with his three companions, and after the liquid ceremonies were concluded faced the room and waved widely at the two strangers.

"Fellers, meet Matt an' Johnny: two old hands of th' trail. They beat a posse acrost th' Rio Grande, an' now they're workin' their way north ag'in. Two good boys."

"What do you know about 'em, aside from guessin'?" asked a voice in the crowd, a suspicious and trouble-making voice.

"Nothin', you damn' fool," retorted Tom easily. "El Toro says they're all right, an' that's good enough for me."

"An' it's good enough for you, friend," drawled Matt, insolently, eying the objector.

"Is that so?"

"If it ain't, I can make it so," retorted Matt. Pretending great irritation, he shook off Tom's restraining hand, and took a step forward.

"Any time any suspicious old woman like you don't like my looks, you can step right up an' change 'em!" He sneered openly, swaying a little on his feet. "If yo're lookin' for trouble, I've got more'n you can handle!"

"Shut up!" said Johnny, grabbing him. "Liquor shore makes you loco! Don't pay no 'tention to him, friend," he called, looking at the scowling objector in the crowd. "Matt's a good feller when he's sober; but Gawd help us all when he ain't. Come on, Matt, behave yoreself!"

"Is that so?" sneered the objector. "An' who th' hell are you?"

"I'm Sittin' Bull's pet daughter, you — damn' fool!" snapped Johnny. "An' I'm lookin' for scalps!"

"Ha-ha-ha!" roared Matt. "Liquor makes you worse'n me! I never been so damn' drunk that I figgered I was a female Injun! Ha-ha-ha!"

A RIPPLE of laughter ran through the crowd, and the objector, grinning widely, arose to his feet and started for the bar.

"Don't you be afeared, Lopin' Antelope: I ain't aimin' to kiss you!" he laughed. "All I want to do is to buy you a drink."

"I'll have one with you, friend; but Matt shore has had more'n he needs," replied Johnny.

"You mind yore own business, an' lemme mind my own!" snorted Matt, and he threw his arm around the shoulder of the advancing man, and dragged him up against the counter. "Liquor don't bother me a-tall," he confided in a blurred, unsteady voice. "Us fellers has been lightenin' one of them pack loads ever since we crossed th' river, an'

th' damn' ropes was more numerous every time we done 'em up ag'in. Between th' mescal, an' th' brandy, an' th' whisky an' th' gin, I'm a little mite uncertain. Just a couple more drinks an' I'm goin' to bed." He staggered, swayed gently, tried to sing and, looking around with a strange expression on his face, folded up like a jack knife, slipped to the floor, and passed out. No one but Johnny and himself knew that, as the pack train had moved across the desert in the darkness, they both had spilled their liquor on the thirsty sands.

Bill Nolan and Tom Jones, being remarkably sober at the end of such a long, wet trip, apparently had done the same thing; but they were quite certain that the two strangers never could pick up that trail and follow it to Hell's Center.

"Liquor don't bother him a-tall," jeered Johnny, lurching toward his prostrate friend, and he, himself, almost collapsed.

They helped Johnny, himself woefully in need of help, pick up the unconscious Matt, and the little group staggered out of the door and into the night. When Bill and Tom returned again, both Matt and Johnny were missing, and they explained this hilariously.

"Matt was dead all th' way," yelled Tom; "an' Johnny passed, an' dropped into th' discard ten feet from th' door. They're shore goin' to have a couple of record-breakin' headaches when they come to in th' mornin'. What's happened since we been away?"

And so it was that Johnny Nelson and his friend, Matt Skinner, came to Hell's Center, to round out the full half-dozen and to take their share of the troubles which the future had in store for them. And so it was, also, that there was another pair of keenly watching men to occupy the third corner of a defensive triangle: a triangle which could pass from the defensive to the offensive with the speed of a striking snake.

CHAPTER XIV

THE sun had passed the meridian before Johnny and Matt emerged into the sight of men; and a more woebegone pair seldom had crossed the threshold of the Palmer

House. While riding along the trail toward Hell's Center they had been as sparing with the liquor as they could be; but once in town and with their four friends at hand, they deliberately had drunk heavily with the thought in mind of being convincing; and this morning after was convincing enough.

"Oh, my; oh, my!" sighed Matt, leaning against the counter, his pathetic face turned beseechingly toward the bartender. "Hair of th' dog," he pleaded. "Oh, my; oh, my!"

"Which dog?" asked Spike, grinning.

"Huh?"

"Which dog?" repeated Spike, the grin growing. "Brandy, whisky, gin, or mescal?"

"Oh, Lordy!" sighed Matt, turning to his equally woebegone friend for inspiration. "Which'll it be, Johnny?"

"Don't you ask me no questions," growled that unfortunate person, closing his eyes for a moment. "Don't make me think, Matt."

"Then I reckon it oughta be a mongrel," suggested Spike, taking four bottles from the back bar in quick succession. There was an eagerness in his movements which suggested the earnest experimentalist. "Just how it's goin' to work, I dunno," he frankly confessed. He favored each bottle equally, and the two glasses which he shoved toward the outer edge of the counter seemed to have a fascination for him. "There: try *that* combination," he suggested, hopefully.

"Try it yoreself!" said Matt with a show of indignation.

"Go ahead!" urged Spike. "I wasn't bit by no dog; but *you* was!"

Matt lifted the glass, tasted it, made a wry face, and downed the dose. His eyes rolled and he shuddered.

"Gawd! Tastes like moldy leather on fire!"

"Th' moldy leather part is mostly yore mouth, I reckon," said the bartender, watching the other sufferer. "Try it, Johnny: go ahead!" he urged.

Johnny sighed, obeyed, put the glass back on the bar, and wiped the tears from his eyes.

"It don't taste like nothin' I ever tasted before," he said; "but it shore is on fire. Listen, Spike, there wasn't nothin' died recent in any of them bottles, was there?"

A snicker from the room became the

focal point of three indignant pairs of eyes; but after brief and pugnacious scrutiny of the abashed Dave, the eyes returned to the empty glasses.

The night was half over when Steve Smith came in, followed by two men who were known as Lefty and Longhorn individually; and as the two L's collectively. The three men headed straight for the table in the rear of the room where Bill and Panhandle were making a few honest dollars more or less dishonestly. With the appearance of these three men a singular thing happened.

The three men who were playing with Bill and Panhandle, scooping up their chips, regretted that they had to quit, and moved away from the table as the three newcomers neared it. The whole thing shouted that it was prearranged, and Bill and his friend smiled at each other. Evidently the two L's were poker experts.

Smith waved his companions into two of the vacated chairs and took the third himself.

"Told you fellers we was goin' to find out just what kinda poker players you are," he said, grinning at the two gamblers. "Meet Lefty an' Longhorn, collar-an'-elbow poker champeens; boys, meet Bill an' Panhandle." He smiled again at the two gamblers. "You fellers shore are goin' to have some tough sleddin' purty soon. Us three have got most of th' money in th' world; an' here's a sample," he said, placing a roll of new, crisp yellowbacks on the table at his elbow. Not a bill was creased or soiled. His two companions duplicated the movement, and grinned.

BILL showed an expressionless face to the newcomers while he dug down into his pockets. Panhandle was going through the same movements, and in a moment the table looked as if it had broken away from a mint and drifted out here on the desert.

At the other end of the room a stud game was making fast going for Dave and Wyatt; while midway between the two tables, Matt and Johnny were deep in the planning of some villainy with Jones and Nolan. The room hummed with conversation, punctuated by the click of chips or the ring of gold and silver coins. Spike and his assistant were still working hard, and tobacco smoke

lay like a fog over the room, here and there its points of deeper density being located by coughs.

". . . five better," said Panhandle, raising his eyebrows and the pot at the same time.

No one noticed Loco sidle into the room and head for the bar; no one but Spike, and he welcomed the unfortunate by reaching behind him for four bottles on the back bar.

"Either you helped or you didn't," said Lefty, expressing a poker axiom. "Th' last time, you didn't. I'll see," he said, and then swore and tossed his cards on the table. "An' Steve asked us to help him trim a couple of suckers! My Gawd!"

"I didn't hear you refuse!" retorted Smith, picking up the cards.

"You wait till you ask me ag'in, an' you will," replied Lefty. "You'll hear me then, loud an' plain." He pushed back from the table, tightly gripping the lone bill remaining of the roll he had brought into the game. "I'm goin' up an' play stud with th' yearlin's; an' as a matter of fact, weaners would suit me better."

"Why, Lefty: you can play stud right here, if th' others are willin'," offered Panhandle with great affability.

"Shore," said Bill, grinning. "Go borrow some money an' come right back."

"You all go to hell," said Lefty. "Didn't I say I was lookin' for nothin' stronger than yearlin's? Come on, Longhorn: let's git out of this while we've got our shirts left."

Steve Smith leaned back, watching his two friends weave through the crowd. He was chuckling. His own roll was about the same as it had been when he entered the game.

"When it comes to makin' a livin' at this game, I reckon you two boys can manage to struggle along," he said, with a chuckle. "But I ain't so pore, myself," he boasted, indicating his own roll.

Panhandle had been swiftly shuffling the cards, and now he pushed the deck out into the center of the table and slid a large roll of bills beside it. He waved his hand at the layout.

"There you are," he said, cheerily. "There's four thousan' even in that roll. Cover it, an' I'll cut you once for th' pile. High wins?"

"Somebody—I think it was Big Henry—called you a tin-horn," said Smith with a smile. "I allus said he was a damn' fool. You keep yore money, Panhandle: you'll mebbly need it."

"Gawd A'mighty!" came a sudden yell from the bar, and startled eyes looked up to see Loco hopping up and down like the crazy man he was. The old man, stimulated by several of Spike's new concoctions, had lost what raveling of sense he had, and with it went all instinct for self-preservation. He looked wildly around, saw Steve Smith, and started toward that person on a sidling lope, yelling at the top of his lungs. Spike's frantic lunge carried him across the bar and he fell to the floor on the other side.

"Killed her, he did!" he shrilled in a crackling falsetto. "Killed her, he did! Killed her with his gun, like th' others did! Killed—"

Smith leaped to his feet, his face like a thundercloud, his hand streaking downward. The gun was free from the holster when Bill's hand gripped it and twisted it back and to one side.

THE roar was deafening and for a moment the smoke hid the weapon. Steve and Bill were struggling desperately. The struggle ceased suddenly and Bill stepped back, the gun in his right hand. He was shaking his head reprovingly and talking earnestly in a low voice. Smith stood poised on the balls of his feet, trembling with rage. The crowd stood breathless, not a man moving.

"Bad luck, I tell you!" came Bill's soft voice. "It's bad luck to shoot a crazy man, Steve! Let th' pore old locoed cuss alone. He don't mean nothin', not nothin' a-tall. Here, sit down, Steve; sit down, an' calm down."

"You gimme my gun!" whispered Smith, his eyes blazing.

"Shore, Steve; I don't want it," replied Bill. "Here, take it an' slip it back into th' holster. Loco didn't mean no harm."

Smith took the extended weapon by the muzzle, as it was presented to him. His finger slid into the trigger guard, and suddenly the gun spun into a roll; but as it did so, Bill's hand, gambling with death, moved like a flash and struck the moving handle. There came a heavy explosion, and the bullet intended for Bill

as the muzzle swung around, being fired prematurely while the weapon was pointing the wrong way, ranged up under Smith's short ribs and dropped him like the stroke of an axe.

"There, by Gawd!" said Bill sorrowfully, looking around at the strained faces. "I was afraid one of us would get hurt. He was rollin' her an' when I tried to grab it my hand struck th' butt. If I could 'a' got a good hold on it—oh, well: it's done!"

"If you hadn't stopped it, you would 'a' got it in th' same place," came a growl, a grudging admission from the middle of the side wall, where Matt Skinner stood on spread feet, with both of his hands hooked by their thumbs to the gun belts. It was common knowledge by now that Matt had no love for Bill or Panhandle; and this admission, reluctantly coming from a hostile source, had more weight, in consequence, than it otherwise might have claimed. Without a doubt, thought Matt, surging inwardly with a fierce joy, this old redhead had no peer along the whole frontier.

Dave Saunders raised his voice.

"Yeah, he'd 'a' got it in th' same place; but if he'd kept his hand off th' damn' gun in th' first place—still, *nobody* oughta shoot a locoed man. Well, it shore was fair enough, I reckon."

Tom Walters, who stood next in line for the dead man's job of boss, and the dead man's greater share of booty because of the office, nodded his head and stepped forward from the crowd. His quick glance at the frightened and seemingly paralyzed Loco was full of hatred, but he tried to mask it. *This* time Loco had worked to the advantage of Walters; but he would kill the old fool at the first good opportunity.

"I don't know that you shoulda interfered, Bill," said Walters; "but you did, an' it's all done now. I'm boss of this outfit, an' I'm tellin' you plain that you don't never want to cut into any play that I make. That's good advice; an' it's a warnin'. Don't you *never* cut in *a-tall!*"

Walters turned, waved a hand at the body, and indicated three men. They stepped forward to do their work as Walters' voice rang out in an invitation for everybody to drink to the new boss.

Loco, bewildered, frightened back to somewhere near sobriety, inched forward

toward the frowning and disheartened Bill. The old man crept along the edge of the table, peered for an instant into the seamed face of the gambler, let his hand rest lightly for a moment on the broad, sloping shoulder and then, wheeling in sudden panic, the old prospector dashed away like a frightened bird.

Bill looked after him with kindly eyes, watching until the old man had slipped through the door to safety; and then, his glance roving over the crowd at the bar, for one instant rested on Spike's bruised but complacent face.

SPIKE seemed to be very well satisfied about something; as, indeed, he was. Bill, by saving the old man's life, had made a staunch friend.

This was one of the times when another friend might not come in amiss; he had, personally, accounted for his share of the men on the list, not to mention two incidental scoundrels, in an even break. It might be well, now, if he sat back awhile to keep suspicion from raising its ugly head; to sit back and let some of the others take a more active part in the game. He was becoming a very prominent citizen of Hell's Center.

CHAPTER XV

SUPERSTITION is a strange phenomenon. Apparently it obeys no law, yet it covers about every phase of human activity; and while it cannot be justified by any rational argument, in itself being irrational, it cannot be seriously discredited by reason in the minds of those who are under its sway. Highly intelligent men, with trained minds and great knowledge, yield to its influence while denying its powers.

If superstition can so grip intelligent men, how then are we to measure its grip on mediocre and untrained minds, capable only of interpreting the obvious in the obvious, unthinking way? How are we to measure the power of its grip on men like Tom Walters and some of his companions? Big Henry, who feared neither man nor devil, was held in terror by it, and others of his band were strongly under its influence. One of these men, who now held the scepter once

belonging to Big Henry, was Tom Walters, and he was soon to show it.

Bill's determination to step out of the action for awhile did not need any effort on his part to put the determination into effect. The action moved away from him, and for a time obscured his prominence, to his grateful relief.

It was taken from him by two younger men, both grown up, but neither of them so far along in years as to have severed themselves from the exuberant devilry of youth. Both Johnny Nelson and Matt Skinner were married and had reached the age of top physical powers, which would indicate that they were well under thirty. In them both ran a strong current of mischievous devilry, masked and held in restraint for the past few years by their environment and their responsibilities; but the current, although submerged and covered over, still ran strong; indeed, it ran stronger than even they suspected, and it seemed to have acquired additional power by its very repression.

They well knew the grisly story concerning the adobe hut over in the bottoms. They had learned the revolting details in the hotel back in Bulltown, and their daily associations with two members of this gang had put the stamp of certainty on the story. It now was an established fact. They also had sensed and fully realized the superstitious fear which gripped Tom Walters and some of his closest friends. For a while this knowledge lay dormant in the minds of both and aroused only contemptuous interest; it lay dormant until one forenoon, when they wandered into the general store to lay in a supply of their favorite brand of tobacco. Their purchases made and sampled, they leaned lazily against the worn counter, idly swapping gossip with the proprietor, their eyes roving carelessly about the store.

"They shore are a godsend to desert hombres," said Matt, speaking of canned tomatoes. The proprietor was engaged in opening a case, and had casually mentioned that he sold more canned tomatoes than any other one vegetable in his stock.

"Yeah," agreed Johnny, his restless glance passing and then returning to settle upon a soldering iron hanging from two nails driven close together in an upright supporting shelves on each

side of it.

"Ain't nothin' better for thirst, I reckon," agreed the proprietor.

"Yeah," said Johnny, his thoughts centering upon and revolving around that soldering iron. He was regarding it curiously and became aware of other things close by it. Yes, that was right. Then his thoughts, becoming reminiscent ran back swiftly in time, and brought a smile to his face; and then his expression changed abruptly as an idea exploded in his mind. He wiped off the grin and backed along the counter. Catching Matt's placid eye, he motioned swiftly and significantly, and found that Matt was as quick in his mind as he was with his hands.

"Here, old-timer," said Matt, moving toward the crate and pleasantly shoving the proprietor along one side of it until that person's back was turned to Johnny. "What's th' use of liftin' out them cans an' totin' 'em a couple at a time? Grab hold of yore end an' we'll lift th' whole case an' put it where you want it."

"But," expostulated the proprietor, hurriedly getting his feet out of the way, "but I don't want th' hull crate—*hey!* What you want to spill 'em for?" he demanded with some asperity, reaching hastily for a rolling can. "_____ it! I don't want th' crate on th' shelves! Who asked you to horn in like this? *Now* look at 'em!"

"SHUCKS!" growled Matt contritely. Sharding two of the cans with his feet. "Seems like I'm allus blunderin'. Oh, well; they won't bust, an' they won't leak. Here! Lemme help you," and he hastily began to pick up the cans, his elbow knocking three from the crook of the proprietor's arm. "Now, *ain't* I clumsy?"

"Clumsy!" snorted the red-faced proprietor with deep feeling. "Clumsy! If you had as many feet as a cow, this shore would be a hopeless job. I didn't ask you for no help in th' first place, did I? You get th' hell outa here, an' let 'em alone!"

"Well, you don't have to go on th' prod!" expostulated Matt. "I only wanted to help you."

Johnny, his hands now thrust deep into his side coat pockets, leaned against the counter and laughed. He carelessly flipped his half-burned cigarette through

the air, and it landed in a nail keg.

The proprietor, having followed the curving missile with his eyes, turned abruptly and glared at the thrower.

"You see where that lit?" he demanded with frank roughness. "What th' hell—"

"Gosh, yes!" admitted Johnny, contritely, as he stepped swiftly forward to retrieve it. "But I don't reckon it'll set no nails on fire," he growled, plunging his hand into the keg, as Matt knocked over a pile of tomato cans.

"No! But it might 'a' set fire to th' keg, you jackass!" retorted the proprietor, turning quickly at the sound of the falling cans.

Johnny dropped the butt on the floor, ground it with a heel, and looked at his friend. He was hurt and indignant.

"Come on, Matt: let's get outa here till th' old man sweetens up, or before you upset everythin' in th' place."

"Aw," growled Matt, slowly following his companion, "I didn't mean to upset th' crate; anyhow, I don't go 'round throwin' lighted cigarette butts into kegs an' things."

"Hell you don't!" retorted Johnny pugnaciously, stepping through the door.

"No, I don't!" rejoined Matt, shortly. He paused. "Now where we goin'?"

Back in the store a growling voice answered that question by suggesting a place which rhymed with any word ending in *e* double *l*, and offered further advice freely.

"What was all th' ruckus about, anyhow?" asked Matt when the store was safely behind them.

Johnny moved a hand out of a pocket, spreading the receptacle wide open for his companion's inspection.

Matt bent over, looked into the pocket, and glanced up curiously, thinking hard and fast.

"Well, what's *that* for?" he asked.

"Look in th' other one," suggested Johnny, swinging part way around and obligingly spreading open the other pocket.

Matt obeyed, studied the contents of the pocket for a moment, straightened up, and fell into step.

"I was born dumb," he confessed, scratching his head.

"An' never got over it, huh?"

"Reckon not," sighed Matt. He checked off the items on his fingers, and

then looked up suddenly, a broad smile on his face. "Yeah!" he inquired with a rising inflection. "I'm gettin' th' drift!"

"Yeah," replied Johnny, grinning.

"By Gawd!" said Matt. He scratched his head again, cogitating. "To-night?" he asked, hopefully.

"Yeah; to-night."

"Think it'll work?" asked Matt.

"Worth tryin', anyhow," said Johnny. "What you think?"

"Gawd, yes! I betcha—I betcha it will!"

They walked on another dozen steps, and then Matt slowed, looking at his companion inquiringly.

"Listen, Johnny: this oughta be well talked over—we don't want to blunder." Again he scratched his head and burst into laughter, and then sobered as his mind raced frantically over several choices of operation. "Hey! How 'bout Loco?"

"Mebby; later, mebby," answered Johnny. "We still got somethin' else to get, an' we oughta get a *big* one. What you think?"

"Yeah! An' I saw one yesterday—a whopper! Man, oh, man! Hell will mebby pop to-night!"

"It won't be no place, mebby, for any flapped holsters, or bunglin' draws," replied Johnny, chuckling.

"NO! They shore want to be wide open an' plumb loose!" said Matt, by a distinct effort of will keeping his face straight. "Th' pore damn' fools: growed men actin' like a lot of babies! You ever take any stock in that kinda stuff?"

"None whatever: but I've shore knowed plenty that did," chuckled Johnny. "Take th' number thirteen, now—but, shucks: what's the use?"

"We'll mebby find out th' use," replied Matt, heading for the Palmer House with his companion close beside him.

Spike looked up, and the infection of their grins brought one to his own face.

"What's so funny?" he inquired hopefully.

"You," said Matt, letting his gaze drift slowly around the room.

"Thanks," grunted Spike.

Bill and Panhandle sat at their own table, minding their own business. They

were perfunctorily playing California Jack. Wyatt and Dave were not in sight.

"Loosen up," said Spike. "What's so funny?"

"You," repeated Matt, laughing softly.

"Me, huh?" asked the bartender, holding the bar cloth aloft in momentary indecision. He glanced at the card players and then at the newcomers. "Why don't you four fellers get sociable?" he demanded, his gaze again shifting to the players. "There's two fellers over there that can win th' buttons off yore shirts, an' they're right good fellers, too." He raised his voice. "Hey, Bill: what you playin'?"

"Californy Jack, if it's any of yore business," replied Bill, smiling. "Me an' Panhandle can lick any two fellers on earth at this game."

"Hear that?" asked Spike of the newcomers. He grinned provocatively. "Of course, if yo're savin' up yore money, you two better let that game alone; but if it was me—" He finished the sentence with a laugh.

"If it was you, you'd sew up yore pockets!" snorted Matt.

"Mebby you don't have to sew up yourn!"

"Yeah!"

"Yeah!"

"You cappin' for th' game?" asked Matt.

"What you mean?" demanded Spike. He let the cloth flutter down, caught it with his left hand as it struck the counter, lifted it swiftly, and sent his right hand whizzing under it. "There," he grunted. "*That's* th' old one-two punch."

Johnny leaned over the counter, reached out his left hand and gently turned Spike's jaw a little to one side.

"Hold her right there, Spike," he said, "until I show you th' best straight right that ever came up outa Texas."

"All right: let her go!" said Spike.

Johnny struck lightly but swiftly, and found his wrist grazing the bartender's neck.

"Roll, Jordan, roll!" chuckled the expugilist. "Roll away from trouble. You want to wait, an' ketch me when I'm asleep. That head roll was only half of it, Johnny: th' other half goes some-thin' like this!" But Johnny had

stepped back and was pointing a thumb at Matt.

"Show *him* th' other half, Spike: I allus like to share, share an' share alike, with my pardner."

"Two bits a game," jeered Spike, again looking at the card table. "Two bits a game! An' if I ever heard a challenge, *that* was one!"

The two friends looked at the card players, read the derisive grins, exchanged glances, and moved slowly toward the table.

"Cinch up, you fellers," said Johnny; "an' cinch tight!"

"We mostly ride her bare-back," retorted Bill. "We won't need no saddle to-day, it's that easy."

Panhandle smeared the cards in the center of the table.

"Play partners?" he asked.

Johnny's eyes flicked.

"Yeah: me an' you ag'in th' other two," he suggested.

SPIKE was surprised into a guffaw of laughter at this canny splitting up of partners.

"Damn' if that ain't what I call usin' yore head!" he cried approvingly. "Th' winnin' combination now bein' busted, I'll lay even money either way."

"Two bits a corner," said Bill, ignoring the delighted bartender. "How you boys like this here town?"

"I said I'd lay two bits on either pair bein' winners," repeated Spike, loudly.

"All right; let yore right hand bet ag'in yore left," retorted Matt, thumbing his nose at the counter man.

"Why, this town ain't so bad," said Johnny, replying to Bill's question. "I'm gettin' so I kinda like it."

"Gawd help him!" muttered Spike. He had been moving restlessly, and now he tossed the bar cloth on the rear shelf and looked at the four card players. "I'm goin' out for four, five minutes: take charge of things, will you, Bill?"

"Here's where our liquor don't cost us nothin'," said Matt, chuckling. "I'll take four whiskies on th' house, Bill."

Bill laughed and reached for the cards.

"Who's dealin'?" he asked.

Spike hurried out through the back door, and he no sooner was through it before Johnny leaned swiftly across the table and spoke softly to Bill and Panhandle. They listened closely to what he

had to say, smiled until the safety of their ears was threatened, and agreed that his contemplated play might be a good one.

"You ain't never goin' to grow up, are you, Kid?" asked Bill, happily. He studied the keen, eager face and chuckled.

Panhandle smiled and let his hand touch Johnny's arm for an instant.

"Don't you grow up till you have to, Kid," he said. "Yore play may fizzle out, or it may start hell a-poppin'. Go through with it, anyhow. Th' rest of us will be all ready to handle whatever trouble busts loose."

"Not meanin' that yo're goin' to hog it?" asked Matt suspiciously.

"Meanin' only that th' rest of us will handle any trouble that gets too big for you an' Johnny to take care of," hastily said Bill.

"You want to remember that there'll be twenty to thirty men in this room," said Panhandle, his eyes on the rear door. "Ssh! Here he comes!"

Spike bustled in through the door, looking comfortable even if his face was streaming with perspiration.

"Lord, but it's hot out there," he growled, mopping vigorously.

"Ain't no place on earth no hotter," replied Panhandle, thoughtlessly, his mind on the game.

Dave and Wyatt wandered into the room, shied their hats through the air toward their own table, and slowly followed them. The hours dragged slowly past and finally the game broke up, the players pushing back from the table. Johnny stood up, stretched, and turned to his particular friend.

"Goin' to take a ride, Matt," he said. "You comin'?"

Matt caught the negative inflection in his voice and shook his head.

"I'm too cussed lazy," he said.

"I'd rather have company," Johnny persisted, pausing on his way to the door.

DAVE SAUNDERS caught the facial expression, read it rightly, and stretched prodigiously.

"Ain't such a bad idear, after all," he said, yawning. "Where you goin'?"

"I don't know: any place," answered Johnny, reluctantly. He did not seem to be overly pleased by the idea of riding with Dave.

"Come on, Wyatt," said Dave. "It'll

wake you up, an' be good for th' hosses. They ain't had no exercise since we come here."

"I don't want to wake up, an' to hell with th' hosses," retorted Wyatt.

"All right," sighed Dave, slowly rising. He followed Johnny out into the street, and a few minutes later they rode past the door, bound south.

Johnny was riding erratically, and Dave raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

"Why th' zig-zaggin'?"

"Lookin' for somethin', Dave. Ah, there's one!"

"Yeah?" asked Dave, looking around searchingly. "One what?"

"That red one, over there: I don't want to point."

Dave scrutinized the object and then turned a solemn and curious face to his companion.

"Shore; but what good is it?" he asked.

"I'll tell you that as we go along," answered Johnny, kneeling his horse.

"Why don't you take it, if you want it so bad?"

"Not now. I just want to locate it. I'll get it after dark."

Dave scratched his head and wondered. He glanced out of the corner of his eyes at his companion.

"Well, I reckon mebby you know what it's all about," he said, pushing up to the side of his friend. "You old Bar-20 fellers allus had that reputation, anyhow: but I'm damned if I can see what yo're drivin' at."

Johnny explained the matter as the horses moved slowly along the desert trail, and Dave's expression slowly changed from doubt to grudging agreement. He was frankly grinning when Johnny finished.

"Well," he said, with a pleasant drawl, "we ain't been none troubled by monotonousness so far; but if we was, I reckon mebby this idear of yourn would bust it up." He thought for a moment. "Huh! If it don't work there's no harm done: a joke is a joke; an' if it does, there'll mebby be excitement enough for 'most anybody." He finished by chuckling softly.

"Bill an' Panhandle know all about it," said Johnny. "You tell Wyatt what's up. When she busts we all want to be waitin' an' ready."

"I'm admittin' that without no kind

of reservations," said Dave.

It was supper time when they returned, put up their horses and parted, Johnny to return to Matt, and Dave to hunt up his friend and tell him the news. Spike was seated in a chair tipped back against the end of the bar, and almost asleep; Matt was playing solitaire without any particular interest. He looked up at the sound in the doorway, grunted, arose, and loafed forward.

"Time to eat?" he asked.

"Yeah, come on," answered Johnny.

Matt threw his big hat in the bartender's face, chuckled at that person's abrupt movements, and backed off swiftly.

"C'am yoreself, Spike; c'am yoreself! All we want is an appertizer for supper."

"Speak for yoreself," grunted Johnny shortly. "I've had mine, in th' saddle. If you'd move around a little you wouldn't need no drink to egg on yore appetite."

"Well," observed Spike, "if he don't pour no more into th' glass than he usually does, it won't do him much good. Damn it, *all* you fellers are like that! None of you do much more than cover th' bottom."

"That's more profit for th' house," said Matt, smiling. "Just for that I don't want no appertizer." He grabbed his hat off the floor and swung around to follow his friend. "Go ahead, Johnny."

CHAPTER XVI

TOBACCO smoke swirled and eddied with the movements of the crowd among the tables and along the bar. The light from the hanging and wall lamps streamed out through windows and doors and made bright yellow rectangles on the sands outside. The tie-rails were lined with saddle horses, and the rest of the buildings in town were totally eclipsed by the effulgence of the Palmer House. Most of the men in the big barroom lived within the limits of the town, yet it appeared from the number of saddled horses that they preferred to ride even the short distances which lay between their various domiciles and the rendezvous of the idle.

It still must have lacked an hour be-

fore midnight when a furtive countenance showed itself grudgingly and fearfully against one side of the rear door frame, shrinking from the sight of the many men in the room. Patiently its owner stood there, just outside the door, wistfully wishing. He moved his lean, rat-like face back and forth as caution dictated, until the busy bartender was favored by a brief lull in trade. Spike was unusually busy, as his assistant had left town on a personal mission. Reaching for the bar cloth, Spike caught sight of the lean face in the spilled light through the door, and made a surreptitious, warning gesture with one hand. The face drew back hastily out of sight.

The bartender filled a glass with liquor, holding both bottle and glass beneath the counter. He wiped the bar again, tossed the cloth on to the back bar, cupped the glass in his generous hand and sauntered toward the door. Looking out and up at the sky, he slyly reached a hand out into the night, and after a moment brought it back again. Slipping the empty glass into a pocket, he covered the bulge of the cloth by an arm, and wandered back to his place of duty, where he almost stepped on a cigar which had spilled from the broken humidior and rolled partly underneath the counter; but he did not see the cigar. Sliding the glass from his pocket to the shelf under the bar, he glanced up innocently and saw a man heading toward him, threading his way deviously among the chairs and tables. It was Johnny.

"Sleepy," somewhat guiltily acknowledged the young man. His grin was apologetic. "I reckon it was that ride I took."

"Mebby," grunted Spike, his mind on the unfortunate human just outside the rear door. "Mebby," he repeated, giving more attention to what went on about him.

"Was that Loco?" asked Johnny in a low voice as he indicated the back door by a barely perceptible movement of his head.

"Uh-huh," grunted Spike uncomfortably. "I told him to stay out of here nights."

Johnny nodded understandingly.

"Good idear, although mebby it ain't so necessary now. Gimme a rye whiskey an' I'll turn in." He swung around and glanced over the room. "Seems like

there's a bigger crowd here than there was last night."

"Yeah; all th' boys are in town now. Good thing, too: money was gittin' tight ag'in."

"All here, huh?"

"Well, all but a couple; an' why they ain't back, I dunno. They left a couple of days before you came in."

DAVE SAUNDERS, catching the words during a brief let-up in the general noise, flashed a look at his friend, Wyatt, and thought that they might be able to explain the continued absence of those two missing men.

"So money was gittin' tight, huh?" pleasantly inquired Johnny.

"Yeah."

"But now it's th' spenders that are gettin' tight."

Spike smiled at this neat turn of phrase, and nodded.

"Did anybody get hurt, *this* time?" asked Johnny carelessly.

Spike looked him squarely in the eye.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Nothin'."

"Nothin' is th' best thing to mean, at a time like this," warned Spike. He cogitated for a moment. "Some of these fellers don't know nothin' about you, an' there are times when they get right touchy."

"Uh-huh," grunted Johnny. He raised the glass, looked at the scant drink, and downed it quickly. As he put the glass down on the bar he sensed a quick movement at the rear door and glanced around just in time to see Loco dash across the few intervening feet of floor and disappear behind the counter. Before the unfortunate old man could grasp the cigar and get away, Spike grabbed him by the collar and shoved him down behind the counter.

"He made it by good luck," whispered Johnny. "Better keep him where he is. Luck like that don't repeat itself twice runnin'."

Spike's reply was unprintable, but he kneed the hidden man farther under the bar and nodded his wholehearted agreement. He clumsily dropped the bar cloth and bent down to retrieve it, and in that brief moment his whispered warning was stern enough to be heeded. Standing erect again, he whipped the cloth through the air to free it from sand and dirt, and

revealed a countenance placid and free from guile.

"Yo're a good one, Spike," chuckled Johnny. "Good-night an' good luck."

Spike replied pleasantly and watched the departing customer, and then looked toward the first poker table in answer to his name, nodded at the upheld fingers and reached for bottles and glasses.

"Three Jacks," said Matt, laying down his hand. He scooped in the chips, looked up swiftly, grinned at Spike, and took the glass offered him. "They can bust Johnny, Spike; but they can't bust *me*," he exulted. "Where'd he go, anyhow?" he asked, his gaze fitting around the room.

"To bed," answered Spike, and he laughed knowingly. "Then *that's* why he got sleepy!"

He waited until the last man had used the bottle, saw that all were served, swept the money into a big hand, and then loitered to watch the next deal, his anxious thoughts on the old prospector lying hidden behind the bar. Damn that cigar!

At a sound he turned and glanced toward the faro players and saw Dave's angry gesture. Dave turned from the game with a snort of disgust and sought an empty chair halfway along the front wall. Spike did not realize it, and there was no reason why he should realize it, but Dave had placed himself in a dangerous but strategic position: the whole room lay before him, with the front door at his left.

A man moved away from the three-card spread, tobacco smoke swirling behind him. He looked at the bar, found it deserted, and glanced around in search of its tender. Pushing past the tables, Wyatt stopped at Spike's side and nudged him.

"Got another glass with you?"

"No," answered Spike, turning abruptly. "Come along to th' bar."

"Reckon they musta put some salt on Dave's tail," chuckled Wyatt, leaning comfortably against the counter. He hooked a high heel over the rail, rested an elbow on the edge of the counter, and shook his head dolefully. "If Dave's luck don't change right soon, an' he keeps on playin', he shore as hell will have to find himself some kinda job. I'm guessin' he's near busted, right now. Dave allus was a fool where faro is concerned."

"EVENEST game there is," said Spike. "Th' odds are less ag'in you in faro-bank than in any other gamblin' game."

"That Panhandle seems to make out right well," Wyatt observed, sizing up the chips stacked in front of that favored son of Chance. "You reckon him an' his pardner are square gamblers?"

"Ain't seen nothin' to make me think nothin' else," replied Spike, shortly. "An' if I did see anythin', I shore got brains enough to keep my mouth shut. Th' fellers they're playin' with don't allus play square, an' they're old enough to look out for themselves."

"Yeah, you would keep yore mouth shut," retorted Wyatt unpleasantly.

"Another smart yelp like that, an' somebody shore will be throwin' water on yore ugly face to bring you to!" rejoined Spike, suddenly crowding his edge of the bar.

"Oh, don't go on th' prod," growled the customer. "I got just enough liquor in me to make me mean. Have one on me an' forget it. I'll take a cigar."

"All right: so'll I," said Spike, pulling out a box from the showcase.

"Who's that half-wit I've seen around here?" asked Wyatt for the sake of making conversation.

"Loco. He's harmless. Drifted in here with th' first gold rush, before there was any town here, I reckon, an' never went out when th' others did."

"He must be a friend of that Bill feller, huh?"

"No, reckon not; though Bill shore did save his life," said Spike.

"Hey, Dave! Come on over an' lemme buy you a drink!" called Wyatt.

Dave dropped his chair forward and as the two front legs struck the floor he was out of it and on his way. He stopped at the bar, hooked a high heel over the rail, and smiled wryly.

"This bein' one of them rare occasions when you loosen up," he said, "I shore will take that drink. It may be a year before it happens ag'in. Well, here's how!"

The three men talked for a moment or two and then Dave wandered off, finally reaching his still vacant chair. He dropped into it and glanced down the room. Bill and Panhandle were still playing poker, but he noticed that both had pushed back a little from the table.

Matt's game, also, was still going on; but Matt, too, had pushed a little away from the table's edge. Wyatt moved around the room, finally leaning against the side wall, where he faced the bar.

Some cheerful soul had raised his lone voice in song, to be joined quickly by other cheerful souls; and the words, starting tentatively, gained power as the singers gained confidence. It was not long before most of the men in the room were singing.

The song stopped abruptly, the words freezing in the mouths of the singers as a most unearthly scream sounded in the night outside. Beginning at the bottom of the scale in throbbing, sobbing notes, the sound swept upward in pitch and intensity until it tortured eardrums with its piercing, stabbing notes.

The room was hushed, breathless, as if sudden paralysis had seized its inmates. Faces registered almost every kind of emotion, but some of them were strangely pale and contorted. Loco, his head now above the bar, was transfixed by terror. Tom Walters, gripping the table edge with straining intensity, seemed frozen by fear. His eyeballs seemed to protrude and his tobacco-stained mouth was gaping. Some of his friends, halfway out of their chairs, remained in that posture, and one man's forearm was bent before his face as if to ward off a blow. There came the loud and unexpected crash of glass, and Spike looked down at the shattered bottle which had fallen from his nerveless fingers.

THE falling bottle broke the spell and there was a sudden bustle of movement, checked almost instantly by another rising, torturing shriek which sounded much farther off. It seemed to come from the direction of the little, deserted adobe shack in the bottoms, and this indication of direction seemed to have a sinister implication, for it dropped Tom Walters back into his chair, where he fairly cringed with fear.

After a short pause the motion began again. Tables were overturned and chairs thrown out of the way of the rising, rushing crowd bound for the doors. At the front door the first man collided with Johnny Nelson, who fought and pushed and clawed his way against the stream of outpouring humanity, shouting curses and meaningless words. He man-

aged to force his way through the doorway and gain the room, and the exit, now being free from incoming opposition, let the crowd pour out at a better speed.

There came sounds of riding gear, the jangling of chains, and then a very thunder of hoofs arose to die out swiftly as the riders spread out to search the plain. What they would accomplish was problematical; but there was one thing certain: whatever telltale tracks might have existed before the exodus from the room would now be wiped out and utterly destroyed under the hoofs of the searchers' horses.

The room, nearly empty now, held a frozen few. Tom Walters still sat in his chair, his jaw gripped by straining fingers, his eyeballs showing the white of fear. He was staring unseeing at the bar, where Loco's wan face still stood out against the backdrop.

Johnny sidled toward the boss, fearfully watching doors and windows, as nervous as a frightened cat.

"My Gawd!" he muttered. "My Gawd!" He glanced hopefully at Walters. "What was it? What was it, Tom?"

Walters gulped and tried to get hold of himself. He was shaking his head automatically and mumbling that he did not know. And then he stiffened, suddenly remembering a trick of Loco's.

"It was that damn Loco!" he cried. "It was him a-yellin'—" and the words died in his throat as he realized that he was at that moment staring directly at the old prospector and that he had been staring at him since the first shriek rang out.

"Like hell!" snapped Spike, pugna-ciously. "Loco's been right here behind th' bar since before—since before we heard anythin'."

"Yes," admitted Walters. "Yes, yes." "Sounded like a woman's shriek," said Johnny, still watching the doors and windows. "It was a woman's shriek, or I never heard one; but," he said, pausing thoughtfully—"but there ain't no woman out here! There ain't a woman in this part of th' country! I reckon there was never any woman out here."

"Yo're dead wrong, Johnny!" snapped Spike, clapping a quick hand over Loco's opening mouth. "There was one, by Gawd! There was!"

"Light more lamps!" shouted Walt-

ers, glaring from Spike to Loco, and back again. "Shut yo're — — mouth an' light more lamps!"

"Ain't no more to light," rejoined Spike. "An' as for my mouth, I'll shut it when I please!"

"There was a woman here, in town?" incredulously asked Johnny, speaking to Spike, but keeping his eyes on the boss of Hell's Center. "Then mebby she's come back ag'in. Hell, that shore explains it. But why did she shriek, an' where is she?"

"Do th' dead come back?" asked Spike spitefully, and again closing Loco's mouth.

"I don't know; some folks say they do," answered Johnny; "but it's only when they've been murdered, or some-thin' like that."

Walters arose, his face livid, his eyes on the window nearest him.

"There ain't no woman within close to a hundred miles of here," said Spike, venomously, his eyes on the back of the boss. He kicked some broken glass under the bar. "It shore sounded, th' last time, like it came from that old 'dobe in th' bottoms," he said, relishing the words, poisonous as they were.

WALTERS wheeled and replied in a burst of profanity. He saw his few remaining friends looking at him accusingly, and he blustered to face them down. He sensed that his affairs were at a crisis, but before he could find adequate words to help him, there came the scrape of a chair from the side wall, where Matt Skinner sat suddenly upright.

"Th' boys will find out all about it," said Matt, calmly. "They're combin' th' sage, right now, an' combin' it close. I never did believe in ghosts; *but*," he smiled shamefacedly, "I allus was a-scared of em. If that was a ghost it shore was a woman's. There ain't no two ways about that. A woman: a *murdered* woman."

"Ghosts!" sneered Walters, but his voice most woefully lacked conviction. "Ghosts! You wait till daylight an' we'll see about th' ghosts! Do ghosts make tracks? *Do they?*"

"No, they don't," answered Matt, complacently, thinking of the gang milling around over the sands. "Do you reckon you'll find tracks?"

"Tracks or no tracks," said Johnny, insistently, "I'm tellin' you that was a woman's voice!" He interrupted Spike's quick protest, and replied to it. "Oh, I know there ain't no woman—no *live* woman—nowhere near here; but that was a woman's shriek, just th' same! A woman sufferin' th' tortures of th' damned!"

"Yo're a — — fool!" shouted Walters at the top of his voice. He had swung around to face this insistent tormentor. He leaned forward, balanced on the balls of his feet, both arms hanging down at his sides, their elbows crooked, his fingers spread apart. "Yo're a — — fool!" he repeated.

"An' *that* makes you a liar!" snapped Johnny, his hands resting on his lean hips just above the handles showing in the worn and open-topped holsters.

Walters' hands moved, but his friends threw themselves on him, pinning his straining arms, and succeeded in wrestling him back into a chair, where they forcibly held him.

"No man can call me a liar an' make it stick!" he shouted, struggling viciously, but in vain. "Let loose my arms! Let me loose, I tell you!"

"I've just called you a liar, an' I'm shore big enough to make it stick," retorted Johnny. "Looks to me like you got a damn good reason to be scared of a woman's ghost! I never saw a white man turn yaller as quick as you did. Yore eyes were fair poppin' outa yore head. Yo're shakin' now so you couldn't hit a barn with a shotgun let alone a Colt."

He looked at the men holding the furious boss of Hell's Center, and nodded.

"Hold him tight, or he'll make me blow him loose," he said. "He's half-scared to death, even now, an' I don't want to take no advantage of him. Daylight will be here in a few hours, an' if his yaller ain't settled down ag'in, I'll give it time; if it has settled, then I'll give him all th' chance he wants to see if I can make that name stick."

He glanced around, sneering contemptuously.

"An' who did he try to blame it on?" he asked with a sneer. "On *me?* You boys? *Matt*, there? Naw: he picked out *Loco!* Picked out a man that ain't only crazy, but ain't got a gun! Huh! He's as yaller as mustard!"

Men were beginning to stream in

again, talking loudly until they sensed that trouble was brewing in the room, whereupon they grew quiet; but the quarrel died out with their entry, and soon the room was booming with talk. It was all foolishness, they said, to search in the darkness; and it was very doubtful if some of them had searched very far or hard.

SOMEBODY walked to the rear door and closed it, with a sigh of relief; and the last man through the front door shut it with a slam. The phenomenon was heatedly discussed from all angles, and several fights were narrowly averted. The ghost theory was strongly discussed and resulted in the telling of tales of ghosts, as examples to bear out various contentions, calculated to curdle the blood.

It now appeared that Bill and Panhandle, Dave and Wyatt, and Matt, too, firmly believed in ghosts, and more particularly women ghosts; Johnny persistently held to his theory, altered slightly, that it had been the shriek of a living woman; and instantly drew the verbal fire of every man in the room. In the enthusiasm of the assault upon him, the ghost theory was greatly strengthened.

"Hear th' damn' fools!" sneered Walters, his slumbering rage fanned anew by the trend of the arguments.

"Hear th' yaller liar!" retorted Johnny, and again Walters' friends held him down. "Yaller from th' soles of his feet to th' top of his head! He near cried like a baby when that second shriek rang out!"

"You keep yore — — mouth shet!" said a voice from the front of the room.

Matt stood up, the calves of his legs against the sides of the chair.

"If friends are cuttin' into this, *you* can talk to *me*," he said, glaring at the speaker. "Johnny's busy, right now; but *I* ain't!"

Again friends interfered: shooting in a crowded room was not considered good form; and on this night the room was very crowded. Angry arguments filled the air, and when they simmered down, the tempers which had caused them also simmered down; and when they reached the point of calmer discussion, free almost from rancour, most of the tempers had died; but in some hearts anger

smoldered secretly, ready to be fanned into flame by some inconsequential factor at some unknown future date.

Walters had been forced to listen to the advice of his friends because he could not get away from them, and gradually their arguments and good offices bore down his opposition. As passion left him, a clearer thinking mind began to function, and the arguments for peace began to find favor with him; but he had adopted a mental reservation at the moment he apparently fully acquiesced to his friends' suggestions. Nature often compensates ignorance by giving cunning.

"Stranger," he began, speaking calmly and unemotionally, "my friends all tell me that I had no business to call you a damn' fool, which I now admit freely. As to bein' yaller, if you want to shoot it out, come daylight, I'll be with you, an' show you a different color. There are some things I might be scared of: but they ain't nothin' that is flesh an' blood, an' least of all, anythin' that packs a gun. You can call th' turn of th' card."

Johnny was in an unenviable position, forced into it by this amende honorable. He had determined to kill Walters at daylight; but to persist in this course now would be to put him squarely in the wrong and arouse the unnecessary hostility of every man in the town except his own friends. He might even drag his friends into it with him, and this would not do. He sensed treachery, and he knew that the danger which he would face in an open break with the boss of the town would be less than the danger he would face if he accepted this peace offer. He looked about the room. Bill's gently nodding head counseled acceptance of the apology; Panhandle was making the same sign. They, too, knew that Tom Walters was treacherous, and that he would not wait long before showing his hand. It was only a matter deferred. His gaze moved on, reading face after face, and for a moment rested on Dave.

"Fair enough," said Dave loudly. "Takes a man to talk like that."

"Right," said Wyatt, and the murmur of approval from the majority of the crowd gave him a cue which he scarcely could ignore. He looked back at the boss, and slowly nodded his head.

"It's a kinda delicate proposition," said Johnny. "It kinda makes it a question of a feller's courage—but I'm statin' plain that anybody that has anythin' to say about mine can reach for his gun at th' same time: he'll need to.

"WALTERS, I called you a liar only because you called me a damn' fool," he continued calmly. "If you say I ain't no damn' fool, as you just have done, then I say that you ain't no liar. As for bein' yaller," he chuckled gently, "I reckon you wasn't no more scared than I was. I was so scared that I pushed back about two dozen husky fellers to git through that door to where there was some light; an' I got in, too, in spite of 'em all!"

He laughed.

"If yo're buryin' th' hatchet, I'll shore help you tromple th' earth down on top of it. An' mebbly me an' you can prove, to anybody that needs proof, that neither one of us are scared of anythin' that wears pants an' drinks liquor. How 'bout it?"

"Set 'em out for all hands, Spike; an' make mine rye," said the cunning boss, standing up. He looked around the room and then back at Johnny.

"I'd shore like to know what made that noise," he said, slowly; "an' when daylight gits here, I'm shore goin' to try to find out."

"We'll both try it," replied Johnny. "If it was a ghost, all right; but if it wasn't, then Gawd help it, or whoever it was."

He slowly followed the crowd to the bar and joined Walters at the far end.

"I never did believe in ghosts; but . . ." he sighed, and raised his glass amicably in salute to the enemy of only a few minutes before.

CHAPTER XVII

THE crowd gradually settled back into the various occupations which had intrigued it before the ghostly interruption.

Johnny moved about the room and made his way to the front door. He stood in it for a few moments and then stepped out into the night. Loco already had left the building, having watched his

chance and slipped out while the quarrel flared.

Johnny moved along the street, turned down the far side of the next building, swiftly removed his boots, and then, running lightly, dashed for a clump of sage not far away. He gained it, reached into it, picked something up, and slipped back to the building. Here he knelt, reached under the structure, and pushed something as far back under the floor as he could. This part of the building was a frame addition; had it been of adobe he could not have made use of it. Putting on his boots, he sauntered back to the street, along it, and reentered the Palmer House.

A full minute after Johnny had passed from sight into the barroom, a figure detached itself from a third building, a building which stood on the other side of the street and faced the one in which Johnny had been interested. This figure, slight and furtive, slipped across the street, along the side of the second building, and crawled out of sight under it. Emerging a moment later, Loco held something in his hand; something rather bulky. Looking around carefully, he espied a lighted window farther down the street; and he hastened toward it, hugging his prize tightly against him.

The curtains in the lighted window were drawn, but a thin streak of light escaped from their edges, and it was sufficient to let Loco examine his find. For perhaps thirty seconds he looked at it, turning it around and around, and then, plunging his hand into it to see why it rattled, he brought up a chunk of something which he smelled and then tasted. For perhaps another thirty seconds he stood wrapped in thought, his blighted mind struggling with its memories. Suddenly it came to him and, making a quick gesture of elated understanding, he scurried away in the night, pleased as a child with a new toy.

Johnny, on reentering the Palmer House, sauntered over to watch the poker game in the far rear corner, disappointed that his night's activities had not developed the showdown he had hoped for. He watched the game without seeing it, for his mind was very busy. He knew the real value of his truce with the boss of Hell's Center; he knew that it was more dangerous for him than the open fight he had hoped for. He reviewed what he had

heard of Walters' dexterity with a Colt, and he seemed to find a sort of satisfaction in it. This was strange, on the surface, for Walters' specialty was fanning with speed and precision. The man had a local reputation for expertness in gun tricks, and was regarded as a master gunman by his fellows.

Johnny smiled to himself as these thoughts passed through his mind. He could see Bill handing that gun to Steve Smith; he could see Smith, another expert in fancy shooting tricks, start the deadly roll, a bit of six-shooter manipulation which was about the height of skill, and always amazed the uncritical. Trick shots required perfect coordination of too many fine factors for a sensible man to risk his life on them when the nerves were taut and the situation desperate. Smith, master of the forward and the reverse rolls, and perhaps even the double forward and reverse, had killed himself because a straight shooting, non-fancy gunman had merely extended an empty hand when the roll was halfway around. Bill had thoroughly understood the possibilities of that roll, and simply had taken advantage of his knowledge. Johnny, too, understood the rolls, and all other fancy tricks known to fancy shooters; he understood them and he could duplicate them; but he never would be so foolish as to try any of them deliberately in a crisis if plain, straight shooting would serve him. The fewer and simpler a man's motions were in deadly gun play, the better for that man. He sincerely hoped that Tom Walters would choose a fancy gun trick when the time came for the deadly showdown between them.

OTHER minds were thinking clearly and straight. Since the quarrel had been patched up between Johnny and Walters, Matt Skinner had appointed himself Johnny's special protector. He was not foolish enough to let Johnny know this, but he was determined to keep within sight and range of his friend, and preferably not at his side. If he could lag along behind and a little to one side, he would have his chosen position. Then let Walters, or any other man, try any pot-shooting at Johnny's back! Bill, Panhandle, Dave, and Wyatt were also thinking along those lines, but none of them went quite so far as Matt. They

knew the peril in which their friend stood, and they would quietly keep their eyes on his surroundings.

Walters pulled out his watch, glanced at it, and slid it back into the pocket. He was becoming impatient. He too had been doing some thinking, and he was eager to carry out his plan and rid the town of a cocky nuisance.

"Another hour to daylight," he growled. "Then we'll see what we'll see!"

"Yeah, reckon so," grunted a voice.

Walters let his gaze rest on Johnny and gave free rein to his suspicions: Johnny was the only man who had not been in the barroom when those shrieks had sounded. Walters' jaw set grimly and his face became hard for an instant; and he suddenly reddened with anger at the thought that the fear which had so strongly gripped him and made him so ridiculous had been caused by human trickery.

"Well," said a voice, humorously, "whatever it was, I'd a blame' sight rather see it in daylight than at night!"

"Yo're right; dead right!" called out a friend. "I'd even go so far as to say that I'd rather hear it at night than see it at day—"

Again the room hushed, again everything was forgotten but the sound which filled the air. Softened a little by distance, it nevertheless held all its horrible, torturing qualities. Rising and falling, it ended in a low, throbbing sob. Again it came, this time dying out on its highest note, a quavering stiletto of sound. Then came silence, doubly silent.

Spike's hand moved across his chest, up and down, instinctively making the sign of the cross. Otherwise, he seemed to be paralyzed. Johnny remained in the position into which reflex action had sent him: halfway out of his chair. His look of amazement was not simulated, nor were the looks of amazement on the faces of his friends. Bill and the others had looked quickly about for a glimpse of Matt Skinner and saw that person rigid from surprise. Little prickles played along their spines, and then ceased as reason returned to bulwark them against instinctive fear.

Tom Walters, the foundations kicked out from under his mental structure, was low down in his chair, shrinking, cringing, pale of face and speechless. Johnny

was present this time: not a man was missing! The room was hushed and silent except for strained breathing.

Somebody sighed loudly. A gust of inhalations and exhalations burst forth as lungs continued their actions. A chair scraped as a man leaped to his feet, his vocal chords functioning furiously.

"To hell with daylight! To hell with daylight!" he shouted, looking about wildly. "I'm gettin' out of this damn country, an' I'm gettin' *now!*" A most reassuring thought was in his mind: the sound had come from the direction of the old adobe shack on the bottoms, where by all rights it should come from; and the shortest trail out of town led directly away from that accursed building.

"Don't you do it!" yelled a friend in panicky warning. "Not at night! Yore hoss can travel fast, but *that* thing can catch it in one jump! Wait till *daylight*, an' *I'll* go with you!"

"I ain't waitin' for nothin' or nobody!" replied the first speaker.

"Shut up! Shut yore face!" snapped Walters, standing up now, a gun in his hand. "I'll shoot th' first rat that tries to leave *this* ship! Set down! Set down, both of you!"

HIS gaze, after a moment's scrutiny of the two would-be deserters, moved slowly around the room and came to rest on Johnny, who only now was sinking back into his chair. He did not see Matt, for Matt was just out of the field of his vision; and Matt was twice as dangerous for that very reason: the open end of Matt's holster had moved upward in an arc under his coat and was lined up squarely on the chest of the boss of Hell's Center. At the poker table in the far rear corner of the room, Bill was hunched forward over the table's edge, as if to hear and see better; but his elbows were resting on his knees, both knees and elbows out of sight, of course. Under that big table two heavy guns were leveled on Tom Walters. Panhandle was watching Walters' closest friends, while Dave and Wyatt alertly kept cases on the rest of the room.

The boss spoke, but as the first words came forth he quickly had to change them, for it had just come to his mind that Johnny had been in the room before, during, and after the last shrieks. The impetus of his first suspicions had re-

turned, and had been again banished by clever thinking. Keener realization of what this implied made the blood drain from his face. He changed his words from angry accusation to reassurance:

"Take it easy, Johnny; we'll find out th' answer to all this hellishness at th' first crack of daylight."

Johnny looked up at him, releasing a gusty breath. Puzzlement still showed in his face. He knew what had made the sounds, but . . .

"Yeah, we will," he said, slowly. "Where—which way do you reckon—it—came from?"

"That old 'dobe hut in th' bottoms," answered a nervous voice quickly.

"— — — yes!" exclaimed another, vibrating with excitement.

"From th' old 'dobe in th' bottoms," muttered Walters. He struggled with himself for a moment, and then threw his head back defiantly.

"All right, then!" he said tensely. "Come daylight, we all go to th' old 'dobe hut in th' bottoms: we *all* go!"

Opalescence transformed the eastern sky, objects emerged from the graying plain. The lamp light in the Palmer House began to dim. Sleepy figures stirred in their chairs, and the sound of many voices grew louder, causing the sleepy figures to stir still more. Spike walked slowly from behind the bar and put out the first lamp. He was tired, sleepy, seemingly all at once. He yawned, stretched out one arm and then the other, and raised both toward the hanging lamp in the center of the room. One by one the kerosene wicks grew black, and stank. The eastern sky was now bright. Outside horses pawed restlessly, and there came the low and musical clinking of harness chains.

Tom Walters stood up with sudden energy. He looked tired, drawn, like a man whose physical fatigue was less than his mental, and both enough. He looked around the room, meeting questioning eyes; and as usual, his gaze sought out and rested on Johnny.

"Aw, hell!" yawned someone from a corner. "Let's eat, first."

Walters considered the remark without looking at the speaker. He considered it with divided attention. The two thoughts in his mind untangled, and he pushed aside the more important for the more pleasant.

"All right," he growled in sudden decision. "Somebody go over an' prod th' cook; tell him to rustle chuck regardless." He looked again at Johnny, trying to hide his hatred. No truce could erase the words that this young man had said to him. He studied the young man, and found Johnny studying him. The silence was becoming noticeable when Walters broke it. "After we feed I'm goin' to prospect that 'dobe hut over in th' bottoms. You want to come along with me?"

The question was a challenge, and it stirred Johnny as it had been intended to stir him.

"Reckon so," he answered with seeming reluctance, striving to hide his eagerness.

"Hell! It's daylight, *now!*" said Walters unpleasantly.

THE implication stung the young man into bravado, and he followed willingly the trail of the other's choosing.

"I don't care whether it's daylight or not!" he retorted. "I'll go any place *you* will."

"Well, I'm glad to hear you *say* it, anyhow," rejoined Walters. He smiled thinly and looked around the room again. "You boys scatter out an' search th' whole plain an' bottoms," he ordered, his words embracing every man in the room except Spike, Johnny, and himself. "Me an' Johnny will take care of th' hut."

"An' me," said Matt eagerly. "I'd like to see it."

"Huh!" sneered Walters, again turning to Johnny. "*Yore* friend wants to go along."

Johnny flushed and turned an indignant face to Matt.

"You can see it after we get back," he said sharply, determined that there be no second fizzle to his plan. "Me an' Tom have kinda got a little bet about which one of us goes in that hut first."

Walters' eyes glistened and his lids drew closer together. If Johnny was guessing he was guessing very close. The young man was a pest. A smile wiped out his frown, and he nodded quickly.

"Yes," he said, "we have. After what was said last night, we both have kinda got to show that our guts are where they oughta be. That makes it a two-man affair."

"Shore," said Johnny carelessly. "Let's go over an' see if th' grub is ready. I'm hungry."

CHAPTER XVIII

DUST filled the little street as horseman after horseman mounted, whirled, and rode off to begin the search for they knew not what.

Matt had intended to ride alone and to keep within at least long rifle shot of Johnny, but Bill's quick, whispered order gave him no choice, and he fell in with Bill and Panhandle.

Tom Walters and Johnny stood in front of the Palmer House, wrapped in dust, and watched the last man whirl down the street. Johnny, as behoved a stranger in the presence of the boss of the town, waited for the older man to take the lead. Minutes passed, neither saying anything; and then Walters, turning his head quickly, broke the silence.

"We'll give 'em plenty of time to get goin' an' scare somethin' up," said the boss. His eyes glistened. "If it's any two-laigged critter, he'll make for th' 'dobe hut when he sees th' sage bein' combed so clean. There's no place else for him to hide, in daylight."

"Uh-huh," grunted Johnny, not for an instant relaxing in his alertness. His air of carelessness was well simulated.

"I'm savin' th' big play for you an' me," said Walters, after a moment's thought. "I didn't believe in ghosts last night, an' I don't believe in 'em now," he said, but the words lacked the ring of truth.

"Uh-huh," grunted Johnny, holding back the smile.

"Let's git in th' saddle, an' be ready to start," said the boss, stepping toward his horse. He mounted with his face toward his companion, a polite compliment which Johnny copied carefully.

"Might as well start now," said Walters, and side by side they swung around the corner of the Palmer House and rode slowly forward in the direction of the adobe hut.

"Take it easy," said Walters, keeping his horse at a walk, his eyes on three distant horsemen on the far side of the

little creek. "We'll give th' boys time to start th' circle an' swing in. They'll center on th' shack."

"Uh-huh," grunted Johnny, riding knee to knee with his companion.

"Ain't so talkative now, huh?" inquired Walters with a grin. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

"Ain't got no reason to be," replied Johnny, watching to see that his companion did not lag behind.

"Reckon not," grunted Walters.

They threaded their way through the sage and followed down the gentle slope of the basin. Steadily the hut drew nearer, but they were so much closer to it than the others that they would arrive minutes ahead of the nearest rider.

Walters' horse stopped abruptly, but Johnny's did the same; in a situation like this Johnny believed in politeness, and was not so rude as to keep on and give the man his dust.

"Cantankerous, ain't you?" demanded Walters, speaking to his mount. He savagely rolled a spur along the animal's flank, and checked its instant reaction. When the horse quit sidling the two men were face to face and two arm's-length apart. Johnny pushed on again as the other's horse swung around into position, and again they rode ahead, side by side.

"You don't believe in ghosts, huh?" suddenly asked Walters, with the trace of a sneer in his voice.

"No; not in daylight, anyhow; an' not enough to make a damn' fool of myself," answered Johnny. "I might, though, if that hut meant anythin' special to me."

"Yer? An' what does that mean?" asked the boss of Hell's Center. His voice had a hard ring.

"It meant somethin' to Big Henry."

"An' what was that?"

"Dunno; but it shore bothered him."

"Huh! Lots of things bothered Big Henry," replied Walters with a snort of disgust. "They ain't botherin' him now."

"No; reckon not."

THE hut was near now; so near that they could see the sun cracks in the adobe. Whoever had built it had been short of hardware, and made use of leather straps for hinges. They had long since dried out and parted, and the packing-case door had fallen inward.

The two men pulled up and stopped a scant dozen feet from the opening.

"Well, here we are," growled Walters, trying to keep the tenseness out of his voice.

"Yeah," replied Johnny, his horse sidling about until it was possible to dismount with Walters in plain view.

They swung down simultaneously, facing each other; and each stepped quickly away from his mount. For a moment they exchanged level looks, and then Walters gently waved his left hand.

"After you," he said politely.

"What for?" asked Johnny, curiously. "I got no interest in no ghosts."

"No?"

"No."

Walters' eyelids dropped a little and a faint smile wreathed his face.

"But it's *daylight now*," he said, a sneer edging his words.

"I reckon mebby that's why you've come so close to it," retorted Johnny. He jerked his head sideways toward the open door. "Go ahead in: you ain't scared, are you?"

Three riders were coming up from the south, and three more from the west. Both groups were about an equal distance away, and that distance was something more than half a mile. Both groups were moving at a walk, and, strange to say, were watching each other more than they were the hut. The group that Johnny saw was composed of friends of his companion; the group in Walters' are of vision was made up of Bill, Panhandle, and Matt. Neither Walter nor Johnny dared to take his eyes from the man in front of him, and so neither saw the other group. Both sensed the coming of their little climax; it had to come quickly if it was to come before the nearing horsemen complicated matters.

"Stubborn, ain't you?" asked Walters, so watchful and intent that his lips barely moved; and this, in itself, was sufficient warning, had it been needed, to the other man.

"No; just kinda set," replied Johnny. "If yo're goin' to have a look around in there before company gets here, you better get started."

"No!" snapped Walters, angrily. "Get in there, an' get in there quick!"

"Still scared, huh? It's yore ghost, not mine," retorted Johnny, and then he laughed. That was one of the reasons

why his friends loved him so: that laugh in the face of danger. "Just to show you that I don't believe in ghosts, I'll go in first; an' I'll prove it to you by back-in' in. Takes guts to back in ag'in ghosts, Walters!" Again he laughed. "Right now I'm figgerin' that th' only danger there is for me is in front, an' not behind."

Step by step he moved backwards, feeling his way. To trip or to stumble now might be fatal. He had almost covered the distance when he heard a noise in the hut, and as his suspicious mind thought of a man planted inside to shoot him down, his spur caught on a root and he lost his balance.

Never in all his life had he thought quicker than he was thinking now. To waste a split second of time in trying to regain his balance would mean death; so he jerked out both guns and turned them loose in a crossfire. His first shot was even with Walters' third.

THE instant Johnny's spur had caught on the root Walters' two hands were in action, the left fanning the hammer of the gun held by the right, and fanning in a very blur of speed.

Johnny struck the earth wreathed in swirling clouds of his own powder smoke, rolled over and up with his legs gathered under him, and his spring carried him nearly a dozen feet. Turning while in the air, he struck the earth again with his heels, facing the open door and covering it with both guns. With the first crash of his left-hand gun he had mentally eliminated Walters as a danger, but he had let a second shot go to make doubly certain. Walters, as a matter of fact, was not only mentally eliminated, but physically, too: his first three shots had come out of his gun as close together as shots could come; the fourth clipped the edge of the doorway, and the fifth went almost straight up in the air, for the shooter was dead when his relaxed thumb had let the hammer fall.

Then came silence, a silence so abrupt as to give the impression of a jerk. Walters lay half in and half out of a little clump of sage, two holes through the upper left-hand pocket of his already soaked vest. Fancy shooting when the nerves are taut, and split seconds precious, seldom makes the scores that it does in target play.

Johnny, his back to Walters and the approaching horsemen from the south, caught a glimpse of the other riders, and forthwith gave his entire attention to the open door of the hut. The smoke had thinned out now, and let him see clearly. He heard the pounding of hoofs behind him and to one side of him; and again, as he had so often done before, he put his unqualified trust in Hopalong.

"Come out of there!" he snapped, balanced on the balls of his spread feet. "Come out with yore hands up, or I'm comin' in with mine spittin' lead!"

"Don't shoot no more!" wailed a thin and quavering voice. "Don't shoot no more! I'm a-comin' mister; I'm a-comin' fast as I can!"

The unseen speaker made good his words, but he came with music blaring, like the Highlanders of old. No bagpipes swirled in Loco's hands, but the sounds were as piercing. He stepped into and through the doorway, his face covered with blood from two lead-carved gashes on his forehead; one leg buckled slightly because of another lead-ripped wound; and under his left arm was hugged a huge tomato can, while his right hand, gripping a chunk of resin, pulled strongly against a short but heavy cord.

Johnny had sense enough to keep from dropping his guns, but hardly more. He fumbled with them around the tops of their sheaths, trying to find the openings, and then let them drop into place. He sat down on the sandy earth and laughed himself weak and silly. Loco wheeled, faced about, and started for town, his instrument shrieking and wailing.

The two squads of horsemen drew steadily nearer, riding in parallel lines. They had seen the swift tragedy from a point near enough to make explanations needless, yet the right-hand squad was primed to ask questions.

The two groups passed Walters' body with barely a glance, being too much occupied with possible troubles with the living to pay much attention to the dead. The leaders of each short line drew rein and the two squads stopped. Loco was still parading through the sage, bound for town, limping slowly along, his tomato-can instrument of torture making the day hideous. He had lost his hat, and his long hair streamed in the wind.

Johnny arose by an effort and faced about. His glance swept swiftly past his

friends and rested on the other three horsemen. The laughter had gone from him, and now he was coolly appraising.

POWERS, the leader of the unfriendly three, and the poker players who habitually doubted the honesty of his fellow players, was the first to speak. The odds were now four to three against his little group; he had seen Johnny's amazing exhibition of cross-arm gunplay, after Walters had fired three times; he had seen Bill's shooting in the Palmer House. Both were very convincing, and he never had owned to any great affection for Tom Walters when that person had been alive; now that he was dead, dead also was Powers' interest in him.

"Reckon we'll pick him up an' take him on to town," said Powers, tentatively.

"Shore," said Johnny. "Be sure to tell it just like you saw it."

"Shore. Bosses certainly do come an' go in this man's town," said Powers, his admiring gaze resting on the young man who could shoot so admirably when turning, upside down in the air.

"Shore do," admitted Johnny.

"Walters was plannin' this half th' night," said Powers, "but it worked out wrong."

"Not to my way of thinkin'," said Johnny.

"Th' bosses have been comin' an' goin' fast since you strangers came to town," said the second man in Powers' group.

"Seems so," said Panhandle, coldly.

"Sorta coincidence, like," said the third man.

"That's shore th' healthiest way of lookin' at it," said Matt, smiling.

"You fellers act kinda like you was well knowed to each other," remarked Powers, thoughtfully.

"Folks get acquainted quick in a small town like this," said Bill, pleasantly. "I feel like I've knowed you all my life."

"Yeah," said Powers a little uneasily. He looked again at Johnny. "Walters didn't fool you much, huh, when he smoked th' pipe of peace with you last night?"

"Not nothin' to mention," answered Johnny.

"Wonder how come he picked out this place to run her off?" asked Powers, scratching his chin.

"Didn't have th' guts to work it out in an even break," answered Bill; "so he figgered there wouldn't be nobody around out here to see him commit a murder."

"Well, he didn't commit it," drawled Powers, slowly swinging out of the saddle. "Now we got to hold another election; but first, we'll take *him* in to town."

He winced as the gusty wind brought a more powerful and more horrible strain of Loco's instrument to his ears.

"That's awful! An' *that* was th' ghost! Well, well, well," he chuckled as he pictured the consternation the shrieks had caused in a room full of grown men. "What a bunch of damn' fools we all was!" Looking around and down at the body in the sage bush, he shook his head, and chuckled again. "Ah, *you*, Tom, was th' dammedest fool of all!"

CHAPTER XIX

ONE by one the searchers, finding nothing to interest them, gave up the fruitless task and returned to town, there to learn of the passing of Tom Walters, the identity of the "ghost," and to hear furtive remarks about the suspected cohesion of the six strangers. Before the last few riders straggled in, the matter of Walters' successor as leader already was being debated, and it was plain that the choice of a new leader would not be made without a contest. The more dominant leaders had served their terms and died; only lesser men remained.

There were two prominent members left out of the select circle of six which had formed the nucleus of the gang. One of these was George White, a tall, gangling, saturnine man with a cast in one eye, whose mustache apparently never had felt a scissors. When it got too long he chewed it shorter. It proclaimed him to be an inveterate chewer of tobacco.

The other remaining member was a Texan who went by the name of Paso Frank, a man of rather less than average stature. He was slender, wiry, quick in all of his actions. His legs were more than ordinarily bowed and, because of this, suggested the thought in more than one mind that he had been allowed to use a saddle for a cradle. He waddled when

he walked, and walked only when he had to; he smoked incessantly, seldom made an unnecessary movement, and had the habit of looking at a man's chin while talking to him. His hair, whatever its original color might have been, was a pale taffy color and hung halfway to his shoulders.

The sequence of the afternoon's events was laid out with some idea of propriety. First and foremost, as a necessary aid to inspiration, were the rounds of liquor drunk to the memory of the deceased. The deceased lay on two tables which had been pushed together. He was wrapped in his own dirty blankets, his face exposed at one end and his dusty boots at the other. Liquor flowed freely, most of it at the expense of the hopeful candidates for the vacant boss-ship.

The first argument of weight arose over the delicate question of boots; should the lamented deceased be buried with his boots on, or off? Innately this was a matter of no importance, which might be why it became so dangerously important. A small kerosene lamp caused the Chicago fire. George White was of the opinion that the boots should be undisturbed; and, naturally enough, Pasa Frank had to defend the opposite idea.

To Bill, sitting in the rear far corner, the disposition of this question was interesting and important, for it bid fair to indicate the strength of the two candidates for the vacant office.

Dave and Wyatt were doing the same, while Matt sat by himself in the far front corner, listening to everything, and especially to anything which might threaten the safety of his absent companion. Johnny was absent, having quietly effaced himself and slipped away during one of the stampedes toward the bar. He was at that moment sitting on a box of canned tomatoes in the general store, giving the attentive proprietor a history of recent events.

"An' I say if you could 'a' got 'em off before he died, then it would 'a' been all right to plant him barefoot," said White argumentatively, and the murmur of the crowd indicated that the majority was with him. "I main-tain that it would desa—desa—insult Tom Walters to disturb him now. He was a friend of mine, an' no friend of mine is goin' to be insulted when he's dead."

"Good for you, George!"

"Thats th' idear," bellowed a knee-buckling brave near the end of the bar. "Stoo late now."

PASA FRANK, waiting a moment for the noise to subside, replied to his rival's remark.

"Yes, he wore 'em when he lived, all right; but while he lived he took 'em off when he went to sleep—an' he's shore gone to sleep now, a sleep that 'll never end. Seems to me that we oughta pay him th'—"

"I vote agin' th' barefoot idear," shouted an inebriate with a finishing hiccup.

"That's it! Vote on her! Put her to a vote!"

"Yeah, vote on her."

"Just a minute, boys," shouted White, raising a hand. "Just a minute! Votin' don't make a thing right! Votin' is only a—a—"

"Damn' nuisance! Who cares how he's buried?"

"'Spression of opinion," yelled another.

"Excuse for a fight," said a third, roaring with laughter.

"Vote on her! Vote on her!"

"Shore! Vote on her!"

"Come on: put her to a vote!"

"All in favor of votin' on her, raise their han's!" shouted a leather-lunged desperado near the front door, and he held up his own hand as an example. "Carried!" he announced without counting. "All in favor of plantin' him like he is, boots an' all, holler *aye!* Th' ayes have it. There you are, all done an' over with, settled permanent!"

"Line up!" yelled a companion. "We'll drink to his boots!"

"Shore; but ain't it about time for th' house to set out a round?"

"Which th' house does!" shouted Spike at the top of his voice in order to make himself heard over the affirmative chorus. "This is on th' house!" he yelled, still louder, if possible; and he was swamped under a rolling avalanche of cheers.

Bill arose and moved to the side of George White, resting a hand on the bandit's shoulder.

"Friend," he said, softly, "tell us what is right. Me an' Panhandle are strangers. We'd like to pay our respects to th' dead, an' join' in th' funeral:

what would th' boys think about it?"

"It's a fair question, stated fair," answered White, swaying back on his heels. "Th' boys would take it kindly of you. Them other two fellers, too; an' that Matt hombre. Dunno about that Johnny coyote: dunno a-tall. *Wait!*"

He swayed forward and stopped against Paso Frank, leaning on the smaller man while he whispered. After a moment he returned shaking his head.

"We've had shootin' enough for one day," he said, "an' th' boys are gettin' their skins full. Better keep *him* away!"

Bill walked toward the front door, returning along the wall, and on his way he passed the word to his friends. He rejoined Panhandle and dropped into his chair. Two men came in through the back door, shovels in their hands, and sweat and grime on their flushed faces. The glare of the light outside had temporarily blinded them against good vision in the softer, dimmer light of the saloon.

"Damn' hard diggin'," said the first shovel bearer.

"Shore is: we oughta find another buryin' ground, where th' soil is—*look there!*" he exclaimed as brightening vision revealed the line-up at the bar. "Somebody's buyin': come on!" The shovels clattered to the floor as their erstwhile wielders leaped forward.

Bill and Panhandle kept their quiet and apparently careless vigil, loafing back in their pet chairs at their favorite table. Wyatt and Dave lazily leaned back in their chairs against the side wall between the two windows, while Matt groused sleepily in his own chair against the front wall. They were all hearing occasional remarks concerning themselves, and the trend indicated more frequent allusions to them. The storm, if there was one, was still far away; but its distant rumblings carried a warning to wise men.

George White stepped back from the bar and raised his voice above the general noise.

"Well, boys!" he shouted, and after waiting a moment, tried again. "Boys!"

THE talking and laughter slowly died, and the candidate for leadership, swaying slightly, raised an arm and continued.

"Boys, we got to do th' last rites for pore Tom Walters," he said. "A couple

of you ketch holt of his feet, an' a couple more git him by th' shoulders. If he buckles, a couple more can take care of that. Me an' Paso, bein' all that are left of th' original six members of this here band, will lead th' parade. Them with th' corpse, foller us; an' th' rest of you boys foller th' corpse. Are we all ready?"

"If you'd got his boots off before he died," said a disputatious drunk, "then I'd say, leave 'em off. There ain't no use of—"

"Aw, shut up, Murphy: that's all settled."

"Quit yore spoutin', Murphy, an' fall in here with me."

"But ain't I right?" demanded Murphy, teetering back on to his heels. "Ain't I?"

"Shore! Yo're dead right! Yo're holdin' up th' funeral!"

"I ain't holdin' up nothin', less it's th' bar," argued Murphy.

"Come on, Murphy: get in here with me—I got a flask!"

"Right you are! If you'll admit it, now, all right!" Murphy looked around the room, saw Bill and Panhandle slowly rising from their chairs, and then looked at the other strangers and found that they, also, were moving toward the end of the line.

"You strangers git in th' tail of th' line," ordered Murphy, and staggered forward to personally place them. "Right in here, Bill; you next, Panhandle. Walters was a damn' skunk, but I'll say no ill of th' dead. Th' rest of you fall in behind 'em. No laughin' or jokin', mind, till we get him planted decent an' all covered over. All right, George: crack th' whip an' throw off the brakes: *let her go!*"

The procession filed out into the street in a somewhat ragged manner, having the tendency to thin out here and to bunch up there; but after the doorway was left behind most of the difficulties were past. It wound down the street, turned the slope along the blacksmith shop, and stopped on a little hillock back of the harness maker's shop. Mounds and headboards marked it for what it was, and the shallow, new grave with its pile of freshly turned earth and gravel and sand marked the stopping place, both for the funeral cortège and for the dead; for the cortège, a temporary stop-

ping place; for the dead, permanent, unless it was the beginning of an unknown journey.

"Don't drop him!" snapped the leader, and then he cursed.

"Didn't do him no harm," replied the guilty bearer. "Hell! Look here," he said, kicking the dead ribs. "See? You can't—hic—hurt him no more."

"You do that again an' there'll be another corpse to plant!" warned Paso Frank, sober enough to know that the guilty brute was a henchman of the rival candidate.

"That so?" demanded a belligerent voice from the other side of the open grave.

"Here! Here! No quarrelin', you ——— fool!" reproved George White severely. "Don't you know this is a buryin'? Shut yore mouths an' take off yore hats. I'll say a few words before th' last dirt falls. You two, with th' shovels: scoop it in as soon as his body hits bottom, an' scoop fast. All right, boys: lower away, an' lower gentle."

PASO FRANK now stepped forward to the edge of the grave and took his turn in the limelight.

"Boys," he said, quickly, nervously, "yo're performin' th' last, sad rites for an old friend. Yo're goin' to miss him—"

"That Johnny hombre didn't miss him!" said a thick voice from the crowd. "You could cover 'em both with a silver dollar!"

"Where is Johnny?" asked another.

"Shut up!"

"Johnny ain't here. Keep on a-goin', Paso."

"As I was sayin'," continued the speaker, "yo're goin' to miss Tom Walters a lot as time goes on. If you'll just bow yore heads with me, boys: Lord, give Tom Walters a fresh deck, a fair cut, and a square deal. Amen."

"I'd 'a' been in favor of plantin' him barefoot, if you'd took his boots off before he—"

"Somebody choke that damn' Mick!" shouted an angry mourner.

"Here, Murphy! Here's a flask, an' it's near full," said another, with a better understanding of the situation. It was passed along toward Murphy, but when it reached that person it was empty; but before he could make known

his opinion, Paso Frank flung up an arm and shouted an invitation to drink which resulted in a stampede.

The strangers, lagging behind naturally enough, drew closer together and became a compact group, eager to seize upon this opportunity for an exchange of words.

It was Bill who spoke first. To his way of thinking there was trouble in the air. Liquor was flowing freely, and the election of a new boss would further arouse men who were dangerous enough when sober; and doubly so, when drunk. The crowd was fast becoming a mob. Already, in more than one mind, the strangers were arousing suspicion; their cohesion was beginning to be suspected. Let the right moment come, and the right kind of appeal, and there was no telling what might occur. The odds were too heavy to be voluntarily faced within the narrow confines of the Palmer House; Bill was considering the lives of his companions, and anything he could do to safeguard them he would do.

"Dave," he said, as the two men fell into step, "trouble is fixin' to bust loose. If she does bust, an' we have time to make th' play, we got to get into th' general store. It's thick adobe, it's got extra strong doors an' window shutters, an' it's stocked plumb full of grub an' ca'tridges. Remember: head for th' store right away, first thing, if trouble breaks loose."

"Right," said Dave. "What about water?"

"There's a hogshead plumb full of water ag'in th' rear wall of the place," said Matt.

"Step along a little faster," said Bill. "We don't want to be too far behind. We got to split up in pairs ag'in. Me an' Panhandle will come in last. Before we do split, however, I want to tell Matt to head for th' store an' arrange for either you or Johnny to be in there most of th' time. I want a man inside that fort, ready to help from th' inside when th' time comes. You an' Johnny can figger that out between you."

"Shore," said Matt, changing the direction of his stride and going off at an angle, heading straight for the store and for his friend. The others, letting distance increase between the pairs, kept on going, and entered the Palmer House two at a time.

CHAPTER XX

WHILE the crowd in the Palmer House boiled and seethed, the fires fueled with election liquor, the atmosphere was quite different back in Bulltown, hundreds of miles to the east.

Bulltown had its quieter periods, depending somewhat on the season of the year, the personnel of the cattle outfits on the outlying range, on the shifting of the town's floating population, on the hour of the day, and on the quality of the town marshal.

The season of the year was just then changing, dynamically, for the first herd to come up from Texas and the Nations was crawling over the crest of the distant southern hills and angling down toward the river bottoms and the crossing, and looked not greatly unlike some deformed caterpillar.

The personnel of the outfits holding cattle on winter range, not only for the grazing but also for quarantine purposes, within a day's ride of town, were somewhat subdued. It was midway between pay days, and in the middle of the week; and the floating population of the town had been so well sifted and herded by the peace officers that the hang-overs of the winter were more or less peaceful; while the new influx had been tardy in arriving to prepare for a busy and prosperous summer.

The hour of the day was mid-afternoon, which while livelier than mid-morning, was much quieter than midnight, or even after dark. And the quality of the town marshal and his aides remained the same. Bat was still the chief peace officer, ready at all times with smile, persuasion, or gun.

We find him now in the officially ungodly part of the town, south of the tracks, surrounded by saloons, dives, and gambling hells. Moving along from one building to the next, he exchanged pleasantries with the proprietors and kept on going. He avoided a pool of sun-caked oil on the side-track, crossed the main track, passed around the end of the railroad depot, and headed for Kelly's. His progress was peaceful and dignified, for at the moment there was no gang and anti-gang feud to make him otherwise. The desperadoes and the wilder punchers

in the surrounding territory, which was not yet organized into a county, were marking time and waiting for voluntary reinforcements to come up the trails from the south.

Entering Kelly's, he paused for a moment for his eyes to become adjusted to the poorer light indoors, and then walked slowly to a small table in the rear of the room, where a woman and a youth were talking over glasses of beer. The sound of his steps made them both look up, and their conversation ceased.

"Rose, ain't you kinda outside yore territory?" asked Bat, frowning for effect.

"I reckon I am," she answered somewhat defiantly.

"My fault," muttered the youth sullenly. There was an air of dejection about him, a hopelessness, a weary toleration of life that made his companion frown.

"Well, Bat, if you can't keep th' Kid from crossin' th' tracks, then don't blame me for bringin' him back ag'in," said Rose somewhat sharply. "Them brace games an' crooked wheels will strip him of his last dollar." She swung part way around in her chair and faced the marshal. "Why don't you put him on th' east-bound to-night, an' send him back to his folks, where he belongs? He don't fit into no honkatonk town like this."

"I don't belong nowhere—unless it's back West, where I come from, like a whipped pup," growled the Kid, uttering misery in his eyes. "An' there ain't nothin' back there but an empty 'dobe hut, an' mebbly a grave: I don't even know if they had th' decency to bury her." His voice had fallen while he talked, and the last few words were barely audible.

"THAT so?" asked Bat, coldly, hoping to sting the youth into some show of spirit. "Nothin' back there but a 'dobe shack an' mebbly a grave, huh? Let me tell you what's back there! There's six of th' best damn' hombres this country ever saw, back there! Back there, fightin' yore fight! An' I reckon by now there's more graves than there was when you ran out!"

"Yeah, I know, Bat; I know," mumbled the youth. "An' I ought to be there with 'em, if I had th' spirit of a louse. You know that I wanted to go! Why

should I want to keep on livin', with *that* memory to damn me, sleepin' or wakin'? You know that I wanted to go back! But you wouldn't let me!"

"Shore; that's right," replied Bat. "I wouldn't let you: an' why? Because I'm waitin' for word from Cassidy. If you showed up there unexpected, before Cassidy wanted you to, you might wreck his plans an' get all them fellers killed. Mebby he's waitin' till him an' th' boys get th' place cleaned out, so you can go back to yore ranch an' have some chance for yore life."

"Back to th' ranch!" exclaimed the youth scornfully. "Back to th' ranch, where she an' I—where she—I wouldn't go back to that ranch for all th' money in th' country! I'd go crazy in a month, crazier than my uncle."

"Then go East, Kid," said Rose, her eyes moist. "Go back to yore folks, an' let time smooth out yore troubles. This ain't no place for you."

"What difference does it make, where I go, or where I stay?" asked the Kid, sullenly; "except just one place! I oughta go back to Hell's Center an' start shootin', an' keep on shootin' as long as I can pull a trigger!"

"An' that wouldn't be long enough to count," said Bat. "You'd be dead before you could get a gun workin'. We've had all that out before. How much of that five hundred you got left?"

"I've got enough."

"How much?"

"Near all of it. I had a lucky run at faro-bank."

"You did?" demanded Bat, his eyes glinting. "An' who dealt th' game?"

"I'm not sayin'."

"No?" growled the marshal, his voice rising. "Reckon I got to go 'round an' pass th' word ag'in. Thought I told 'em *all* not to let you play."

"There's some down my way that can't hear well," said Rose.

"I ain't no baby!" growled the Kid.

"Yo're gettin' hard to ride herd on, huh?" said the marshal. "All right: I can't foller you every place you go, day an' night. That means yo're pullin' out. I'm buyin' you a ticket to Philadelphia, an' it'll take you home on to-night's east-bound. You can say good-bye to Rose right now, for you won't see her ag'in."

"I ain't goin' home!" growled the Kid defiantly.

"Yo're goin' on that east-bound limited to-night, if I have to handcuff you to a seat," declared Bat. "You think I got nothin' to do for th' rest of my days but ride herd on you? Th' drives are startin' north, an' it won't be long now before I'll have all th' trouble I can handle without gettin' gray hair over you. Yo're takin' th' limited, Kid, an' yo're takin' it to-night."

"But there ain't nothin' in th' East for me," said the Kid, his voice breaking. "Damn it all, Bat: can't you understand that I just don't care what happens to me? I'd thank th' man who would blow my brains out. Everythin' I had that meant anythin' was in th' West—an' it's—dead. Dead, Bat: an' I'm just draggin' along, sick of livin'."

By an effort Bat kept his face cold and his voice harsh.

"If you don't aim to go back to yore ranch," said the marshal, "then there ain't no use waitin' for word from Cassidy. From now on till train time I'm stiekin' close to you, Kid: close as a tick to a cow; an' when that train pulls out to-night, you'll be on her. Rose," he said, looking down at the strangely quiet woman, "yore range is south of th' tracks; an', besides, old Dad Wiggins is worse. He was callin' for you when I passed his shack."

"Claire is with him now," objected Rose, rising swiftly in her own defense; but her voice showed anxiety.

"Claire is all right, th' minister to th' contrary notwithstanding," replied Bat with a smile; "but old Dad wants *you*; an' you know what an old buffaler hunter is when he wants anythin'."

"YES, I know. All right, Bat," said the social outcast as she stood up. "I'm goin'; but if you see Black Mike, you tell him that if he don't pay me that ten dollars he owes me, an' pay it pronto, I'll blow his damn' heart out!"

"I'll see him, an' I'll tell him, an' I'll collect th' ten without no bloodshed," said Bat with a smile. "How is old Dad's cash holdin' out?"

"There's enough for a day or two, an' I don't reckon he'll need money much longer than that; but you might tell th' boys to kitty out another twenty-five. That'll shore see him through, Bat. Th' old man is on his last trail, an' right close to th' end of it. After th' twenty-five

is gone, th' town will have to pay for another pine box."

"Th' city council is talkin' about cuttin' out pine boxes," said Bat, grimly. "Taxes are gittin' too high."

"Huh!" sneered Rose, venomously. "They can keep their money! I'll pay for th' box, an' it won't be pine!"

"Reckon mebby th' boys would rather do that themselves," said Bat. "They figger you've done more'n yore share, nursin' him like you've been. Oh! I near forgot: Big Sadie was complainin' about you an' Claire bein' away so much," he said, grinning. "Some of th' boys was complainin' that you don't dance as lively as you used to."

"To hell with th' boys!" snapped Rose. "An' if Big Sadie don't like our actions, she can go to hell, an' we'll start a place of our own!"

"Which was about th' idear I left fermentin' in her mind," chuckled the marshal. "Good-bye, Rose. *Good-bye!*"

"Oh, don't get up a sweat!" she retorted. "I'm goin'! Kid," she said, taking a quick step toward the dejected figure slumped against the table. "Kid, I'm sayin' good-bye. Think of me once in a while." She bent over swiftly, twisted his head around, and kissed him squarely on the mouth; and then the sudden swish of silk marked the passing of Rose out of his life.

* * *

The east-bound pulled in with its usual puffing and roaring, and squealing and clanking of iron. While the engines were being changed and the boxes examined, the marshal of Bulltown and a slender stripling of a youth stood near the steps of the smoking car.

On the far side of the limited stood a west-bound freight, its crew idling until they got their orders and the switch light changed. At most of the stations the main-line switch was far enough down the track for it to be thrown as soon as a limited cleared it while slowing down for the platform; here, the main part of the siding lay east of the station, and nine times out of ten east-bound trains rested on the points until they pulled out and went on their way.

"You've been right all along, Bat," said the Kid, voluntarily. "Th' place for me, right now, is with th' old folks; an' I knew it, too, only I was ornery an' weak. Reckon it was just kinda because

I couldn't get started thinkin' along th' right track; but I'm straightened out now, an' I'll shore be glad to see my old mother an' dad. I—I don't know how to thank you, Bat; you an' all th' rest of th' boys, an' Rose; but—I—well, I—"

"Hell, Kid!" snapped the hard-boiled marshal. "That's all right! This town's tough as hell, an' due to get tougher right soon, but she's shore got a heart in her, down close by th' tracks! If you want to please us, an' Rose 'specially, you head East, an' stay there. If any more uncles, locoed or not, stake you to a ranch, you up an' tell 'em to go to hell. You never was cut out for ranchin', Kid; not never."

"I know it, now; but it's too damn bad I didn't know it before; but even so, it wasn't th' ranchin'—it was that gang of—"

"I know that, too," replied the marshal; "but other parts of th' Southwest have gangs of — too. Take south of here, in th' Nations; oh, well, there ain't no use of talkin' about that. There's th' conductor with his orders, as if he needs any; he knows where he'll meet th' west-bound, an' so do I. Drop me a line, Kid, when—"

TWO shots rang out east of the station and they sounded as if they were north of the tracks, in forbidden territory.

Bat hastily gripped his companion's hand, wrung it hard, whirled and sprinted toward the disturbance, drawing a wicked-looking Colt as he passed the platform.

The youth watched him disappear into the darkness, had his attention distracted by the swinging lantern of a trainman, and climbed the steps of the smoking car, walked swiftly through it, out of the rear door and dropped to the ground on the far side of the train as the wheels began to move. Casting a swift glance to right and left, he saw the idle freight crew breaking up as one of its members hurried toward the main-line switch. For a moment the way was clear, and he darted forward under the nearest box car, and was snug on the rods before the operator handed over the train orders.

The switch light changed, brakes rattled, and there came a jerking which passed from car to car as the long train

slowly got under way. The flanges bit on the curve, the wheels clattered over the switch points, and the Kid was bound westward, back to the place he believed he belonged, on a voluntary journey to meet death.

Riding the rails did not come easy to him, but that mattered little if he could stick to them until the next stop, where he could leave the freight and wait for the next day's accommodation without having to argue with the toughest city marshal along that railroad line.

Daylight found him crawling from an empty box car on the siding at Rawhide, in which he had passed the last part of the night. He found a lunchroom and had a hearty breakfast, and from there he wandered back to the tracks as a section gang opened the tool house. He was dispirited and lonesome, and something about the freckled-faced Irish foreman made him walk down the track. The hand car was already speeding away, but it stopped at a little box-like structure painted a vivid red. When the Kid reached this place he saw black, corrugated cans of blasting powder under the opened lid; and a few boxes with a bright red stripe around them.

The foreman looked up and around at the sound of steps, and nodded.

"Howdy," said the Kid, smiling a little.

"Same to yerself, lad," replied the foreman, loading a stinking pipe. Around the broken end of the clay stem cotton cord had been wound to make it easier on the teeth. "Lookin' fer wurruk?"

"No; not yet," answered the Kid, his smile becoming bolder in the face of such friendliness. "You short a hand?"

"No; not *yit!*" answered the foreman, speaking unnecessarily loud and putting heavy emphasis on the last word. His tobacco-stained teeth were revealed in a broad grin. "But," he continued, "come night, we *may* be!"

He looked at his gang and laughed, waving his hand at one of the red-banded boxes being placed on the car.

"'Tis dynamite th' lad's carryin': an' see how gintle he handles it! If I've towld thim once th' stuff ain't dangerous, I've towld thim forty times! But these lads on th' prairie divisions ain't used to it, a-tall, a-tall. Still, if th' stuff's owld, an' has had th' hot sun meltin' th'

juice av it all summer long, thin mebbly a man should be gintle handlin' it. *That* box ain't fair thawed out yit from th' winter's cold: but they handle 'em very gintle, notwithstanding!"

The crew laughed and looked a little sheepish, but shrugged their shoulders as if to say that they would rather look ridiculous in the eyes of one man than "natural" in the eyes of many, and cheerfully went on with their work.

"**W**HYY," said the Kid, mainly for the sake of saying something, "I allus reckoned th' stuff was dangerous all th' time. Ain't it?"

"No, lad; it ain't," said the foreman, pleased to be able to talk about something he knew well. "Many's th' box I've packed on hosses an' mules up mountain trails that would worry a goat," and he forthwith gave a practical lecture on dynamite, its disposition, its use, its power, and its handling. He finished with a criticism of the division superintendent.

"His surveyors an' his ingineers towld him there was no rock there," he said. "Thin they found it, a great ridge av it just under th' top of a sharp swell. She was there, all right; an' they either had to git it out or abandon th' idear of a cut, an' run hell an' gone around th' hill. It is a long hill, an' th' result is, here I am; an' there's th' dynamite. There's th' stuff that 'll lift that rock like it was feathers." He turned as he heard his name called, shoved out a hairy, caloused hand, wished his new acquaintance good luck, and swung onto the hand car as it rolled past.

"You'll hear us before th' day's over," he called, and turned to grasp the flying handle.

So, carelessly and coincidentally, are purposes shaped, and human destiny affected. Seeds, falling on fertile earth, will sprout: aye, and the sprouting may be unsuspected.

In due time the Kid bought a ticket on the accommodation for the station nearest to his destination; and it was nearer than either of the two mentioned by Hopalong. He was not concerned with visiting Willow Springs, needing no information about how to get to Hell's Center.

After a long, hot, and dusty train ride, he swung down to the platform, at Dos

Algodoneros, and from that point of vantage turned slowly on his heels to look the town over. No one whom he knew was in sight, and his glance swept back toward the corral where he would obtain a horse and outfit; but midway in its course it was arrested by a red-painted box several hundred yards down the railroad track, and in that instant an idea fairly exploded in his brain.

He had left Hell's Center hopeless and helpless, in no way able to cope with a single man in the town, not to consider them all: he would return still hopeless, so far as concerned anything which life might hold out for him; but he would return far from helpless: he would have an army in a box. Now he hoped fiercely, with the savagery of a man whose one purpose is to destroy, that he would find not just one man, but all of them, and as close together as they could get. He now had more than a horse to buy: he needed two horses. Instead of one saddle he would get two: one for himself, and one pack saddle. As he tore his gaze from the red house of explosives there came to him exultant eagerness, and to his face the first smile it had known in days.

* * *

At Dos Algodoneros the section foreman emerged from the bunkhouse picking his teeth after a satisfactory breakfast. He flipped the toothpick from him, drew out his pipe, and felt for the tobacco sack; and then he lowered both sack and pipe as he stared unbelievably down the track. Was the explosive box open, or was he seeing things? The cover looked to be askew, and that meant—

He sprinted along the right of way and realized that his wind was not as good as it should be. Yes, the cover was aslant, and he could see the wedge-shaped crack between its upper edge and the top of the box. Panting, he stopped before it. A powerful pry had been inserted in the crack bridged by the hinges, for they had been ripped loose, the screws torn out of the splintered wood. He threw the cover to the ground and looked inside. What was missing, and how much?

"Six tins of blazin' powder; aye right. Ah, th' dynamite! Let's sec, now," he said to himself as he considered it. "Yes: about fifty pounds! Great Gawd! *Fifty pounds!* Is he in-

tendin' to blow up th' whole . . . ah, ha! a coil of fuse—six feet, I'd say. Now for th' caps!" He picked up the topmost box, one which he himself had opened days before. He opened it again and ran his finger back and forth, back and forth, counting silently. He was not certain how many this broken box had held on the night before. Still, he could make a shrewd guess. "One cap, he took. Well, he might have taken th' whole box—Great Gawd! One cap means one explosion! One explosion of fifty pounds of dynamite! What . . . where . . ."

HE was a railroad man, first, last, and always: and in his railroad man's mind there was just one thought: the railroad! There was the trestle, out west of town; there were half a dozen rock cuts through lava ridges; there was a high fill, curving like a drawn bow. Dynamite and the railroad! And only last week Number Six had been held up just west of the third cut beyond the town!

He was not standing still while these thoughts poured through his mind like molten steel; he was running at top speed toward the station, near which stood a one-armed scaffold holding a cut engine tire, the town's only fire alarm. Panting, he reached it; and, panting, he swung the sledge against the ringing steel again and again and again.

Men dashed out of doors, from every door in town. Some ran straight for the foreman, seeing his arms fall and rise and fall as the sledge struck home. Others dashed for corrals, and reappeared mounted on leg-fanning ponies.

"Fifty pounds of dynamite stolen!" he shouted to the foremost, the sledge falling from his hands. "Another hold-up, mebbey. Number Two is tearin' in from th' east! Scatter, boys! Up th' track, an' down it! Watch th' rock cuts, th' trestle, all curves, an' th' long fill! An' watch yoreselves! Fifty pounds of dynamite with only one cap for th' lot! You with horses: ride as far as you can before Number Two meets you!"

He whirled to shout to the telegraph operator, but that person was also a railroad man; the wires were carrying the warning in both directions. He heard the operator's statement, and ran toward the tool shed, where his crew already had

the hand car on the rails. Somebody, calling loudly, was running after him; and he angrily turned his head, and then checked himself and took the proffered rifle: a rifle might be needed in any matter concerning half a hundredweight of explosives! He dashed on again, threw his weight with that of the pushing crew, and, leaping to the platform of the rolling car, made the hardwood handles bend and creak.

Number Two came and went in peace and safety. Not a rock cut had been blasted to block the rails; the long fill had not even been scratched, and the trestle stood as sturdily as it had from the occasion of the building of it, when a cloudburst had wiped out its predecessor.

The threat had been an empty one, but the frantic activities connected with it had cured the dwellers of Dos Algodoneros of any desire for further searching; and accounted, perhaps, for the peaceful progress of a desert traveler.

The Kid rode steadily ahead, the pack horse showing the way along the faint trail. The blazing sun struck down upon a jogging box covered with sacking, secured by an imperfect packer's hitch to the pack saddle. In this heated box the nitrolycerin was slowly settling toward the lower ends of the sticks; but with full faith in the words of the Irish section foreman, and an apathy regarding what might happen to him, the Kid pushed on. In one pocket was a closely rolled coil of fuse; in another, two gleaming copper caps, the section foreman's estimate to the contrary notwithstanding, with fulminate enough to tear off the jaw of the man who should bite one of them carelessly; and they had to be bitten when crimped onto the end of the fuses; but this would be another matter left to the mercy of God.

CHAPTER XXI

IN Hell's Center things were moving steadily toward trouble in the Palmer House, where confusion was mounting and riot seemed imminent. Liquor was flowing without stint, liquid bribes for votes. Murphy was bellowing challenges to fight any man in the world at rough-and-tumble; and despite his

known prowess, it began to look as if his hand would be called. The two candidates for the leadership of the gang were trying valiantly to quell the rising trouble and to get some kind of order. They were anxious to have the main question put to a vote and have it decided one way or the other.

"Anny man in th' worruld!" shouted Murphy, his increasing brogue an indicator of the amount of liquor he had downed. "Anny damn' man a-tall, a-tall! I'm th' champeen rough-an'-tumble fighter av th' whole damn' country an' I can lick anny man that says contrary!"

"Yes!" sneered a gunman. "An' what th' hell is rough-an'-tumble?" He pushed forward belligerently. "Rough-an'-tumble! It don't settle nothin'!"

"Don't it?" roared Murphy, glaring. "It settles plenty when I'm doin' th' fightin'!" His face and neck were like fire. Drunk he was; but he was still crafty. He read the threat in the other man's eyes, but the gunman was just two steps too far away.

The gunman sneered. He was standing with his bowed legs slightly spread and he was swaying gently on his feet. His right hand patted his holster significantly.

"Settles nothin'," he repeated in drunken insistence. "Settles nothin'! But *this* does! *This* settles everythin', an' right now it's goin' to settle you, close yore noisy Irish mouth!"

Habit which had become instinct was not quite enough to overcome the blunting effects of the liquor; his draw was bungled, his grip fumbling for an instant; and in that instant Murphy leaped, driving a straight left before him. The weight of his flying body was behind it.

They went down locked in deadly grip and out of the flurry on the floor a gun went spinning against a wall. The crowd surged forward and back, giving grudging room for the combatants; and one man allowed his partisanship to outweigh his judgment; he took a short step forward and kicked Murphy with vicious strength; and he kicked with the heel and not with the toe, which showed that he was not as drunk as he might have been. The blow had no sooner landed than a man on his left, pivoting swiftly on one foot, sent a full arm swing to the point of the kicker's jaw. The kicker, off bal-

ance, his head twisted awkwardly, pitched backward under the impact of the terrible blow, and the breaking of his neck sounded sharply.

"Kill him!" roared Murphy, not knowing that his wish was gratified. He jammed his knee into the stomach of the man under him, and forced his straining thumbs deep into the strangling throat. "Settle nothin'?" he panted, arching his back to get more power into the thumbs. "Settle nothin' eh? Well, mebby: for it's shure goin' to settle you!"

George White darted forward to grab Murphy, seeing that his victim was being killed; Paso Frank, thinking it was assistance, threw himself against the rival candidate.

"Paso!" grunted White, clinching with his adversary. "Murphy's killin' him! Let me loose an' help me tear him off!" He turned a strained face to the spell-bound spectators, crying his warning.

"So he is!" shouted an unsteady voice. "Th' Irish—!"

The crash of the gun filled the room with sound and smoke; and Murphy, slumping, loosed his grips, rolled off his victim and, glaring red-eyed about the circle, dragged himself toward the shooter. Before the man knew he was in danger Murphy grabbed his legs and brought him down. The flailing gun exploded and a window crashed; again it fired, and a man moaned and slid to the floor; the third shot sent a puff of adobe dust sifting down from the ceiling; and then it dropped from the hand that held it and slid under a table.

PANHANDLE pushed through the crowd, bent over and placed his hand on Murphy's shoulder.

"Murphy! You can't kill a dead man! Murphy!"

"Another wan, eh?" growled the Berserker Irishman, throwing a huge arm around Panhandle's shoulder; and then, suddenly growing limp, he slumped back across the man he had killed.

Panhandle stood up and looked around. The two leaders had quit struggling and were again trying to calm their henchmen. Bill was leaning against the wall, just inside the rear door; Dave and Wyatt stood beside the front door; Matt, attracted by the shooting, was outside the building, leaning on the sill of an open

window, his head and shoulders inside the room. Panhandle turned, stepped through a gap in the crowd, and moved swiftly along the side wall on his way to join Bill.

A drunken bully, whose business was the robbing of trains, caught sight of the swiftly moving puncher, and lurched after him, mumbling curses.

"Where you goin', you — tin-horn?" he shouted, and the crowd, caught by this new development, ceased its quarreling and gave its attention to the new entertainment.

Panhandle stopped and turned, facing the advancing bully.

"That's my business, strange as it may seem," he said quietly, and then he raised his voice, looking quickly at the two leaders. "You've got four dead men now to take care of," he said. "Why make it five, or more?"

"I votes for George White!" yelled a leather-lunged thief, flourishing an arm. "Come on: let's vote!"

"Vote!"

"Vote! I make two for White!"

The drunken bully hesitated, stopped, and then lurched on again, his bloodshot eyes on the gambler's face.

"What th' hell do *you* care about dead men?" he asked loudly. "Dead men shouldn't worry *you* or yore *friends*! Who are you, an' what are you doin' here, *all* of you?"

"Let him alone, Hansen! Let him alone, an' vote!"

"Come on, Hansen! There's two votes for White already! What do you say?"

"What do *I* say?" asked the bully, stopping again and partly turning. "I don't know. What *do* I say?"

"Come on, Ole. Let Panhandle alone," ordered George White. "If yo're a friend of mine, now's th' time to show it: how you votin'?"

"All right: I'm votin' for George White," said Hansen, and again faced the gambler. "How *you* votin'?" he demanded pugnaciously.

"He can't vote: he's a stranger," called a voice.

"That's just what I was tellin' you!" retorted Hansen, triumphantly. "They're *all* strangers: to *us*! They ain't strangers to each other. Who killed what's-his-name? That Bill feller, there by th' door. Who killed whosis? That Johnny feller. Who killed what's-his-

name's pardner? That Bill feller! An' now who *you* fixin' to kill?" he demanded, glaring at the gambler.

"Only a half-witted Swede named Hansen!" retorted Panhandle. "Unless yore friends make you shut up yore big mouth!"

"Yo're fixin' to kill—*me?*?" shouted the Swede in a burst of fury. His hand flashed down and fumbled at the gun in the holster as the crowd surged to get out of the way.

Panhandle, too, moved his hand; his left hand, which darted out like a rapier and landed against the Swede's unprotected jaw. Thrown off his balance, his groping hand missing the butt of the gun, the Swede was a mark for a second punch. It came. Tex curved over a right swing that dropped the dazed bully like a hammer blow.

"I could 'a' shot him just as easy," said the gambler, coldly and calmly. "He is drunk," he explained. "When he gets sober you can tell him that was th' reason I didn't shoot. Anybody else mindin' my business for me?"

A GROWL ran through the crowd, and among the muttered phrases were references to the suppositious closeness of the six strangers. The point was being made seriously, and it seemed to have been discussed previously.

Panhandle stood quietly until the rumberling ceased, and then he spoke.

"You," he said, looking a man squarely in the eye, "just said that us strangers seem to hang together. I'm obliged to you for th' idear. If I have anythin' to say about it, after this day's hell-raisin', we *will* hang together as long as we stay in Hell's Center. We may have a chance for our lives if we gang up. I'm notifyin' you, now, that we are goin' to gang up. You fellers are goin' to have some votin'; but I'll have my election first."

He looked toward the front door, where Dave and Wyatt leaned carelessly against the wall, ready with four guns to sweep the room.

"You, Dave," he called. "You just heard th' idear. You in favor of us strangers gangin' up?"

"I was kinda hopin' to fit in with th' other crowd, Panhandle," said Dave, slowly; "but th' way things have gone, I'll team up with you an' yore pardner,

gladly; if my own pardner is willin'."

"Second best is better than third best," said Wyatt. "I was hopin' like Dave, here; but I'm with you, Panhandle. We vote yes."

The gambler turned slightly and looked at Matt, who still was framed by the window casing.

"How 'bout you an' that Johnny feller?" Panhandle asked him.

"I ain't got much sense," replied Matt; "but I've shore got sense enough to say yes to that. I'll join yore gang, Panhandle, an' I shore can speak for Johnny. He allus does what *I* do: has been doin' it for years."

"There's th' answer, hombre," said Panhandle, smiling as he squarely faced the outlaw. "White's got his gang; Paso, his'n; an' *I* got mine. We're mindin' our own business, as long as nobody minds it for us. If you feel any itch toward mindin' our business, you'll be better off if you take it out in scratchin'. Go ahead with yore election: may th' best man win."

"Three cheers for Panhandle!" yelled a red-faced inebriate, hoping for an extra round of drinks.

"Three cheers nothin'!" shouted another. "I'm votin' for Paso! To hell with Panhandle. Let's hold this here election!"

"George White, for me! Come on, fellers: line up for George!"

"Who's goin' to count 'em?" demanded a man in a corner. "Last time we had a real election we elected Big Henry: an' that damn' Swede voted three times! Who's goin' to count 'em?"

"Leave it to th' bartender," suggested Paso Frank. "Let Spike do th' countin'."

"Like hell!" yelled Spike, smelling plenty of trouble ahead for the umpire. He cared nothing for empty honors.

"Shore! Let Spike. Line up, fellers!"

"I tell you I don't want to have nothin' to do with it!" protested Spike earnestly.

"Hell you don't! What you got to say about it?" demanded a pugnacious outlaw.

"All right! All right!" hastily replied Spike, preferring to defer trouble rather than rush to meet it. "Line up. I'll call yore names an' check 'em with— with coins. Th' pile with th' most coins

wins. Ready? All right: Squint Johnson—one silver dollar for George White. Red Flint—one silver dollar for White.”

An so the election proceeded, during which Panhandle and his friends quietly left the building and moved to the general store; but they took plenty of time to cover the short distance. and stopped frequently to discuss matters.

ENTERING the store, each made casual purchases, running mostly to tobacco and cartridges; but every man's eyes were busy and every man's mind sized up the building and weighed its defensive points.

Its walls were of adobe, two feet thick all the way up to the flat roof, and capable of stopping bullets. Its front and rear doors had been thriftily made out of broken and abandoned wagon tongues, laid side to side, tightly together; and the cross-pieces were also from wagon tongues. Most of the iron work had been forged from wagon tires, tires four inches wide and half an inch thick. The doors had been built to protect valuable goods in a lawless town.

The window shutters were two-inch hardwood planks, strapped together by wagon-tire cross-pieces. In the center of each was a narrow loophole, beveled on its inner edge. In each door, also, was a loophole. With its regular stock of goods the place was provisioned for almost an unlimited siege of a garrison of six.

Hopalong appreciated its strength, but he was regarding it with a frown: the thought of playing the part of the besieged did not please him.

Back in the Palmer House the election was over, and the better man had won; he was the better man because he had more votes than his rival. Neither he nor the defeated candidate measured up to any of their predecessors in office, and each was suspicious of the other. Up to now the gang had been something of a unit, but now there were strong signs of factional leanings. Paso Frank only bided his time, and with him bided his friends.

* * *

Across the desert a dejected horseman slowly pushed on his way, a plodding pack horse before him. He entered the lava desert from the southwest. The going was harder, but the trail was shorter;

and it was the trail he knew well. Mile after mile he pushed on, sometimes napping in the saddle; and when he camped it was more from force of habit, the habit of resting at night. He built himself a campfire, hobbled his two horses, and opened a can of beans. Half of them had been eaten when a blood-curdling shriek sounded from the surrounding darkness.

Startled, the Kid placed the can on the ground beside him and drew a gun. He made no effort to get to his feet, no effort to draw back from the revealing light of his small fire. After a moment he placed the gun across his thighs and reached for the can. Nothing human had made that sound, and whatever had made it would have to come to him before it became a danger. If it came, he would shoot it; if it did not, all right.

Again the shriek sounded, much closer, and the Kid twisted part way around to face its direction. There came a third shriek, half-hearted, jerky; and then a burst of crazy laughter introduced the lean, bent figure of an old man. It hovered about in the sage, just beyond the edge of the firelight. It was very familiar, and the Kid called out.

“Come up, Loco,” he said. “I’ve got some beans.”

“Smart, ain’t you?” jeered the voice from the sage.

“Come on, Loco; time to eat.”

“Ha-ha! Think yore smart! You can’t trick me!”

“Come on, Uncle; have some beans with me.”

“Well! Mebby—mebby. Yes, sir: it is! That you, Jimmy?”

“Yes. What you doin’ out here? Prospectin’?”

“Yes, prospectin’: an’ I’m right close onto it, Jimmy,” confided the old man, sidling into the firelight. He moved up close to the calm young man, ready to jump back, peered at him, and then prodded him with a testing finger. “It is: yes, sir! It’s Jimmy! I’m right close onto it, Jimmy; but it ain’t nowhere near here,” he hastily added. “You couldn’t find it, not never! Nobody can find it but me! No, sir!”

The Kid humored the old man, wondering why they both should be so accursed: one by insanity, the other by life itself.

“Run high to th’ ton, Uncle?” he asked.

"Grades up, grades up higher'n a kite, Jimmy. Quartz! Mountains of it. Quartz!"

"Figger to blast?" asked the Kid, still humoring the unfortunate.

"Smart, ain't you?" retorted the old man, his eyes gleaming with cunning. "You goin' home?"

THE Kid looked at him quickly, smothered the curse, and silently nodded.

"Reckoned so, seein' you headin' in. Margy 'll be glad to see you. Go with you, I will. Quartz! Grades up higher'n a kite, Jimmy. Got to blast, I reckon." He scratched his head. "Ain't got no powder nor dynamite. Go home with you, I will. Quartz! Mountains of it!"

The Kid pulled his hat down far on his forehead to hide the bitter tears filming his eyes. The old man had been "queer" for years, but since that day . . . He sighed, noticed the gun, and absent-mindedly holstered it. *Home! God!*

"Set still!" whispered the old man, and he slipped out of sight into the sage, moving as silently as a ghost. He searched swiftly and found what he was looking for. Again the shriek rang out, and he emerged with his noise-maker hugged tightly in his arms. As he passed the pack saddle and the box, he kicked the latter experimentally.

"Easy, Loco: that's dynamite!" warned the Kid, but without much interest. It might be better for both of them if the thing exploded.

"Loco's hungry," announced the old man, hurrying up to the fire.

His face was averted, hiding his thoughts. Dynamite for his quartz! Dynamite! He knew all about dynamite. There was a fuse, and a cap. You split the fuse to give the match a good chance. You crimped the cap on the other end of the fuse. You made a hole in one stick. Quartz: a mountain of it!

"Beans are all I've got," said the Kid, opening a can and handing it into the eager grasp of the hungry guest; and then he began to ask questions, patiently, infinitely patiently; questions repeated again and again before the old man's sick mind sensed their import; but once sensed, Loco spoke on endlessly; and out of the welter of nonsense there emerged, occasionally, some fact worth while.

At dawn the Kid awakened, drank his fill from a canteen, and emptied another

can of beans. Loco was not to be seen; and neither was the box of dynamite or the pack horse.

Swearing under his breath the Kid ate his hurried breakfast, saddled up, and followed the tracks of the missing horse. There was nothing else he could do: he needed that army-in-a-box. The tracks led him roundabout in a direction bearing steadily in the general direction of Hell's Center, and from their general drift he knew that they would take him around the town on the north. Well, the old man had the dynamite, for awhile; but he did not have the fuse or the caps. To reassure himself in this regard, the Kid felt in his pockets, and swore again: the old man had them all!

CHAPTER XXII

HELL'S CENTER had once been quite a town, but not so large a town as, let us say, Rhyolite. In population it had been very much less, for after the blush of the first rush it had shrunk swiftly. There were no ore-laden hills surrounding it like a horseshoe; there were no mines making dark holes in the hillsides; no dumps of tailings to fall, fanwise, down the rocky slopes. There was no railroad station; no twin lines of water pipes crossing the desert to it; it had no house built of beer bottles; it had no two-story stone store; no concrete schoolhouse with a slate roof. In only one way was it like Rhyolite and other deserted Western mining towns: it had been built, used for a short time, and then deserted. It had become, for a time, a ghost town to cheer an unsuspecting desert traveler until he reached it and found out what it was.

North of the general store, on the same side of the street with it, and not more than two score paces distant, stood the Palmer House. South of the store, on the same side of the street, was a vacant lot. Beyond this lot was what was left of a frame shack, a hurriedly erected affair for the dealing of three-card monte by an itinerant gambler in the days when Hell's Center was a busy town. The sun had shrunk the boards until they had pulled loose from most of the nails which held them; and the desert winds, at times high, had found many places for success-

ful attacks. The framework still stood, but the roof had caved in on the south side; and in all this general decrepitude there was one noticeable, almost startling thing: not a nail was rusted.

A short distance south of this dilapidated structure was one of the numerous adobe corrals which dotted the town. At one time there had been strings of pack trains moving to and from Hell's Center; a stage coach had made three trips a week across the desert. Transportation had been entirely by flesh, and the better stock had been grain-fed.

This corral, sound almost as the day it had been built, was a space perhaps ten paces wide and thirty long, and was enclosed by a wall which stood nearly shoulder high. Even now it was used occasionally, as was shown by the signs; but only when some sudden activity seized upon the town.

The sky was moonless, but peppered by stars. The night was, therefore, dark as desert nights become. Two figures moved cautiously through the sage, drawing steadily nearer to the corral, the rendezvous. From the south two more slowly came into sight, heading for the same point. The four men met at the south gate, exchanged low comments, and divided into separate units. Two of these moved in opposite directions around the outside of the wall; the other two, around the inside. There was no reason for this scouting except habitual caution. They met again at the gate, and moved slowly through it toward the center of the corral. From the west came another figure, moving swiftly with choppy strides; and on the other side of the street, coming from the east, was a sixth, also moving swiftly. They met at the east gate, mumbled something to each other, and entered the enclosure.

"*Quien es?*" asked a low voice.

"It's us, Tex: Johnny an' Matt. We all here?"

"Yes," answered another voice. "Anybody see you headin' this way?"

"Not that we know of, Hoppy. We was right careful."

"Set down. It's time we all had a good talk. Things are gettin' ready to move lively; an' if we want to have any say about how they're goin' to move, we got to wrestle it out tonight. Anybody got any idears?"

"Mebby, Hoppy: but let's hear yourn

first," said Dave Saunders, speaking so softly as barely to be heard.

"You can talk louder, Dave, if you want to," said Tex, grinning in the darkness. "They're still raisin' hell in th' Palmer House, celebratin' th' victory."

"Yeah; but Paso Frank an' his gang was in th' blacksmith shop th' last I know of 'em, an' they ain't celebratin' any victory," said Johnny. "Looks like th' Hell's Center gang is splittin' up."

"NOT enough to keep 'em split up if they are threatened by outsiders," said Wyatt Duncan. "That would be th' best thing that could happen to them fellers right now."

"Shore would," grunted Matt.

"What's under yore hat, Hoppy?" asked Tex.

"First, there are two left out of th' gang that murdered th' Kid's wife—two of th' skunks left," said the leader. "George White an' Paso Frank."

"Hell!" snorted Matt. "Two is only two. Me an' Johnny can get 'em both in five minutes. Go on."

"We've been forced to come out in th' open an' gang up," said Hopalong. "I'm surprised that we didn't have to do it sooner. However, that's fact. There are lots of suspicions loose about us. We've killed or had a hand in th' killin' of the four leaders. That was th' thing that made it so noticeable, that set them to thinkin' an' made 'em figger we was all well known to each other. That, an' droppin' into town purty close to th' same time. Th' meat in these remarks is that we are all braided together. We are a third gang; an' an *outside* gang; a gang that picks off th' leaders of th' main gang. That right?"

"Shore; an' we're damn' good pickers. Go ahead."

"When we came in here our idear was to get them six skunks an' clear out," continued Hopalong. "We was on th' offensive, nat'rally. Gangin' up has started us th' other way; an' I never thought much of goin' on th' defensive. Mebby we'll have to. We are only six ag'in near thirty. We are all friends, an' a feller don't like to see his friends killed."

He waited a moment, but in the end he had to break the silence himself.

"We've got th' general store picked out as our fort if we get hard pressed,"

he continued. "That's all right: that's only common sense, *if* we have to have such a place. There's a question that's been botherin' me for th' last couple of days. I don't know that I can make it as plain to you fellers as it is to me, that I can make it as plain as I'd like to; but if you would like to listen, I'll try."

"Go ahead," muttered Dave.

"Keep ridin'," said Matt.

"All right," went on Hopalong. "We see what's comin'. It's right plain. Sooner or later we're goin' to be drove into that store an' stand off a siege, if we just wait an' let th' other fellers make all th' leads. That ain't good medicine. When a feller waits till his hand is forced, he generally ain't got much choice of action; he generally has to kinda do what th' other feller wants him to. Siege is slow business, an' right tryin' business. Thirty to six don't suit me a-tall, 'specially with th' leaders alive to hold th' gang together an' to direct it. It'll mostly be rifle work, an' them fellers are as good with rifles, shootin' mostly from behind cover an' over fixed ranges, as we are. Our shootin' places will be fixed, an' easy watched. They can move around an' shoot from unexpected places, an' they can lose five men to our one. You savvy all this?"

Grunts of affirmation answered him.

"All right, then. There ain't a man of us that has an equal in that gang when it comes to Colts," he said, "but Colts won't figger much. They ain't got no plan of action laid out now; but *we* will have, if we're wise. We can walk into th' Palmer House just like we have been walkin' into it: two by two. We can make up our minds to all act together at th' same time an' at th' first excuse, an' act sudden. We'll have th' jump on 'em right at th' start. From then on Nature will take her course, an' th' store is always handy for them of us that can make it; either th' store or our own hosses. I'd rather take to th' hosses after th' job has been done; an' I know a way to get to 'em, an' get away on 'em, an' take our own time ridin' out. But there's a better way than that."

Again he paused, waited for remarks. None came.

HIS auditors moved gently in the darkness, shifting for comfort; but they all had followed him and were con-

tent to hear him out before making any comment.

"Take that store, now," Hopalong pursued. "It's th' best chance fort I've seen in many a day. Stocked plumb full of grub, with near sixty gallons of drinkin' water in an open barrel, which means a loss of two, three gallons a day from evaporation; but, even so, it's right good. Th' doors are wagon tongues, an' th' shutters right strong. It couldn't hardly be any better, an' it might come in right handy, if we're forced to turn to it. It's right where we need it if things go wrong."

"There's somethin' under yore hat that's goin' to be interestin'," murmured Johnny, nudging his friend Matt, who was having a thoroughly good time. "Go on, Hoppy: this takes me back a dozen years, an' there ain't nothin' on earth any better than that."

Tex laughed softly, nodding in the dark. His mind was racing back over that dozen years, jumping from high spot to high spot. He would give every dollar he owned if he could go back to the beginning of that dozen years and travel the trail over again.

"Hoppy's gettin' old," he jeered happily. "My Gawd! He'll be a young feller when he's eighty. Go ahead, Gran'pa: we're listenin'."

"All right," said Hopalong, grinning. "Now it strikes me that any bunch of damn' fools can get themselves herded into a fort by a larger crowd, an' die there, one by one." His voice was becoming edged.

"Th' garrison may kill off three times their own number. They might make a wonderful stand-off; but that won't do them a mite of good if they're killed. Defense is all right when there ain't nothin' else left; but let me tell you that a stiff punch has got a lot more in it than a parry has, every time! Th' whole thing simmers right down to a question of judgment: when is it *time* to hole up an' go on th' defense?"

"I saw one punch today that was a lot better than a parry," chuckled Wyatt. "That last one of Panhandle's, for instance."

"Don't embarrass me, Wyatt," said Tex. "Go on, Hoppy."

"All right. I'm figgerin' that th' time ain't come for us to pull in our horns an' let th' other fellers do th' fiddlin'. But

to make that right certain we've got to lay out some plan, look over th' ground, an' each man play his part accordin' to Hoyle. ●f course, no series of fixed plans can be stuck to closely; but that's where brains come in; an' that is where I'm settin' a damn' sight prettier than either one of th' other leaders in this town. I'm leadin' brains, th' best brains in th' cow country. When one of *you* fellers has got to step aside from a planned course, you'll step *right*. I can count on *that*."

There was another silent interval, and then Hopalong went on again.

"George White an' Paso Frank are th' other leaders," he said, "an' they are th' two that are left out of th' six that we came in here to execute. Now I mean that word 'execute'—it's some different from just plain killin'."

Another silence, and again he went on:

"There's th' Palmer House, where they *all* hang out. That blacksmith shop ain't got any liquor, an' I'll bet it's empty right now. When th' trouble starts they'll all be in th' Palmer House, if we make our plays like we should. That rests on our own shoulders, an' only goes to prove that th' defense has got to take what it can get. They'll all be in th' Palmer House.

"Th' Palmer House has got one blank wall: th' south one. There's one door in th' back wall, an' no window. There are two windows in th' north wall. There's one door an' one window in th' front wall. None of them are loopholed. To be of any use th' doors have got to be open, at least on a crack. A stream of lead pourin' in through th' cracks will make them doors shut, an' shut quick an' tight. That leaves th' windows. They ain't got shutters. They are open windows. To shoot out of a window a man's got to show about half of his head. There are three windows. Two or three good rifle shots layin' outside can cover 'em all, an' at th' same time take care that th' doors don't open enough to let a man slip out. Even if it happens to be dark, there'll be enough starlight to see anybody movin' ag'in that light-colored 'dobe wall."

A GAIN he paused and again there was a moment of silence, but this time the silence seemed to be electric. His auditors' minds leaped ahead of his next

words and they sensed what was coming. The very audacity of it thrilled them. All of these men regarded audacity as a particularly bright star in the firmament of endeavor; all of them had made valuable use of it time and again; as a matter of fact they all were what they were because of it.

"That gang," said Hopalong slowly and softly, "bein' five to one, ain't worryin' very much about us, an' it's takin' its own time. They'll just brush us off, kinda, if we get to pesterin' 'em, or when they feel like it. They ain't worryin' about no damn' fool plays. They ain't got no reason to worry about 'em. Why should they? They're thirty, ain't they?—an' we're only six. They ain't locoed enough to reckon that six men are figgerin' on coopin' up thirty men inside a house, an' keep 'em inside, by Gawd, till they beg for mercy, or th' fool six clear out without no danger of bein' followed. No, they ain't *that* crazy: but *I am!*"

"By Gawd!" breathed Matt Skinner. "So'm I!"

"Man, oh, man!" muttered Dave Saunders, a vivid picture coming into his mind. "I've wasted thirty years, Hoppy, by not knowin' you!"

"Growin' old, huh, Hoppy?" chuckled Tex. "Yo're like some wines: th' older you grow, th' better you get. This means team-work, an' lots of thought. She's shore got to be figgered, an' figgered right."

"It's plain as hell," growled Wyatt Duncan in open admiration, "but it took brains to see it, just th' same." He stirred gently. "Go on, Hoppy."

"Yes, it's got to be done right," said Hopalong slowly. "We've got to pick th' time. We can't do it in daylight, because they all won't be in there then. Night is when they gather, an' night is our time; but not too early. It's th' darkness that makes our danger of failin'. We want light enough to see well. That means we got to make it as late at night as we can; as close to dawn as possible. We can't all be there with them. Everythin' has got to be ready on th' outside when th' break comes. Two of us in th' Palmer House will be enough. I'm plannin' on bein' one of 'em, seein' that I ain't a family man. Nobody is dependent on me. As a matter of fact, if it's needed, I can be both: there's really no reason for two men to take th' risk."

Growls interrupted him. growls from five volunteers. They would not let him go on. It seemed that they all believed that he had done his own share already; more than his own share. Tex claimed a place as one of the pair detailed to work in the room; but Tex was ruled out by a few grunts. He, too, had enjoyed more than his fair share of the excitement. Johnny fell under the same classification: hadn't he killed Tom Walters, on the poor end of an even break, and while turning cartwheels? Tex, Hopalong, and Johnny were out of that job, and out of it cold. Must they be hogs? Couldn't they give somebody else a chance to justify such a long journey?

"Let all that wait," said Hopalong, calmly. "That's somethin' that can be decided by th' flip of a coin; there's more important things to be talked over."

"Flippin' a coin is th' answer," said Dave; "but only if Wyatt, Matt, an' me do th' flippin'. This can be settled by one word from you fellers: let's settle it now."

There was a little argument, but in the end Dave's suggestion was allowed: the other three were out of the inside work.

"Why am I figgerin' it like this?" asked Hopalong, resuming his talk, as if someone had asked him that question. "Th' main reason is that we have got to get away from here some time, away from this town an' away from this part of th' country. We got to get away, an' we want to do it in safety, if it's possible. I figger it is."

HE waited a moment for questions that did not come, and then went on again.

"If we were all single men, we might be crazy enough to make a last-stand play for other folks to talk about; but I'm th' only unmarried man here, an' I'm kinda holdin' myself responsible to five women. If there's any last-stand foolishness to be done, I'll do it myself; an' that's shore out of style with me *this* year. There ain't no need for it.

"Part of our job has still got to be done; but I figger that it's shapin' up so it can be done right quick. That was one of th' reasons why I wanted to be one of th' men in that room when th' show-down comes; but second thought tells me that I got no real reason for it; every one of you fellers is just as well qualified

to take that end of it as I am; better, mebby, bein' younger. It's a damn' desperate job."

A low ripple of laughter answered him, and various comments were made; but no one shaped his complimentary remarks in such a way that would lead Hopalong to believe that the job really should be his. Good jobs were scarce.

"A good general all us keeps out of th' fightin', so he can see all of it," said Wyatt, smiling in the darkness. He was nobody's fool.

"Yes, sir!" endorsed Matt, emphatically. Matt's frame of mind was altering itself to look upon his good friends Wyatt and Dave as rivals, friendly rivals, of course; but rivals, just the same. He was not going to be one of the two to call the turn of the coin first; that would make it necessary for him to call it right twice in succession. Then he realized that one call would decide it: two of the three would get the job. He quit figuring percentages and let his mind roam around a little without hobbles, and this was his reward:

"Them fellers inside th' room oughta be right young fellers," he said, glancing around for endorsements. He received none, and felt that, somehow, his brilliant thought had fallen flat. It had.

"I've been figgerin' this thing out for three, four days," admitted Hopalong. "That means I've been lookin' th' ground over. I haven't had this whole idear for that long, but I've been wrastlin' right hard, just th' same. Th' lay-out couldn't be better if I'd made it myself. Th' town's full of old 'dobe corals; an' three or four of them are just in th' right places. Here," he said, and explained his plans in minute detail. At the conclusion of his talk about this particular bit of strategy in the art of war, he insisted upon discussion, and sat back to answer questions.

There were not many questions, and those that were asked only showed that he was right when he claimed that his gang had brains. There were six stations, four of them outside the building; and then, as the action moved along, there would be other duties and other stations. The part that each station would play was threshed out and settled. The men who would fill the stations were named for three of them; the other three would be known after the coin was flipped.

"When is this plan goin' to be worked," asked Dave, with pardonable curiosity.

"Tonight," said Hopalong calmly.

"Well, then," said Wyatt, the soft clinking of gold coins telling that he even then was feeling for one of them, "let's flip an' decide it."

"Too dark to see heads or tails," said Tex, "an' you dassn't strike a light. Wait till you get in th' Palmer House. Th' three of you can walk right up to th' bar an' flip a coin to see who pays for th' drinks. Flip 'em in th' air, an' let 'em fall free. Th' odd man is out." He chuckled. "He's stuck for th' drinks, an' plumb out of luck."

"Good idear," laughed Matt. "Do it right under their noses! I'll laugh even if I lose."

"Yes," said Dave, chuckling.

"All right; suits me," growled Wyatt, arising. "Let's move along an' see who's unlucky. Dave, me an' you have been paired up right along. By rights we oughta go in together; and find Matt talkin' to Spike. Bein' thirsty, we head for th' bar; an' being polite, we insist on Matt joinin' us. Then th' argument starts about who is doin' th' treatin'. Huh?"

The consultation broke up, and its various units faded into the night, each pair taking a different course; but all bound for the Palmer House or its vicinity; the Palmer House, the focal point of the town's activities; and the Palmer House had no idea just how much activity, or what kind, was going to focus upon it in the next few hours.

CHAPTER XXIII

DAVE SAUNDERS led the way to the street, with Wyatt Duncan at his heels. Dave's mind was moving faster than his feet as he turned to follow the road in the direction of the Palmer House. Either he or Wyatt, or perhaps both of them, were moving forward toward a situation which certainly would prove to be a desperate one; either he or Wyatt, if Matt Skinner was one of the lucky two in the flip of the coins. If Matt should lose the toss, then Dave and Wyatt would bear the brunt of swift action, outnumbered fif-

teen to one, their friends powerless to help them. Any extra aid they could call upon would be very welcome, and Dave was searching his mind for a clue to such an aid; it popped into his consciousness full blown.

"Load up th' empty chambers, Wyatt," he said, thoughtfully.

"You figger on somebody keepin' cases on us—checkin' up on our shots, if we get to shootin'?" Wyatt asked.

"It's been done before, Wyatt; an' these coyotes weren't weaned yesterday. Some of them don't know very much, but they all can count up to five."

"Uh-huh," grunted his companion, slowing up. "Couple more apiece might come in handy, anyway."

"Yes. Some folks believe in gamblin' on a shore thing. It might be that I'll get th' chance to burn five out of each gun, wastin' 'em, kinda."

"Yeah; sorta givin' 'em plenty of rope, huh?"

"Yes."

After a moment's delay they went on again, but they stopped in front of the general store and leaned against the wall to give Matt plenty of time to go into the Palmer House ahead of them, not knowing that Matt had gone in through the back door and even then was stopping before the bar.

Spike looked up and showed a very relieved countenance. The differences between George White and his friends on one side, and Paso Frank and his friends on the other, had been temporarily bridged; but it had been bridged after a very tense half hour; and Spike was just beginning to return to normal. Massed gun play in a closed room has little regard for bystanders, and Spike knew that the front boards of his bar looked far stronger than they were. A .44-40 or a .45 Colt cartridge cuts through ordinary two-inch planks like a knife through cheese, and when it comes out of the farther side its deformities tend to make a truly terrible wound.

"Hello," he said. "Where's yore friend?"

"Just what I was goin' to ask you," replied Matt. "I'm thirsty, but I'll wait awhile on th' chance that he'll show up. I don't like to drink alone."

He let his gaze roam the room and he seemed to be pleased by the air of tolerant friendliness which now pervaded it.

"Everybody sobered up. an' friends ag'in?" he asked Spike in a low voice.

Spike sighed.

"Yeah, so far. What you been doin' with yo'erself?"

"Played Californy Jack with Johnny an' then took a little nap; we was up kinda late last night." He looked around the room again and then turned a curious face to the bartender. "Don't see Bill or any of the others," he said.

"Oh, they'll be in," replied Spike. He glanced at the front door. "Here comes two of 'em now."

Matt turned his head and smiled. The two newcomers moved steadily toward the bar, reached it, shoved their big hats back on their heads, and felt for the rail.

"Where you been since supper?" asked Dave, purely as a matter of politeness. He did not wait for an answer, but turned to the bartender. "Hello, Spike. Panhandle an' th' others of our new gang showed up yet?"

"Nope; not yet. What'll you have?"

"We'll have a drink," answered Wyatt, smiling, and nodding to the man behind the counter. "What'd you think we'd have?"

"My treat," said Matt, quickly. "I was just waitin' for company, wasn't I, Spike?"

"Yeah, you was."

"But I invited you," protested Wyatt.

"Comin' right down to cases," said Dave, chuckling, "it's my turn, by rights."

"Hell," said Spike, professionally. "What's th' difference? It'll go 'round three times, won't it?"

"Not for me," said Matt. "I'll have to drink a lot more when my pardner comes in, or do a lot of arguin'; an' I ain't givin' him no handicap. It's my treat, Spike, because I was here first. Shove her out."

"**N**OTHIN' of th' kind!" retorted Wyatt, without any too great display of friendliness. He was a stickler for frontier etiquette.

"That's right!" said Spike sarcastically. "Start an argument! We ain't had no arguments today! What hair I've got has turned white since mornin'! Why don't you toss for it, an' be sensible, instead of actin' like strange dogs?"

"You got a great head, Spike," said Matt, laughingly.

"An' I've been thinkin' it was total empty," said Dave with a chuckle. "Come on, Wyatt: don't be a damn' mule. We'll toss for it."

"Odd man pays," said Spike in the official capacity of umpire, a capacity adopted by generations of bartenders and having almost the weight, warrant, and sanctity of rules of practice, than which there is nothing more sanctified. No question is too intricate or technical not to be left for some bartender to decide. Psychology, economics, philosophy, medicine, the price of hams, foreign relations, spiritualism, the troubles of the O'Brien family—all are meat for bar-room decisions. Very often the decision handed down was "to hell wit' it: what'll you have?"

Three coins were produced and tossed into the air to fall freely to the counter, a large gesture proclaiming unquestionable honesty. In such a toss there could be no previous agreement. Spike's bent head straightened, and he looked at Matt.

"Yo're stuck," he said, and reached behind him for the bottle.

"Most generally am," said Matt, hiding his disappointment, and waiting for the bottle to reach him. The glasses emptied, he dragged a sleeve across his lips, picked up his change, and dropped his foot to the floor.

"Reckon I'll go out an' see where my pardner is," he said. "See you boys later, I hope."

"Shore hope so," said Dave, speaking the exact truth. He wanted to shake hands with Matt, but did not dare to.

Matt's elbow touched them both as he left the bar. He nodded to several men as he made his way toward the front door, thinking that the very noisy room would be even noisier very soon.

Stepping to the street, Matt passed along the full length of the right-hand tie-rail, wishing that he could cut the horses loose. How easily it could be done now, and how difficult a task it might prove to be later on! This was a task, among others, which would have to be done; but it would have to be done, like the others, in its proper turn.

Matt followed close along the front of the building, turned its south corner, and swung his back against the blank wall just two steps from the street. The general store was closed and its proprietor in

his domicile; should he for any reason return to the store, the piles of rubbish at Matt's feet would provide him with sufficient cover to escape the storekeeper's eye. A row of tumbleweed moved not far from his feet and he instantly had a gun on it.

"Easy, Matt," said a very low voice, and the tumbleweed moved again.

Johnny Nelson, lying face down on the other side of the window, slowly pushed up to his hands and knees, and in that position crawled to the side of his friend.

"Everythin' all right, so far?" he asked in a whisper.

"Yes, except that I was odd man," growled Matt. He considered the task set for himself and his friend. "We got to move fast an' soft when we start," he said.

"Yeah; no bunglin'," replied Johnny, and thereafter the two men remained silent, their ears tuned for the steps of anybody who left the Palmer House in that direction. Anyone who left in any other direction would run into a gun-muzzle before he had gone very far.

Inside the building Dave and Wyatt remained at the bar, talking carelessly to Spike, until some minutes after their friend Matt had disappeared. Dave then looked around, espied a vacant chair close to the side wall window nearest the rear, said that he was tired of standing up, and moved lazily among the tables toward the cherished seat.

WYATT looked idly after him for a moment, grunted some civility to Spike, and sauntered through the crowd toward another vacant chair, this one happily close to the other window in the side wall. He seated himself and tipped back against the wall, sighing with contentment, without a care in the world.

George White and Paso Frank, sealing a hypocritical armistice with straight rye whiskey, to the good of neither, exchanged a few low words while they watched the two friends out of the corners of their eyes. Each called over to him his closest friend, and soon the four outlaws were deep in a low-voiced discussion which boded no good for somebody.

The general noise in the room held steadily to its high level, Spike was kept reasonably busy, considering the amount of drinking done earlier in the day, and the card games ran along amicably and

without pause. From time to time some player, glancing at Dave or Wyatt, would exchange a few words with them and resume his play.

Peace was to be the key-note for the two friends, if possible, while time slipped along, time being a very essential factor. They behaved on this night as they had on other nights, neither of them showing the tension which gripped them, a tension increased by the forced waiting. It is so much easier to act than to wait. They talked with this man, joked with that one, and apparently they had nothing on their minds but their hats.

Midnight came, and still the peaceful atmosphere continued, notwithstanding that it was George White's intention to break up the third gang, the outfit of strangers. He was going to break them up tonight, but circumstances were staying his hand.

White had no more faith in Paso Frank and that person's friends than he had in a side-winder, and a side-winder is vicious, unexpected, and swift. It does not always rattle. White was not going to start trouble with Panhandle's crowd while Paso and his companions were on the scene in force; and this was something not foreseen, not provided for, in Hopalong's plan of campaign. White had good reasons for this determination: anything might happen in a *mêlée*; and Paso was a man to take quick advantage of a good break. The killing of Big Henry was still very vivid in the new leader's mind.

One o'clock came and Spike began to get restless. He had been on his feet all day long, and he was on them every day in the week; but not only had today been particularly trying, but he had had no sleep the night before. When one o'clock came his mind turned toward the comfort of his bed. Business had fallen off, and he was putting in his time puttering around the bar, polishing and repolishing, occasionally allowing himself the luxury of a yawn. Half-past one found the crowd no less in numbers, and Spike, swearing under his breath, petulantly grabbed a chair, slammed it down at the end of the bar, and dropped into it with a gusty sigh.

Two o'clock arrived and found him growing ugly, but he knew that the manifestations of ugliness on his part

would be as nothing to the ugliness they most certainly would evoke. Therefore it was with a sigh of relief that he marked the sudden and purposeful movements of two poker players as they pushed back from the table. They cashed in their chips, said their goodnights, and started for the door, not seeing Paso's frantic but hidden gesture. Paso could ill afford any shrinkage in the numbers of his friends. Spike's fervid and emphatic goodnight to them did not meet with Paso's whole-hearted approval; but had he known it, Spike's goodnight was not nearly as emphatic as it should have been.

The two men, reaching the street, swung to the right and cut toward the tie-rail at an angle which carried them even with the side of the building. They were just reaching out to jerk loose the tie ropes when each stiffened convulsively under the sudden and unmistakable imprint of a gun muzzle on the spine.

"Up with 'em an' keep quiet!" came the whispered command, and their hands had no sooner started heavenward before their guns were plucked from the holsters.

"Put 'em down, behind you!" said Matt, softly, the muzzles pressing a little harder.

THERE was nothing to do but to obey, and in a moment ropes twisted tightly around crossed wrists.

Matt held the two guns now, and Johnny slipped his own back into their sheaths, jerked loose the tie ropes, swung into a saddle, looped the reins of the second horse over the pommel, and maneuvered both animals around the south end of the tie-rail. Matt, waiting with the two prisoners, made a flourish with his weapons, and stepped back to see his friend herd them at a walk toward a corral in the rear of the general store, and returned to maintain his lone watch on guests departing from the Palmer House.

Johnny herded his captives into the corral, turned them over to Tex, with the horses as well, and slipped back to his place beside Matt.

Tex, chuckling softly, swung into the vacated saddle and herded the prisoners out again, around the rear of the corral, and northward to the main corral, which

was out of sight and range of the Palmer House. He dismounted, drove the horses inside the enclosure, put up two bars, and then ordered the captives to lie down, faces to earth. More rope went on them, this time around ankles and knees; and then Tex carried them, one by one, and laid them against the base of the wall, each one tethered to a sturdy sage bush to keep them from rolling together to work on each other's bonds.

The first two horses of the general round-up had been obtained, and Tex felt so good about it that he was eager to spring to the firing line and take up the position assigned to him.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE man who was dealing three-card monte swept up the deck and slipped it into a pocket, announcing to the solitary player that the game was closed, which the solitary player, being in a streak of luck, did not like. The dealer was another of Paso's henchmen, and he wandered over to the conference table and stood silently beside his leader.

Paso glanced up inquiringly.

"Callin' it a day?" he asked, sharply.

The monte dealer studied him quickly.

"At dealin'," he answered. "I'm tired of it and my hand was gettin' slow. When you figgerin' to turn in?"

"Oh, purty soon," answered Paso, waving carelessly toward a chair not far away. "Set down an' wait a few minutes."

Paso glanced around the room, swiftly checking up on his adherents; but he killed the frown as it was born. It would not do to let his friend White know that he was worried. He was two men short, and the odds against him had increased by just that number. His glance had taken in Dave and Wyatt, and he wondered how they would jump if a break came. George White was saying something to him, and he turned his attention to the speaker, seeing the tail end of a whisking look of contempt pass from the other's face. Things were getting tight.

"Where are th' rest of them strangers?" asked White in a low voice edged with temper. He had fully counted on the presence of the six strangers, and he

had told off six men to get the drop on them all secretly. Orders are orders, which he should have known, since he had given them; but he did not know that the orders had not yet started to run in the minds of his chosen killers: the six were not in the room, and therefore they could not be covered. The understanding had been that they would all be present. Nobody was paying any particular attention to Dave and Wyatt because all knew that the action would not start until their four friends came in. "Where are th' rest of 'em?" repeated White, his anger climbing. Anger and whisky made a bad combination.

"Dunno," answered Paso, wishing that his own men had not bunched up so closely in the front of the room. Again he caught a look on his companion's face that gave him a second warning, and this time he took it.

"Reckon I'm turnin' in," he said, pushing back from the table. Conditions were not favorable for the carrying out of the things he had in mind. He was wondering if it would be a good play to have a good talk with Panhandle: if he could add the six strangers to his own force the situation would be cleared up beautifully.

"I'll tell you when to turn in," said White, biting off the words. "Yore friends can go to bed if they want; but we got a job to do."

"Then I reckon it'll take us all," quickly replied Paso. White must think him to be a fool. Send his friends away, indeed! "They're six tough hombres." After a moment he glanced again at the two men sitting back against the wall. "Mebby they can tell us somethin' about their friends," he suggested.

"Yeah," growled White, and he raised his voice. "Hey, you, Dave!"

"Present!" promptly replied Dave, smiling.

"Has that new gang of Panhandle's busted up already?" asked the leader with strong sarcasm.

"Mebby it has by now," answered Dave, a slight frown clouding his face.

"What's th' matter?" asked White, jeeringly. "Too many bosses?"

"Somethin' like that. Me an' Wyatt, there, are th' only privates in th' army."

"Yes," chuckled Wyatt, "an' yo're tryin' to be a noncom!"

SOMEBODY laughed and the ripple of amusement ran erratically through the crowd. It was a situation they all knew and could fully appreciate.

"Well, give 'em time," said Paso, meaningly and meanly. "They're right handy pickin' off leaders."

"You mean they've *been* right handy," said White sharply, looking Paso squarely in the eyes. "Pickin' off leaders is plumb outa style!"

Paso returned the look.

"It never shoulda been in style," he said with a calmness that took all his will power to maintain. Sweat rolled down his back and made his shirt feel cold and clammy. White had read him like a book.

"They comin' in here to-night?" asked White, ignoring Paso.

"Reckon it's too late now," said Wyatt.

"By Gawd!" swore White, his eyes glinting. "I got a notion! I got a notion to go an' root 'em out, an' preach 'em a sermon!"

"That so?" asked Dave, knowing that the big moment was drawing near. "That's shore a job that I don't want!" He shook his head slowly but widely. "No, sir!"

Through him there ran an ecstatic thrill, the thrill of battle. He stood up slowly, still shaking his head; and there was no reason for anyone to think that he had gone crazy; no reason in the world to think that he was ready to go into deadly action against nearly thirty gun fighters—he and his quiet, lazy friend by the other window. He was thinking swiftly: to make the play with any hope of success—and it had to be successful or the lives of the four men outside would be put in jeopardy—to make the play a success they would have to move first, and unexpectedly. For a moment he thought so deeply that White's words were lost, and then he slowly became conscious of them.

"... an' pervide music for 'em to dance into hell!" White finished.

"Yeah!" grunted Paso Frank, suspecting that he might be one of the dancers. Things were getting tighter. He glanced swiftly around the room, finding that his friends were alert and watching White. Dave's next words caught him in mid-breath and his lungs suspended functioning for an instant.

"You!" sneered Dave. He had slid his feet back along the sides of the chair, and the chair was now between his knees. His big hands were hooked by their thumbs to the sagging gun belts, and he was watching that end of the room, with the two leaders squarely in the center of the picture. "You!" he repeated.

White's whisky-flushed face paled as much as tan and suffusion would allow. His eyes narrowed while he studied the sneering stranger. One quick glance, a lightning-quick glance, showed him the rest of the room.

Wyatt stood between his own chair and the open window, his thumbs, also, hooked to gun belts. Paso Frank's friends were grouped as they had been, almost breathless with interest; and instead of watching the strangers, as they should be doing, every man of them was watching him.

The suspicion in his mind grew swiftly and became a deadly certainty: at the first shot, fired by anyone, it would be a fight between him and Paso, with the two strangers playing incidental parts. A fight between him and his friends on one side, and Paso Frank and his friends on the other. Paso was short two men, but the strangers, if they took sides at all, were likely to be against himself. Dave's sneering word told him that. Joined battles with the numbers even, or nearly so, were not his way of fighting; there would be better, far better opportunities to take care of Paso Frank, with no need to kill off his men. Once Paso was out of the way, his friends would gradually fall into line.

"Yes, me!" retorted White, but without much anger. If he could squirm out of this and save his face he would be all right.

"Play *them* a tune to dance to?" inquired Dave with heavy sarcasm. "Hell, man: they don't know how to dance—suppose *you* show us *how*?"

HIS guns were out with the words, and he sensed that Wyatt had drawn. Wyatt could take care of his own end of the room: none better. Daylight was farther away than he wished, but a man couldn't always have everything he wanted.

The heavy guns roared into action, balanced nicely at his hips. The first shot tore away the lower end of a chair

leg; the second ripped the sole of one of White's boots from the soft upper; the third cut the edge of the man's foot. White was on his feet now, his elbows raised comically to give him a needed balance as he hopped from one foot to the other. And hop he did, as stiff-legged as a chicken. Four, five, from the right-hand gun. One, two, three, four, five from the left-hand gun. At the sound of the last shot Dave let his hands fall a fraction of an inch, his expression indicating chagrin.

White's mottled countenance changed swiftly from an enraged scowl to enraged triumph. The fool had emptied his guns; but there were Wyatt and Paso Frank. Still, a leader, to retain his leadership, must act like a leader: to fail in such a test would be the end for him.

His hands dropped like the strike of a snake and came up with each of them holding a gun. It became a cross-arm affair, not in the draw, but in the firing. The left-hand gun blew the top off of Paso's head—it was so high as almost to be a miss. The right-hand gun leveled and swung: and then there came two more roars from Dave's hips. White dropped forward without a bend in his body, crashing down across the table, and fired two more shots after he had been killed. Reflex action is highly developed in a real gun fighter; in the case of Wild Bill Hickok it was almost beyond belief. White was no Hickok, but he was a gun fighter and had been for years.

Somebody shouted, another reflex action, but with the flare of Dave's last two shots there had been swift action along the wall. Wyatt, having the advantage of two fully loaded guns, let his friend go first; and with the disappearance of Dave through the window, Wyatt shot at two gun-drawers, and leaped through his own window, holstering the guns as he left the floor.

Glass crashed along the back bar and splinters sprang from the outer edges of the two doors. Two panes of glass *putted* and flecks from them stung one man's face and filled another's eyes. For an instant the crowd was spellbound, and then, with a shout, a man leaped to close the front door, and closed it with a slam; another shot out the three lamps and filled the room with the sudden stink of kerosene, which blended with the odor of black powder smoke without improving

it. Another man, in the rear of the room, crawled as rapidly as he could on hands and knees, and shut the back door with a slam which shook the glasses on the bar.

They were all on the floor now, listening to the crack of rifle fire on the outside and the spiteful scream of the lead which poured in through the open windows. Now and then the doors boomed flatly, telling that the besiegers were not overlooking them; but to the men in that room this was a waste of lead: not a man was fool enough to open one of them to let in a fire which would sweep along a lower plane.

Spike crawled out from beneath the bar, shedding glass from his liquor-soaked head and shoulders. He moved as swiftly as he could, belly-fashion, across the room toward the more comforting shelter of thick adobe closer to his precious skin. Bullets have the power to glance, as he had discovered while lying under the bar; and he had seen wounds made by ricochets; but here, close to the wall, it would take a very acrobatic bullet, indeed, to find him.

THERE was offensive inactivity in the building, but it lasted only until the surprise wore off; and then the three windows were manned, but after the first exchange of shots they were manned only to stave off a rush. No one knew how many men were around the building, and from the first burst of firing the indications were that the besiegers were in force. Who or what the attackers were or represented was a question which each man answered according to his conscience or his temperament. There did not seem to be any great threat of a rush, and the garrison cased up in its tension and began to discuss this amazing development.

Coulson fired with a quick, snap aim at a rifle flash, and stepped back from the edge of the window.

"Posse, I reckon," he said, thoughtfully. "An' shore as hell they've sewed us up. There ain't no water in th' buildin', an' while I like liquor as well as th' next man, it's shore damn' pore steady drinkin' for folks in our fix."

"There's some water behind th' bar," said Spike, sitting up, his back to the wall. "Not much, though," he amended.

Brink hazarded a shot, swore at the closeness of the reply, and slid away from the window.

"Shore as hell it's a posse," he said. "You reckon them strangers was deppeties, in here feelin' us out?"

"If they was, they did," said Coulson.

"You called th' card, Brink," said a voice from the front window. A heartfelt curse followed the words. "That's just exactly what they are, an' we shore played th' part of prize-winnin' damn' fools! They know how many we are, an' that means there's a hell's slough of 'em out there waitin' for targets. Well, we'll hold 'em off while th' water lasts, an' do th' best we can."

"Be better shootin', come daylight," said another. "Hell of it is we ain't got no rifles; an' six-shooters ag'in rifles ain't what you might call an even break."

"Yo're right! They can lay off at long range an' pick us off without no danger to themselves. They've got it all figured out an'—*Damn!* That one nicked my car!"

"If th' newcomers are as tough as th' first six we'll have more'n ears nicked," said Coulson. "Will you ever forget that Dave feller, standin' here to-night in a gang as big as us, makin' a man *dance*; an' then out-guessin' him in an even break an' killin' him with loaded sixth chambers? That Dave's a idiot!"

"Don't waste yore shots, boys," said a voice from the front window. "Wait till daylight, when you can see somethin' to shoot at."

"Them flashes are plainer to shoot at now than anythin' we'll have in daylight," objected someone. "An' mebby you think they won't be able to see what *they're* shootin' at, in daylight! Wish I had a rifle!"

The man at the front window laughed grimly.

"There's one out here, opposite me, that you might get," he said. "It's a buffaler gun by th' sound of it, or a young cannon."

"Gimme a bucket, Spike," said Coulson. "That well is only twenty feet away, an' mebby I can crawl out to it. It'll be gettin' light right soon," he explained.

"Good idear," said another. "We'll cover you as good as we can."

"Don't you do nothin' like that!" expostulated the water volunteer in a panic. "You act just like you been actin', all of you!"

"Reckon that's best," replied Coulson.

"Git me that damned bucket, Spike!"

THE bartender complied, and the volunteer moved toward the back door. He opened it slowly, very slowly, being careful to crouch behind solid wall while he did so. The crack grew steadily and his hand stopped. He waited for a moment, dropped flat on his stomach, and slid out through the opening, pushing the bucket before him. Nothing happened and he wriggled over the sill onto the ground outside. Then the bucket said *spank* and jerked in his grasp, and he pivoted on his stomach like a turntable and got back through the opening with speed and eagerness.

"Starlight, shinin' on th' bottom of that tin pail," suggested a friend. "Spike, you got a wooden bucket?"

"Yeah; but it's heavier," said Spike.

"I wish it was *thicker*," laughed the volunteer. "Be bad to try it ag'in so soon, I reckon; but if I don't, then we got to wait till to-morrow night. *Hey!*" he exclaimed, as a sudden thought struck him. "Somebody else try it this time; I've done took *my* turn at it!"

"Hell, I'll take a try at it myself," said Spike suddenly. "Lemme by."

Flat on the floor, like a drifting shadow he faded through the door, was swallowed up in the darkness.

Minutes passed. Men began to murmur curiously, then angrily. Someone among those inside lay down and poked his head cautiously through the doorway. A second later he pulled himself back, dragging something after him, and uttered an oath.

"Damn it, here's the bucket—an' water in it. But where the hell's Spike?"

From the dark outside, and some distance away, rose Spike's voice. "I'm out here—an' damn well going to stay out here. You fellows in there are no better'n rats in a trap—an' I don't figger on bein' inside there with you when the trap's sprung. *Adios*, fellers!"

"Run out on us, huh?" Curses, shouts of rage rose inside the Palmer House. "Shoot him! Kill the yellow rat—!" A dozen bullets ripped through the darkness toward where Spike's voice had sounded.

But the cunning Spike had already moved. A little later his voice sounded again, farther away, lifted in an anxious call. "Panhandle! Bill!—Don't shoot.

It's me—Spike. I'm comin' in, an' I ain't got a gun on me."

Again a roar broke from the besieged, and another shower of bullets sought the recreant bartender. Then silence fell, to be broken after a moment by Coulson's querulous voice. "Anyway, we got the water. Gimmeadrink—I'm burnin' up!"

"We're on rations," said Brink sternly. "Half a glass a man; an' only *once* around!"

"All right: I'll take mine now."

Coulson swore suddenly as a bright thought struck him, and his exclamation made him the focus of attention.

"I got out, an' got back, didn't I?" he demanded hurriedly. "Well, what does that tell you hombres? Why can't we *all* get out, single file an' not too close together? If that feller out there had seen me he'd 'a' shot, wouldn't he?"

"You've named it, Coulson!"

"We got to move rapid, before it gets any lighter!"

"Come on! Let them coyotes watch th' buildin'! We can take 'em from behind an' get 'em half cleaned up before they know we're out!"

The door opened again, slowly, gently; and Coulson slid through, a friend close at his heels to follow in turn. There came the sharp crack of a rifle in the dry-wash, Coulson groaned, twitched, and lay still.

"Hit you, Coulson?" anxiously asked the friend, reaching out a hand to touch Coulson's ankle. "Did he? By Gawd, he *did!* Coulson's dead!"

"Close that door!" cried a man who had carelessly moved in front of the crack and stepped into two streaming bullets before he could stop himself. "Either push him through or pull him in, but *close that door!*"

A VOICE sounded from the dry-wash in a short lull of rifle fire.

"I let you get th' water because I figgered it didn't amount to nothin'," called Panhandle; "but I'll shoot every damn' thief that tries any more of that!" Two more shots screamed their arrival, but the last one found solid wood. The door was shut, and would remain so.

"That was Panhandle," said Brink, angrily. "I know his voice."

"Yeah! It's just like a tin-horn gambler to play a dirty trick like that! Well, *now* what?"

CHAPTER XXV

WHEN Dave and Wyatt leaped through the windows they struck the ground on the balls of their feet, leaning backward, their knees giving to the shock; and the knees, straightening like released springs, drove them back sideways against the wall, out of danger of any snap shot from the room. That adobe wall was eighteen inches thick, and anyone who made a real effort to get a shot at them would have to lean through the deep embrasure, the upper half of his body exposed, and face the lead streaming through. No one tried it. Once close against the wall, the two men crouched and ran toward the rear, bearing in mind that the back wall had no window, and that its partly opened door would be no prized vantage point for a marksman; lead would stream in through it also.

Reaching the rear corner, they ran straight back from the building, skirting the well and avoiding the scattered piles of rubbish as best they could. Breathless, they dipped down into a shallow gully, followed it for a score of paces, and then dropped into the main wash, where they were shielded by its high, perpendicular walls.

A friendly voice hailed them, a voice calm enough, but giving some small hint, despite the speaker's efforts to the contrary, of a great relief over their safety.

"Yo're welcome! Sounds like you touched somethin' off, back there."

"Yeah, reckon mebby we did," panted Dave, walking toward the hidden speaker, and peering close to get his identity. "George White got to talkin' about dancin', which he did. He did it right well for an awkward man. He figgered my gun held five shots, but he figgered wrong. He dropped Paso Frank, figgerin' that Paso was more dangerous than me because his guns were loaded; an' then he swung on me; but I was savin' two shots for him, an' delivered 'em. Wyatt, here, blew hell outa anythin' he could see. You sound like Tex, and you oughta be Tex."

"Yeah, I am. So th' slate's wiped clean, huh? Got all six."

"Slick as a greasy skillet," said Wyatt. "You never saw so many surprised hombres in all yore born days.

Them that wasn't plumb numb was lickin' their lips when Dave was wastin' ammunition which was goin' to be valuable; an' then their cinches busted, an' when they picked themselves up we wasn't there."

Tex chuckled, his eyes on the vague spot which was the back door of the Palmer House.

Wyatt cocked his head, listening.

"Who's usin' that Sharps cannon?" he asked, grinning in the darkness. "Ever' so often I hear a buffaler gun roar out over th' general racket, an' it roars kinda reg'lar."

"That's Hoppy," answered Tex, and he hesitated for an instant, and when he spoke it was with reluctance. "He's got a job that he hates like poison. It's so rotten mean that he wouldn't pass it on to nobody else, which is his way. If there's any man in this whole country who hates to hurt a hoss, that man's Hoppy. He's got th' dirty job of killin' them hosses at th' tie rails. There must be twenty of 'em; an' that means twenty mad, tough hombres chasin' us across country that they know better than we do. Th' hosses have to go. He's layin' as close as he can get to 'em, tryin' his damndest to kill clean with each shot."

Dave grimaced in the darkness, glad that somebody else was doing that shooting, and knowing that it was shooting that had to be done; but he did not know the resourcefulness of the old, limping redhead who had mourned the acceptance of that job. He did not know that the horses were not being killed.

WYATT was thinking how serious it would be for them all if those animals were left for the besieged to use, and he also thought that the horses would be saved a deal of suffering and abuse if they were killed instantly.

"What about th' hosses in town, th' other hosses?" asked Dave, beginning to breathe with more regularity. "We still got that job?"

"Yes, you have," answered Tex. He raised his shoulder, dropped his cheek against the smooth walnut stock of his rifle, and sent another slug into the rear door as a matter of routine. He listened for the sound of impact: it came instantly, and was that made by lead on wood. He grunted his satisfaction: the door was shut.

"We're all at our stations now," he said, looking up as he pumped the lever. "We're only waitin' for you to get th' loose hosses, an' for them tie-rails to be cleared. Then we pull out, an' to hell with Hell's Center. Th' job is done."

"Come on, Wyatt," said Dave, turning on his heel. "We still got a little time before dawn, an' if we move rapid we can rustle off every head of ridin' stock in town. Lucky we know just where to look for 'em. Our own hosses where they oughta be? Yeah? Come on, Wyatt, so-long, Tex."

"So-long," grunted Tex, his gaze returning to the rear door.

Here and there around the building, except on its blind south side, he could see the occasional flash of rifles, indicating where his friends were holed up behind thick, adobe walls. While Dave and Wyatt had played their own parts in the Palmer House that night, their friends had been busily engaged in cutting loopholes in the more strategic corrals, and in getting everything in readiness for the storm.

Tex could picture the three of them, holed up safely and keeping a score and a half of desperadoes within the confines of four walls. It took Hopalong to think of such a ridiculous and yet simple plan. He chuckled and fired again, and the sound of lead on wood came back to him. From out in front of the building came the roar of the great buffalo gun, Hopalong's .45-120-550. How that gun did shoot!

Then Tex remembered that Johnny, too, had such a weapon, and with the remembrance came the disturbing thought that he had not heard the latter's rifle. Was anything wrong with Johnny? Again came the roar of the Sharps, and a burst of revolver fire from Johnny's position reassured the rear-door guard.

Johnny could have told Tex why his rifle was silent. He had given Hopalong most of his rifle cartridges, and neither he nor Hoppy had too many for the situation. They were big and heavy and their use was regulated more by necessity and reasonable chances of making a hit rather than by numbers. When Hopalong had started off to do his delicate shooting in the dark, Johnny, knowing what was in his old friend's mind, silently gave him most of his own cartridges, and determined to do his own window-dressing

with Colts. Right now the shooting was more for demonstration purposes, for discouraging egress, rather than for deadliness; it was mostly to close-herd the outlaws and keep them inside the building.

Matt Skinner, lying comfortably behind his loop-hole, where he could see the front of the Palmer House as well as his own particular window, pumped a fresh cartridge into the smoking chamber of the Winchester, and grinned with contentment. He thought that his last shot had been followed by a yelp of pain: all right, then let th' damned fools stay away from the window. They brought it on themselves.

His mind turned to Dave and Wyatt; they should be busy about now in rounding up the horseflesh. By daylight, or shortly thereafter, they all should be ready to leave town without the threat of pursuit. It all had been figured out to a T. That long-headed old shag-bark used his brains to some end. Then the roar of the buffalo gun made him wince. He was glad that he and Johnny had managed to drive off at least two of the animals before the fight began. It was a mean job that Hopalong had given himself, poison mean; but it had to be done, and somebody had to do it, which was the hell of it. He saw the flash of a gun out behind the building, and knew that Tex was all right and still watching that door.

HOPALONG, lying prone behind a desert-varnished boulder, fired three shots of his Colt through the front window, and then hitched still closer to the store. Not a horse had been hit, so far, to his great relief: and he hoped that none would be hit. Why in hell couldn't he find the mark he was trying for? The gun was powerful enough to do the work if he could see the small mark he was searching for. There seemed to be a thin and darker streak along the darker band of shadow. Again he sent a few shots through the window, and wormed ahead another half dozen feet. If daylight caught him where he was he would be in a proper fix. Ah! Was *that* a thin, gray line? Was *that* the glint of starlight on sun-bleached wood? If it was, he had been shooting too high. Was—yes, by God, it was!

He slid the rifle forward, planted himself firmly, exhaled a little, steadied and

then gently, oh so gently, squeezed the trigger of the gun. The sound of impact bounded back to him, but it was so closely merged in the thunder of the report that he was doubtful. Still, it sounded different from those others which had struck adobe. This time the left-hand Colt spat swiftly at the window; and again the Sharps reloaded, slid forward and steadied. The roar smashed back at him from the wall of the building, but this time he caught the sheen of a silvery-white splinter as it sprang into the air.

He sighed with relief and reloaded. He was on the target at last, and now it would be only a matter of moments. Again the great gun crashed, and the almost hidden tie-rail cracked in two, the frantic horses, plunging and rearing, ripped the fastened ends from the posts, and were free. Hoofs thundered down the street, the noise sufficient to let Dave and Wyatt know that their job had grown. The happy marksman now swung the rifle on the second tie-rail, and he found this one easier, for he had the range to an inch. Three shots broke it, and again the surging horses tore free and stampeded down the street.

There was no reason to waste another moment in so precarious a position. So far all the shots fired at him had missed; but there was no telling when one of them would make a hit. He would leave the front of the building to Matt's enfilading fire. He wriggled backward, dragging the big rifle after him, and not long thereafter he was back where he had started from, on the safe side of a ridge of sand and gravel. He moved along it, crossed the street farther up, and swung back toward the Palmer House, stopping at the first position.

"You makin' out all right?" he asked, after he had answered the sharp challenge.

"Yeah," replied Matt, chuckling. "Right well. What happened to them hosses?" he asked, curiously. He fired again, pumped the lever, and looked up.

"Didn't have th' heart to kill 'em, an' didn't have to," answered Hopalong, smiling gratefully. "Managed to shoot th' tie-rails in two, an' th' hosses did th' rest."

"Did, huh? Well, that's an idea that I'll put away for future reference," said Matt, reverently. "Live an' learn, live an' learn. Hoppy, yo're a ring-tailed,

diamond-studded old lizard. *Listen!*"

It was the anxious hail of the bartender Spike that they had just heard, followed by the furious volley from the besieged Palmer House.

Hopalong raised his own voice in answer.

"This way, Spike—an' keep under cover. I'm takin' you at your word; but if you are up to any tricks, may the Lord have mercy on your soul!"

A moment or two later there was the scuffle of feet, and a vague figure loomed out of the night. It was Spike. Very nonchalantly, easily he told his story; no one, listening, would have thought that here was a man talking for his life.

WHEN he had finished, Hopalong was silent for a moment. "You've been in with a bunch of human rats, and you're probably no better than you should be. But if I was sure you had nothing to do with killing that woman—"

"I swear to God I hadn't," said Spike earnestly. "I wasn't even along, but I heard about it later. The old fellow that had that little ranch—the Kid's uncle—was always a mysterious old coot. And one day a nugget fell out of his pocket right in front of some of Big Henry's gang. Big Henry was sure he had found a lot of gold and had it hid somewhere around that 'dobe, and that he'd slipped the news on to this Kid and his wife. Loco was always prowlin' 'round there too, which made Big Henry all the surer. So Big Henry and some of the worst ones went up there that night to try to make them two young 'uns tell where it was. He picked the girl because he knew torturing her was the surest way to make her husband talk if he knew. But I don't reckon neither of 'em knew—they never told, an' the girl died. Maybe there wasn't any gold, except that one nugget."

"So that was it! I thought it'd be something like that." Hopalong was silent for a moment. "Well, Spike, I reckon you've saved your skin. But I'd advise you to get—an' git as far an' as quick as you can in two seconds. An' let this be a lesson to you—don't never nest up with a lot of human rats in future."

Spike grunted. A second later the sound of his footsteps, diminishing rap-

idly, testified that he had taken Hopalong's advice fully to heart.

Hopalong and Matt both laughed.

Again came the crash of Tex's gun bellowing into the night as it hurled its heavy bullets into the Palmer House door.

"That's Tex, tellin' 'em to stay in outa th' rain," chuckled Matt. "What was that he said about water?"

"He let 'em get water, knowin' that when day comes they can get out an' have all they want," replied Hopalong. "I reckon they kinda imposed on his good nature, an' tried to sneak out an' get away."

"An' found out that he ain't got any good nature right now," said Matt. "Hell, I coulda told 'em *that*, if they'd asked me. How's Dave an' Wyatt makin' out?"

"Don't know; but I will know right soon," replied Hopalong, and faded from Matt's sight.

Johnny looked up. He had not challenged because he knew the familiar, limping step.

"What happened to them hosses?" he asked.

"I cut th' tie rails with th' Sharps, an' they got away. Didn't have to shoot any of 'em: not a single one."

"You got any cartridges left?" asked the practical young man, holding out his hand.

"Some. Got enough, I reckon. Here, I'll split even with you."

"I got to report that Tex is hobnobbin' with th' enemy," said Johnny with a short laugh. "He just made one of 'em a present—45 slug, round end first." He chuckled softly. "There's two fellers in there that have got a couple of mine, judgin' by th' swearin'."

"I wouldn't be a heap sur—*Listen!*" said Hopalong sharply; and the sounds of many hoofs came to them from somewhere back of Tex's position.

"Dave an' Wyatt!" grunted Johnny.

"Yes! It shore didn't take 'em long to round up th' two bunches I turned loose from th' rails. They're headin' 'em up for th' corral."

"It won't be long, then," replied Johnny with satisfaction. "You figger on drivin' 'em out onto th' desert an' turnin' 'em loose, or herdin' 'em ahead of us?"

"Some of them hosses are grain-fed, an might wander back here," said Hopalong. "We'll drive 'em ahead of us. That's th' shorest way."

"Suits me; suits me right down to th' ground! Let them filthy coyotes hoof it out, like they made th' Kid. Wonder where he is, anyhow?"

"Bulltown, like as not, seein' I ain't sent no word to Bat about him."

"Well, we shore can tell him that his slate's clean," said Johnny, picking up his heretofore idle buffalo gun. "Reckon I'll give 'em one shot with this—I like th' noise it makes."

HE cuddled down against the stock, steadied, waited, and fired; and a bellow of rage and pain roared back from the Palmer House. "Somebody must 'a' got right in front of that one," he chuckled. "Sounded to me like that Brink coyote."

"It won't be long now, Kid," said Hopalong, moving away. "I'll find Dave and Wyatt an' see how things stand. So-long. Remember, now: our cayuses are at that little corral, acrost th' street. When you hear me shoot three times rapid, you slide outa here an' get to th' hosses."

"I ain't forgettin' nothin', not a damn' thing," said Johnny. "Reckon I'll try just one more with th' Sharps," and he forthwith gave his entire attention to his particular window.

CHAPTER XXVI

HOPALONG moved on, bound for the rear of the Palmer House and Tex. When he drew near to his friend he heard Tex challenge sharply, which surprised him: he had had no thought that he could be seen; and then to his utter amazement he heard a strange voice reply; but was it a strange voice? Somehow it sounded familiar.

"*Quien es?* Who th' hell are you?" demanded Tex. "Hold 'em high an' keep acomin', *both* of you!" His voice was tense and hard. "One false move an' yo're done! *Come on!*" Then Tex heard a slight sound behind him, and twisted sideways, but a reassuring voice sent him twisting back again.

"Keep acomin', pronto!" ordered Hopalong, now at Tex's side. "Good Gawd! It's th' Kid! An' Loco!"

"All right: you can drop 'em," said Tex, and instantly turned his attention to the rear door of the Palmer House.

"What th' hell you doin' out here?" demanded Hopalong, reaching out and gripping the Kid's shoulder. "Spit it out, Kid! What you doin' here?"

He listened to the swift and broken recital, a recital which left much out, but enough was told to make Hopalong's face soften: the Kid had come back to square accounts, and to die.

"You say you've got some dynamite?" he asked swiftly. "Where is it? Yeah? Gimme th' fuse an' caps, an' you take Loco up to th' big corral just over th' ridge beyond th' blacksmith shop. Pick out a couple of saddled hosses an' wait there. Most of them hosses are fresh. We're pullin' out right soon, an' yo're goin' with us. Keep yore eye on Loco: we won't have time to go lookin' for anybody. Understand?"

He watched the two disappear into the night, and then turned to Tex. He was smiling grimly.

"There's more stuff in th' Kid than I figgered," he admitted. "Come back here to kill all he could, an' die! With dynamite, no less!"

Tex fired, pumped the lever, and locked up.

"We're shore goin' to make a cleaner job of Hell's Center than we figgered on," continued Hopalong. "I'll be back inside of ten minutes, an' when I come I'll come fast. I'll bring th' Kid's hosses with me. Be ready to join me, Tex."

Tex saw him melt away, and resumed his watch on the back door, firing one shot at it as casual information that it had not been forgotten.

Hopalong hurried to where he had been told he would find the horses and the dynamite. The box was there, lying on the ground, and the two horses had begun to stray. If he couldn't catch the animals he would have to shoot them; but they were not at all skittish, and he soon had them and led them to a sage bush, where he tied them securely and then hurried back to the box.

In another moment he was carrying it toward the blank wall of the Palmer House. He reached his objective in safety, smashed in the cover of the box

with a Colt, and worked rapidly with the deadly little sticks. He dug a hole in the end of one of them and placed the stick aside. Taking the coil of fuse from his pocket, he measured it to the required length by spans of his hand, cut it off, split one end of it into four pieces with his knife, and then, capping the other end by crimping the cap on with his teeth, shoved this end of the fuse into the hole he had made in the stick. He was working swiftly, and in another moment the sticks were piled against the adobe wall, the capped cartridge in the middle of the pile. He looked quickly around. There were some large, flat rocks close by, and he hastened to them. They would serve as weights to give the dynamite the added power of a kick-back. He had no time to make a better blanket, but the rocks would do nicely.

SCURRYING from the Palmer House with the rest of the sticks, he slipped up close to the wall of the general store and again worked at top speed. He was glad that the storekeeper did not sleep on the premises, for he wanted every man to have a chance, at least, for his life. This fuse was cut a little longer than the other. He lit it and ran at top speed to the mine he had placed against the Palmer House, lit that, and then dashed away to get the horses and pick up Tex. Already a pale streak in the eastern sky warned him that time was getting short.

"Come on, Tex!" he cried when he reached the wash. "Down th' wash after me! There's two twenty-five pound charges of dynamite due to go off in about seven minutes. I'll get them two hosses an' head straight for th' corral. You hustle th' rest of th' boys there as fast as you can!"

Soon the sounds of galloping horses passed around behind the Palmer House and circled around to the firing line, stopping at the main corral. Hopalong swung down from the saddled horse and called out sharply.

Dave Saunders came up at a run, followed closely by his friend Wyatt.

"All right, boys," said Hopalong, bending swiftly over one of the prisoners taken by Matt and Johnny. His fingers worked swiftly at the ropes. "Herd them hosses ahead of us on th' Tinaja Verde trail. Here comes Johnny: he didn't wait for th' signal. He'll help

you. Fire three quick shots for Matt, an' then move rapid!"

He helped the prisoner to his feet, gripping him with fierce strength.

"In three minutes th' Palmer House is goin' up in smoke. There's twenty-five pounds of dynamite against th' wall, an' I ain't sayin' where. Th' general store is goin' up with it. It'll take you one minute to run to th' Palmer House an' warn yore friends; an' about th' same amount of time for them to get out of th' buildin'. Rub yore ankles an' knees an' get limbered up: an' when I say *go* you GO!"

Dust was sweeping over them in dense clouds as the impounded horses were driven out of the corral, herded up, and started for the trail. Hopalong saw Matt and Tex running up, and shouted for them to stand by the riding horses. He looked again at his watch, slapped the prisoner on the shoulder, and gave him the word to start.

"Go!" he shouted, and as the frightened man darted away toward the Palmer House, shouting out his identity at every jump, Hopalong released the second prisoner, jerked him to his feet, and shoved him after the first. "Seat!" he shouted, and then laughed aloud, as he turned to dash for the horses.

Swinging into their saddles, the little group whirled and raced for the street, swung northward along it and then turned off in the direction of the Tinaja Verde trail, riding in the dust of the horse herd, dust which still filled the air. When on the outskirts of the town and well out of revolver range of the Palmer House, they drew up, waiting.

Already the involuntary garrison of the Palmer House was streaming from doors and windows, and running from the building as if it were a thing accursed. The mounted friends saw the last man emerge and start down the street like a frightened rabbit. In his panic he had turned the wrong way, and just as he was between the two buildings there sprang heavenward a great cloud of smoke, dust, and débris. Almost before the sound had died out there came a second eruption as the general store disappeared. The unlucky last man was **blown off his feet, but they could see him scrambling frantically away on all fours.**

The billowing smoke swirled and thinned, and what was left of the princi-

pal part of Hell's Center stood gutted and gaunt against the still gray western sky.

"There goes their grub an' their liquor," said Hopalong, chuckling. "We've got their hosses, saddles, an' rifles. Looks like there'll be a kinda parade startin' toward San Ignacio when th' sun goes down. Hi! Damn' if they ain't shootin' at us!"

HIS friends laughed in derision, for the bullets were falling far short, throwing up little jets of sand, just able to be seen in the growing light. No one made any effort to reply, although there were two rifles there that could have spanned the distance and with some to spare.

Matt Skinner raised his arm and thumbed his nose at the furious population of Hell's Center; and then, swinging around, joined his already moving friends.

They soon caught up with the horse herd and helped to drive it. All that day they went on, through the dust and the heat, and into the evening. Then the lava belt was reached and they knew that it was only a few more miles to the water hole. At last they reached it and saw, to their utter amazement, a lean lanky cowpuncher sitting cross-legged on the ground beside a little pile of twigs. As they rode up he struck a match and started the fire.

"Great mavericks!" marveled Hopalong, dismounting. "You been here all this time?"

"No; no, I ain't," answered Nueces, gravely shaking his head. "I only got here two days ago, I got to figgerin' that mebby you boys would have to come out on th' jump, an' if you did, you'd shore head for this water. I allus figger that it's a good thing, out on th' desert, to keep a water hole in th' fambly; so I been layin' on my belly, up there, seem' to it that no Hell's Center hombres got here ahead of you an' took possession. I've been so hot I near drank up all th' water myself. How'd you make out?"

Hopalong looked around and saw that the Kid was helping the riders with the horse herd, and that he was taking a sort of interest in the work.

"We got th' whole six, an' a few extra," he answered. "That kid come back ag'in with fifty pounds of dynamite to

blow up th' gang an' hisself at th' same time. He's goin' back East, where he belongs."

"Fifty pounds of dynamite!" breathed Nueces. "Fifty pounds of dynamite, plumb wasted! What a pity!"

"No," drawled Hopalong, chuckling. "It wasn't wasted. It just blew up, an' took most of Hell's Center with it. Piled

it against th' store an' th' Palmer House, an' let her go. Let's open th' cache an' get supper ready for th' boys."

"She's already open," said Nueces, yanking a tarpaulin from a pile of stuff behind him. "Fifty pounds of dynamite ag'in two mud walls! Hell, let's start cookin'."

And they did.

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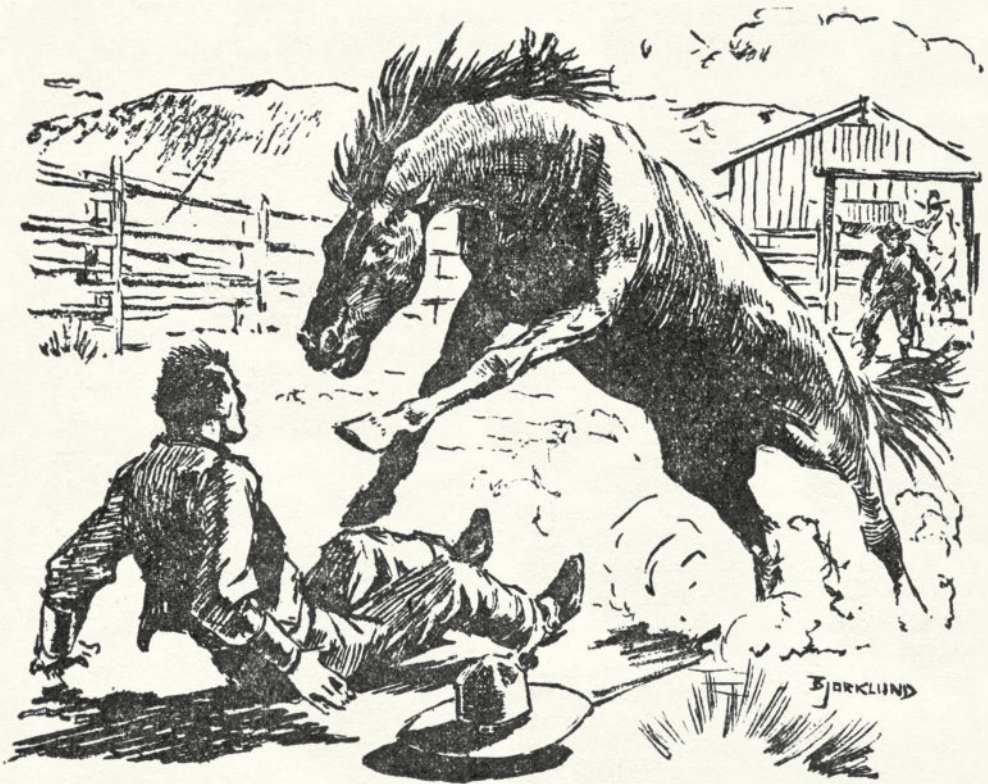
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Honest Pardner

by FRANK C. & O. A. ROBERTSON

YOU ask me what people around here mean when they say a man is as honest as Solly McGuire?

It's true that his honesty was somethin' of a tradition in these parts. Like his lyin'. He didn't go in for the big whoppers that nobody except tenderfeet are expected to believe. When *he* lied to you you believed him, even if you knew better. An' when his sense of honesty told him to do a thing he done it. Like the Vaughn case in which I, Jim Connell, happened to be mixed up.

Not that Solly ever took any pleasure in deceivin' anybody. His whole nature run contrary to them precepts. Howsoever, he never allowed himself to become a slave to a reputation for truth and veracity. And whenever he deemed it expedient, as you might say, he could be plumb relentless in steerin' some misdirected hombre on a course that was wormwood to his soul.

Otherwise, Solly was real do-cile, an' bein' plenty Scotch by nature, he never wasted his talent.

Bein' a professional bronco twister, an' havin' a stand in with all the big horse outfits Solly made a lot more money than a regular cowhand, so any buckaroo that got a chance to throw in with him felt lucky. Wherever there was a big bunch of bronsks to be scratched out, Solly always got first chance at 'em, an' the big outfits were always willin' to pay him more than they would anybody else.

Not that he was any world's beater as a rider. He was good all right, but there were quite a few of us that figgered we knew somebody that was better, even if we didn't elaim that honor ourselves. It was in savvy of horse nature where Solly had it over the most of us.

To see him take the kinks out of a bad one an' git on easy terms with it would make you think he'd cast a spell over it. Of course, every now an' then he'd come up against a killer, but the worst of 'em seldom got as tough with him as they would with some other twister. People were that way about him, too. Kinda.

I've known a few hombres that sorta wanted to auger with him, but they never could seem to find a good place to begin at.

Another thing about that, though, was that Solly always had a pardner that had to be reckoned with. He never did seem to care to go it alone. Before I hooked up with him he had a young fellow by the name of Billy Vaughn.

Billy was altogether unlike Solly; wild an' reckless, an' about as uncertain as a cross-eyed woman with a garden hose. All he knew about horses was to stay on top of 'em. He couldn't see danger if it was comin' at him as big as a house till it hit him in the face. But in spite of Solly's savvy, caution, an' experience, he got hurt a lot more times than Billy did just ridin' his luck.

Billy finally got himself killed though, but durin' the time they were together he never missed a day's ride on account of injury. An' Solly didn't git to go to the funeral because he was already in the hospital himself. Howsomever, that puts me somewhat ahead of this incident I'm aimin' to relate.

They'd taken a contract at the time to snap out about a hundred head of broncos for old man Beardsdall down on the edge of the desert. It was a tough bunch of mustangs that the local brone fighters had been shyin' away from for some time. An' there wasn't nobody criticisin' 'em for it either.

There was some pretty old horses in the lot an' they were all plenty tough. Some of 'em had been monkeyed with before, which don't make 'em a bit more congenial to mingle with.

Among the spoiled lot was a big blue roan, which had killed a brone stomper who had started a bunch of 'em two years before. This Grizzly horse was among the first they got in. He was eight or nine years old an' naturally plumb bad. On top of that he seemed to remember that he'd earned two years' freedom by killin' one twister an' was plumb willin' to bargain for additional liberty on them same terms.

For all that he'd handled a lot of them kind of horses, Solly was some afraid of Grizzly. All of which ain't no reflection on Solly's courage. He was just plumb experienced in them things an' knew what a bad horse could do.

I happened to be at the corral when

Solly forked this Grizzly horse for the first time, an' right then I seen that a bullet between that pony's eyes would have simplified matters a heap. When that brone found himself hemmed in by the corral fence, he put everybody out of it an' off of it. Solly had to rope him from the outside, an' at that the horse came blamed near climbin' over after him before Billy could git a rope on his feet an' git him down.

AFTER hog-tyin' him an' gittin' the saddle on, they turned everything else out of the corral. Then Solly got all the saddle under him he could, an' Billy slipped the ropes.

Grizzly come up squealin', an' for about six jumps he sure made Solly hang an' rattle. Then when it looked like he'd about bucked himself out, he changed tactics and went over backwards. Right there's where Solly's quick wit an' caution failed to click.

As Grizzly went over he crashed against the fence. Solly could have went over with him as he'd probably done with a hundred horses before, an' likely fell clear. Likely he'd have got the saddle under him again in time to come up on top, but bein' on the ground with an animal like this Grizzly horse wasn't what he was hankerin' for, an' Solly wasn't no hand to take chances. So quick you could hardly see how it was done, he grabbed onto the fence an' let the horse go down without him.

Solly grabbed a pole with one hand an' had his feet on another one lower down, but he didn't climb on over, just hung there lookin' back at the horse. He'd been mighty fast in takin' advantage of the break that had come to him, but he'd accidentally shoved one foot between a pair of poles, an' it stuck there for maybe a quarter of a minute.

That horse was up like he'd been bounced, an' the lunge he made for Solly hangin' there on the fence would have made a mountain lion look sleepy. Solly jerked his foot loose but he'd been delayed too long. Grizzly got a mouthful of clothes an' bide an', the next instant Solly was out in the corral with that crazy mad horse churnin' up an' down on him with both front feet, bitin' an' squealin' like a stuck hog.

There was only one thing to do an' Solly done it. He curled up on his side

with his arm over his head an' took it until Billy could ride in an' fight the horse off with a club, while the rest of us got to Solly an' snaked him out of the corral.

Billy Vaughn was plumb beside himself with grief until Solly assured him he wasn't goin' to die. At that he'd accumulated a broken arm and shoulder an' several cracked ribs. However, about the first thing he said was for Billy not to take it out on the horse.

"It's our game, not his," Solly says. "If he don't wan't to play with us, he's got a right to buck about it."

That was like Solly, an' considerin' the condition he was in, Billy didn't argue about it. Just the same, I could see that the Grizzly pony was in for a mighty tough session.

We took Solly to the hospital that afternoon, but before we left him, it was arranged for me to help Billy go on with the job.

We worked for a week, an' then the brone stompin' job come to a sudden stop. Grizzly caught Billy nappin', an' I wasn't close enough to do him any good. When I got to him he seemed to have something powerful urgent to say, but all he could do was whisper a girl's name. We buried the boy a month before Solly got out of the hospital.

Billy Vaughn's folks lived fifty miles away, so Solly didn't get to see any of 'em until after the horse buyer arrived an' accepted the string of broncos as broke saddle horses.

With the others went about twenty-five head that Billy an' Solly had picked up an' broke for themselves. I remember what they brought—twenty-two hundred an' fifty dollars. Solly just sold the horses in his own name. He cashed the check, takin' the money in big bills, an' set out to visit Billy's folks.

Countin' the money Solly always kept with him, an' the wages he'd collected from Beardsdall, the horse money made quite a stake. Right close to three thousand dollars. Solly always carried quite a roll in an old black bill fold, which he kept in his hip pocket, buttoned down, an' he had a habit of feelin' for it every few minutes to make sure it was still there.

Also, we had that Grizzly horse with us. Which was just another of Solly's funny notions. Rather than have the

horse shipped some place where he wasn't known, an' where he'd be pretty sure to kill somebody else, Solly had bought him in himself.

I wasn't acquainted with the Vaughns, an' as Billy hadn't been on good terms with his family for some time, Solly had never met 'em either. All that Solly knew about 'em was that the family consisted of the old folks and a boy older than Billy, who had garnered up a local reputation as a mean, no-account bully.

None of the family knew anything about the horse money, or they'd have been after it. Solly could have got plumb away with it if he'd wanted to. But that was where that honesty of his come in.

WE drifted in just about sundown, an' the family was out on the front porch. Solly introduced himself as Billy's pardner, but we was made to feel that our droppin' in on 'em wasn't anything to git excited about. But you should have seen their faces change when Solly flashed that roll of greenbacks an' informed 'em that eleven hundred an' twenty-five dollars of it belonged to Billy.

The atmosphere sure warmed right then. That kind of honesty, I reckon, hadn't been included in their course of study. Their eyes sure gleamed when they rested on that wad of money. Especially Fred's—that was the boy older than Billy.

After that we was real company, an' they insisted on us stayin' all night. Fred himself showed us to a room upstairs when it was time to turn in.

There wasn't any latch on our door, an' not knowin' who might be sleepin' in the room opposite, we set a chair against it to keep it shut. It don't seem no time till daylight, when we're waked up by quite a commotion goin' on downstairs.

We rolled out right away an' was gittin' our clothes on when Solly put his right hand on his hip an' give a sort of snort. He drops the boot in his hand an' pulls out his bill fold.

"Hell, Jim, I've been robbed," he says in a kind of a hoarse whisper.

"No," I says, "there couldn't nobody git in here." The chair was still against the door.

"I sure'n hell have. Look." He comes hobblin' across on one high-heeled

boot an' one sock foot, holdin' the pocketbook out in front of him.

Sure enough there wasn't nothing in it but a piece of folded newspaper. He'd been so used to the feel of that pocketbook that he'd noticed somethin' wrong with it when he stooped over to pull on his boot. He walked over to the window an' looked down.

"It was that cock-eyed Fred," he goes on. "My pants were on a chair right here in front of the window. He's fetched a ladder an' climbed up an' got it without ever comin' in the room."

We looked down, but the ground was too hard-packed out there to leave any tracks that couldn't be scuffed out.

I'm nowhere near as cool about it as Solly, but just the same, I see plain enough where things are goin' to lead when it becomes known that the money has been swiped. It's goin' to look like I've taken the money, an' am tryin' to frame it onto some member of the Vaughn family. I said as much to Solly.

"We won't talk about it," Solly says. "There's no use makin' a fuss, an' we've got a lot better chance of gittin' it back if he don't know we've missed it. That's what Fred figgered on, thinkin' I'd just feel of it an' not look at it till I got home. By that time I wouldn't have no way of provin' where I'd lost it."

I wanted to jump Fred about it right now, but at the same time I realized that it wouldn't do any good. He'd just deny it an' there we'd be—no way in the world of makin' our charges stick. And every chirp we made would be puttin' me in a worse hole than I was already in.

"I promised my mother we'd take a trip back east this winter to where she was raised, an' now I'm just about broke," Solly says, as though that closes the discussion, but I could see that his jaws had set kinda flat an' hard.

Howsomeever, while we were comin' downstairs we heard somethin' that took the money off our minds for the time bein'.

"You went an' stole Kitty away from Billy, so whether it's you or him that's responsible for this fix, you gotta marry her," comes floatin' up to us in a kinda scairt, high-pitched voice.

"There's a purty girl settin' by the door cryin'. A crippled old man with a face like the tail-end o' hard times is shakin' a mean finger at Fred, like he's

right out of patience with him.

"You know I ain't got the money for hospitals an' such," he howls when we come in.

Fred just sets there with a leerin' grin spread over his face, an' the girl evidently finds it an' us a little too plenty, for she lets out a little screech an' dives out through the door. Fred makes a grab at the old feller's scrawny neck an' boosts him out through the door, too. We could hear a bullyin' an' a whimperin' exchange of compliments goin' on out there, an' then a buckboard rattles away.

"I wouldn't marry that ole devil's daughter if he had a million dollars," Fred chucked when he came back in, "let's eat."

"They're allus tryin' to make trouble for poor Fred," his mother puts a soothin' finish to the subject, an' we all set up to the table.

AFTER breakfast, old man Vaughn suggested to Fred that he ride into town with us an' bank the money Solly had given him.

There's an interested look on Solly's face as he watched the old man hand that money to Fred, but he don't say anything. He knows Fred ain't the kind to take liberties with. He wasn't any good, but he won't stand messin' with. A lot of fellers had found that out.

Fred got away from the house ahead of the rest of us, an' when we went out to git our horses he was already saddlin' up. As he stooped over to reach the cinch, I caught sight of a six-shooter strapped on under his coat. I shot a glance at Solly an' seen that he'd noticed it, too. However, he just winked at me an' went on.

"Right nice little family ruckus," Solly whispers as we pick up our bridles.

"Kitty—that's the name Billy spoke when he died," I whispers back, an' I seen Solly's face set frayed an' hard like a chunk of granite. "Help me git my saddle on Grizzly," he says.

That request seemed kinda off color, but just for that reason I didn't say anything. Ridin' a bad horse into town where it might buck into a crowd of women an' kids, or where some unwary person might bump into it an' git killed, was somethin' Solly hadn't never been guilty of.

Of course Grizzly had tamed considerable by that time an' was more or less a broke horse. That is, he'd kinda got reconciled to havin' a rider on his back, an' if a man was careful he could move around him on the ground without gittin' struck at or kicked, but he had to be mighty sedate about it. One of the things the horse still wouldn't stand for was havin' his head touched.

You couldn't git a bridle on him without throwin' an' hog-tyin' him, but Solly rode him with a hack, an' never took it off. By bein' careful about tyin' in the reins an' not touchin' his nose he got along all right.

Fred was ready to go before we got our bed horse packed, but he didn't offer to help an' stood around an' watched while we got the saddle onto Grizzly. Mrs. Vaughn had come out to say somethin' to him, an' seein' our careful preparations, was still hangin' around the outside of the corral waitin' to see the excitement when Solly gits on.

"Is—is that the horse that killed Billy?" she asks kinda solemn as Solly led the old outlaw out into the middle of the corral, an' I went to git my horse.

Solly hesitates a minute before answerin'. "No, this is the one that 's liable to kill me if I ain't careful," he says an' grins; but I reckon the woman don't figure he's jokin'—much. Solly always does look kinda pale around the gills when he's mountin' a bad one, an' that's the way he looks now.

He steps in close, while the rattles in Grizzly's nose are goin' like a couple of crickets, hitches up his chaps an' then feels of his hip pocket an' makes sure that it's buttoned down. If there's anything wrong with it he don't seem to know it.

I'm watchin' Fred. He's always seemed to be plumb at ease, but now it seems to me he relaxes in dead earnest. There's a peculiar little smile comes on his face an' stays there while Solly gits a short grip on his reins, turns the stirrup around, slips his foot in it, an' eases himself off the ground.

Grizzly takes it, though his nose is still rattlin', an' he's got his eyes rolled back until nothin' shows from in front but the whites. As Solly straightens up in the saddle he heaves a sigh of relief himself, an' favors the rest of us with a grin of achievement. I'd a swore, myself, that

there ain't a thing on his mind but Grizzly's behavior, an' that he's plumb satisfied with that. The safest place around that horse is right up in the middle of him, an' up there Solly seemed to feel kinda secure, an' all his concerns seemed to fall off him like a cloak.

We could see old man Vaughn grinnin' at us an' wavin' good-bye from the porch.

"So long, Mrs. Vaughn, see you in church, an' tell dad I can't wave good-bye without gittin' bucked off," Solly says as me an' Fred drops in on each side an' edges Grizzly out through the gate.

IN half a mile Grizzly had left the kinks out of his back an' showed every indication of bein' good for all day, but at a little, sandy-bottomed creek a mile from the house Solly pulls up an' stops.

"I've got to have a drink," he says an' prepares to dismount.

"You're safe enough where you are," I tells him. "Wait till we git to town."

"Yeah, we can git somethin' good to drink there," Fred chimes in, but Solly is already off.

Grizzly lets out a snort an' jumps away, but for once he don't kick or strike. Gittin' off of him so soon after gittin' on must have sorta took him by surprise.

Solly lets him have enough rope to be safe an' sprawls down on his belly beside the creek, an' took a long drink. Then he hunkers down on his heels an' starts buildin' a smoke like he has all day to set there. There's a peculiar grin on his chops, an' me an' Fred just set there watchin' him.

"I got a surprise for you, Fred," he remarks, as he pokes his sack of Durham back into his shirt pocket.

Fred Vaughn don't say a thing, but he stiffens in the saddle, an' it seems to me he gits ready to reach for that shoulder holster under his coat. Just tense an' ready. But if there's anything comin' off Solly don't show he anticipates it none whatever.

"That's so?" Fred says finally, kinda soft an' wary.

"Yes, sir. See this horse? Well, he belongs to you."

"What?" Fred blurts.

"Yep. Plenty times I've heard Billy

say he'd shore like to see *you* ridin' this Grizzly horse, so I figger he'd want you to have him."

I'm plumb unable to see what's in the wind, but I know there's a cyclone broodin' for Fred. I've heard Billy make that same remark, but I never figgered it was inspired by no brotherly love.

Right away a pleased grin comes over Fred's face. Old Grizzly is a sure enough good-lookin' piece of horseflesh, an' since Solly's been so honest about the money Fred don't doubt he's on the level now.

"How come you don't say so before?" Fred wants to know.

"On account of him bein' purty spooky fer a colt I thought I'd unkind him for you before I turned him over," Solly explains.

"Colt, did you say?" Fred grins.

"Why, yes. He's comin' four in the Spring," Solly says plumb innocent. Grizzly's ten if he's a day, but it's not my put-in if Solly wants to prevaricate.

"Why man, you're either kiddin' me, or else that brone's got you fooled complete," Fred laughs. "That plug'll never see twelve again. Look at them fetlocks."

"No?" Solly says like he's kinda miffed. "Look at his teeth if yuh don't believe me."

It's a challenge, an' Fred climbs right down. I just had time to git my brone in the clear when Fred makes a grab for Grizzly's head. He just brushes the horse's nose, but that's a plenty. "Waugh!" Grizzly says, an' goes up like the beast he's named after.

Fred dodges, but he ain't quick enough. Down comes one of Grizzly's front feet an' pats him on the head. As Fred goes down on his knees Grizzly lands about four more with them feet so fast you can't count 'em. Solly swings on the rope then an' turns the horse away.

Grizzly has gone plumb hog wild by that time an' jerks the rope out of Solly's hand an' quits the flat. I start after him, but Solly yells for me to git some water.

While I'm dippin' up a hatful of water Solly has dragged Fred over to the edge of the creek. He ain't exactly unconscious, but his brain is a heap addled, an' I keep him gaspin' for breath

with hatful after hatful of water while Solly frisks him for that stolen money. Finally Solly sets back on his heels an' shakes his head. He can't find no money except what Fred is to bank, which he puts back in Fred's pocket. But he empties Fred's holster.

"No use drownin' him, I guess," he says, an' we roll the feller over an' give him a kinda belated chance to come to. Fred wasn't what you'd call bad hurt, but he sure looked messed up. He had a bump the size of a sagehen's egg on the top of his head, an' a few mighty sore spots along his back, an' one ear is danged near skinned off. But all we seemed to have got done, besides blood-atonin' Fred fer some of his sins, was to have lost old Grizzly.

SOLLY was afoot, unless he rode on top of the bed horse, so he ketches Fred's horse. Fred is settin' up now, madder'n a wet hen, an' feelin' through his pockets. "You've took my gun," he yells.

"Jist holdin' it till after the ceremony," Solly says quiet-like.

"What ceremony?" Fred wants to know, but just the same there's a scared look comin' on his face which shows he's beginnin' to get Solly's drift.

Solly tosses Fred's gun to me, an' turns to Fred. "Git on your horse, Fred, an' I'll climb on behind you," he says. "We're headin' for the justice of the peace, an' there's goin' tuh be a weddin'."

Fred fully understands now that we're intendin' to marry him to that girl that made the early call on him, an' he begins to crawl. "Hell, fellers," he whines, "I can't marry nobody. They'd throw me in the can for bigamy. I've already been married onct, an' ain't never been divorced."

For once Solly indulges in a little high-powered cussin' an' looks like he don't know what to do next. "Hell, that's right," he says kinda to himself, "Billy told me." Then he swings aboard Fred's horse. "You can walk home, can't you, Fred?" he asks.

Takin' his horse seems to make Fred more excited than all the rest of the meanness we've done to him.

"You can't take my horse!" he screams, an' proves he's able to walk home by startin' a rush for Solly, but he

sees his own persuader in my hand pointin' his way an' decides to stay put.

But his talk ain't nowise entertainin' to listen to, so we rode away follerin' Grizzly's trail. "I'll turn your horse loose to come home when we ketch that runaway Colt," Solly yells back at Fred, kinda rubbin' it in.

We had to chase that cussed outlaw ten miles before I got a chance to hang my twine on him.

Grizzly ain't got over his mad spell yet, an' as the rope chokes him he rares up an' takes a fightin' swing at Solly up on Fred's horse. Solly throws himself way out to avoid them rakin' hoofs, but his cinch has been workin' a little loose an' over he goes, saddle an' all. Solly lands in the dirt clear of Grizzly, but Fred's horse lights out for home a-buckin' with that empty saddle under his belly. He ain't gone more'n four jumps when the saddle blanket slides out.

"My gosh, look!" Solly yells as I spur out an' yank Grizzly away. That Injun blanket, folded both ways to make four thicknesses, is now unfurled on top of the sage bushes an' the ground around it is carpeted with greenbacks.

"The son of a gun!" Solly whispers

an' sets down on a sage bush like he's gone too sick to stand up. "Fred had that money folded up in his saddle blanket, an' if it hadn't been for Grizzly we'd a sent it back to him."

I was pretty shaky. If we hadn't found that money I never coulda been sure that Solly didn't half suspect me of takin' it. I suggested that we'd better git the hell outa that country before somethin' else happened, but Solly just set there on that sage bush lookin' sober. I saw a palish green color comin' over his face, an' I knew something else was just bound to happen.

"We've got one more job to git over with first," he says to me. "It's that girl of Billy's. No matter what she done he sure wanted her taken care of. Furthermore," he says in a kinda weak voice, "she needs marryin'—bad. We've got to marry her, Jim."

"For Gawd's sake, feller," I protests, "I ain't gonna marry nobody!"

"I ain't askin' you to," Solly snaps back vicious, though his teeth are chatterin'. "Billy was *my* pardner. But you're comin' along just the same an' give me some moral support."

THE END

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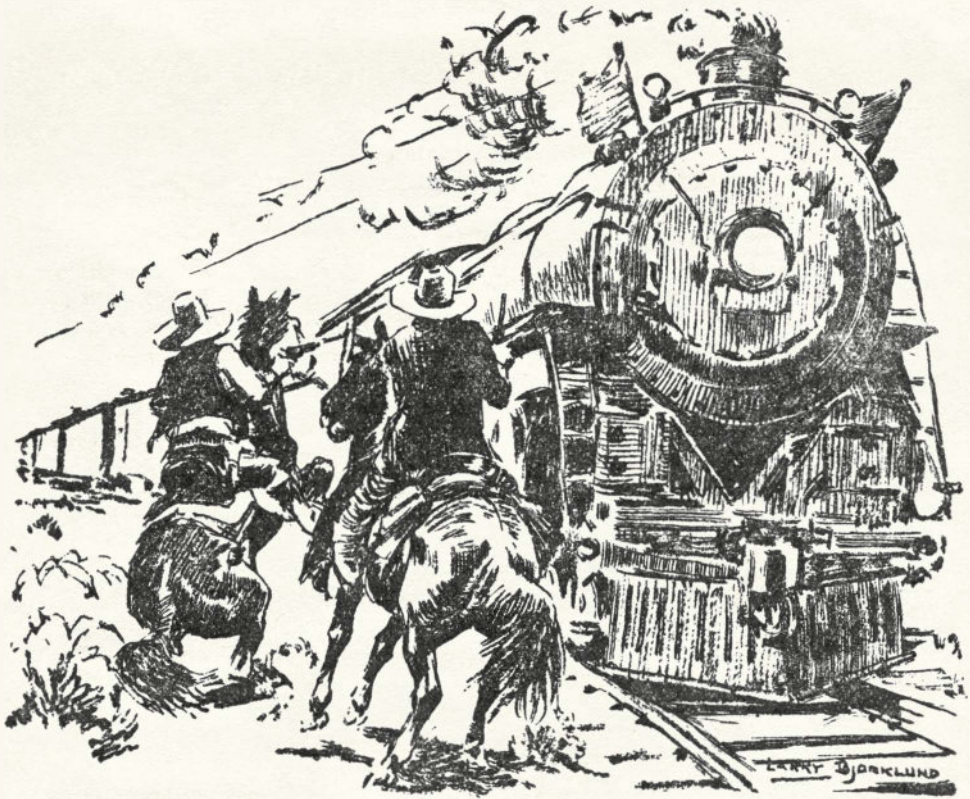
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In Search of a Bad Man

by CHARLES TENNEY JACKSON

DEPUTIES Mahaffy and Moffett waited in the shadow of the concrete irrigation flume just below the point of the black rock where the Los Gatos road bent sharply between the cañon wall and a sheer drop of two hundred feet into the creek bed. It was a good spot to halt a lone bad man coming down into this trap from Starrett's camp. Rounding the rock he would stand sharply in the clear desert moonlight with every move outlined while the officers covered him with their guns from the shade of the cliff.

Deputy Mahaffy of Francey County, Kansas, shoved the steel cuffs back into his overcoat pocket for the fourth time and hunched nervously around where he could see Deputy Moffett of San Andreas, Arizona. The big automatic on his hip worried his rheumatic leg, too, for Mr. Mahaffy was not used to shooting-irons.

Deputy Moffett spat into the road dust and listened to Deputy Mahaffy rehearse this job in a husky whisper.

"All I want, mister, is for you to stand

by till I git this prisoner loaded on that eastbound train that goes through your town at four filty-five tomorry mornin'. He might be a pretty bad Injun to handle. Now, back in Kansas, we got good Injuns, mostly. They come into town from the reservation selling galax and Christmas greens, and some o' those old bucks I'd divide my last scalp with.

"But this here Pete Johnny I come out west to arrest, he sure broke loose on the warpath last summer. Shoots up the town and, when they gits him in jail, durned if he don't clout the turnkey over the head, climb out and wing the constable and break for the timber. Nobody ever see him since."

"Fannin' two guns?" inquired Deputy Moffett professionally.

"Folks back there can't understand it yet. This Pete Johnny was goin' to the Cherokee school when he ups and declares himself. Fur as anybody figgered it was a Wild West medicine-show started him off. This show was on a vacant lot jest back o' the co't-house, peaceful as could be. The old doc was bally-

hooin' his tonic, and his bunch o' Sioux and Apaches was poundin' kettle-drums and givin' a war dance.

"This little Pete Johnny listens awhile in the crowd and then he ups and begins to shoot. He has two old German Luger pistols he got somewhere. The dang fool sure busts up that show. The tent catches fire and the hull town has to turn out volunteers or we'd lost the Fust Baptist church and Levy's Emporium, too. Meantime this Pete Johnny chases them Apaches 'way up in the bresh on Chunky Gal Mountain. Some of 'em never turned up yet.

"The constable gathers Pete in; but he never would say what was eatin' on him. He sits in his cell broodin' a couple o' hours and then produces another big gun somewhere and breaks jail. Looks to me, now, like he'd come out here to Arizona lookin' for more o' them Apaches."

DEPUTY MOFFETT drew his white brows close in a frown over his frosty eyes and bit himself off a chew ere he answered.

"Apaches — them is hard Injuns, brother. What kind o' Injun did you say this *hombre* was?"

"They tell me he was a Cherokee, mebbe."

"Sounds like some kind o' chicken to me. You say he runs them Sioux and Apaches clean up in the bresh and nobody seen 'em since? Now, Apaches is tough Injuns, brother."

"Pete Johnny runs 'em clean out o' Kansas."

"You got," retorted Mr. Moffett curtly, "to show me. Our Injuns don't run so durn easy. 'Tain't natural. What I figger is that this buck o' yourn jest went plum' loco."

"Clean ftified in the head I reckon. Now Sheriff Tom Floyd, back in Francey County, never would have got track o' this buck if he hadn't been correspondin' with Sheriff Beasley o' yore county. When Mr. Floyd finds Pete Johnny is hangin' round this irrigation work-camp up there, shootin' craps for a livin', he sends me right out to fetch him back. In a way, you might say, Depitty, it's the first big job the county ever handed me in nigh thirty years an' more."

The Arizona officer looked the Kansas officer over carefully. In a way he thought that Deputy Mahaffy resembled

himself as Deputy Moffett had glimpsed his own person in the specky glass of the washroom in the county court-house basement. In a way, an onlooker might have noticed this desemblance, also.

Deputy Mahaffy was white of hair and smooth-shaven. Deputy Moffett was white of hair but with a silvery, tobacco-stained mustache. Deputy Mahaffy moved heavily and with a sort of creaky care of his legs, as if thirty years in a swivel chair had made him sot and settled.

Deputy Moffett felt that way himself. His old gray eyes peered out from under shaggy brows to meet an equally kindly, wistful look in the blue eyes of the Kansas man. Thirty years of patient service in the San Andreas county court-house, Mr. Moffett had seen. Somehow he felt as if he had missed something. The Great West had passed him by.

Wild days, colorful years of bad-men, fighting sheriffs, rollicking cowpunchers and turbulent miners—all had come and gone like a dream while old Mr. Moffett thumbed records and filed documents in the little back room of the offices where sheriff after sheriff had come and served and gone his way.

He felt now that he never could visualize himself as a man-hunter, and, when he looked Deputy Mahaffy over, the Kansas seemed just a stooped elderly office man, not at all easy with a gun in his belt or a pair of steel cuffs in his pocket to be snapped on the wrists of any wild young bad man coming down this lonely road in the moonlight.

Moffett wrinkled up his cheek with a slight cough to cover some slight perturbation about this outlaw business.

"Well, brother, our Injuns is tough Injuns. Now if yore papers is right this bad *hombre* you want has been hangin' round Starrett's camp two weeks. Wait-in' for pay day, mebbe. When them greasers git their hides full o' *mescal*, pay nights, them joints is no place for any grapejuice Injun."

"Accordin' to information and belief," announced Mr. Mahaffy importantly, "my Injun stops over in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and cleans out a bunch o' big rich oil Injuns in a crap game. Then he heads west huntin' fur trouble. He had ought to be along here right soon if yore sheriff fixed it up right for us to git him."

Mr. Moffett eased around testily and looked up the silent road. In that moonlight you could see a man's teeth to the turn of the rocks. In a way, he was anxious for this renegade young gunman from Kansas to come down that road and, then, in a way, he wasn't.

HE wondered how this Kansas officer could shoot. Mr. Moffett himself was loath to admit that this big forty-five on his hip felt out of place and in all his long tenure of office no sheriff had ever seen fit to start him off on a bad-man hunt.

In a way Deputy Moffett felt that Sheriff Beasley, even today, had delegated him to accompany the Kansas deputy to go pick up the fugitive because the sheriff thought that old man Moffett had been poring too hard over record books and figures in the county courthouse and needed a week-end off up in the hills to get the air.

The sheriff had even arranged the arrest, as it were, from the San Andreas court-house, by telephoning to the camp boss of the irrigation project and telling him to ask the suspect to go down the Los Gatos road tonight to call at the railroad station for a supposed telegram.

Deputy Moffett hadn't understood till he and the Kansas officer had gone sixteen miles out on the road in the buckboard, that this Injun Pete Johnny was a real bad-man, a gun-fightin' breed and a jail breaker who had put two officers down for the count when he started to leave Kansas.

But there was one thing which Mr. Moffett had hoped and desired, and that was that Deputy Mahaffy of Franceyville, Kansas, was a good gun-shooting officer who could drop his man, belt-shooting, with an eyelash draw, at forty paces, if need be.

Mr. Mahaffy wasn't. Mr. Mahaffy had come to the Southwest fully expecting that the Arizona authorities would provide him with a good man and true in the way of an officer who had grown up in the saddle cracking down outlaws, with two guns working, four at a pop.

Not for worlds did the deputy from Kansas wish the deputy from Arizona to know that the county had sent him on this quest to bring Injun Pete Johnny home because the supervisors thought he deserved a vacation with pay after serv-

ing thirty-five years as court crier and summoner of delinquent taxpayers.

In a way each felt that he had been buncoed as they sat against the wall by the roadside waiting for this renegade to walk into the trap. Some thirty years for each, doddering over musty courthouse chores, just hadn't put Deputies Moffett and Mahaffy in the class of those famed sheriffs and town marshals of the old frontier. But now each felt that the big chance had come. Clothed with full authority to make arrest, out on the man trail, neither wanted to go back without some excitement.

Deputy Moffett was even hoping—in a way—that this dang fool Indian would put up some kind of fight. Mr. Moffett felt that any Arizona brave would. Not that he knew much about them, for they were all herded away at the far end of the State from the peaceful seclusion of the San Andreas court-house, where he had rounded out thirty-odd years of public service.

The Kansas officer felt much the same way. After listening two hours to Deputy Moffett's loftiness about bad-men of the Southwest he thought that Injun Pete Johnny who had jumped the Kansas reservation ought to show some stuff for the natives out here in the West.

"Well," muttered Mr. Moffett, "he ought to be along. The camp boss said he'd start him down this road so's you could pick him up alone with none of them greasers interferin'. Personally, I think this bad Injun o' yours got all his ideas o' the war-trail out o' the movies and readin' them cowboy magazines. I read 'em myself right there in the San Andreas court-house. Some of 'em's pretty good."

"Well, yes, I'll say so. But I don't see yet what hunch a Cherokee Injun back East got to bust up an Apache Wild West show."

"You say he runs our bucks up in the brush?"

"The town marshall finds feathers and beads and buckskin fringe all up the Chunky Gal road. Pete Johnny runs 'em a mile."

Deputy Moffett considered this slowly.

"WELL, mebbe so. As I said as fur east as I got was El Paso, Texas. But one o' the boys in our office goes to Boston once to fetch back a check-passer.

Well, sir, Collins says the East is a hell of a country. He says after the train left Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, they rushed and tromped over more damn two-by-four states than he ever tell of. He said he'd ask the peanut butcher, 'Where are we now?' The feller says, 'New Jersey.'

"Collins takes a chew and tries to spit out the wind in a tunnel and they tells him it was New York. The next flicker Collins knowed they was clean under this dang state and somebody hollers it was Connecticut.

"He gets up mad as hell in a couple o' hours when they slewed him around into Vermont and New Hampshire, and, by the time he gits into Maine, where this cheek-passer had jumped, Collins was so fed up on states and statutes and limitations he packs his guns in a grip and comes back. No East for me, brother."

"Well, Kansas's different. We got a sight o' breshy mountains back o' Chunky Gal. A bad-man could hide up in back and the hull gove-ment couldn't git him out. Out here in the West you got too many dang motor roads and scenery hotels. Pete Johnny might have been mighty disappointed if he was lookin' fur trouble."

"Hey?" queried Deputy Moffett testily, for he was getting stiff in the bones sitting against this cold concrete. "Trouble? If this Kansas buck come West honin' for blood let him be. I'll steer him down on the border where Injuns is one hundred per cent. Americans. You can take him home then, what's left o' him and his hair, in a woman's war-paint box. It'll save yore state expenses."

"I'll take him home, skipper," retorted Mr. Mahaffy, "hear them cuff's jingle, hey? You just stand by, Deputy."

Officer Mahaffy tinkled the cuffs in his pocket again with a hand that trembled slightly from the cold night. Then he stopped this noise and stared fixedly at the sharp turn of the road about the point of rocks. There, in the brilliant moonlight, stood a solitary figure. It had stopped a moment as if listening. Then it came on silently, the white dust jetting up at each quick step.

Deputies Mahaffy and Moffett slid up heavily against the wall.

"Thar's yore meat, brother," whispered Mr. Moffett hoarsely.

"Come on—"

Deputy Mahaffy felt for his gun, but the belt had slid so that it was away around by his spine, under a buttoned-up overcoat. He glanced hurriedly at the granite hard face of the Arizona officer. Mr. Moffett's white mustache was working rapidly up and down in a mutter which the Kansas man could not understand at all. Then the Arizona deputy folded his arms resignedly and nodded to his companion.

"Do yore stuff, brother," he said.

Officer Mahaffy had no time to figure his stuff. He stood in deep shadow, and this slender figure rounded the rock from bright moonlight squarely into him.

The thin brown face of Injun Pete Johnny registered instant surprise. His worn summer suit looked as if he had slept in it for weeks. His plaid cap was powdered gray with alkali. His three-color socks and mountain-toed college shoes of mustard yellow were unkempt as if he had found the war-trail long and hard.

But his black eyes widened between rifts of black coarse hair hanging over his brow, the same shock of caveman hair that cheer leaders of Cherokee School No. 2 had seen many a day in sixty-yard dashes from the forward pass, and the debating teams had watched gleaming slick with "Stayso" and combed straight back over his skull, hardly stirring a strand, even as Pete Johnny shrilly debated the Constitution or "Resolved that the beauties of Nature surpass the beauties of Art."

HE never moved as Deputy Sheriff Mahaffy's excited fingers closed down on his hard, slender arm. Then he murmured—

"Excuse me, please."

"Hands up!" yelled Mr. Mahaffy.

"Excuse, please."

"Well, I'm damned!" roared Deputy Moffett.

"Gi' me that other hand, you!"

Mr. Mahaffy circled for it while he struggled to get his steel cuffs out, but they had tangled in the lining of his pocket. So Pete Johnny merely waved his free arm in the air till Deputy Moffett seized it.

"Mebbe you don't remember me," said

Mr. Mahaffy, "but if I'd been on duty at the jail 'stead o' the court-house that night, you'd never got a leg out o' Francey County."

Pete's brow had been wrinkling perplexedly. But now it cleared brightly as if he identified old Deputy Mahaffy with some forgotten episode of other days.

"Oh, yes! Pretty good—all right," he said and grinned amiably.

The Arizona officer dropped his arm and stood back.

"Well, if this Injun is a bad-man, then Billy the Kid was a Y. M. C. A. coffee-slinger. Neve' mind yore cuffs, brother."

Deputy Mahaffy was still jerking them in the ragged lining of his coat. Then he started grumbling.

"All right, Pete. But understand, you come along. Hear me?"

"All right. Pretty good," said Pete Johnny. His black eyes began to narrow as if a second thought had hit him. He ripped out something that might have been a string of cuss words which would sour all the grapes in Delaware. And he stared down into the misty moonlit valley at the few twinkling lights as if that second thought was troublesome.

The thing was that Pete Johnny was shy. He could run and yell war-whoops on the gridiron and massacre the English language in quick nervous staccato when he had to recite; but when Pete Johnny got out where men were men, especially big, rugged white men, he lost both speech and nerve, completely. He looked these two over doubtfully. By this time they had both squirmed their gun belts around where they could be utilized in emergencies. Pete Johnny noted the moves.

"Pleased to meet you," he added deferentially.

The Arizona officer turned to the Kansas man.

"Brother. I see I was wrong. Come to think, Delaware ain't grapes. It's peaches."

Deputy Mahaffy pulled his automatic half-way out, showed it; then he shoved it in the holster.

"Well, I got him, didn't I?" and Mahaffy grunted victoriously.

"Railroad, that's what I'm pinin' to see. Git your buckboard, Mr. Moffett. I'll sleep better when this man is east-bound sittin' next to the winda." Then he turned to the prisoner. "Pete, it was

a long run you made after you broke out the co't-house bascmnt cell. I'll say you flittered fast."

"How is eve'body?" said Injun Pete Johnny, hopefully.

"The turnkey got out the hospital three weeks before I left. They thought his skull was busted. Constable Ott that you winged out in the alley—for a while he was despaired of. How did it happen you had two big German pistols when you started amock?"

"Two in my pants," smiled Pete. "Firs' time only one they took. All was excitement."

"I'll say there was. How come you shoot up a medicine-show?"

Pete grinned.

"I was on my way to church, excuse me—"

"WELL, dang my eyes!" roared Deputy Moffett. "Mister, load this animal on the rig. You'll have to hire a wet-nurse for him afore you git to Kansas City. Bad Injun—"

"I got a kid o' sixteen in high school that could herd a whole band o' war braves like thissen back to the reservation."

"Halfback?" inquired Pete as if he ought to make conversation.

"Oh, hell," growled Mr. Moffett, "bring him on. You can read yore warrant when we get to town by a stove. Git in the back seat with him, mister. Didn't find no guns nor knives, did you? No, sir, this bad-man would hurt himself if he had weapons."

Deputy Mahaffy clung to Pete's arm till he got him into the buckboard seat. Deputy Moffett swung his portly bulk in front. Mr. Mahaffy was on the same side, and the two rotund old officers weighed it down to the springs while Injun Pete Johnny's 118 pounds of bone and sinew jounced high in the air.

Mr. Moffett flicked his horses and they trotted down the white dust of the curving road. Presently he heaved a sigh and turned to look at the two behind him. Half a mile down toward the shining alkali flats the Arizona man sighed again.

"In a way, mister, I'm disappointed. What you said made me believe we was in for a ra'al old time Injun-fight. I'll admit I never seen one. Our Injuns been rounded up now so dang long that if it

wasn't for the tourist business I reckon folks'd never see any. What gits my nanny is this, and I'll be free to say so, now this dang battle has flittered out flat on its neck. I been depity under fourteen sheriffs in the last thirty years and I never was give a job that was wuth a popgun cap fur excitement. Yeh see?"

The Texas man leveled snow-white brows at Mr. Moffett's leathery old cheek. Then he nodded with a sigh:

"Sheriff, I understand you. Beats all how a good man gets stalled in some rusty old place in a co't-house, and folks never know he's livin'. I swear I come West hopin' you people'd show me stuff like we read about."

"You can't get no jolt out of a dang bad-man like this."

"No. Pete Johnny disapp'nted me. The rookus he raised back there, I sure thought he'd make a holler anyhow."

"He's a hell of a misfire, all right. I sure hate to go back into town with him and you after the talk you peddled about what a fast fannin' son-of-a-gun he was. Them college shoes and all."

Pete Johnny listened silently. He looked down at his dusty legs once and then glanced at his two bulky guards.

Deputy Mahaffy leaned forward to Deputy Moffett's shoulder.

"I've a big notion," he muttered, "when we get near town, to snap the darbs on him. Husk off them shoes, too, and iron up his feet. We could tell 'em we had a mighty time shootin' it out with this man up in the rocks here. Who'd know anything about it?"

Mr. Moffett looked at him with frosty eyes.

"The dang fool would spill the beans when we landed him in jail."

"He wouldn't git no chance. We can hustle him right on the train. Ironed and roughed up like he'd give us a bad time. Understand?"

Mr. Moffett tried to light his pipe with an aged, purple-blotched hand. Then his worn eyes fixed on a dim line across the arid flats. That was the railroad and, after passing the Jake Wells flag station, the motor road would follow it to San Andreas.

"In a way," he grunted, "I see yore drift. A couple o' old depitties like you and me, we never had no chance to show what was in us. Under no sheriff did I ever have no chance. They just shoved

me on to the book end o' the office, years ago, and there I was. Fitchered, by swanny!"

"THE minute you helped me load this Johnny on the train East, you could say anything to your office you wanted to," said Mr. Mahaffy indifferently. "I dunno as I'd ever hear of it. I can surprise the folks back at Franceyville myself, if I bring this young shootin' buck home. Single-handed. They wouldn't think it of me."

"Brother," said Mr. Moffett, reining up on the lines, "make it bad when you get home. I'll stand fur it. A fella, when he gits past his prime and ain't done nothin' much, he don't git no chance. Now after we pass this tank station le's tie this *hombre* up. Make it mean, brother. Run down in his tracks fannin' two guns. See?"

Deputy Mahaffy looked over his prisoner searchingly. Pete Johnny shivered in his faded hairline suit. But no Iroquois going to the stake ever set his features into more stolid, obstinate acceptance of fate. Pete Johnny acted as if he didn't care what happened to him now. He had had his big chance and fumbled it.

When the rig reached the sandy flats, with the dried washes of treeless creeks cutting down from the shadowy cañons of the foothills, Injun Pete Johnny looked back once more. It was as if Pete felt he had left some important business unsettled up there and these two fussy captors had interfered with his program. But he hunched down against the night chill and hardly seemed aware of the garrulous conference as Deputy Mahaffy in the rear seat leaned forward to enlarge his views to Deputy Moffett in front.

"Well, now, friend, I see yer talkin'. It looked to me like a big thing when I started. Comin' West to run down this buck I figgered a lot on what the papers might say about it. Looked like the big chance for me; but the punch is clean taken out o' this by Pete himself.

"If we turn the varmit loose up the road we might git in a couple o' shots they could hear up at the Turley ranch when we passed it."

"You ain't aimin' to say we shoot him?"

"Hell, no! Fog up the dust around

him and then holler, 'hands up!' "

"The dang fool might keep a runnin'. What kind o' shot are you, Depitty?"

"Well," grumbled Mr. Moffett, "I'm deaf in one ear but it didn't come from gun-shootin'. The fact is I never had no use for a gun in the record office. I borried this off the city marshal when the sheriff told me to go and show you the way up to Starrett's camp. From what you say we ain't either of us dead on the draw."

"No. But I won't take no chance on this prisoner thataway. When we git in town to the depot—I'll put the irons on when we git warmed up. Buy him a ticket and hustle him on the train—he can't explain that he never put up no fight when we took him."

Deputy Moffett leaned his arm along the seat and tapped Mr. Mahaffy on the wrist.

Far away over the shining flats a bright light had suddenly flashed. It made the long lonely row of telegraph poles gleam for an instant and then swept the little dark station house and water tank by the single siding track. When the buckboard jogged on in the white dust past the depot Mr. Moffett saw a single figure standing on the platform in the shadows. Up the switch he thought he saw another form which vanished to the dry ditch of the right-of-way.

"Somebody must be figgerin' on loadin' stock tomorry," he muttered, "or else flaggin' the train. But the agent lives a mile up the track. They don't have any night man at Jake Wells' station."

"Don't talk to 'em," cautioned Mr. Mahaffy. "If it's cowboys, you know all they'll see is a dang college buck shiverin' his teeth out and lookin' no more like a desperado than I am."

"That's right brother. No kick to it. There's a bunch o' hosses behind the loadin' chute with a man holdin' 'em. Jest don't take any notice of 'em, Depitty. I'm drivin' right through."

"Pete," ordered Deputy Mahaffy solemnly. "Straighten up. Git out o' that rabbit crouch. Show these Western folks you ain't jest a damn grapejuice Cherokee. Pete, I bragged a lot on you since I started to trail you down."

PETE JOHNNY looked at him uncertainly. He lifted his dusty Scotch

cap and scratched his black locks; then, his eyes fixed on that little group of horses just off the road by the loading-pen. Four horses with empty saddles and one rider whose cigaret tip glowed faintly under his gray high hat. When this man saw the buckboard rattling along through the dusty moonlight he never stirred.

That headlight of the westbound Transcontinental flashed again nearer, and the rumble of flying wheels arose on the desert night. The lone rider was watching the other way, toward the depot.

"Giddap," muttered Deputy Moffett and he reached for the nigh horse with his ragged whip. Deputy Mahaffy continued to lean forward, his right hand under Mr. Moffett's elbow so that any curious onlookers might not suspect that these were two man-hunters returning from a complete fizzle so far as any real punch was concerned. "Giddap," repeated Mr. Moffett. "That's a complete stranger to me, partner, and I know 'em all in this county."

Deputy Mahaffy did not answer. He watched ahead as he felt a slight twist of the prisoner's knee touching his overcoat pocket.

Indian Pete Johnny was staring back at the lone horseman. He saw another man now, out on the main track beyond the station. This man was waving a lantern, and, even as he did, there came a slow screech and groan of slowing wheels on the long train sweeping across the moonlit flat.

But Pete Johnny did not notice that, nor the flagman with the lantern. Nor the other three figures strewn along the tracks. He was watching the man who was guarding the five horses by the stock chute. Pete's lean long face grew longer. His black eyes bulged between the strands of jet hair over his brow. Once he muttered bewilderedly. The two officers paid no attention whatever.

Pete crouched forward, staring at Deputy Mahaffy's ear. Then he slipped to his feet like a ghost. He bent over Mr. Mahaffy's shoulder, fumbled a moment behind his back and then he slumped right over the forward seat of the buckboard.

Just an instant. Something gleamed in his hands. Metal that he smashed down upon the astounded Kansas man's

arm. That arm he then jerked forward upon Mr. Moffett's arm. Then, as Mr. Mahaffy let out a startled whoop and the team sprang forward, Injun Pete Johnny did a complete back somersault out of the rig, landed on his feet behind it in the dust, straightened up and dashed back up the road.

Mr. Mahaffy was struggling to turn while Deputy Moffett tried vainly to check the pitching team. He seemed mysteriously handicapped. The buckboard teetered, hung on two wheels, and then overturned, hurling the two officers into the ditch.

"Let go my arm!" yelled Moffett with his face in the sun-cracked mud. "I can't manage 'em this way! Let go!"

"Let go me," grunted Mr. Mahaffy. "I ain't got you."

"Cuffed!" roared Mr. Moffett. "The Injun steals the irons out o' yore coat and jams 'em on us both."

They twisted around and sat up. Mahaffy felt about his clothes with his free arm.

"Got my gun, too. Got yours, hey? He was a slick one. To think we trusted that grinnin' fool."

"Listen," panted Moffett. "Shootin' up at the station. Yore Injun has gone after them cattlemen waitin' for the train. Man, it's his finish. The sneakin' coyote!"

THEY got up, side by side, jerking at the cuffs which held them together. Then they stopped abruptly.

The train was grinding brakes in response to a lantern signal up at the lonely switch. But above this noise had come a shot. Two more and a chorus of yells and curses. The spurt of yellow flame came from the end of the wooden stock chute near the closed station.

"Man," gasped the Arizona deputy, "come on. Gun fight. I never yet in thirty years got a sight of a good one."

The prisoners got to the road and trudged along. The long train had stopped now. Dim lights gleamed in the Pullmans but not a trainman was in sight. Crouched in the shelter of the stock chute, the two officers came upon Injun Pete Johnny. He was aiming carefully toward the locomotive, where a lone figure stood firing back. Another man was vanishing into the sage-brush toward the hills. But nearer, by the pen,

a horse was down and a man was struggling feebly to free his leg from its weight. Another man sat against a post, coughing, and finally he stretched out with a weary moan.

Pete Johnny turned his pistol toward the man who was crawling from under the horse. The two deputies were behind him when he yelled at this one, who promptly stuck his hands up. The other horses milled around helplessly.

"I tol' you!" shouted Pete. "Up at the bunkhouse I tol' you politely, Mike."

"Git away, Injun!" yelled the other man. "Give me time."

Deputy Mahaffy blustered to his fellow-prisoner.

"Get a hand around in my left pants pocket and get my keys. Get this cuff off, mister!"

"Hold still," retorted Moffett. "This is a holdup. This gang was set on robbin' that express car. Flagged the train and started to clean up. They've all beat it, the bunch of 'em."

"Pete crashed in on 'em from behind," said Mahaffy. "Shot one down and killed a horse. Captured one. Pete!"

He yelled in a voice of authority just as Mr. Moffett succeeded in getting the cuff unlocked. Then Mahaffy strode toward Injun Pete Johnny. He beckoned toward Pete's gun.

"Excuse me please," muttered Pete. "All right, but my money, please."

He turned the pistol over reluctantly to Deputy Mahaffy.

"Line up these two guys," said Mr. Moffett. "That one is shot through the shoulder. This one's nigh got a busted leg—the horse fell on him. What's it all about, Pete?"

"Money, please," urged Pete. "I saw Mike the Ike on this horse when we passed. He no good so I chase him."

The larger of the two prisoners glowered at Injun Pete and then faced the two deputies.

"This bird has been follerin' me the last two months to git back eighty dollars I took off him back East. I told him last week if he'd stay off me I'd give him his dough to make him shut his yawp."

"It was the Baptis' young people's church money," explained Pete. "I was treasurer. One night he stingle me in a game—"

"Back in Kansas?" said Mr. Mahaffy. "What the hell!"

"No cussin', please," said Pete. "I was Baptis' young people."

"Grapejuice!" yelled Mr. Moffett. "I told you so. Depitty! There comes the trainmen. Turn these two *hombres* over to 'em. Well, say, this is a holdup, hey? Thirty years I was in office and durned if I ever got sight or smell o' one."

HE suddenly looked at his fellow-officer meaningly. The three trainmen were hurrying on with lanterns. when the larger prisoner saw them he began to speak hurriedly to Moffett.

"Listen, skipper. I seen you in San Andreas this summer. You're a deputy sheriff all right. Now, listen. I'll come clean. I don't know much about this train job. I'm an Eastern man, bo. This Daley crowd who framed this stick-up, they pulled me into this. Jest to hold horses for 'em. I was broke, up at the contractor's camp, with this Injun pesterin' me to give him back his eighty dollars. He jest drove me desperate follerin' me around with his yammer. I'd bumped him off if I'd had a chance."

"How'd you rob him back in Franceyville, Kansas?"

"I never robbed him. I was driftin' along with 'Doc' Altmeyer's medicine-show last summer when I meets this buck. I was the big Apache chief; mebber this Kansas man remembers? Well, one night in a cigar store I shakes this Injun down for his jack. He thought he could guess them old peas—"

"Trimmed him out o' his church money?" said Mahaffy.

"Mister, I'm ashamed o' that shell and pea stuff. It was like crackin' the baby's bank. Well, this Injun goes away and studies out that he'd been flim-flammed. He trails me around wantin' his money back. Of course, I gave him the air; then, last day o' the show he starts his stuff.

"Me and 'Slim' Ross and that half-breed, 'Canny' Bridger, was in the tent all dolled up with our feathers and war paint, hittin' the kettle-drums, when Injun Pete rises up in the audience. He works two old guns he'd borried somewhere. He pops one through Doc's silk hat. He drills one through the gasoline-torch tank. The tent catches fire and the riot was on."

"I'll say so," said Mr. Mahaffy. "The town'd lost the drug store and Levy's

Emporium if the volunteers hadn't got out handy. All was excitement."

"We hit for the brush. Slim and me and Canny left fringe and beads clear over the ridge on a getaway. We jumped a freight and finally I got to Tulsa, Oklahoma. But one day up turns Injun Pete. Some canvasman o' Doc's show put him on my trail. Then I lit into Denver with a street carnival. Up turns Johnny after his money.

"Finally, I went up into this irrigation camp, dealin' a little stud. In walks Pete Johnny again. Then I hooks up with the Daley bunch and along comes this dang fool Injun in your buckboard to bust us up. What's eatin' on him?"

"Well," put in Mr. Moffett, "I heard o' the Daleys. They hang out up on the San Remon headwaters. Bad outfit, mister."

Mike the Ike took a hurried glance at the trainmen.

"Say, Deputy, I gave you the lowdown on this. Now when I come up before the judge, say what you can for me, will you?"

"You close yore dang trap," said Moffett. "Hear me? You ought to swing, you had. Mr. Mahaffy, let me go talk to them trainmen."

Mr. Mahaffy swung his gun on the two prisoners. Pete Johnny shivered in the cold desert air and turned to the Kansas officer.

"All right, pretty good. I was all gone of the church money. That gambling with three shells—very nice, but crooked. I was very mad. When they arrest me for shooting at Mike I was madder. In jail I was more madder. Excuse me for jumping out; but I understood I was embezzler for the Baptist young people, and how I get money back if I not follow Mike the Ike?"

"You busted them Daley boys wide open," said Mr. Mahaffy. "Now in a way, Pete, I'm proud o' you. Grapejuice Injun, hey?"

MR. MOFFETT was coming back. The train crew were around the wounded outlaw and Mike, who had grown silent as a clam.

"They'll load these *hombres* on the train," said Moffett, "Take 'em to San Andreas and turn 'em over to the law. The sheriff'll have posesses out before daylight to round up the three that got

away. Git 'em, too, for them Daleys on foot in the dry hills ain't got a chance when the boys phone Starrett's camp, and the outfit comes down to head 'em off. Say, this Injun was bad medicine."

"He's still hollerin' for the Baptist young folks' money."

Mr. Moffett suddenly beckoned to his fellow-officer.

"He don't know yet exactly what it's all about. Come on, brother, and bring him. I got to git my team untangled back there."

Pete came along, after one reluctant stare at Mike. The prisoners were on the train by the time the Arizona officer had his buckboard right side up and the team in place.

The train was moving before he spoke earnestly to the Kansas deputy.

"Mr. Mahaffy, have you any ideas about all this mess?"

"I never had so much excitement in all my born days."

"Same here. You're like me, jest an old office grubber that your sheriffs kept settin' in a frayed old chair back there in the county court-house. When there was rough work to do they just overlooked you and me. Well, sir, as I see it now, we had our big gun fight, didn't we?"

"We certainly saw the fur fly for once in our lives. But it was Pete Johnny who busted up this train robbery."

"Excuse me," murmured Pete, "my mistake."

"Oh, dang his hide," moaned Mr. Moffett. "Git in, folks. I figure we'll git the money now to square up the eighty dollars he lost in that shell game. So he can pay back the Baptist treasury and swear off on gamblin' with showmen. And I take it your sheriff back home and the judge and all could be brought to see that him shootin' up the jail and wingin' a warden was just kind of a cat-fit, when he sees his fix."

"They wouldn't treat him hard. Send him to the gove'ment school mebbe, but that's what he's yearnin' and pinin' to do, anyhow, so's he can play football again. I'd speak for him."

"Pete," demanded Mr. Moffett, "would you be willin' to call this war off that you come West and started agin the paleface? Big Injun, Pete."

"Excuse me," repeated Pete uncertainly. "Pretty good."

"What we got to do now," went on

Mr. Moffett, "'is jest kind o' keep this Injun from grabbin' the spotlight. If he gits a good whack out o' the job, he's satisfied. You understand me, Depitty?"

Mr. Mahaffy climbed in by Pete Johnny's side.

"In a way I do," he answered. "Yes, sir, two old stuffy codgers, like you and me, shut up in the back rooms of the sheriff's offices all our lives. Now, Pete's a young fella. He's got a big career, mebbe. But you and me—"

The Kansas man stopped wistfully. The Arizona man was staring ahead, his gray brows thickened over his tired old eyes. The sun was coming up over the distant ranges. Pink and silver bursting through golden bands, with the bleak mountains giving up their deep purple gorges to a veil of misty light. Nearer, the unbroken sage and alkali flats began to take on form and color.

The team jogged on along the line of telegraph poles. The two old officers watched the splendor. On the far ridge the few clouds seemed to shift so that phantom figures rode again.

The Old West of splendid adventure glowed in the morning; the shaven poll of a brave with scalp-lock dangling as he urged on his painted pony; gallant riders of the Santa Fé trail, long-haired and buckskin-clad; the jog of dirty canvassed wagons with prospectors and settlers westing with the long trail from the rising sun.

THE phantoms rode on with the light and faded with it. The two patient old hearts had never seen the wonders of it all, nor felt the thrill. The great tumult of America had passed them by as they pored over musty records of petty things.

Two miles out from the first alfalfa green about the pretty town of San Andreas the Arizona deputy sighed.

"Well, sir, this is the end. I'm dang glad I met you."

"Same here. Say, Pete, you gone asleep?"

Pete straightened up and grinned at them.

"Pete, this big day don't mean nothin' more to you than you git your eighty dollars back and fix up yore trouble back in Kansas, does it? I'll say you're a man! Now, if anything comes right out o' this mess, I figure we split three ways.

How about it, Mr. Mahaffy?"

"Yes, sir. And Pete, you ain't goin' to stand in our way are you? It wouldn't mean nothin' to you—but a couple o' old depitties like me and Mr. Moffett here, you understand?"

"Pretty good," grinned Pete. "Every time. You catch 'em."

"We'll put him up at the best hotel," said Mr. Moffett. "And you and him stick around a week till we see what's what. There's my sheriff now, over by the depot. He'll be glad to meet one o' them fightin' officers from Kansas that we've read about. I'm a Western man myself."

Two weeks later, High Sheriff Tom Floyd of Franceville, Kansas, grabbed his hat one morning and rushed down the dingy court-house corridor to shake a newspaper under the county recorder's nose.

"Boys!" he yelled. "Listen to this—you remember I sent Old Man Mahaffy out on a wild goose chase after that Indian student that started the riot last summer. I never expected old 'Jim' Mahaffy would find his man. Just thought Jim was entitled to a vacation on county money after the years he's put in for us on a janitor's wages.

"Old Mahaffy was always dreamin' that some day he'd see the real West before he died. Yes, sir, and he grew old always hankerin' after gunplay and some big job that he was no more fit to handle than a baby. But just read this here item in a St. Louis paper, will you?"

It was no more than brief reprint,

wandering on a wire out of the Great Southwest:

San Andreas, Ariz., Nov. 22.—Rewards totalling \$12,000 will be paid to Deputies J. M. Mahaffy and A. T. Moffett, according to state and railroad officials, for their activities leading to the capture of the Daley gang, members of which have been convicted of the recent attempted holdup of the Transcontinental train, near here.

Old-time law officers of the border say that the courage and fidelity of these two veteran deputies in attacking the outlaws, who outnumbered them three to one, was an exploit that ranks with the best traditions of the Old West. Deputy Mahaffy was presented with a gold watch by the San Andreas Chamber of Commerce last night at a banquet given him before he departed for his old home in Franceville, Kansas.

Among those present was Pete Johnny, the young Cherokee Indian student who furnished the clue upon which Deputies Moffett and Mahaffy hunted down the Daley gang. Mr. Johnny gave a brief but earnest talk in support of home missions among his people back in Kansas, and business men present collected several hundred dollars to further his work.

High Sheriff Floyd put his feet on the recorder's desk and gazed at the ceiling.

"I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it right here in the paper. Le' me tell you we oughtn't to let them Western fellers get ahead of us. If the silver cornet band hadn't disbanded we'd have it down to the depot when old Jim and this Injun get home."

"Let's get the band together again," said the recorder.

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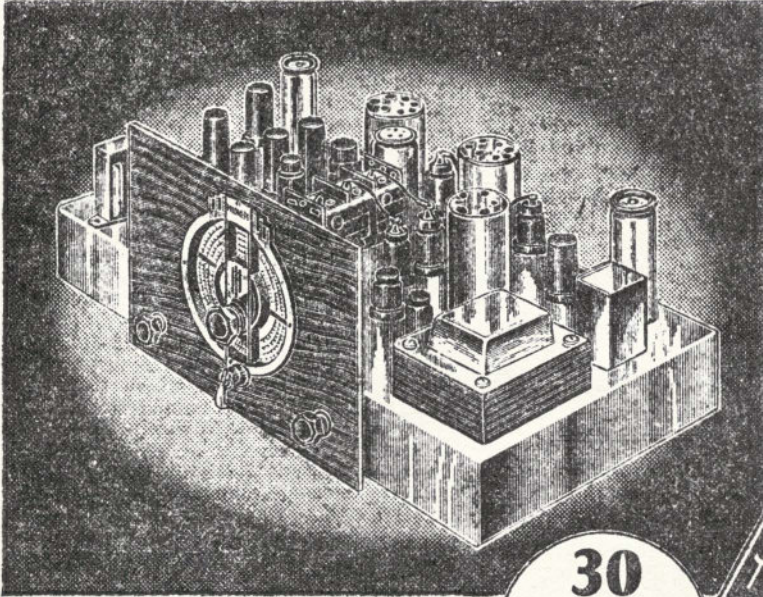
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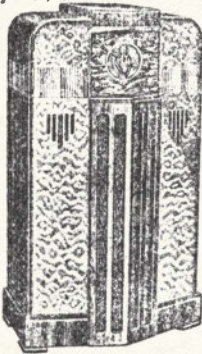
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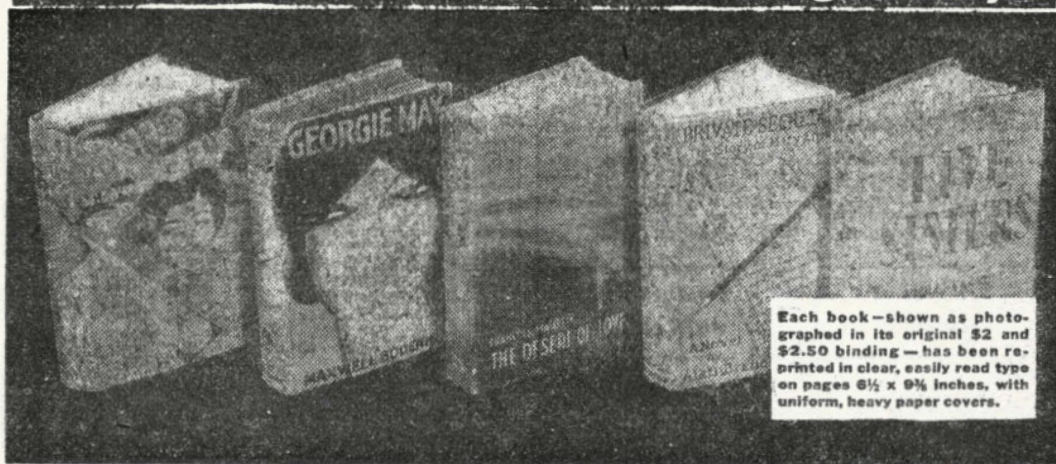
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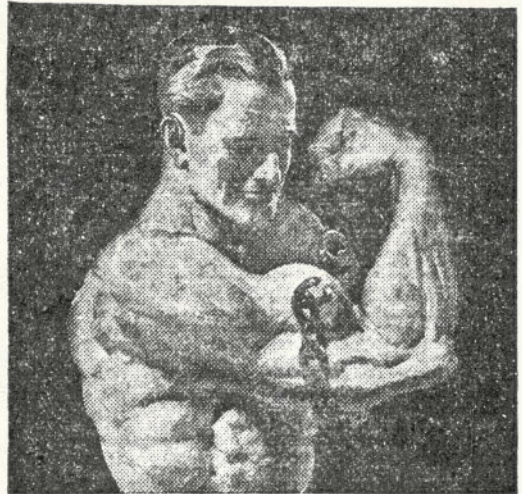
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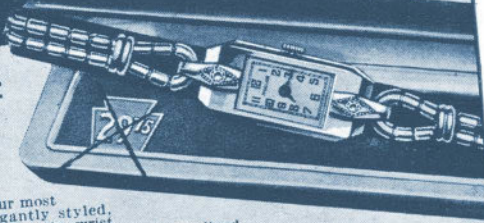
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You walk into an office and put down before your prospect a letter from a sales organization showing that they did work in their own office for \$11 which formerly could have cost them over \$200. A building supply corporation pays our man \$70, whereas the bill could have been for \$1,600! An automobile dealer pays our representative \$15, whereas the expense could have been over \$1,000. A department store has expense of \$38.60, possible cost if done outside the business being well over \$2,000. And so on. We could not possibly list all cases here. These are just a few of the many actual cases which we place in your hands to work with. Practically every line of business and every section of the country is represented by these field reports which hammer across dazzling, convincing money-saving opportunities which hardly any business man can fail to understand.

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One man in California earned over \$1,600 per month for three months—close to \$5,000 in 90 days' time. Another writes from Delaware—"Since I have been operating (just a little less than a month of actual selling) and not the full day at that, because I have been getting organized and had to spend at least half the day in the office; counting what I have sold outright and on trial, I have made just a little in excess of one thousand dollars profit for one month." A Connecticut man writes he has made \$55.00 in a single day's time. Texas man nets over \$300 in less than a week's time. Space does not permit mentioning here more than these few random cases. However, they are sufficient to indicate that the worthwhile future in this business is coupled with immediate earnings for the right kind of man. One man with us has already made over a thousand sales on which his earnings ran from \$5 to \$60 per sale and more. A great deal of this business was repeat business. Yet he had never done anything like this before coming with us. That is the kind of opportunity this business offers. The fact that this business has attracted to it such business men as former bankers, executives of businesses—men who demand only the highest type of opportunity and income—gives a fairly good picture of the kind of business this is. Our door is open, however, to the young man looking for the right field in which to make his start and develop his future.

**Profits Typical of
the Young, Growing Industry**

Going into this business is not like selling something offered in every grocery, drug or department store. For instance, when you take a \$7.50 order, \$5.83 can be your share. On \$1,500 worth of business, your share can be \$1,167.00. The very least you get as your part of every dollar's worth of business you do is 67 cents—on ten dollars' worth \$6.70, on a hundred dollars' worth \$67.00—in other words two thirds of every order you get is yours. Not only on the first order—but on repeat orders—and you have the opportunity of earning an even larger percentage.

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House to House Canvassing**

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