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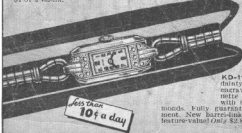
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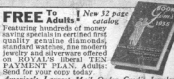
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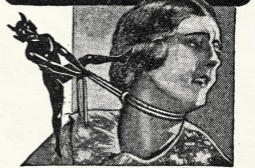
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ME AND PETE

By C. WILES HALLOCK

ME and Cowpoke Pete Ladore,
We was buddies long before
Boss McCracken's daughter Blanche
Come from Denver to the ranch,
Cowpoke Pete agreed with me
That a feller'd *never* see
Anywheres—from near or fur—
Such a *beauteous* gal as her!

From that moment my regard
For my ridin' mate and pard
Cooled until within a week
Neither one of us would speak;
Him to me nor me to him;
We just eyed each other grim!
All because a gal we knowed
On us *beauteous* smiles bestowed!

Bein' in this hostile mood
Made us slight both work and food,
Till the other hands about
Said we'd hafta fight it out!

So we slipped away one night—
Him and me alone—to fight
For to settle, blow by blow,
Which would be Miss Blanche's
beau!

We squar'd off to start the fray,
Out behind a stack of hay;
But before a blow was socked,
We heerd sounds that sorta shocked
Both of us! We paused to lissen;
'Twas the sound of parties kissin'—
Comin' from the other side
Of that haystack! And—we spied!

Thar was Blanche and Foreman
Rand
Makin' love to beat the band!
Me and Pete's now friends again;
Sadder, though, and wiser men!



BRICK-TOP IN

CHAPTER I. TROUBLE COMIN'

PUFFING a reeky pipe which sent a stream of acrid smoke back over his left shoulder, Sheriff Milt Stiles stalked out beneath the wooden awning in front of Henry Fletcher's general store in Blue Rock, and leaned nonchalantly against a post.

At the moment, nobody else was in sight along the dusty, wind-swept, sun-drenched street, which was lined with ramshackle and tumble-down buildings, more than half of which were but empty and decaying monuments to a glory long past. Blue Rock once had been a thriving mining camp making history, but

the lode had petered out, and now it was only a quiet trading center for a few ranches.

It was midday, and hot, and a shimmering haze was hanging over the lofty Colorado mountains beneath the deep blue of the sky. Blue Rock resembled a deserted village at this hour. There were no sounds indicative of human habitation, except the rumbling and monotonous bass voice of some boaster in Bill Marsh's saloon, and the high-pitched squawling of a peevish child in a cottage on the hillside.

Sheriff Milt Stiles yawned and stretched in accord with the general lassitude of the moment. He was here in Blue Rock, some distance from the active county seat, on the prosaic business of prodding some



BLUE ROCK

By JOHNSTON McCULLLEY

Author of "Señor Scalawag," etc.

slow taxpayers, and the inactivity irked him. He half closed his eyes, and scratched his back against the awning post. He rubbed his stubble of beard with a horny hand and wondered whether he could let another day pass without resorting to lather and razor.

But suddenly he became alert. To his ears had come the slow and rhythmical *plop-plop* of walking horses' hoofs in the deep dust down the street. He glanced swiftly in that direction, squinting against the glare of the sun, to ascertain the identity of the rider approaching.

He beheld a horseman astride a

flaming sorrel, an animal handsome enough to attract immediate attention even in horse country. An old pack mare, also a sorrel, bobbed along sleepily behind the rider.

Recalling some things he had heard by way of official information, those two sorrels gave the sheriff a moment of suspicion. He watched carefully. As this latest arrival in Blue Rock passed into the streak of shade beside the blacksmith shop, he dropped his neckcloth to expose a lean bronzed face, and removed his hat to let the wind stir his mop of unruly hair. That hair was a flaming red.

"Glory be!" Sheriff Milt Stiles ejaculated, as immediate and complete identification flashed into his mind. "Brick-top Burke! Here's some trouble comin', prob'ly."

The sheriff continued leaning against the awning post like a man half asleep and utterly unobservant of his surroundings. But he deftly hitched his holster around to the position he favored most, and knocked the dottle out of his pipe and stowed the pipe away in his trousers pocket. Sheriff Milt Stiles recalled an incident where an unexpected drift of tobacco smoke suddenly had ruined a man's aim at a crucial moment, and he was taking no unnecessary risks.

THE red-headed rider stopped at the watering trough beside the blacksmith shop to water his animals, and to dismount and get a drink himself, and slap some of the white trail dust from his arms and shoulders. So, when the sheriff heard the rather dismal creaking of ungreased wagon wheels coming from the opposite direction, he transferred his interest momentarily and glanced there.

Coming slowly down the street from the north was a ramshackle light wagon drawn by a team of crowbait horses. The wheels were wabbling on bent axles, and the vehicle squeaked and groaned as though about to fall apart. On the lopsided seat sat a man slightly past middle age, bent over and holding the reins loosely, his wrists crossed on his knees, and beside him was a young woman of about twenty-five, who sat erect and looked straight ahead as though seeing nothing.

"More trouble comin'," the sheriff growled. "It's a different kind of trouble, but it's trouble just the

same. It's sure descendin' on me from every side, trouble is."

The wagon reached the hitch rail in front of Henry Fletcher's store, and the crowbaits stood panting and wheezing, while the lone red-headed rider was still at the watering trough by the blacksmith shop. The pair on the wagon seat returned the sheriff's nod of welcome and descended, the man to tie his team, and the girl to get upon the plank sidewalk and stamp the clinging dust from her heavy shoes.

"Howdy, there, Luke Lansard!" the grizzled sheriff greeted cordially. "Howdy, Elsie! Girl, you're lookin' as purty as ever, I notice."

"Aw, now——"

The girl's face flamed with pleasure at the compliment, though it had been voiced by the old sheriff instead of by some handsome young range *Romeo*, and she gave him a wan smile.

She was tall, lithe, graceful. The wind whipped her ill-fitting dress about her, and half revealed a well-proportioned form. But she was too thin, and lines of anxiety and worry marred a face which otherwise might have been considered rather pretty. Knowing how things were with the Lansards, the sheriff did not wonder at the girl's facial expression.

Elsie Lansard went languidly on into the store, the screen door slamming shut behind her with a vicious snap of new hinges, and her father sighed wearily as he got upon the walk and kicked one of the awning posts to free his boots of some of the thick dust.

"How's things, Luke?" the sheriff asked.

"Worse, Milt."

"I'm sure right sorry to hear that, but I've been expectin' it. You've been up against a stacked deck right

from the first, as a man might say. That piece of property you bought—folks have been callin' it Heart-break Ranch for years. It's had half a dozen owners——"

"Oh, I know!" Luke Lansard broke in. "But I took a real fancy to the place, and thought I could make a go of it. Could have, too, if I'd had a little more capital to work with. I put a lot of hard labor into it. But one bad year was enough to wreck me."

"It almost wrecked some of the older and bigger outfits, too," the sheriff said.

"Sam Dardon and his Circle D bunch seem to get along all right, somehow."

THE sheriff's eyes narrowed slightly, and he looked at Luke Lansard with sudden shrewd speculation. There had been a trace of bitterness and hostility in Lansard's voice.

"Yes, Dardon does seem to get along—somehow," the sheriff said. "He's the one who's holdin' the mortgage on your ranch, isn't he?"

"That's right," Lansard replied. "It's due to-morrow. I drove into town to-day to meet Dardon and tell him that I won't be able to take up my notes. But he prob'ly knows that already. Can't even pay the interest."

"You're not—that is——" the sheriff stammered.

"Have some hard feelin's and maybe have trouble with Dardon about it, you mean? No, nothin' like that. I borrowed the money and gave the mortgage in good faith, and I can't pay off, so he's entitled to take the ranch. It's two thousand dollars. Sam Dardon may be the loser, at that. There's not much stock left, and what's left ain't very

good, and the place itself isn't worth much."

"It may be worth somethin' to Sam Dardon. He owns that adjoinin' acreage, and it'll give him some valuable water rights," the sheriff explained. "And that rocky stretch up against the hills—I think I know what he'll be doin' with that. I overheard him talkin'."

"He's so sure of gettin' the ranch that he's got everything figured out, huh?"

"I suppose so. Dardon's a man to figure ahead. He's thinkin' of raisin' goats."

"Goats?" Luke Lansard exclaimed. "What? Why, of all the—— Why, Milt, they're worse'n sheep! And him a cattleman!"

"It's them Angora goats he's thinkin' of raisin'—the mohair kind," the sheriff explained. "There's a bunch of money in it, if you're lucky."

"There's a bunch of money in anything—if you're lucky," Luke Lansard declared, speaking with bitterness in his voice again. He looked worn out, worried, haggard, and beaten. "Well, that's all, as far as I'm concerned. I've failed again. I've been failin' all my life. I don't care a hoot about myself. But—there's Elsie."

"Yeah, there's Elsie. She's sure a fine girl," the sheriff said. "Wish I had a daughter like her myself. What are you aimin' to do, Luke?"

"I ain't quite decided yet. Load up my old wagon and travel, I suppose. It won't take me long to load. I'm about ready to quit—or steal. It seems that bein' honest and hard-workin' don't get a man much these days."

"That's nonsense talk, Luke!"

"Yeah? Maybe so, and maybe not. I'm meanin' it! I feel I ain't

to be trusted any more. If I saw some easy money layin' around loose—"

"Quit it!" the sheriff barked. "You're talkin' like a wild man, Luke. You'll get along, all right."

"Oh, I'll get along, I suppose. I'm gettin' too old and stiff to be even a good hired cowhand, and I ain't got much spirit left. I might be able to find me some kind of a job in the county seat, and live there. And Elsie—she reckons as how she might get a chance workin' in the hotel there, cookin' or waitin' on tables."

"I'll help you all I can, Luke. I've got a little influence. I'll be goin' back to the county seat in a few days. Just over here to prod some slow taxpayers."

"I paid my taxes, anyhow, and my bill here at Fletcher's store," Lansard said. "Paid off my two hands a couple of weeks ago. I'll quit clean."

"That's a lot more'n some can say. Cheer up!" the sheriff advised. "You'll get along."

"When I see how some folks get along, I feel like oilin' up my old six-gun and turnin' outlaw and takin' up hill ridin'. If I'd get a chance at some easy money—"

"Have sense, Luke! I sure don't want to have to man-hunt a friend like you."

"Well, I'll be seein' you again before I drive back to the ranch," Lansard said.

He turned abruptly, acting like a man with troubles heavy upon him, and went into the store. The screen door slammed viciously again.

Sheriff Milt Stiles straightened and glanced down the street. The red-headed rider had left the watering trough, and was coming on.

CHAPTER II.

SHATTERED PEACE.

HENRY FLETCHER, who owned and operated the general store, also ran the Blue Rock bank and post office. The bank consisted of an old and battered safe which could have been opened without much difficulty with hammer and chisel, and the post office was only a rough bench with twenty-six pigeonholes in a rack above it—one marked for each letter of the alphabet.

Henry Fletcher had been in Blue Rock for only about three years, which made him practically an overnight stranger in a community where gossip dealt with pioneers and ran back as far as great-grandfathers. He had bought the store after the death of the former owner. Fletcher was a thin, irascible man of middle age, with a hawkknife face and gleaming eyes, not trusted too much and not any too well liked generally. Recently he had been trying to dispose of his store, desiring to move on to wider fields of commerce.

Sheriff Milt Stiles glanced back through the dirt-incrusted window of the store and saw Luke Lansard and his daughter talking to Henry Fletcher, then looked toward the approaching rider again.

The latter came slowly up to the hitch rail in front of the store and got down out of his saddle, yawning and stretching, and tied his horse with a quick-get-away slip knot, an incident which did not escape the keen eyes of the sheriff. The pack mare lumbered up beside the horse and stood with drooping head, a picture of calm resignation to an inglorious existence.

The newcomer did not salute the sheriff, nor by any action did he re-

veal that he was aware of the official's near presence. He got upon the walk and stood with his fists planted on his hips, within ten feet of Milt Stiles, and glanced up and down the street. He shook his head and sighed mournfully, and got out materials and started making a cigarette.

"What a town!" he remarked. The epitome of disgust was in his voice. "Nobody in sight. Only one team and three horses at the hitch rails, and they sure ain't much. All the buildin's need paint, and their winders washed. Must be a lot of unburied dead walkin' around hereabouts. I'll have to make some changes, I reckon."

The sheriff spoke quietly: "Maybe you ain't goin' to be here long enough to bother about it."

The red-headed rider turned slowly to confront him. He acted as though he had not known the sheriff was standing there. His lower jaw sagged, and his eyes bulged in simulated astonishment. Then he beamed.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "If it ain't old John Law himself! You're wearin' the official sheriff star, I see, so you must be this here Milt Stiles I've heard tell about."

"Right! And you're Jim Burke, commonly known as Brick-top. That head of hair, and those sorrel nags you always use, identify you well enough."

"Yeah! Officially I'm Jim, but I'm Brick-top to all my friends and some of my enemies."

"Then you admit you've got enemies?"

"I reckon! There are some gents I wouldn't want to be anything else. Pardon me till I finish makin' this smoke, and we'll have some chin music."

AS "Brick-top" Burke wet the paper with the tip of his tongue and finished making the cigarette, Sheriff Milt Stiles appraised him shrewdly. He was still under thirty, the official judged—tall, sinewy, quick, and deadly. He was arrogant and proud, too. Brick-top Burke was a man with a reputation for top-notch riding, and swift and accurate shooting, for a flaring temper which was always getting him into trouble, and for the courage to back up his moves, good or bad.

He was an expert cowhand, but seldom did he remain long in any bunk house. Either he was soon discharged for being a trouble maker, else he merely grew restive and moved on. He preferred the towns to the open range. And the man who played poker with him generally was wiser and sadder when he quit the game.

"Wherever Brick-top Burke rides, there's grief, so I've been told," the sheriff remarked.

"Oh, a man hears a lot of things!"

"This here town of Blue Rock ain't what you'd call a trouble center, Brick-top. There's no wild bunch hereabouts. Only a cheap poker game on pay days, and the drinkin' don't amount to much. This range is half dead. The folks don't like to be disturbed. It looks to me like you'd forked your bronc in the wrong direction this time, Brick-top."

"Why, Sheriff Stiles! Every word you've said backs up my own idea that I've come to the right place."

"I'm givin' you warnin' right now not to start any wolfin' around here, Brick-top. You've never bothered much in my county, and you'd better not begin it now."

"I don't aim to do any wolfin' around, 'less I'm pestered into it."

"No? You just rode up here to

look at some of our fine Colorado scenery, huh?" the sheriff asked.

"With me," said Brick-top Burke, "scenery is only somethin' you can run cows over, or can't, as the case may be."

"You didn't come here just for the ride."

"You're as curious as an old woman scentin' scandal," Brick-top Burke declared. "That comes from bein' a law officer. Maybe I'd better explain."

"Maybe you had."

Brick-top Burke stretched again, and took a heavy drag on his cigarette.

"Me, I'm tired of wolfin' around," he announced loftily. "There ain't any kick to it any more. I promised myself that I'd raise the devil like a crazy kid till I was twenty-seven years old, and then turn man and pay some 'tention to my responsibilities. I was twenty-seven last Tuesday."

"So you ain't a crazy kid any more? Overnight, you're goin' to turn from a drinkin', gamblin', fightin', trouble-makin' young fool, always teeterin' on the brink of the law—and be a man? Is that it?"

"You catch on right easy, Sheriff Stiles."

"And who do you think is goin' to believe all that? Me, for instance? Maybe you think that I ain't dry behind the ears yet."

"Well, you've got right big ears, and there's a lot of space behind 'em to get dry."

"Yeah? You go right ahead with your funnin', Brick-top, but don't think that it'll get me off guard. I'll be watchin' every move you make. You ain't in Blue Rock for any good. You ain't goin' to come ridin' your sorrel nag into my county and bust the peace all to smithereens."

"But it's like I said," Brick-top

Burke persisted. "I'm yearnin' to settle myself down. I've been savin' my poker winnin's for the past six months or so, and I'm goin' to invest 'em in some business."

"Poker winnin's, huh? Prob'ly six-gun money, if you've got much money at all. Maybe there's been a stick-up I haven't heard about yet. And you came to a quiet place for a hide-out, and walked right into an old sheriff who happened to be here on some tax business."

"I said poker winnin's!" Brick-top Burke interrupted, his eyes snapping angrily. "I've never collected any six-gun money yet."

"You've never been caught, anyhow," the sheriff admitted. "And where do you aim to invest these poker winnin's, as you call 'em?"

"Well, I'm gettin' right sick of the cattle business. Not that it ain't all right for some. But me and beef critters never did get along."

"No? You never worked steady with 'em long enough to get well acquainted," the sheriff accused.

"Anyhow, there's more style in bein' a merchant. There's a lot of advantages in runnin' a store. And I heard tell that the store here in Blue Rock is for sale."

"You run a store—*you*?" The sheriff's face betrayed his amazement, and then he gave an inelegant snort.

"There's a lot to it," said Brick-top Burke. "It's a good, steady business. And I'd get my smokin' tobacco and hard candy at cost—think o' that!"

"You runnin' a store!" the sheriff scoffed. "You'd better get right busy and think up a better yarn than that for comin' to Blue Rock."

"Then you don't believe me?"

"Somehow, I don't," the sheriff replied promptly. "If you've come here gunnin' for somebody—"

"There ain't anybody hereabouts that I'd take the trouble to come gunnin' for, as far as I know. And generally, when I do go gunnin', I don't take a pack mare and outfit along."

"You'd better ride on, Brick-top. I won't rest easy while you're prowlin' around my county. You're like the center of a cyclone, with trouble rollin' and surgin' all around you. Always was, and always will be."

"Now, you're bein' unkind," Burke accused, his eyes twinkling.

"This here's a peaceable community. Like I said, there's no wild bunch in this locality, none of your kind. You'd be bored around here, Brick-top."

But, at that moment, the usual serenity of Blue Rock was shattered by the sharp tattoo of pounding hoofs and the snappy bark of gunfire. Into the far end of the street raced a rider who bent low over his mount's neck. As he rode at top speed, he was firing back at two pursuers, whose guns were blazing in reply.

"What the——" Sheriff Milt Stiles began.

"Yeah, it's sure right peaceful here," Brick-top Burke judged, sarcastically, tossing his cigarette into the deep dust of the street and reaching for his six-gun. "I believe every word you say, sheriff. But maybe we'd better get under cover. Of course, I understand that these boys are only playin', but they may get to playin' rough."

CHAPTER III.

BRICK-TOP MAKES AN OFFER.

THE pursued man was racing for the hitch rail in front of the store, and the two pursuers came on after him in determined fashion. They all ceased

firing. The quarry swerved his horse, skidded the mount to a stop at the hitch rail, vaulted out of the saddle, and sprang behind the sheriff, where he strode frantically to reload his empty gun.

The two pursuers came to an abrupt stop, also, and sprang from their saddles to stride forward angrily. The sheriff had not moved, but he had his right thumb hooked into his belt just above his holster. Brick-top Burke had stepped a few feet aside to watch developments. He knew none of these men, and had no hand in this affair—yet.

"Let me get the rat!" the foremost of the pursuers cried. He was short, squat, swarthy, and now his face was suffused with rage.

"Take it easy, Dardon!" the sheriff warned. "What's this all about?"

"I can take care of my own affairs, Stiles."

"It's my affair, when it comes to runnin' down a man and gunnin' for him."

"He's that Dick Parrow, who works for me——"

"So I notice," the sheriff interrupted quietly. "But why are you tryin' to massacre him?"

"He stole——"

"That's a lie!" the man behind the sheriff screeched. "I didn't steal anything. I told him what I thought of him, and was goin' to quit. He chased me before I could get my blanket roll from the bunk house. Him and Jake Crane were ready to start for town——"

"That's enough!" It was Sam Dardon, the owner of the Circle D, who barked the words. "I'll tend to this. Watch the sheriff, Jake!"

The order was given to the second pursuer, a tall man of uncertain age who now acted with surprising speed. He jammed himself against the sheriff and prevented him draw-

ing his gun, and at the same moment jabbed the muzzle of his own weapon into Sheriff Milt Stiles's stomach.

"No hard feelin's, sheriff, but Sam wants to handle this," Jake said.

Crane was Sam Dardon's right-hand man, and had a reputation for being mean in all things. His meanness was reflected in his countenance. His eyes were mere slits as he looked into those of the bewildered sheriff.

Sam Dardon started to dart around the sheriff and get at the man behind him, gun out and ready, and Dick Parrow had not had time to finish reloading. But Sam Dardon was checked in his purpose for once in his life. Before him suddenly stood a red-headed man whose six-gun had appeared as though from nowhere. Dardon found the muzzle of that gun menacing him, and he knew better than to lift his own.

"Easy, mister!" the red-headed man said softly. "I'm helpin' the sheriff keep peace and order here. He's told me that this's a peaceable town, and I reckon we won't make him out a liar. Tell your friend to back away from the sheriff, or I'll split your spine with a bullet! And you—Parrow, or whatever your name is—put up that gun! Gents, we're goin' to arbitrate."

"Who are you?" Dardon howled.

"Me? I'm known here and there as Brick-top Burke. I've been around some, gents and I've seen plenty of people on the warpath."

"You'll be sorry for hornin' in here."

"We'll come to that later, maybe," Brick-top replied. "Tell your man to—"

"All right! Stand back, Jake," Dardon ordered.

"Holster your own gun, too—pronto!" Brick-top commanded. "Relax. The sheriff's in charge."

SHERIFF STILES was plain mad. He stepped back a few feet, and his eyes blazed as he looked at the master of the Circle D outfit. His official dignity had been ruffled and likewise his personal feelings outraged.

"I'd ought to cause you trouble for these here high-handed ways, Dardon," he said. "If you think Dick Parrow stole somethin', swear out a warrant. If there's goin' to be any shootin' around here, I'm goin' to have a hand in it."

"Me, too," said Brick-top Burke.

"And you can keep out of this, too—but thanks for what you've done," the sheriff added. "I'm the law officer around these parts. Now, what's it all about?"

"Oh, let it pass!" Sam Dardon said. "I was mad enough to shoot the skunk—"

"So I noticed," the sheriff interrupted.

"I'll tell you what it's about—since I'm ridin' without my pay or blanket roll," Dick Parrow said. "I just told Dardon that I didn't want to work for a man who'd foreclose a mortgage on a nice gent like Luke Lansard, and who'd want to raise goats, and—"

"Don't go any farther, or I'll blast you—sheriff or no sheriff!" Dardon howled.

"All right! I'm done! Give me my pay out of Fletcher's safe, and I'll ride on."

"You can have your pay. Wait right here till I get it," Sam Dardon said. "And the sooner you ride on, the sweeter the air'll be around here."

"Yeah? That's fine, comin' from a man who aims to raise goats." Dick Parrow was getting his courage back now.

Dardon swung angrily through the door and into the store, and the

snap of the screen illustrated his feelings. Sheriff Milt Stiles stood against the post with his gun held ready. Jake Crane sneered his disgust and stalked along the walk to go into Bill Marsh's saloon, at the window of which could be seen the faces of those inside, thoroughly awake now because of the excitement.

Inside the store, Fletcher, Luke Lansard, and his daughter had been watching the scene from places of comparative safety. Sam Dardon bobbed his head at the Lansards and went straight to Fletcher.

"Give me thirty cash out of the bank," Dardon ordered. "I owe that rat twenty, and the extra ten'll more than pay for the stuff he left behind. If I ever catch him on my property again, or even in the neighborhood, I'll— Get me that cash!"

He secured the cash as quickly as Henry Fletcher could open the old safe and get it for him, and burst out of the store again, to thrust the money at Dick Parrow.

"Now, get goin'!" Dardon ordered. Without another word, he turned and went along the walk toward the saloon.

Dick Parrow pocketed the money and glared at Sam Dardon's retreating back.

"I don't like to be ordered out of the country by anybody, 'specially when I ain't done anything," he said.

"Don't let yourself be," Brick-top Burke advised.

"Shut up, Brick-top!" the sheriff ordered. "A man might have known trouble would pop the minute you got to town. Like I said, you're always the center of a cyclone."

Dick Parrow got his horse and led it down the street toward the watering trough at the blacksmith shop. The sheriff holstered his gun.

"Thanks for steppin' in when you did, Brick-top," he said.

"What's it all about, anyhow?"

THE sheriff explained about the Lansards, and the mortgage, and the possibility of foreclosure and goat farming. Brick-top listened with interest.

"Was that Lansard and his daughter got out of the wagon?" he asked.

"Yes. They're good folks. It's a pity he's losin' out. But he's that kind of a man."

"Maybe he needs a good business partner."

"I'm sure I don't know where he'd get one."

"I told you I was aimin' to go into business. Maybe I wouldn't like runnin' a store, after all. It might be too confinin'."

"You? You buy in as Luke Lansard's partner? It'd be like teamin' up a dove and a rattlesnake."

"You don't like me at all," Brick-top complained. "You're unkind and you're unjust. That ain't right in a law officer. You might introduce me to this Lansard, anyhow."

"I won't have any hand in it," the sheriff said. "Nobody's ever goin' to say I brought you and Lansard together."

"I told you I was aimin' to settle down, didn't I?"

"If you ever do, it'll be the way dynamite settles down," the sheriff told him. "You'd better ride on, Brick-top. There's trouble wherever you are."

"Is that nice, after me just helpin' you like I did? Are you goin' to introduce—"

"I sure ain't!" Sheriff Milt Stiles snapped.

At that moment, Luke Lansard came from the store with Elsie. Lansard intended seeing Sam Dardon, as soon as he cooled down a bit,

and Elie was going to visit a woman in one of the cottages. Brick-top Burke grinned at the sheriff, but looked seriously at Lansard and his daughter.

"Mr. Lansard, I'm Brick-top Burke," he said. "Maybe you've heard of me, and maybe you ain't. I've got some money to invest, and I've heard about your present difficulties. If you'd like to have me for a partner——"

Lansard laughed. "Only thing I could sell you an interest in would be a mortgage, and maybe that team of crowbaits at the hitch rail."

"The mortgage is two thousand and a little interest, ain't it? I'll pay that, and add enough to make three thousand, 'cause we'll need some runnin' cash at first. For a half interest."

Even the sheriff looked astounded. Elsie Lansard's eyes seemed to penetrate Brick-top Burke. He was watching the girl's father.

"Three thousand for nothin', a man might say," Lansard replied. "Why?"

"Got the cash right with me. You can pay off this Sam Dardon to-day, if we make the deal."

"Brick-top Burke, you're up to somethin'," the sheriff accused. "Your yarn about savin' your poker winnin's and wantin' to settle down to business don't go with me. And offerin' to put up three thousand cash for a half interest in somethn' you ain't seen, and don't know anything about! It's six-gun money, that's what it is!"

"Tain't your money I'm offerin' to put up, anyhow," Brick-top informed him. "Want to make the deal, Mr. Lansard?"

"I—I don't know anything about you——" Lansard began.

"I can tell you all about him in a few words," Sheriff Milt Stiles put

in. "He's Brick-top Burke, one of the wildest young scalawags in seven States. He's a drinkin', gamblin', fightin' fool! Never caught at anything illegal, but been suspected of a lot. He's a wild cat!"

"Even a wild cat has his uses—he c'n scratch, at least," Brick-top declared. "And the sheriff forgot to mention some things. I c'n ride horses and punch cows—or maybe even raise goats. He says I gamble. I do. I've got a hunch this is a good gamble, though I can't just now tell why. The offer stands, Mr. Lansard."

Elsie Lansard plucked at her father's sleeve.

"Take him up, pa," she said.

CHAPTER IV.

A DEAL IS COMPLETED.

HER action and remarked startled her father, but it almost floored the sheriff. The girl was looking straight at Brick-top Burke as though reading him. He merely glanced at her, and then back at her father. They all knew it was no sudden, romantic interest in the girl which had prompted Brick-top to make his offer. He scarcely had seen her. And a girl was no great novelty to Brick-top Burke.

Nor could they guess why Elsie Lansard had judged so swiftly that he was a man who could be trusted to be her father's partner. Perhaps, the men thought, the girl could not see where her father would lose anything by such a deal. At least, it would save the ranch for them.

"I—I'll think about it, Mr. Burke," Lansard said.

"I'm Brick-top to my friends, sir."

"I'm goin' to Bill Marsh's place to talk to Sam Dardon now. But I

reckon he won't consider an extension of the mortgage. He's got plans of his own for the place, I understand."

"I'm keepin' the offer open," Brick-top said.

"You go and do your visitin', Elsie," her father commanded. "I'll pick you up when it's time to go home."

The girl looked at him imploringly, and seemed about to say something more, but did not. She nodded to all of them, and hurried along the walk. Lansard turned toward the saloon.

"Brick-top," the sheriff said, when they were alone, "you're up to somethin'. And let me tell you this. I like the Lansards. Luke's a fine man—only had a little hard luck—and Elsie's a fine girl. If you cause 'em any trouble—"

"Shucks! All this stornin' because I want to buy an interest in a ranch."

"Did you know anything about Lansard and his ranch before you came here? Is that why you came—to buy into that outfit?"

"Never heard tell of 'em or the outfit. I'm playin' a hunch. Every time I play a hunch, there's a profit. Poker or anything else. I don't mean any harm to your friends, and I may do 'em some good."

"And you've got the cash with you, huh? I can't understand it. That talk about a hunch ain't strong enough when you gamble three thousand."

"I've gambled more'n that on a hunch, sheriff. Stop your worryin'. It'll make you gray."

The sheriff snorted in derision, and went into the store. Brick-top Burke calmly made a cigarette to replace the one he had tossed away when Dardon and Jake Crane had

come into town riding furiously on the trail of Dick Parrow. Remembering the latter, Brick-top glanced down the street and saw him talking to the blacksmith. He went down the walk a distance and beckoned to Parrow when the latter glanced his way, and Parrow mounted and rode up to him.

"You aimin' to depart from these here climes?" Brick-top asked him.

"Nothin'e else to do. I've left the Circle D, and there ain't another job open in the district. This range ain't overheavy with ridin' jobs."

"Are you a right good hand?"

"I aim to be."

"If I was you, and didn't yearn to depart from hereabouts, I'd maybe linger around a while. There might be a job open any time," Brick-top said.

"How come?"

"I'm playin' a hunch. When I play a hunch, I pick my own partners, if any. You made Dardon and that Jake Crane so mad they started gunnin' for you, and somethin' tells me it wasn't just because you told him he shouldn't foreclose a mortgage."

"You're right," Dick Parrow replied. "Sam Dardon—well, I can't rightly find words to tell you how bad he is. And he was sayin' that maybe he'd let Lansard stay on and manage the ranch at a salary—providin' he could marry that Lansard girl."

"Yeah? And he ain't the kind as should marry her, huh?" Brick-top asked.

"Elsie Lansard's a fine, sweet girl. Sam Dardon ain't fit to marry even a girl who ain't."

"Uh-huh! Stick around town a while," Brick-top suggested.

"I'll stick, though I don't know why I should."

PARROW turned his horse and rode back toward the blacksmith shop, and Brick-top Burke went to the store to get some cigarette tobacco and talk to Henry Fletcher, who was alone.

"I heard this place was for sale, and came here to look it over," Brick-top said, "but I've got another deal in mind now."

"I've got a buyer—he's comin' tomorrow," Fletcher replied. "In case we don't deal, and you don't, see me again."

"Certain! Mind if I step to the back of the store? Want to get somethin' out of my money belt."

Fletcher waved the way, and Brick-top went toward the rear of the store, where the bank and post office were located. He fumbled beneath his clothes for a time, and then returned, stuffing something into his trousers pocket.

Out into the street he went, and to Bill Marsh's saloon. He thrust aside the swing doors and entered. Only half a dozen men were in the place. Sheriff Milt Stiles had gone there from the store, Jake Crane was there, and Dardon was talking to Luke Lansard.

Brick-top had his trail drink, meeting the eyes of Jake Crane squarely as the latter glowered at him. Then he drifted away from the bar and sat at one of the gambling tables, picked up an old pack of cards, and began toying with them.

Dardon and Lansard had raised their voices a little, and Brick-top Burke could not avoid overhearing. As a matter of truth, he desired to overhear, and had no compunctions about a little job of eavesdropping at the moment.

"Maybe, if you could give me a little more time——" Luke Lansard was saying.

"What's the use, Lansard? How

could you make it, even in another year? Hardly any stock left. Prices are goin' down."

"You want the place, I reckon."

"Frankly, yes," Sam Dardon replied. "I want the water rights, and I've got some ideas about the ranch."

"It's your right. I'll load up my old wagon and get out, soon as I can."

"You're forgettin', I reckon, that everything on the place belongs to me, even the old wagon and the crowbait horses."

"Well, that's bein' pretty hard, Dardon. Want me and my girl to walk off down the road, carryin' packs on our backs? I can do it if you say so, and so can she."

"Maybe there ain't any sense in either of you goin'," Sam Dardon told him. "Your girl's pretty nice, Lansard. Tell you what I'll do. How'd you like to stay on and manage the ranch, carryin' out my plans? Salary and percentage of profits."

"Why, that'd be fine!" Lansard said.

"There's one stipulation, though. If you stay on that basis, it'll have to be as my father-in-law."

"Your *what*?" Luke Lansard seemed aghast.

"I'll marry Elsie and——"

"You? Marry my girl? You're almost as old as I am. And that ain't all. You ain't the kind of man I want Elsie to marry, and not the kind she wants to marry. I reckon we'll walk down the road tomorrow, with packs on our backs."

"You're a fool!"

"Maybe so. Reckon I have been a few times in my life, 'specially in business. But I'm a father, too, Dardon. And I ain't any fool when it comes to bein' a father. Not by a blame sight!"

"All right! It's your say! You

can get ready to get out—and be right sure you don't take with you anything that's covered by the mortgage. I'll be over about noon tomorrow to take possession. The sheriff's in town, and he can handle everything legal."

LUKE LANSARD'S eyes had been blazing and his head held high. Now he gave a weary sigh, and his head fell forward as he gripped the corners of the table and started to get out of the chair and to his feet.

But suddenly he felt a hand pressing him back into the chair again. And a second hand appeared before him on the table, and in this second hand was a sheaf of currency. Brick-top Burke's voice came into his ears:

"The offer still holds, Mr. Lansard! Here's the cash."

"Yes!" Lansard snapped the word like a man with new courage, and accepted the money. "We'll have the sheriff draw up the papers——"

"What's this?" Dardon demanded.

"Why, I'm buyin' a half interest in Heartbreak Ranch," said Brick-top Burke.

"I'm ownin' that outfit."

"Not just yet. To-morrow, maybe—but it happens that Mr. Lansard is goin' to pay you off to-day—right now—interest and all. I just gave him the money to do it with."

"You keep out of this, Brick-top Burke!" Dardon roared.

"Legal, ain't it? I got a right to buy a chunk of ranch if I like, and Mr. Lansard's got a right to pay off his mortgage. The sheriff's there at the bar. Ask him."

The sheriff and Jake Crane had turned and were watching the scene, as were the others. They had heard the latter part of it, too.

"This here's some trick," Dardon said. "You'd better stay out of my

affairs, Brick-top Burke! I aim to have that ranch. I've made plans about it. And you're not goin' to step in at the last second and turn things upside down!"

Brick-top Burke had been watching Jake Crane in the mirror on the back bar across the room. He had the idea that Crane was the sort to take violent action at any moment on behalf of a flustered employer. And he was not wrong.

Jake Crane suddenly lurched to one side and away from the sheriff. His hand darted to his holster, and his six-gun came out of it in a draw which rated fairly for speed. Yet it was too slow.

Brick-top Burke's right hand flipped downward and upward, and his gun roared, and a puff of smoke swept aside into the face of Sam Dardon as the bullet sped across the room and into the right shoulder of Jake Crane. Crane dropped his gun and reeled back against the bar.

"Be careful, Dardon!" Brick-top spoke as he stepped swiftly aside, so the smoke puff did not obscure his view. Sam Dardon was at the point of drawing a gun, but thought it better to let the weapon remain in its holster.

"Steady, everybody!" Brick-top warned. "Sheriff, he was tryin' to get me, so I let him have it. He ain't hurt bad. He showed poor judgment, I reckon."

"I saw it, Brick-top," the sheriff agreed. "I knew there'd be the devil to pay with you in town. Blue Rock was so calm and peaceful till you came."

"Told you I wouldn't do any wolfin' unless I was pestered into it. It always pesters me to have a gent go for his gun when he aims to make me the target. Oh, sheriff! Step over here and give me some legal advice, huh? We've got a deal on."

CHAPTER V.

CRIME IN BLUE ROCK.

STROLLING across the room, Brick-top picked up Jake Crane's gun and ejected the shells, then tossed the weapon to the back of the room. The bartender and another man were preparing to dress the shoulder wound. But Brick-top was not careless. He watched Sam Dardon despite the fact the sheriff was standing at the table beside him.

Then they went to Fletcher's store, where there was paper, pen, and ink. Laboriously the sheriff did what he considered was a mass of writing, and announced that he would take the papers to the county seat himself when he went. Lansard handed Dardon the money due—principal and interest.

"Put this stuff in your safe, Fletcher," Dardon ordered angrily. "I'll be goin' to the county seat myself in a few days, and I'll bank it."

Fletcher took the money and put it into the old safe, neglecting to give a receipt, which Dardon would not have requested anyhow, since the transaction was before witnesses.

"I'm only takin' this amount of cash for safe-keepin', understand," Fletcher said. "I won't be responsible."

"Safe enough, I reckon," Dardon replied. He walked back to the table which they had been using as a desk. "Well, Lansard, you've got your ranch—and a partner," he added. "Can't say that I'm blamin' you. Naturally you'd do anything to save the property. But I'm rememberin' this Brick-top Burke!"

"A lot of folks remember me," said Brick-top.

"I don't know what your game is, Burke. But when you throw that much money for a half interest in a

ranch that ain't any good except for goats——"

"Maybe we'll raise goats," Brick-top interrupted. "That's a bright idea. Fine job for a cattleman."

"Where you got that much money, nobody knows—except maybe myself."

"I play good poker," said Brick-top. "Sit in a game with me sometime, and maybe you'll learn somethin'. One thing, Mr. Sam Dardon. If you've got some hard feelin's about this deal, you'll do yourself a favor to forget 'em. Just a little hint, Mr. Dardon. I've got eyes in the back of my head, and I'm a light sleeper."

"Why, you——"

"And I don't like to be cussed, either. In fact, I generally resent it somethin' powerful."

So it happened that the ramshackle light wagon returned to Heartbreak Ranch heaped high with provisions, not to mention cans of paint and materials for mending fences and buildings. Luke Lansard was sitting up straight on the seat with Elsie beside him, and even the crowbar horses seemed to have some spirit. And behind the wagon rode Brick-top Burke on his flaming sorrel, with the old pack mare following, humming a song as he rode and viewing the country like a tourist.

Occasionally Elsie Lansard glanced back at him, and he grinned at her. Then her face would flame, and she would look ahead quickly again.

The ranch was not far from Blue Rock, and the sun was still high when they came to it. Brick-top Burke felt a sinking sensation in his breast when he saw the house and buildings. They needed a lot of repairing. Some stock was wandering about, and there was a pony in the corral which belonged to Elsie. A few chickens were pecking around,

and pigeons cooed on the eaves of the big barn.

"Well, now, Brick-top, you can see what you've bought," Lansard said. "I didn't coax you any."

"Suits me," Brick-top replied. "What needs to be fixed can be fixed. Before we're done, pardner, we'll change the name of this outfit from Heartbreak Ranch to somethin' else in people's minds. Or else the heartbreak will be in other folks 'stead of us."

He helped unhitch the team, and went to do the chores with Lansard, there not being many to do. He turned his own animals into the corral. A cow pony came wandering up from somewhere to be put in, also, and Lansard announced it was the only mount he had at present.

There was ample room in the house, and Brick-top selected a bedroom on a corner, with windows low to the ground, and took his packs there. Elsie cooked the evening meal, and they had their first meal together.

They talked for a time, principally about the ranch and what could be done to get it going properly, and Brick-top announced that he had some more money and would be glad to toss it in if it happened to be needed.

"You do seem to have a lot of money," Lansard said, with some suspicion in his voice.

"Sheriff Milt Stiles says it's six-gun money." Brick-top grinned at them. "I told him it was poker winnin's I'd been savin' to go into business with."

"I'm afraid you picked a poor business."

"Shucks! I always have good luck when I gamble and play a hunch."

They retired early, and soon the lamps were out and the house dark. Brick-top Burke stretched on the

bed, wide awake. He remained that way for about an hour, until there were no sounds in the house, and then he got up and dressed again.

Opening one of the windows slowly and carefully, so it made not the slightest sound, he dropped through to the ground, and closed the window almost all the way. Through the semidarkness of a night with a new moon in the sky, he went almost silently toward the corral.

He had stacked his horse gear near the fence on a bench, and now he got it ready. Then he went to the corral gate and whistled softly. From the far side of the corral came his big sorrel, and Brick-top opened the gate and let the horse out. Working swiftly, he made it ready for the trail. He mounted and rode down the lane to turn into the main highway. When he had traveled for a short distance, he urged the mount to more speed. From the crest of a hill, presently, he saw the few gleaming lights of Blue Rock.

HENRY FLETCHER lived in a room in the rear of his store, and boarded at one of the cottages. He generally remained in the store until a late hour, then went to Bill Marsh's saloon to gossip and have a single drink, after which he returned to the store building and retired for the night.

He did not vary his routine on this particular night. In the saloon, he found Sheriff Milt Stiles, who also was boarding at one of the cottages, talking to Bill Marsh and a couple of the townsmen. Jake Crane had returned to the Circle D Ranch after his wound had been dressed. Sam Dardon had remained in town, but now he was gone, too.

When Henry Fletcher entered the saloon, the topic of conversation was Brick-top Burke and his unusual ac-

quisition of a half interest in Heart-break Ranch.

"That gent's up to somethin'," the sheriff declared. "I don't aim to take my eyes off him for some little time. Told me he yearned to settle down and get into business."

"Payin' out that much money for somethin' he never saw—it ain't like a man of his type," Bill Marsh declared. "Maybe the Lansard girl's caught his interest."

"Scarcely looked at her," the sheriff said. "It ain't that. Said he was playin' a hunch."

"He sure burned Sam Dardon up," Marsh continued. "Sam had his plans made about that ranch. Maybe Brick-top was just showin' off. That'd be like him, from all I've heard."

"He acted funny in my store, I thought," Henry Fletcher put in. "Stepped to the back and got somethin' out of his money belt. That was the money he handed Lansard, prob'ly. Seemed to be sizin' up the place, too. But he'd told me he'd come here to see about buyin' me out, and——"

Henry Fletcher was interrupted. To the ears of those in the saloon came a muffled roar.

"What——" Marsh began.

"Sounded like an explosion," Fletcher added.

"Ain't anything around Blue Rock to explode, since the minin' days," the sheriff concluded.

They hurried to the front door and went out upon the walk. Nobody was in sight, nor did they hear any unusual sounds.

"That's danged funny!" Marsh declared. "It sure sounded like an explosion of some sort to me. Seemed right near, too."

"Explo——" Sheriff Milt Stiles began. He stopped as a thought

came to him. "Quick, Fletcher! Let us in the store."

"Why——"

"Quick, man! Your safe——"

"Safe!" Fletcher gasped. "You mean——"

He ceased speaking and started running along the walk, and the others followed. At the door of the store, he fumbled with his keys.

"Hurry, man!" the sheriff cried at him.

Henry Fletcher finally got the door open, and they rushed inside. Into their nostrils poured pungent vapor, the acrid smell of exploded powder.

"Make a light!" the sheriff barked.

Fletcher ran to the nearest lamp and ignited a match. He touched the flame to the wick, put on the chimney. Sheriff Milt Stiles, weapon out and held ready, charged toward the rear of the store ahead of the others.

"Safe—busted wide open," he yelled. "That mortgage money's gone, prob'ly."

"And my own—and the postage stamps——" Henry Fletcher suddenly was like a wild man. He rushed to the safe. Account books and charred papers were scattered on the floor in front of the safe, the door of which was hanging lopsided and the lock of which had been ruined by the explosive.

"Cleaned out!" Fletcher said. "My money—and that of Sam Dardon's."

"Back door's standin' open," Bill Marsh reported.

"Bring more lamps, and don't muss things up," the sheriff ordered. "I'm goin' to investigate this right here and now. Help Fletcher get another lamp, Marsh."

"Who could have done it?" Fletcher cried. "Who'd have known there was anything in the safe 'cept

a few postage stamps and some change? I always send money to the county-seat bank when I get more'n a little."

The sheriff brushed them aside and began his investigation. Between the safe and the rear door, he discovered several tracks which seemed to have been made by dirty boots. The group went outside, one of the men carrying a lantern he had found and lighted. The ground behind the store was flintlike, and no tracks could be found there. Not far away was a small gulch, where a horse could have been hidden easily.

"He got the stuff and made for that gulch, I'm bettin'," the sheriff said. "Prob'ly traveled a long ways before he got on his horse—if he had a horse."

"The money's gone—it's six-gun money now," Fletcher mourned.

"Six-gun money! Well, not that exactly, since nobody got it at the point of a gun. But you might call it that," the sheriff said. "And that remark sets me to thinkin'."

"You suppose this here Brick-top Burke bought half a ranch with some money and then came and got the money back?" Bill Marsh suggested boldly.

"That," Sheriff Milt Stiles decided, "will bear a lot of lookin' into. Brick-top Burke better be able to show where he was when this happened."

CHAPTER VI.

ACCUSED.

THE sheriff whirled around to confront Bill Marsh. "You get up three or four of the men in town," he ordered. "Tell 'em I want 'em for a posse immediate. I'll go to the town corral for my horse. Have 'em meet me there."

Muttering and with rage surging within him, he hurried away through

the night. Robbery of any sort anywhere in the county was bad enough, to the sheriff's mind, but blowing a safe almost in his presence was the acme of perverseness. Sheriff Milt Stiles was determined to bring this particular culprit to justice.

Three of the younger men of Blue Rock answered the official summons and rode behind the sheriff along the north trail. He headed for Heart-break Ranch, and the pace he set was speedy. He said nothing to those who rode with him.

But he was doing considerable thinking as he rode. Brick-top Burke was a possibility as the guilty man. But Brick-top Burke, when he had ridden into Blue Rock, had not known there would be an unusual amount of money in Fletcher's safe. Moreover, practically all the stolen money had been the property of Brick-top only a short time before.

As Bill Marsh had hinted, it would be like Brick-top Burke to buy an interest in a ranch, and then steal back the money with which he had paid for it, thus having both his interest and his money. The honest old sheriff confessed to himself that Brick-top, though often suspected of breaking the law, never really had been found with evidence against him. He might be nothing worse than a wild young scalawag. But the mere presence of Brick-top Burke in a place like Blue Rock was enough to make the sheriff suspicious.

Then, there was another possibility. Milt Stiles was remembering how Luke Lansard had talked. Lansard, bitter because of adversity, had been threatening to turn outlaw, had said he felt that he could not be trusted if he found any easy money around loose.

Since then, however, Lansard's

ranch had been saved from foreclosure. Yet, incensed at Sam Dardon's attitude, he might have committed the theft to strike at Dardon, and also to have money to cache away against the possibility of another "rainy day," of which he had experienced so many in his lifetime.

The posse reached the end of the lane at Heartbreak Ranch and turned into it, and the sheriff called a halt while he gave the other three instructions.

"If anybody here's guilty, maybe he hasn't been able to get back home yet, though he's had plenty of time," he said. "Two of you check the horses in the corral, and see if any of 'em are wet, especially that sorrel of Brick-top Burke's. Then come on up to the house. I'll go to the house with the third man."

They rode slowly and almost silently along the lane beneath the spreading branches of giant trees. No light gleamed in the house, and no unusual sounds reached them. The two assigned to the task went directly to the corral, and the sheriff and the third man dismounted, trailed their reins, left their horses in the shadows, and went cautiously to the house.

"We'd better be ready for business," the sheriff warned, whispering. "If Brick-top Burke did it, and rode back here, he'll prob'ly be quick on the trigger when he knows we're after him."

THE sheriff pounded on the door with his fist. There was no answer, and he pounded again. Inside the house, after a time, a light gleamed. A voice spoke just inside the door—the voice of Elsie Lansard:

"Who is it, and what's wanted?"

"This is Milt Stiles, Elsie," the

sheriff replied. "Is your father awake?"

"He didn't answer the knock. He was tired, and may be sleeping soundly. I'll see."

"Is Brick-top Burke here?"

"Yes. He's using our corner room."

"You get him up, too," the sheriff directed. "We want to talk to both of 'em."

Then those outside waited, cautious and alert, and ready for any emergency. Brick-top Burke, if guilty, might appear suddenly in a mood intensely hostile, and try to make his escape. While they were waiting, the two men came hurrying up from the corral.

"Brick-top Burke's sorrel ain't there," one of them reported. "And that cow pony Luke Lansard generally uses ain't there, either."

"Um!" the sheriff grunted. "Both mounts gone, huh? Well, stand by."

Elsie Lansard came back to the door and spoke to them:

"Sheriff Stiles! They—they're both gone! Neither is in the house. Is anything wrong? Has anything happened?"

"You know where they went?" the sheriff demanded.

"I thought they were both in bed and asleep. We talked after supper, and went to bed rather late. What is it, please? Is there anything I can do?"

"We'll wait around outside, Elsie," the sheriff told her. "Maybe they'll be showin' up. We're sorry we disturbed you."

"But please tell me what has happened." There was fright in her voice.

"It's nothin' for you to trouble your purty head about," the sheriff lied. "You go right back to bed. If they don't show up right quick, maybe we'll be ridin' on."

He led the three men away from the house and down by the corral, where they could talk without being overheard by the girl.

"So they're both away from home—out ridin' at this time of night," the sheriff said. "Looks bad to me."

"Oh, maybe they can explain it—Lansard anyhow," one of the posse men suggested.

"They'll have some explainin' to do. The girl didn't know they were gone. Why should they both sneak away from the house without lettin' her know? If there was anything wrong around the ranch, and they had to ride out to tend to it, she'd have known it for sure."

"There's somebody comin' down the lane," one of the men warned.

"Stand by!" the sheriff whispered. "And you'd better be ready for action."

They could hear, faintly, the hoofbeats of a walking horse and the creaking of saddle leather. In the faint moonlight, presently, they could see a rider approaching the corral.

THEY got back into the deeper shadows as the rider came on.

Before the gate of the corral, he stopped his mount and started to get out of the saddle. But a moving shadow caught his eye as one of the men shifted position, and instantly he was alert, and the faint moonlight was reflected from a weapon in his hand.

"Who's there?" he snapped. It was the voice of Brick-top Burke.

"Steady, Brick-top! This is Milt Stiles, and I've got some friends with me."

"Oh, howdy, sheriff! What are you doin' away out here at this time of the night? You'll be catchin' your death of cold."

"And what are you doin', ridin' around this time of the night?" the sheriff countered.

"Just been on a little trip around, lookin' at the country by moonlight. Restless, and couldn't sleep."

"You're always rather restless," the sheriff accused. "Why not get on the ground?"

"Sure enough!" Brick-top Burke dismounted immediately, but he did so cautiously, and he kept his six-gun ready.

The sheriff went up close to him, and the others moved forward, also. Brick-top Burke seemed nonchalant about it.

"Quite a party!" he said. "Is this one of your posses, sheriff, or are you gents only takin' a moonlight ride, also?"

"Since we're here, we'd like to ask you a few questions, Brick-top."

"Go ahead." Brick-top Burke calmly holstered his gun, and reached for his cigarette materials. "Mind if I smoke?"

He hummed a range song lightly as he rolled his cigarette, and as the sheriff addressed him.

"All your funnin' about takin' a moonlight ride won't go now, Brick-top. I want to know where you've really been."

"Just ridin' around."

"That won't do, Brick-top. I'm right serious about this, as maybe you know. Something's happened, and you're under suspicion."

"Yeah? What's happened to get you so much riled up, sheriff? You're steamin'."

Sheriff Milt Stiles felt anger welling within him, and had experience enough to know that anger would profit him nothing in a situation like this. He fought to control his mounting rage.

"Brick-top, you answer my questions, or tell me straight out that you won't, or I'm goin' to put the irons on you!" Milt Stiles declared.

"Now, you sure are makin' serious talk, sheriff. Why don't you tell me what's happened? If you're aimin' to hint that I may be guilty of somethin' bad——"

One of the other men suddenly hissed a warning:

"Another rider comin', sheriff."

Sheriff Milt Stiles acted with speed. Brick-top Burke felt the muzzle of a gun jabbing him in the ribs and heard the tense, low voice of the sheriff again:

"Back up into the shadows, Brick-top, and don't make a sound, or I'll let you have it! I'm handlin' this little party in my own way."

Brick-top Burke offered no resistance. Just in time, the sheriff warned him not to strike a match to light the cigarette he had made. The rider down the lane came on slowly toward the corral. The sheriff and his men remained back in the shadows, as noiseless as shadows themselves.

IT was Luke Lansard who rode up and dismounted in front of the corral gate, to find himself suddenly confronted by the sheriff and one of his emergency posse men. Lansard recoiled in surprise.

"Howdy, Luke!" the sheriff greeted.

"Howdy, Milt! Great grief! It's a wonder you wouldn't scare a man to death. What's goin' on? Got some of the boys from Blue Rock with you, I see. That's Brick-top Burke, too, ain't it?"

"Yeah. Brick-top just came ridin' in, and now you come ridin' in. Is it a habit at Heartbreak Ranch to do your range ridin' at night?"

"Well, not generally. What's happened?" Lansard asked.

"Everybody seems to be askin' that question, so I'll tell you—in case you don't know already. Somebody cracked the safe in Fletcher's store to-night, and got the money Brick-top paid for his half interest in this ranch, and also some other stuff. Both you gents are under suspicion. If you want to talk up, all right. If not, just say so, and I'll make the next move."

There followed a moment of silence. Brick-top Burke had stepped forward into the moonlight, but there was not light enough for facial expressions to be read. However, the sheriff caught the swift glance which passed between the two men.

"So that's it!" Brick-top Burke said, laughing a little. "Maybe I've got a bad reputation, and I'm sure liable to be accused of almost anything. But why consider Lansard? He's not known as bein' a burglar and thief, is he?"

"Any innocent party could explain this night ridin' right off," the sheriff hinted. "I'm standin' here waitin' to hear explanations."

"It won't take me long to explain and set your mind at rest, far as I'm concerned," Brick-top told him. "I went to bed, and got up again, and got my horse and hit the trail. Had some good reasons for doin' it. Just as I started away from the ranch I——"

His words had been to center attention and merely formed the preamble to swift action. For an instant, the sheriff was off guard as he listened attentively. Suddenly Brick-top Burke crashed against him, tore the gun from the official's hand and tossed it aside, had his own weapon out of its holster and was thrusting the muzzle of it against the ample paunch of the old sheriff.

"Steady, gents!" Brick-top's voice had changed tone, and now there was menace in it. "One bad move, and you'll lose a perfectly good sheriff in this county. I'm goin' to walk away from here, gents, leadin' my horse and with the sheriff walkin' beside me. If there's any hostile move, it'll be just too bad for Milt Stiles!"

It had happened with such unexpectedness and speed that it dazed them. They had been expecting Brick-top to try to lie out of a bad situation, instead of using violence to get away from it. And now Brick-top Burke had the reins and was leading his horse with them looped over his left arm, and his left hand gripped the sheriff's arm, and in his right hand Brick-top held the gun which had done deadly execution before, if reports could be credited. They passed through the dim moonlight and away from the group.

"Come and get him!" the sheriff was howling. "Never mind about me! Come and get——"

But the others made no move to do so. They feared for the sheriff. Brick-top Burke, they judged, on the verge of being arrested for burglary and safe blowing, would not hesitate to do as he had threatened. So the others simply guarded Luke Lansard and waited.

A short distance from the lane, Brick-top released the sheriff and prepared to mount.

"I'll get you for this, Brick-top, if it's——"

"Yeah, I know!" Brick-top interrupted. "I've heard those words before. No hard feelin's, sheriff. A man must take care of himself. Good night!"

There was a clatter of hoofbeats, and he was gone.

CHAPTER VII.

PARTNERS.

WITH Brick-top Burke riding his flaming sorrel and getting away to such a fine start, pursuit at the moment would have been but folly. Brick-top raced away through the night, down the lane and to the road, and no shot was fired after him.

The irate sheriff hastened back to the group at the corral. Elsie Lansard was there now; she had dressed and hurried down from the house when she had heard her father's voice.

"So it was Brick-top Burke who cracked that safe in Fletcher's store," one of the posse men said.

"I don't believe it!" Elsie Lansard cried. "I watched him all through supper. He's been wild, but he's not a criminal."

"I reckon your association with criminals ain't been such as to make you a good judge," the sheriff suggested. "He made a break and rode away like a guilty man, didn't he?"

"He may have had some reason for doing that," she defended.

"You never saw him till yesterday," the sheriff reminded her.

"I liked him the moment I saw him. I believed him when he said he wanted to settle down and stop being a wild boy. I'm grateful that he bought in and saved the ranch from Sam Dardon and his crowd."

"Yeah. But this here ain't a time to think of gratitude," the sheriff said. "He turned to face Luke Lansard. 'Are you ready to talk, Luke? Brick-top's your partner. Where were you ridin' this time of night? Where was he ridin'? Elsie didn't know either of you was gone from the house.'"

"Maybe you think I robbed the safe, Milt," Lansard said.

"You made some wild talk to me yesterday, and you ain't got any reason for likin' Sam Dardon, and it's Dardon's money that's gone. How do I know that you and Brick-top Burke didn't join hands to get that money back by crackin' the safe?"

"How dare you?" Elsie cried at him. "Are you calling my father a thief?"

"Remember, I'm the sheriff when I'm talkin' like this. A thing like this must be cleared up right away, to the satisfaction of all concerned. I'm takin' you into town, Lansard. Get your horses, men."

"Then I'm going, too," Elsie declared. "I'll saddle my pony."

Protests did not deter her, and when the small cavalcade started, Elsie Lansard was riding beside her father, who had grown taciturn and would talk to nobody. He had refused again to say where he had been riding that night, and why.

It was still dark when they came to Blue Rock, to find lights blazing in the store and saloon, and in some of the cottages. Several horses were at the hitch rails, and the sheriff knew instantly that word of the robbery had been carried out to the Circle D, and that Dardon and some of his men had ridden to town.

There was a group on the walk when the sheriff's party reached the hitch rail in front of the store, to dismount and tie their horses. The news was flashed that Brick-top Burke had made a break for it and had succeeded in getting away.

They trooped into the store. Sam Dardon was like a wild man. He strode forward angrily.

"If you had a hand in this, Lansard——" he roared.

"Stand back, and shut up!" the sheriff commanded him. "I'll handle this, if you don't mind."

"The whole thing looks fishy to me," Dardon said. "This Brick-top Burke comes into town just in time to put up money for an interest and stop the foreclosure. How come he'd invest so much money in something he'd never seen? Lansard had till noon to-morrow to settle. Brick-top had plenty of time to ride out and look the place over before decidin' to invest. But, no! He walks up and tosses money on the table and——"

"Take it easy," the sheriff advised.

"Yeah? I'm the one who's losin' the money. Fletcher said he wouldn't be responsible when he put it in his safe. Well, Stiles, what are you goin' to do about it? I want the thief caught, and I want my money back."

"You'll probly get both, if you'll keep still and keep your shirt on your back," the sheriff told him. "I suppose you gents have messed around here."

"Everything's just as it was when you left," Fletcher said. "Nothin's been touched."

THE sheriff inspected the scene of the robbery again. He decided that a terrific blast of powder had been used, more than necessary. The charred books and papers showed that. But Stiles found nothing new by way of evidence.

"I've sent to the ranch for all my boys," Sam Dardon was saying. "We'll comb the hills for this Brick-top Burke, and when we get him, we'll know what to do with him."

"I'll pick my own posse," the sheriff remarked.

"Nobody else around here who's fit for a posse."

"And there won't be any stringin' up! If Brick-top is caught, and I think he had anything to do with

this, he'll be taken to the county seat and wait in jail for a trial."

"You seem to have right tender thoughts about that gent," Dardon accused. "Anyhow, my boys are goin' after him, and I'd like to see anybody stop 'em! Maybe he'll get shot accidental while resistin' arrest."

"Are you aimin' to take the law into your own hands?" the sheriff barked angrily. "You do, and I'll see——"

"You'll do nothin'," Dardon boasted. "Try to put me under arrest, and see how far you get! And this man Lansard! What are you aimin' to do with him?"

"I'll tend to this!" Milt Stiles snapped again. "You're bein' influenced 'cause you're sore at not gettin' Heartbreak Ranch, and 'cause Brick-top Burke handled you when you and Jake Crane came chasin' Dick Parrow into town."

"Losin' all that money is influencin' me some, too," Dardon said.

"Well, I ain't influenced. I'm just a sheriff. I'm out to get the man who cracked that safe, and I'm goin' to get him! In a law-and-order way. You stand back, and I'll handle this. If you don't, Sam Dardon, I'll handle you, if I have to go to the county seat and come back here with a flock of deputies to do it."

"Well, get busy!" Dardon roared.

The sheriff motioned for Luke Lansard to sit on a stool before the post-office bench, and stood before him, arms akimbo, looking at him squarely.

"You'd better talk, Luke," he said. "You can see how serious this here is, I reckon. Clear yourself, quick. You were ridin' last night. Where?"

Lansard looked at the group, at his daughter, and back at the sheriff.

"I hate to get anybody in trouble," he said. "And understand that I ain't intimatin' anybody is guilty of anything. So here goes. Last night, I went to my room to go to bed, and I remembered somethin' I hadn't done, and slipped out of the house quietlike, so's not to wake up Elsie. As I was startin' back to the house from the barn, I saw somebody slippin' down toward the corral."

"Who was it?" the sheriff demanded.

"I didn't know, so I slipped after him. And I saw he was Brick-top Burke, and he was callin' his horse to the corral gate. He put on the gear and rode away."

"You didn't hail him?"

"No. I wondered what he was up to and where he was goin'. Knew he had slipped out of the house, 'cause we thought he'd gone to bed and to sleep. So I saddled up and took after him, intendin' to trail him. Don't seem like a nice thing in a man who'd just taken him on as a partner, and who'd saved my ranch for me."

"Never mind that," the sheriff said.

"It made me a little suspicious, the way he slipped away. If there was anything wrong, I wanted to know it. I've got a daughter, and I didn't want the wrong kind of man hangin' around the place if——"

"He's not the wrong kind of man," Elsie Lansard put in. "Why didn't you stop him and ask him what was wrong, pa?"

Everybody there who knew her was aghast at her defense of Brick-top Burke. There seemed to be no explanation for it, unless it was woman's intuition. The sheriff waved it aside, and motioned for Lansard to continue.

"I started trailin' easylike, not wantin' to be caught at it," Lansard continued. "He'd got a big start of me, and I lost him. I trailed to town——"

"So you came to town," Dardon put in.

"I did," Lansard snapped back at him. "Didn't see anything of Brick-top, and didn't show myself. I rode back toward the ranch, and cut across country to the hill and stayed there a while, waitin' to see if he'd come ridin' along, and from which direction if he did. When he didn't, I went home, and found the sheriff waitin'."

"Brick-top got to the ranch ahead of you, yet you didn't see him from the hill," the sheriff said. "If he'd been ridin' out from town, you'd have seen him."

"Been sure to," Lansard replied.

"There's a lot of ways he could have gone to the ranch from town without followin' the main road," Dardon put in again. "Can't you see, Stiles, that this man Lansard is tryin' to cover up Brick-top Burke? They're partners. Both in on this deal. Plain as the nose on your face. When my boys get here they——"

"That'll do," the sheriff said.

DOWN the street in front of the buildings slipped a man unseen. He got to the hitch rail, and untied one of the horses and led it away, around to the rear of the store, where another horse was waiting. At the rear door of the store, he listened to what was going on inside.

Brick-top Burke, eavesdropping, understood Sam Dardon's hostility better than did any of the others. Dardon was infuriated that he had not got his hands on Heartbreak

Ranch, regarding which he had made certain plans. He was doubly incensed at Lansard's reception of the idea that he marry Elsie Lansard. And Dardon's Circle D riders, a wild and lawless bunch who would do anything their chief suggested, were coming in as swiftly as possible.

Brick-top Burke glanced through the rear door of the store, which stood open a few inches. Those inside were grouped not far away. The sheriff was still standing in front of Lansard, who remained on the stool, and Dardon was a little to one side. The other men were scattered. Elsie Lansard was back by the store counter.

"Brick-top Burke cracked that safe and stole the money he'd paid me, and Lansard was in on it," Sam Dardon was declaring. "Plain as the nose on your face. Sheriff Stiles, I want this man Lansard tied up right now, and held. My boys will get Brick-top Burke. If I ever see him again——"

"Look right this way, Dardon! Hands up, everybody!" the voice of Brick-top Burke barked, as he kicked the door open wide.

CHAPTER VIII.

TO GO ON THE DODGE.

THEY whirled to find him standing there confronting them, his face stern and his eyes gleaming, and six-gun held ready. He was bending forward slightly, in the position of an alert gun fighter.

"Get your paws up!" he barked again.

Hands went into the air as he took one more step toward the group. He was watching them all, but Sam Dardon got the most of his attention, so much of it that the in-

furiated Dardon did not dare take a chance on drawing his gun.

"Lansard! Get here to the door!" Brick-top barked. "Make it quick!"

"But, Brick-top—"

"Quick! You get back, Miss Lansard! There may be some shoot-in' here! I'm sure feelin' like wolfin' when I look at some folks." And it was Sam Dardon at whom he looked.

Luke Lansard left the stool and got to the door.

"Outside!" Brick-top whispered to him from the corner of his mouth. "Your horse—to the left. Mine's to the right. Ride out the south trail when we start. No questions now."

Lansard passed him and went into the night.

"Let me tell you gents one thing," Brick-top addressed the others. "Luke Lansard didn't have anything to do with this safe-crackin' business, I'm right sure. He ain't the safe-crackin' kind of man, and you gents should know it. And he ain't goin' to be pestered by any bunch of ranch hellions 'cause their boss wants him out of the way. I'm leavin' now, gents. Use your own judgment about startin' anything."

He backed slowly to the door, holding the gun ready, his eyes still gleaming at them malevolently. He put out his left hand and grasped the edge of the door. And suddenly he sprang backward, jerking the door shut as he did so and slamming it, and jumped to one side. The door was shattered with a fusillade an instant later.

Brick-top Burke vaulted to his saddle and ripped with the rowels. Bending low, he raced after Luke Lansard, who already had started toward the south trail. The store door was jerked open, and men rushed out into the night. Guns barked and flamed, and bullets

ripped through the air, singing their vicious songs, but none struck home.

"Horses! Get after 'em!" somebody was shouting.

Far out the south trail, Brick-top Burke and Lansard pulled up.

"Now, you've done it, Brick-top," Luke Lansard said. "They had an idea we combined to loot that safe, and this'll make 'em sure of it."

"Let's cut around and talk as we ride," Brick-top advised. "They may be comin' after us."

They left the trail and circled back toward the town, riding down in the depressions. The dawn was near, and soon they could be easily seen.

"Dardon's riders are comin' to town, he said. Dardon ain't got any love for you, Lansard. You and me—we wrecked his plans. The old sheriff's all alone, and anything might happen to you before he could prevent it. That's why I got you out of there. Dardon was fixin' to have you strung up. Want your girl to go through life rememberin' her father was strung up, and his name not cleared? You didn't rob that safe, did you?"

"No!" Lansard said. "It's like I told 'em—I saw you ride away and wondered where you were goin'. And everything was so peculiar—you steppin' in and buyin' a ranch you'd never seen, for no apparent reason, and me havin' a daughter and—"

"I'm understandin', Lansard, and I ain't blamin' you a mite. Far as Elsie's concerned—she's a mighty fine girl. I liked her the first second I saw her."

"That's funny! She said somethin' the same about you," Lansard replied. "What do we aim to do now, Brick-top?"

"I just wanted to get you away

so you wouldn't be handled when Dardon's riders got to town. Best thing for you to do is circle around and get back to the ranch and tend to the chores. It's the last place they'd go lookin' for you—they prob'ly think you're ridin' with me—but keep your eyes open, just the same. And if any of Dardon's men come prowlin' around, get inside the house and use your rifle. They won't have any legal right to pester you."

"Maybe that'll be best Brick-top. But what about you?"

"Me? I'll be ridin' around the hills for the time bein'. Dardon's after me. His men will be trailin' and chasin', but that ain't worryin' me any."

"Brick-top, did you rob that safe to get your money back?"

"What do you think?" Brick-top countered.

"I—I ain't thinkin'," Luke Lansard said.

"Here's where we split up, I reckon. Circle around and get back to the ranch. It'll be daylight pretty quick, and you don't want to be seen. They think we've gone into the south hills, maybe."

"But you——" Lansard persisted.

"Don't you worry any about me. Elsie will be all right, won't she?"

"She'll put up with some of her friends in town till this thing is over."

"That's fine. Well—so long!"

"Wait, Brick-top! Ain't you got anything to tell me at all? I'm your partner."

"We ain't got time for chin music now, Lansard. I'll be seein' you later. I've got to dodge Dardon's riders, and that may take some dodgin'."

"Did you——"

"What do you think?" Brick-top Burke asked, again. He wheeled his horse and rode away.

Luke Lansard watched him disappear, and then began his own slow and cautious journey to Heartbreak Ranch.

CHAPTER IX.

AN ACT OF BURGLARY.

BBRICK-TOP BURKE rode for a time along the bottom of a gulch and emerged as day-break came, to climb the side of a wooded hill. From a position of advantage near the crest, he could look down upon the little town of Blue Rock.

Horses lined the hitch rails, and more riders were hurrying to the town along the trail which ran to Dardon's Circle D Ranch. Brick-top estimated that there must be at least a score of them, and soon they would be hounds, and he would be the fox.

It pleased him to be the fox, to have a chance to match wits with his pursuers. They knew this country better than he, since it was their range. But Brick-top Burke was a man to whom new country presented no mysteries. He could find his way around.

He had no intention of getting over the hills and making an escape from the vicinity. Brick-top Burke might be on the dodge, but he was not on the run. He had work to do hereabouts, and had to wait for an opportunity to do it.

He let his horse rest while he stretched on the ground and watched the street of the town. He could see Dardon and the sheriff arguing in front of the store, both gesticulating wildly. Then Dardon seemed to be issuing orders, and his men got into their saddles and scat-

tered in different directions, two or three in each group. Brick-top Burke watched where they went, tried to guess where they would search.

Then he mounted and circled back through the woods, and went over a bald crest and down the opposite slope. As swiftly as he could make progress in the rough country, he directed his course toward a canyon at the edge of Sam Dardon's ranch property.

He watched and listened at the head of the canyon for a time, then descended into its cool, dark depths and rode cautiously along the bottom through the rank fern growth.

From the depths of the brush came a guarded hail:

"Brick-top!"

Brick-top Burke reined in, and let his right hand drop to his holster. The brush parted, and a man came forth—Dick Parrow.

"How's things?" Brick-top asked.

"I was hangin' around the ranch, listenin'," Parrow reported. "When news of the robbery got there, Dardon went wild. He made his plans before he rode to town."

"Yeah? What were they?"

"The men were to saddle up and ride after him, and the rest after the mornin' chores were done. They sure did 'em by lantern light this mornin'. Nobody at the ranch now except the chink cook and an old-timer who cleans out the bunk house."

"That's fine," Brick-top Burke said, grinning.

"Dardon's sure a schemer. You and Lansard cracked the safe, he said, and you were both to be run down and strung up before the sheriff could get hold of things. He aimed to make a quick deal with

Elsie Lansard then for the ranch. He sure wants the Heartbreak. And how he does hate you for steppin' in with that wad of coin and keepin' him from gettin' it."

"Where's Jake Crane?"

"Rode to town with the last batch of men. Got his right shoulder tied up, of course, where you plugged him. Brick-top, you sure do make enemies. Crane or Dardon—they'll shoot you on sight."

"Dardon had a sight of me a short while back, but he didn't do any shootin'," Brick-top replied. "Get your horse, and we'll be goin'."

"You aim to risk it?"

"I aim!" Brick-top Burke said.

"I'm right along with you, Brick-top. You prob'ly saved me yesterday, and I want a hand in this."

HE disappeared into the brush, and emerged presently leading his horse. He got into the saddle, and rode by Brick-top's side along the bottom of the canyon for quite a distance. Then they went up a slippery slope to the level, and rode carefully there, cutting through the brush beneath the trees.

The buildings of the Circle D loomed before them. From a clump of trees a short distance away, they watched. They saw an old man at the door of the bunk house, busy with a broom. From the cookhouse came the nasal singsong of the Chinese cook.

"Easy enough to handle," Brick-top said.

"Somebody might drop in on us."

"If anybody does, and tries to get hostile, it's goin' to be a hot party," Brick-top declared. "There's a man hunt on after me, by unauthorized persons, and I've got the right to protect and defend myself, 'ordin' to law."

"Where do I come in on that?" Parrow asked.

"You, bein' with me, they'll prob'ly start gunnin' for you, too. So you'll have a right to protect and defend yourself." Brick-top grinned.

They waited and watched a moment longer, then rode forth cautiously and approached the Circle D ranch house. Beside it, they dismounted. Neither the old-timer at the bunk house nor the Chinese cook had seen them.

Brick-top Burke raised a window.

"This here's a real act of burglary," he said, grinning again. "Let's get inside."

"Maybe I'd better stay out here and watch, Brick-top. We may need our horses in a hurry."

"Show me around, then come back."

Brick-top crawled through the window, and Parrow followed him. They had entered a bedroom where everything was in a state of wild disorder. They went through it and into a hall, and through the living room and to a small room which Sam Dardon used as an office.

"There it is," Parrow said.

He indicated an old roll-top desk in a corner of the room. The lid of the desk was down, and locked. Brick-top Burke got out his jackknife.

"More burglary," he said, grinning. "But it's in a good cause, a man might say."

Deftly he snapped the lock with the jackknife, and rolled back the top of the desk. Sitting before it, he began pawing over a disordered mass of documents, account books, and miscellaneous papers.

"Here it is," he announced finally. What he had found was a crude map. "Show me, then get outside and watch."

Parrow bent over the desk.

"That there's the rocky ridge at the base of the hills, on Heartbreak land," he explained. "That line 'tween the Heartbreak and the Circle D is—well, it's some kind of formation that makes a difference and—"

"Never mind that, Parrow. You get outside and watch."

Parrow hastened away, and Brick-top Burke leaned back in the chair as though this office had been his own, and inspected the crude map well. Then he put it where he had found it, and began inspecting a mass of old letters. Selecting a few, he read them carefully. Finally he put everything back as he had found it, as well as he could, and closed the desk.

He was smiling grimly as he left the office room and started back across the living room to the hall.

"Goats!" he said. "I always play a hunch. And generally win. Won't some folks be surprised!"

Then he heard Dick Parrow's frantic call:

Brick-top! Come runnin'!"

CHAPTER X.

A TIME OF BATTLE.

BRICK-TOP dashed through the hall, tore through the bedroom, and sprang through the window. Parrow already was in the saddle, and holding the reins of Brick-top's sorrel. From the edge of the woods three riders were emerging.

As Brick-top vaulted into his own saddle and seized the reins, the three gave wild cries and charged forward.

"Dardon men," Parrow yelled at Brick-top.

That made them enemies. And they had recognized Brick-top's fa-

mous sorrel. They came charging on, as Parrow led the way around the corner of the house with Brick-top close behind him. Guns were barking already, but no bullet came near.

Brick-top Burke had no wish to shoot it out with anybody if such a thing could be avoided. But these men had no legal right running him down. He knew the old sheriff had not made them deputies. They were out to do murder at the orders of Sam Dardon.

Parrow was riding along a curving road which led to the main highway to town, and Brick-top continued following him. They were out in the open. Guns blazed behind them again, and one bullet came too close to Brick-top to suit his fancy. He fired in reply, and one rider swerved aside and slumped over in his saddle as his horse stopped.

"Keep comin'," Parrow was yelling.

Brick-top fired again, and rode. The big sorrel was abreast Parrow's mount now, and they raced side by side. Another bullet whistled past Brick-top's head. He fired back again, missed, and took another shot and missed again, but it seemed to deter their pursuers some. They were two and two now, and those behind had a proper regard for Brick-top's marksmanship.

Then they reached a curve in the road, darted into the main highway, and raced down it in the direction of Blue Rock. The pursuers dropped behind.

"Bad business," Parrow said, as they drew up some distance away to give their horses a breathing spell. "Now they'll know where to look for you, Brick-top—and for me."

"Yeah, I reckon you're in for it now," Brick-top replied. "They

recognized you, of course. You're pals with a hunted outlaw."

"Dardon would have got me on sight anyhow, me knowin' what I do. Did you find what you wanted, Brick-top?"

"I sure did."

"And was I right?"

"You were right. If we get clear of this mess, you won't ever have anything to worry about, Parrow. Your future's assured, as a man might say."

"We ain't clear of the mess yet. And how can we ever be?" Parrow asked. "Dardon won't ever stop. We'll either be plugged or run out of the country."

"You're forgettin' that I'm a property owner hereabouts," Brick-top replied. "Nobody's got a right to run me out of the country."

"Sam Dardon don't go much on rights."

"So I know. Stop worryin', Parrow. We'll get through, somehow. Let's ride. You want to stick to me or shift for yourself?"

"I'd rather stick with you."

Brick-top Burke led the way now. They went along the shoulder of a hill and then up a slope. The sun was up. They used due caution, not knowing at what instant they might encounter some of the Dardon men.

"Where are we goin'?" Parrow asked.

"To the Heartbreak," Brick-top replied.

"Ain't that dangerous?"

"Prob'ly the safest place in the country. I want to be sure Lansard got home all right, and that nothin's botherin' him now."

TO get to the Heartbreak, they were compelled to cross a ridge, the one which was indicated on the map Brick-top had found in Sam Dardon's desk and had

inspected so well before reading the letters.

When they were over the ridge, Brick-top glanced continually toward the north as they rode, at a rocky slope almost devoid of vegetation, and at some queer domelike formations beneath the slope. He was grinning again.

They could see the Heartbreak buildings from where they were riding, and the wind was blowing away from them, so they heard no sounds coming from the ranch. But, after a time, they ascended a slope to the level and glanced toward the Heartbreak lane.

Brick-top Burke gave a howl of wrath. From a window of the house, puffs of smoke were issuing, and from behind an outbuilding were coming other puffs. Luke Lansard was besieged.

"Let's ride!" Brick-top roared.

They raced along the road and came to the end of the lane, and along that they went at breakneck speed, Brick-top Burke letting out a yell that was carried on the wind to those at the house.

He had reloaded his gun, and now he brought it out of the holster and prepared for grim business. Two men rushed from behind the shed and made a wild dash for horses standing not far away. They tumbled into the saddles and turned to flee. They had recognized Brick-top Burke, knew he had a friend with him, and they cared for no battle just then.

"After 'em!" Brick-top barked at Parrow.

So they raced past the house and down beyond the corral. The pair ahead had ridden to a depression, and a cloud of dust showed where they were riding in it. Brick-top led the way to the edge and began

using his gun. Parrow, beside him, was firing, also. He had cast his lot with Brick-top now.

Getting out of the depression, the pair ahead turned to fire in reply, then rushed away. Brick-top pulled up.

"Let's get back to the house," he told Parrow.

Luke Lansard was waiting for them in front when they arrived, holding a rifle.

"They came down the lane," he explained. "When I ordered 'em away, they began shootin', so I did some shootin' myself. Think I nicked one of 'em a little."

"They got away, and they'll get in touch with some of the others, so it'll be learned that you're here," Brick-top told him. "Saddle your horse and ride with us till you can find a place to hide out."

"Maybe I'd better go in and surrender to the sheriff, Brick-top. I never cracked that safe, so they'll never find me guilty."

"The sheriff ain't in a position to protect you, and you know it," Brick-top said. "Dardon and his gang are out to kill you, if you want to know it."

"Why should he be? Because he didn't get to foreclose on the ranch?"

"That's got somethin' to do with it," Brick-top confessed. "But there's somethin' else a lot more important than that and we ain't got time to talk about it now. Lock up. I'll get your horse ready."

He rode to the corral with Parrow, and they caught up Lansard's pony and made him ready for the trail. By the time they were done, Lansard had locked up the house, extinguishing his fire first, and was ready to ride with them. They went to the main trail and crossed it to plunge into the woods.

"Dardon's men are scattered all over the country," Brick-top explained. "Liable to run into 'em at any time, so keep your eyes open and your six-gun ready. Man, you don't know how Dardon would like to have you blasted."

"What's it all about?" Lansard asked.

"If we get out of this mess and settle Dardon, your hard-luck days are over," Brick-top told him. "I always play a hunch. Did when I bought in on this ranch without ever seein' it. And, as usual, I'm goin' to win."

"Did you crack that safe, Brick-top?"

"Didn't you?" Brick-top countered.

"No!"

"I thought maybe you had, which was why I handled the old sheriff last night and made a ride, to make it look like I was guilty. And it sure did."

"Then, if you thought I did it, you didn't, huh?"

Brick-top grinned again. "Who cares about a little safe crackin'?" he asked. "If I didn't, and you didn't, what jasper do you suppose did? Dardon wouldn't, 'cause that money was his already, and he don't use many stamps. There ain't many people to suspect."

Lansard eyed him peculiarly.

"We won't be sayin' anything more about it," he offered. "But I reckon we're on the run till the thing is settled."

"I reckon," Brick-top agreed.

"Three of us against the gang," Parrow put in.

"Lansard ain't goin' to ride with us," Brick-top objected. "Too risky. He's no wild young blade any more, and he's got a daughter to think of.

He's got to hide out somewhere. Lansard, I'm tellin' you that this here is right serious. No foolin'! I've got reason to think that Sam Dardon's men have orders to kill you on sight, and me, too."

"But why?"

"Never mind why. They wouldn't let you surrender if you tried. They'd shoot you out of your saddle and then say you went gunnin' for 'em and they had to do it."

Parrow gave a sudden cry of alarm and reined in his horse. From the brush ahead came the crack of a gun. A bullet sped between Brick-top and Lansard.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PRISONER.

BRICK-TOP led the way to one side, his gun speaking as he rode, and the other two followed him, also firing at the hidden menace.

From another direction, fire came at them. Parrow howled maledictions as a bullet burned across his shoulder. They crashed their mounts into the brush, where there was good cover, but where scant progress could be made.

"Got 'em on two sides of us, and they sure won't come out into the open," Brick-top said. "Keep your eyes peeled. We'll be meetin' somewhere in the brush."

They moved on cautiously, alert, circling to the left, away from the spots from which the shots had been fired. Somewhere in the brush, their enemies were circling, also, they supposed, hoping to catch them at a moment of disadvantage.

Off to one side, a gun blazed. The bullet did not strike home. Parrow was the first to shoot in reply, and from the brush came a yell

which told he had scored an accidental hit.

"Move!" Brick-top ordered. "Now they know where we are."

They crashed their horses through the brush, making no effort now at concealment. They could hear other mounts being pushed through the brush, also. Ahead of them was a small clearing, and they made for it.

At its edge, they stopped to listen. They could hear somebody shouting in the distance. And then, on the opposite side of the clearing, two riders came into view. One was the wounded Jake Crane.

"Capture Crane, if we can," Brick-top whispered. "He ain't able to do much shootin', I reckon. We need him in our business. I've got some plans."

They were obscured by the brush, but had a good view of the clearing. Crane rode out with another of the Circle D men, and they stopped their horses as though listening for sounds which would tell them where to find their quarry. Whoever had been shouting in the distance, had ceased.

"Make a dash for 'em," Brick-top whispered.

He gave the signal, and they crashed out of the brush and straight at the other two.

"Get 'em up!" Brick-top cried.

The man with Crane immediately swerved his horse and opened fire. Crane's mount swerved sharply, also. Lansard and Parrow replied to the fire, and their foe crashed to the ground out of his saddle.

Brick-top Burke jumped the sorrel forward and against Crane's restive mount. Crane was trying desperately to draw a gun with his left hand and handle his horse at the same time. Brick-top got the gun and tossed it away.

"I'm needin' you, Crane," he announced.

"You've got me, I reckon. I can't put up much of a fight now."

"I ain't aimin' to fight with you," Brick-top said. "You're goin' to be one of them hostage things, if you get what I mean. Out gunnin' for me, huh? I suppose you're in command of part of the mob, and Dardon the rest?"

"Somethin' like that."

"Why is Dardon so blamed eager to have me stretched cold on the ground?"

"Well, he says you and Lansard cracked Fletcher's safe, and got that money."

"Any reason outside that?"

"None as I know of."

"You're a poor liar," Brick-top told him. "But we'll go into all that later."

THE man who had been shot out of his saddle was dead. Brick-top motioned for Parrow to lead Crane's horse, and they all got back into the brush again. There they stopped, to listen and watch.

"How many more men have you got hereabouts, Crane?" Brick-top asked.

"Two more somewhere around, 'less they've missed us and turned back. We were goin' through the woods and meet down by the road."

"Thanks! We'll be ridin' there."

"Are you aimin' to battle the whole Circle D outfit?" Crane asked scornfully. "You're up against somethin', if that's your plan."

"Been gettin' along all right so far," Brick-top assured him. "Ain't any wounds on our side yet, 'cept Parrow's got a burned shoulder, and that only makes him mad."

"So this rat's thrown in with you, huh?" Crane cried.

"Who's a rat?" Parrow barked at him.

"Take it easy," Brick-top ordered. "There's a rat around here, but you ain't him. Don't go to mussin' up this here hostage. I need him in my business. He'll come in handy when we get back to town."

"Back to town!" Parrow cried. "Are you crazy, Brick-top?"

"Well, I've been called so. Sure, we're goin' back to town, in time. There's some things to be cleaned up, and they can't be cleared up out here in the woods."

They rode on cautiously, descending the slope toward the Blue Rock road. Crane was silent and morose, but his eyes were gleaming, and Brick-top guessed that he thought they were riding into an ambush. He thrust the muzzle of his six-gun against the prisoner's ribs.

"If you've got friends hidden hereabouts, and they open up on us, it's goin' to be bad for you, Crane," he said. "So maybe you'd better take precautions."

"I told you a couple of men would be down by the road."

"So you did. And how many more are round here, if any?"

"None, as I know of. But the boys are prowlin' around through the country, searchin' for you. I don't know where some of 'em are, or where they're prowlin', exactly."

They emerged from the brush and dropped down into the road. Crane was kept between Brick-top and Parrow, and Lansard rode behind. Slowly they progressed around a bend—and found two Circle D riders waiting.

"Put 'em up!" Brick-top barked. "I've got my gun jammed against Crane's ribs."

"Easy, boys!" Crane yelled.

They had started to go for their guns, but now they stopped and put up their hands. Brick-top left Parrow to guard Crane, and rode forward. He got the guns away from the two and tossed them far into the brush.

"On the ground!" he ordered.

They glanced toward Crane, who sat his saddle in a state of helpless abjection, and he gave them no signal. So they got on the ground.

"Put your reins around your pommels, and slap your horses away," Brick-top ordered.

"You settin' us afoot out here?" one of them asked.

"You've guessed it. Better be glad I'm not feelin' real mean this mornin'. I ain't had much sleep, and that always makes me peevish. Come to think of it, I ain't had any sleep at all. But I aim to sleep calm and peaceful to-night."

"And maybe for a long time," Crane tossed at him.

"I ain't meanin' that kind of sleep. That kind ain't comin' to Brick-top Burke for years and years, not till he's got grandchildren to dance on his knee when the rheumatism ain't too bad for that kind of dancin'."

The reins were put up, and the Circle D mounts properly slapped and chased down the trail toward the town.

"That'll give any Dardon man somethin' to think about, if them horses are seen," Brick-top observed. "Well, gents, I hope you like walkin'. You'll find your guns in the brush, if you look around long enough. It's goin' to be a hot day, but I can't help that."

Then the cavalcade went on, leaving two cursing range riders behind. When they got around the next

bend, Brick-top Burke was laughing.

"They'd rather have been shot," he declared. "Why is it a cowboy hates so to walk? They tell me walkin's good exercise, but I don't know. Never tried it much."

CHAPTER XII.

DARDON GETS IMPULSIVE.

IN Blue Rock, the scant population was enjoying the greatest sensation it had experienced in years. Not since the old hectic mining days had there been so much excitement. The robbery in Fletcher's store, the activities of Brick-top Burke, the wild state of Sam Dardon, the quarrel between Dardon and the sheriff, and the man hunt through the hills had set the people on edge.

In the midst of all this arrived a short, fat little man who squinted behind thick spectacles. He went into immediate conference with Henry Fletcher. He was the prospect to whom Fletcher expected to sell his business.

He listened calmly to the tale of what had happened, discovered that no liability attached to the "bank," and then suggested to Fletcher that they talk business. People were asked to discuss the situation elsewhere, and an inventory begun.

Fletcher was selling out. He had known that this man would buy, that only a few minor details had to be arranged before the deal could be made. Fletcher was eager to get away, for he had his eye on an enterprise in another part of the State.

In Bill Marsh's saloon, Sam Dardon prowled around like an angry beast. He had ridden forth with some of his men, but had decided to return to town and await develop-

ments there. Sheriff Milt Stiles sat at one of the tables, calmly smoking.

"My boys'll get 'em!" Dardon was raging.

"If they do, you get into trouble," the sheriff promised.

"Maybe not. You ain't very active, Stiles. When there's a robbery, it's a sheriff's game to go after the robbers. This Brick-top Burke—he's a bad gent at best. And that Luke Lansard throwin' in with him is——"

"Luke's all right. I believe the story he told," the sheriff declared.

"And how about Brick-top Burke?"

"I ain't quite sure," the sheriff admitted. "His comin' to Blue Rock was a funny thing. That yarn of his about wantin' to settle down was funny, too. Buyin' in on that ranch without even lookin' at it——"

"That wasn't so funny," Dardon cut in. "He gets a half interest, then steals back the money he paid for it, so he's winner if the buy's good or bad."

"You sure seem eager to get the Heartbreak," the sheriff suggested. "Nobody's ever made a go of it."

"Angora goats, I figure, would go good there."

"Maybe. Nobody around here raises 'em."

"No reason why I shouldn't start it, huh?" Dardon asked.

"But you ain't got the ranch now."

"I may get it yet. When Brick-top Burke and Lansard are finished, maybe the girl will sell right reasonable."

"You got a fancy for the girl? She's a nice girl," the sheriff said.

"Oh, I was willin' to marry her, and let Lansard run the ranch for me."

"You're right accommodatin'," the sheriff said, with much sarcasm. "The Lansards are friends of mine, and I'm watchin' over Elsie as much as her pa."

"Friends of yours! Looks like it. You let Brick-top Burke walk out of the store with Lansard last night."

"Yeah. And I didn't notice you stoppin' him, either," the sheriff retorted. "There are times, I reckon, when Brick-top Burke ain't to be stopped, without some damage bein' done the man as tries to stop him."

DARDON drifted back to the bar, and the sheriff remained at the table. He charged his pipe anew, and lighted it, and after a few puffs got up and wandered the length of the room to the front door. He went out upon the street to stand beneath the awning and lean against a post.

The townspeople had scattered to their homes, except some of the men who remained to talk of the sensation. The sheriff wandered down to Fletcher's store, and found Fletcher and the new owner at the door. They had completed their deal.

"I'll be leavin' in a few hours, Stiles," Henry Fletcher said. "Got a chance to make a deal in Denver, and don't want to miss it. It's been nice in Blue Rock, but the town ain't much, and I aim to grow."

"Good luck to you!" the sheriff growled. He did not like Henry Fletcher much.

"I'd like to know how this robbery thing comes out. I'll write and learn. The new boss will have to buy a safe, I reckon. I made out a report for the post office department about the stolen and damaged stamps."

"When are you leavin', and how?" the sheriff asked.

"Bob Gaines will drive me to the county seat. I told him to be ready by the cool of the evenin'."

"Packin' any money along? I don't want a stick-up on top of this robbery."

"The new owner's paid me with drafts. Wouldn't do a stick-up man any good. I've always banked at the county seat."

The sheriff wandered away again, strolled to the blacksmith shop and back, and again neared Bill Marsh's saloon. He disliked to go inside, for the mere presence of Sam Dardon irked him.

He always had considered Dardon as a potential criminal. There was nothing against the man legally, as yet, but Sheriff Milt Stiles felt that Dardon only needed an opportunity.

Somebody down the street gave a shout, and the sheriff glanced languidly in that direction. But an instant later he had jerked erect and was all attention.

Into the street had come a small cavalcade. The sheriff could see Luke Lansard and Brick-top Burke with Jake Crane riding between them, and Dick Parrow just behind, acting as though he wished he were not there.

"More trouble," the sheriff growled.

He was glad that none of the Circle D riders happened to be in town, that all were out searching for Brick-top Burke. He felt that he could deal with Dardon alone, even if he had to go to extreme lengths to do so.

Sheriff Milt Stiles stepped to the door of the saloon and swung it back.

"Dardon, come here a second," he called, in ordinary tones.

Sam Dardon put down the glass

from which he had been drinking and sauntered toward the door, like a man resenting the summons.

"Well, what is it now?" he asked.

"Somethin' out here might interest you, I reckon," the sheriff said.

The riders were almost to the saloon now. As Dardon stepped out, Sheriff Milt Stiles took precautionary measures. He whipped out his gun, pressed it quickly against Dardon's body, and with his other hand extracted Dardon's weapon from its holster.

"What——" Dardon began.

Then he noticed the riders, and curses rumbled from his lips.

"Give me that gun!" he roared at Stiles. "This here is my business!"

"No shootin' till we find out what this is all about," the sheriff cautioned. "That's why I took your gun, Dardon. I didn't want you to blow up and start somethin' and maybe spoil everything."

"Why, I'll——"

"Stand steady!" the sheriff urged.

"Let's find out what this means."

THE riders came to the hitch rail and began dismounting. The men of the town came forward, but cautiously, fearing to find themselves suddenly in a district of peril.

"You—Jake! What's this mean?"

Dardon howled.

"He's a hostage," Brick-top Burke said, grinning. "If anything happens to any of us until this powwow is over, Jake Crane ain't goin' to be with us any more."

They all got upon the walk, where the sheriff stood waiting.

"So you came back, Brick-top?" Stiles said.

"Yeah. It's some safer here. The woods are full of gents ready to go gunnin' for me. They were tryin' to shoot Lansard out of his house,

but we stopped that. I'm afraid there's a few Circle D men all mussed up, and others walkin' back home."

"You——" Sam Dardon howled. "Sheriff, give me my gun!"

"Wait!" Stiles urged. "What's the meanin' of this here, Brick-top? Did you come back to surrender for blowin' that safe?"

"Me? I never surrender for nothin'," Brick-top said. "I came back to have a little understandin' about some things."

"I'm listenin'."

Brick-top Burke rolled a cigarette and leaned against a post. Lansard and Parrow had Jake Crane between them a few feet away. Dardon was standing at the sheriff's side.

"Sheriff Stiles, you wouldn't believe me when I said I was goin' to settle down and invest my poker winnin's," Brick-top began.

"I got some sense."

"But it happens I told the truth for once—about bein' twenty-seven and everything. I drifted up here first 'cause I heard the store was for sale, and thought I'd look it over. But Fletcher was already pretty sure of a deal."

"He's just closed it, and he's leavin' in the cool of the evenin'," the sheriff said.

"He is, huh? Anyhow, I had a hunch to save Lansard's hide by buyin' half of a ranch I'd never seen. I always play my hunches."

"So you've said before."

"I'm repeatin' it," said Brick-top Burke. "I bought in, and went out there. Last night, I slipped away to take a little ride and meet up with Parrow. I'd been talkin' to him here in town before I went out to the Heartbreak."

"What's Parrow got to do with it?"

"Parrow," said Brick-top Burke, "is a clean, honest gent. He was workin' with a bad outfit, not from choice, but because a man has to eat and sleep somewhere. Dardon and Jake Crane came chasin' him into town, blazin' away at him, and I helped save him, and he was grateful."

"Get down to brass tacks!" the sheriff said.

"Anything to oblige. Dardon accused Parrow of stealin' somethin', and then sidetracked that idea. Any man with sense would know Dardon wouldn't go gunnin' for a man just 'cause the jasper had told him he shouldn't try to foreclose a mortgage or get married to a girl too good for him. 'Twasn't that, so it must have been somethin' else, I judged. I decided to find out what it was—and I did!"

"Why, you——" Sam Dardon cried.

Sudden rage seemed to make a madman of him. He crashed against the sheriff and tore his own gun from Stiles's hand. It came up, blazing.

Brick-top Burke had jumped aside, suddenly alert and active. His own gun barked twice. Sam Dardon dropped the weapon he held, looked wildly at the others, clutched at his breast, and sprawled forward.

"He was too impulsive," Brick-top Burke said. "I had a hunch he might try to shoot me."

"And you always play your hunches," the sheriff said softly.

CHAPTER XIII.

DOUBLE WINNING.

THEY carried Dardon's body into Bill Marsh's place and put it in a corner on the floor, covering it with a blanket. Nobody could object to the move Brick-top Burke had made. He had been lean-

ing calmly against a post, talking, and this man had made an attempt on his life. He had a right to shoot to defend himself.

When things grew quieter, Brick-top and the sheriff sat at a table in the front of Marsh's place and continued the conversation.

"Dardon was right eager to get the Heartbreak, though it didn't seem to be worth the mortgage money," Brick-top said. "He was aimin' to raise goats—so he said."

"You mean he had some other idea?" Stiles asked.

"He had an idea of gettin' right rich, and mighty quick at that. A few months ago, Dardon had a gent visitin' at his ranch. He pretended to be prowlin' around the country lookin' for possible mineral deposits for some big company, but that was only a bluff. He was a scout, all right, but of a different kind.

"He found out somethin', but not on Dardon's land. It was on the Heartbreak. Dardon mentioned that he held a mortgage and would have to foreclose in a few months, and that the title was tied up at present, and this here gent bein' somethin' like Dardon, and no doubt the two gettin' together in a shady deal, they decided to wait till Dardon had foreclosed before doin' anything."

"About what?" the sheriff demanded.

"You ever notice them peculiar domelike things along the base of the hills on the Heartbreak side of the ridge?"

"Sure," said the sheriff.

"They probably don't convey anything to your nimble mind 'cept that they're freak scenery. Sheriff and gents, they're called gas domes by some. They're found sometimes at the edge of an oil field."

"What?" Stiles gasped.

"Me, I ain't any mercenary wretch. Kindly remember I didn't know anything about the ranch when I bought an interest in the place. I was just playin' a hunch. One of the big oil companies stands ready to do the handsome thing by the owners of the Heartbreak. Dardon was waitin' to foreclose. Goats, my eye!"

"You mean there's oil on our land?" Lansard asked.

"From certain letters I've seen, I'd say there's a lot. That expert's reports certainly were enthusiastic. And the preliminary deal—anyhow, Lansard, I don't think you're goin' to have any more grief days in your life, not about money. Fact is, I think you're goin' to be cursed by bein' rich."

"And you—you——" the sheriff sputtered.

"I always play hunches. I sure went into business with my poker winnin's."

"I ain't sure yet about them bein' poker winnin's," Milt Stiles declared.

"You still harpin' on that six-gun money angle?" Brick-top demanded. "I'm ashamed of you."

"And there's the robbery of Fletcher's safe to be explained," the sheriff continued. "Don't think I'm forgettin' that."

"Almost anybody could have robbed that safe," Brick-top told him. "In fact, it looked overdone to me."

"What you mean by that?"

"A hammer and a chisel and a couple of taps would have opened that safe, and everybody knows it. And whoever did the job used enough explosive to wreck a dozen safes like that. The papers and

books were charred. Do you reckon that money got charred some, too?"

"If you know or suspect anything, speak up!" the sheriff ordered.

Before Brick-top could continue, somebody thrust his head through the door.

"Some of Dardon's riders are comin' back!" he called.

Those at the table got quickly to their feet.

"Now, Brick-top Burke, you'll find out somethin'," Jake Crane said. "You can wing me and kill Sam, but you'll not get very far fightin' the bunch. When they learn that Sam's dead——"

"We won't be havin' any war here," Stiles said quietly. "If there is, I'm goin' to be in it."

"Yeah, and how long would you last?" Crane asked. "No trouble about it, either. Everybody'll say you got bumped off in the mess, and it couldn't be hung on anybody."

"You gents stay right here," Stiles commanded.

LANSARD and Brick-top thrust Jake Crane back against the wall. He was unarmed and harmless. Sheriff Milt Stiles went through the swing doors and stood just outside, his thumbs hooked into his belt.

About a dozen of the Circle D riders were coming slowly along the street toward the hitch rails. They seemed to be talking together. As they drew nearer, Stiles felt some apprehension. They were not talking loudly, or laughnig. The manner was grim, determined.

They eyed him as they dismounted—and they did not tie their horses in front of the saloon, but in front of the store, which looked very much as though they planned to protect their mounts from flying lead.

They grouped together and talked again, and they came along the plank walk in a body, their boot heels thumping the planks. The sheriff watched them calmly, but when they were about twenty feet away, he held up a hand.

"Better stop right there, boys, and talk it over," he suggested.

One of them stepped forward as spokesman.

"This Brick-top Burke, he shot up one or two of our men in the woods," he said. "He was at the ranch house, too, and got inside for somethin'. Now we've been hearin' that he caught Jake Crane, him and Lansard and Dick Parrow, and brought him into town."

"That's right," the sheriff admitted.

"We want him, Stiles."

"About a score of you jaspers take after one man, and he gets the best of you, so you come ridin' back here and askin' a law officer to turn him over to you, huh?"

"We got orders to get him."

"From whom?"

"From our boss, Dardon, as you blamed well know."

"Them orders—they're canceled," the sheriff announced. "Sam Dardon's dead."

"What?" the crowd roared.

"He pulled a gun and went after a gent, and the other gent got him, all fair and legal, in the presence of me and some other witnesses. Dardon's game is known. Them as has sense won't be sayin' or doin' much, 'less they find themselves in trouble."

"Who killed Dardon?" the spokesman demanded.

From inside the saloon came the roar of Jake Crane:

"Hey, boys! Brick-top killed him! Brick-top's in here! Come and get

him! He's——" Then Jake Crane's voice was choked off.

The men on the walk had heard, and they recognized Jake Crane's voice. They surged forward, and the sheriff calmly drew his gun.

"Wait, boys!" he ordered. "It was in fair fight. Dardon tried to get him, I've told you. I don't want any trouble with you, boys. You prob'ly will get me if it starts. But I'll go down fightin'."

"Turn your back, Stiles, and let us get at this Brick-top," the spokesman begged. "We don't want to hurt you. Who's he, that you should be hurt for him? He robbed that safe, didn't he? Fugitive, ain't he?"

"I ain't certain about that yet," the sheriff said. "I'm tellin' you to keep back. Better ride home, and send in a wagon for Dardon's body."

Then they rushed. The sheriff's gun spoke once before it was torn from his grasp, and one of the Circle D men reeled backward wounded. They tossed Milt Stiles aside and into the deep dust of the street, and crashed through the swing doors of Bill Marsh's place.

BRICK-TOP, Lansard, Parrow, and Jake Crane were behind the bar. The others in the place had fled through the rear door. The Circle D men scattered through the room, overturning tables to get behind them, crouching in front of the bar, starting to work toward the rear.

"Easy, gents!" Brick-top called from behind the bar. "Better listen a second."

"Do your talkin', Brick-top," one of them called, "but make it short. Then we'll speak our piece."

"If you're aimin' to do battle, you're right foolish," Brick-top said.

"Dardon's gone, and you wasn't ever anything more to him than hired men. Somebody will have to take over the Circle D and run it, 'cause it's a good property. He tried to get me, and I killed him to save myself. We've got Crane here, and as soon as you open up, we'll plug him."

"We don't care about Crane," somebody howled. "But we'll get you."

"I've tried to make you see sense, gents," Brick-top told them. "I reckon you won't. So you can start whenever you're ready. Better say your prayers."

Some gun spoke, and a bullet crashed into the bar. Other guns joined in a chorus. Bullets thudded into the bar its entire length, but did no harm to those behind it. Not a shot had come from the other side.

"Rush 'em and get 'em," somebody called.

Two men were crawling to the end of the bar with the intention of getting behind it and pouring a withering fire upon the men there. But now a gun did speak behind the bar, and one of the two fell back groaning, and the other retreated. Those behind the bar were watching that end.

No doubt they were watching the top, too, the Circle D men thought. They were firmly entrenched. It would be dangerous work finishing them. The Circle D men ceased their foolish shooting and looked at one another, wondering what to do. None wished to be the first to try to climb over the bar or run around the end of it.

But they were determined, and so they signaled one another and rushed. They charged upon the bar from every side, got upon it, started climbing over, guns held ready, firing even before they could see targets.

And there were no targets!

They dropped behind the bar, to find nobody there. The four were gone. Astounded, they looked at one another. Then one discovered the secret.

"Here—trapdoor," he shouted. "Goes to the cellar—stairway. Marsh keeps liquor down there. That's where they've gone."

Nobody cared to open that trapdoor and make a target of himself. They consulted again.

"They can't stay down there forever," somebody said. "We could burn 'em out, maybe. They'd come quick enough if we could get a fire started in the liquor supplies."

They grouped together in front of the bar to consider that.

"Hands up, everybody! Drop your guns!" It was the voice of Sheriff Milt Stiles at the front door.

"Make it quick, gents!" That was the voice of Brick-top Burke from the rear door.

In the front door were the sheriff and Dick Parrow, and they held hotguns they had requisitioned from Fletcher's store. In the rear door were Brick-top Burke and Lansard, and they held shotguns, also.

"Quick, or you'll be blasted!" the sheriff barked.

THERE is something about a menacing shotgun that brings terror to the heart of a man who will stand up to six-gun battle. And now the Circle D men saw the four shotguns come up, to be trained upon them. One man dropped his gun and sprang back away from the group, holding up his hands. The others promptly did the same. After all, they were fighting for the unjust cause of a man who was dead.

"Thanks, gents!" Sheriff Milt

Stiles said. "Walk this way, out into the street. You and Lansard follow 'em, Brick-top. Lucky you thought of gettin' out through the cellar in time to prevent a bloody battle, and lucky I thought of shot-guns."

They trooped out into the street and toward their horses, acting something like shamefaced boys. Bill Marsh went into his place of business to resume control thereof.

"Now that the boys are quieted down, and this here Blue Rock is a calm and peaceful village again, we can go back to that safe-robbin' business, sheriff," Brick-top said.

"What about it, if you know anything?"

"Like I said at first, that money was poker winnin's I've been savin'. I've had a trick, for years, of puttin' a funny little mark on bills I win at poker, and then watchin' to see if they ever come back to me after I let go of 'em, and puttin' on another mark an' seein' how they keep in circulation."

"Yeah?" The sheriff showed interest.

"If you found somebody with a lot of money, all marked like that, you'd have a right to think it was the money that came from the safe, wouldn't you, the money I used to pay for half the Heartbreak Ranch?"

"I sure and certain would," the sheriff said.

"Stay close to me, sheriff, and you'll maybe see somethin'," said Brick-top Burke. "Hello, what's this?"

"Oh, that's Fletcher leavin'. He sold his store to that man, and he's goin' to be driven to the county seat. Goin' to Denver to go into business."

"The store I was aimin' to buy," Brick-top said, grinning. "Maybe it's just as well. It paid me to follow my hunch. And it won't be

exactly cattle business, either. By the way, sheriff, look at this bill. See the little mark? That's the one I meant."

"I'll be rememberin' it, Brick-top."

"Let's say good-bye to Mr. Fletcher."

Fletcher had put a traveling bag into the rig, and was about to get in himself. Some of the men were shaking hands with him and wishing him luck. Brick-top gripped his hand.

"Got any idea who robbed your safe?" Brick-top asked.

"That's the sheriff's business now," Fletcher replied.

"Yeah, I reckon it is," Brick-top admitted. "I've had some ideas about that job. Too much powder used. Prob'ly a long fuse, too—long enough so you'd be in the saloon talkin' when the blast went off."

"What are you meanin'?" Fletcher demanded.

"You wasn't responsible for that money. And it'd be a nice stake to take away with you, and you knew you'd be leavin'. The currency would have been ruined by that blast, like the books and papers. Anybody else would have used a hammer and chisel. But you had to make it look good. I'll bet you've got that money in your grip right now."

"Why, you— Of course, I've got some money in my grip. Why not? I had some stowed away here at the store."

"Let's take a look at it," the sheriff suggested.

"All right!" Fletcher opened the bag. "Money is money. 'Cause I've got some, it don't mean I got it crooked. I'm getting out, so naturally I take my money with me."

The sheriff was investigating a

thick package of currency. Some of it undoubtedly belonged to Fletcher. But there were bills and bills which had on them Brick-top Burke's little good-luck gambling mark.

"You're not gettin' out till I get ready to take you to the county seat, Fletcher," Sheriff Milt Stiles said. "This here is marked money. It belongs to Sam Dardon's heirs, if he has any. It sure doesn't belong to you."

AND that evening, back at the Heartbreak Ranch once more, busy consuming food at the table, Brick-top Burke glanced up at Elsie Lansard, who

was at the stove, and gave her one of his characteristic grins.

"I always play my hunches," he said. "We're all goin' to be rich. This here time, though, I played a hunch which might turn out double. Whenever I play a hunch, I win, but generally I only win once. This time, I've got an idea I'm goin' to win twice on the same hunch. That'll be a record, I reckon."

"Win twice on the same hunch? What do you mean?" she asked.

"I won once on that oil business, didn't I? And I think the second winnin' ain't far off. But we'll go into that later."

She saw the look he gave her—and blushed.

MOTHER OF RIVERS

COLORADO is the mother of rivers. When planning to go there, says *Nature Magazine* of Washington, look at your map and you will see that from high mountains great streams radiate like the spokes of a wheel.

One system reaches the Mississippi through the Platte and the Arkansas, another courses southward through the Rio Grande to the Gulf, while a third flows westward through the Colorado to the Pacific.

These rivers have fixed the routes of land transportation, the areas of irrigated agriculture, and the location of cities and towns.

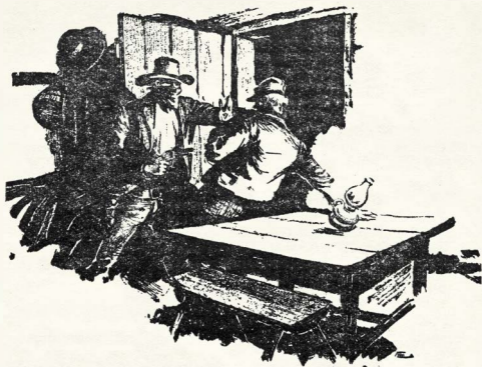
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GOLD BARRIER

By LESLIE GORDON BARNARD

Author of "More Precious," etc.

FOR a moment, as the canoe rounded a bend of the river, an eye of light that might have seemed a beacon for ships had it not been where it was, and placed high up in the precipitous hillside, welcomed the two men who paddled bow and stern through mist and darkness and a gusty rain. Like a lighthouse it gave out intermittent flashes, and though it was faint and at a distance its gleam seemed to bewilder the leathery old-timer whose strong wrists and sure instincts had guided the craft safely through difficult waters thus far.

"Easy," shouted Sonter, the younger man, who paddled bow. "Whirlpools ahead."

The fury of dangerously narrowed waters caught them, spun them, but the old experienced wrists fought and won. The canoe drifted into safe shallows and touched the comfortable security of a beach of sand.

"We'll make camp," said the old prospector curtly. "It's the very devil of a night."

Sonter confirmed the idea with a oath.

"Who was it wanted to push on?" he demanded, gracelessly enough for one in another's debt.

The old man had no reply. He seemed quite capable of understanding Sonter's bitterness of spirit. Sonter had come out of the barren lands, heading south, with a hungry look in his eyes. There is a hunger for food which will make men do strange and merciless things, in extremity, but Sonter's was something more than physical hunger, though the grub-stake he had won by trickery at cards was long since gone, and he had to subsist as best he might. Thanks to the humanity of prospectors and trappers with whom he fell in, his stomach was filled now and again. But those other pangs were only intensified by men whose talk turned readily to gold. Sonter had come North to find the precious metal; he was going back bitter and defeated.

WIND and rain still beating upon them, the two men got ashore, finding a ledge of rock with sheltering escarpments on either side. Quickly a tent was pitched, dry resinous sticks were secured from a tangle of scrub timber, and firelight leaped up to reward them.

The elder man methodically set about getting food, and the succulence of beans and bacon and flapjacks brought some relaxation to Sonter's face. It was a queer, hard face, the lips too thin, the nose pinched, the brow neutral, the eyes evasive. He made no attempt to help with the meal, but the old prospector again offered no complaint, seeming glad enough of companionship on any terms. Six days now they had navigated and portaged; six days since—lodged together in the prospector's shack many miles north—the desire of Sonter to get back south had stirred something in the old fellow, too. Suddenly he had

made the decision, and they had both come.

Sheltered by the tent and warmed by the fire, Sonter ate greedily, then lay back on blankets spread above a waterproof mat, upon which the old man insisted.

"Rheumatism, son," he said. "It's an enemy to watch. Maybe if I'd been a mite careful when I was your age——"

Sonter laughed.

"If I ever grow as old as you, I'll sure hope to be as flexible. You're good for lots of doings yet, old-timer!"

The other's face muscles moved; the weathered skin was drawn high over cheek bones that emphasized the great caverns of his eyes. A drooping white mustache only half concealed the line of his generous mouth.

"Good for lots," he said, "but suppose the heart's gone out of you?" He leaned forward, gazing at Sonter strangely. "You've got the look," he said at last. "It's like drink to some men. You've got it—and was I you, I'd sure aim to watch it. Gold! The lust for gold." His fingers twitched a little. "Not just to have it, but to find it—to wrest it for yourself out of the earth." His voice became more somber. "It's a thing a man's sort of got to watch himself about. It can play hob with lives, and friendships, and the souls of men!"

When his voice ceased, a muffled echo of it seemed to be held in the rocks, then that, too, died, and the sound of wind and rain, though it could scarcely reach them here, became omnipresent. Sonter, speaking not at all, lay full length on his improvised couch, elbow crooked to support his head so that, broodingly, he could watch the old man and

hear what gold could do in the inmost soul.

The prospector was the least loquacious of men but now he seemed to want to talk. And Sonter, tranquilized by a full stomach and warmth, made a good listener.

"Seeing that light up yonder," said the old-timer, "that one that flashed on and off like as we come around the bend, got me thinking back a deal. All this district hereabouts I used to know purty well. Hain't heard the story of old Joe Weston and his light, have you?"

"No," said Sonter.

"Well, it can be told purty quick, for all that there's two destinies, as you might say, tied up in the bundle—his and another's."

Deep in the leathery caverns under his bushy brows, his eyes smoldered.

"Joe Weston had a pardner," he said. "You've like heard tell of David and Jonathan? Well, that's how those two young chaps was. They were young then when they first met, fightin' their way North when the Klondike rush was on in '98 or thereabouts. They fell in together, goin' share and share alike, whether it was thumbs up or thumbs down for them; and it didn't matter much how it was so long as they had each other and grub didn't come too almighty infrequent. They didn't get much pickings at that—but they were all-fired happy, and Eldorado, as you might say, was always just around the corner of to-morrow."

THE old man paused to shift his feet farther from a promising puddle, and to charge an ancient pipe, which, once lighted, was quickly forgotten.

"Queer when you look at it," he resumed, "but for years those two kept adventurin' on, always believin'

some day they'd make a lucky strike. Time and again they'd come back defeated, swearin' off gold for the rest of their natural lives, and next month they'd hear of a strike somewhere, and they'd be off again, with the sun in their eyes and wind on their cheeks and the lure of the quest burnin' in them. But the years went by, and they got to be not much more than a coupla tattered old scarecrows. Times they'd get cranky with each other but deep down they loved with a love passing the love of women."

Sonter shifted on his elbow, and broke in gruffly:

"But the light up there, and the gold. What's all this got to do—"

"The gold? Yes! It was old Joe Weston found the gold at last. Struck it rich, he did. But he was alone then. Can you beat that for a queer break? The one time Joe Weston had to go it alone because this pardner of his was laid up, he stumbles on what both had always talked of and dreamt about. Heaven knows in what unlikely, forsaken valley he found it, but there it was and there it is. Free gold. Nuggets you wouldn't believe, washed out of the bed of a lost river. He came back to tell his pardner.

"Son," said the old prospector, sitting up and leaning forward, "you got to get this right. You see, Joe's pardner was laid up with a sort of rheumatic fever, and flat on his back convalescing when Joe comes back with the news. Do you wonder that everything inside him went sour? To be flat on his back when the big find was made! So what did he do, with Joe Weston leanin' eager-eyed over the bed offering him fifty-fifty? Why, he looked up, Joe Weston's pardner did, and cussed him to all get out. Then he lay back gaspin', watchin' the light die out of Joe

Weston's face—and something hard as steel came there instead." The old man sucked a dead pipe. "Gold did that," he said. "Gold came between them—then they hated."

Silence fell between the two men.

"But the light?" said Sonter at last.

"Impatient, ain't you? Won't let an old feller reminisce his own way? Well, I'll make an end. Joe Weston, after he'd seen how it was, he went back to his cabin swearin' he'd never have his pardner darken the door again. But Joe, he weren't one to hold a grudge. It wa'n't his nature. So what does he do but trek back to the hospital a fortnight later all set to make peace, only to find his old pardner was up and gone, nobody knew where.

"Joe, he tried everywhere to find the feller, but it wa'n't no use. He'd clear vanished. It preyed on Joe's mind, I guess. It got so he'd tell about it to every stranger happen' through these parts, hopin' maybe they'd run across the man. Joe'd say to 'em: 'If you meet up with him, you tell him—see? You tell him Joe Weston's still waitin' for him to go in after that gold. You tell him Joe Weston's got a beacon fixed and burnin' for him up at the old cabin, and so long as that burns, it'll mean there's both a welcome and the gold waiting.'"

He broke off and set a fresh match to his pipe.

"I hain't seen the light before," he admitted, "but I heard about it, even 'way up North. They say it's a sort of obsession like with Joe Weston. Sunset he lights it and keeps it goin' till sunrise. They say it ain't been out for goin' on ten years."

Sonter sat up and stared at the narrator.

"You mean," he demanded, "that this guy ain't done nothing about

that gold? That he's just passed it up waiting for his old pal?"

"That's the size of it."

"Well, can you beat that!" breathed Sonter with something like awe. He lay back, considering the thing, until presently he fell asleep, his snores tearing the silence, and, haunting his dreams, the vision of gold.

THE morning broke in blue and white and golden splendor. The mists had rolled from the hills; the rain-washed valley was vivid and inviting, gulls wheeled in plaintive but poetic motion to tell that the sea was not so many miles away. At breakfast Sonter broached an idea:

"How about stoppin' over a day or two?"

The old-timer looked at him.

"Two minds with but a single thought," he said, with a doubtful grin.

"There are stores?"

"One or two. Quite a settlement hereabouts. It's all right, son; you go buy yourself something and pretend you're back in civilization. I'm old enough to know what it feels like to get back to some of the gadgets a man's been used to. If you climb up this rock a piece, and hit to the left, you'll find a trail'll take you there. I'll expect you when I see you."

As soon as breakfast was over, Sonter went. Mounting the rock, he found the trail, pausing only long enough to note where high up on the hillside, and perhaps a mile away, old Joe Weston's cabin stood boldly out, whitewashed and neat, in the brilliant morning light. Then he went on down a farther declivity to where, in a valley, lay the little town. It was larger than he had imagined; a smelter, a canning industry, and

a sawmill bore testimony by their activity to the fact that business was improving. In ten minutes he was abreast of the mill, the smell of fresh lumber and the whine of saws on wood coming to him. He passed it with small interest, but the smelter made his feet tarry on their way; in a window of the small office, guarded by iron bars, was an exhibit of raw ore, of gold dust, of ingots of the precious metal. Sonter stood outside gazing at these, a covetous look in his eyes, then moved off when some workmen came out the gateway.

The one street of the town was wooden-built and excessively ugly, but here were stores in which merchandise to attract the eye was displayed; even jewelry which men with small need for it, but with money burning in their pockets, bought in a crazy orgy of spending. The sight of other cheap but lurid attractions did not ease Sonter's inner excitement. Had he been lucky up North, he, too, might be among those who spent their money freely, madly, in places like these. Right next to the gambling house a second-hand shop flourished. Remembering the ring on his finger—relic of a day long gone—he went in and flung it down on the plain pine counter.

"How much for that?"

The proprietor, a lean-jawed, shrewd-eyed, impassive man, looked it over.

"Five bucks!"

Sonter cursed. He picked the ring up and started out.

"I'll make it seven," announced the man languidly. "Not a nickel more. Take it or go jump in the river."

Sonter took it. The money in his pocket, he went next door. There were card games. They might be run by sharpers, but Sonter had his

own ways. He could deceive the devil's elect. He won—not too steadily, lest he awaken suspicions. Finally he rose, pocketing his gains. He was in funds again. He felt reckless and ready to spend.

"The drinks are on me, boys!" he said.

They crowded round him, voting him a good fellow. A man, coming in the doorway, stood watching the scene. He was a short, wiry, wizened old man, attired in ancient trousers, thrust into long boots that seemed too large for him, a gaudy but faded wind-breaker, and a peaked cap with ear flaps.

"Round up the old-timer," said Sonter. "Tell him to join us."

But the word was unnecessary. The old fellow was coming forward. "You-all are a stranger hereabouts?" quavered the old man. "Well, I'd like for to get word with you."

Somebody, grinning, made the introduction.

"Meet the one guy in the world who knows where a fortune lies in gold, and won't do nothin' about it."

Sonter shook hands. The hand in his big palm was curiously thin and transparent, though weathered and gnarled with many hard years. He sat down readily to listen again to the story of Joe Weston, from the lips of Joe Weston himself. Substantially his tale was what Sonter had already heard.

"It's good of you to hearken," quavered Joe Weston. "And if you should anywheres run across a chap like that, you'll pass the word to him? Nigh on ten years of nights I've kept that beacon burnin' for him."

"Sure!" Sonter nodded. "Sure!"

He stared after the retreating figure of Joe Weston, then turned to ask a bystander:

"Is it straight goods—about the gold?"

"When it comes to gold, buddy," the man answered, "that old coot knows *p* from *q*. Half the population hereabouts have tried to buy or worm his secret out of him, but it's no go."

Sonter stood up and ordered drinks all around again. For a time a sense of well-being elated him, but by and by this died. When he became morose, the crowd drifted clear, leaving him alone in a corner, brooding.

A SLICE of moon lighted Sonter's way that night. It could not compete with the alluring lights of the main street, grown still more garish with the coming of dusk. But as the lights of the little settlement dropped away, the quiet moonlight fell peacefully over the hills, and hung above the tidal river in mystic benediction.

So it had lighted the way of many men: prospectors, trappers, lumbermen, merchants, Indians—and under it men had thought great thoughts and base ones; had gone about high concerns or affairs acquisitive, selfish. The very land seemed old and wise, but so quiet and patient that it held, for Sonter, no intimations. If it offered him anything, it was only a sense of security. He thought of two old men—friends of youth—separated by a quarrel over gold, and separated still from that rich conquest which a lost river held for any one who could find the way. Poor fools! And especially Joe Weston who held back, waiting for the man who never came. Free gold! Gold to be washed easily, virgin and rich, from a stream that ran—where?

Sonter's pulses quickened, and with it his pace. And now ahead he

could see his goal. All this time he had been climbing, so that the river became a silver serpent below, winding out of the Northern hills whence, defeated in his quest and bitter, he himself had come; winding out to a plain that would lead it at last to the sea. The night was crisp and cool enough, but sweat stood out on him. He paused a moment, stood listening; felt himself alone and ready—and went on toward where the curious beacon operated just ahead of him.

When he was near enough, he saw it was a homemade sort of lantern, crudely shaped; with the clever use of reflectors it became a much greater instrument of light than its source—a round coal-oil wick—seemed to warrant. This light was set on a swivel on a post, and some clockwork arrangement kept it moving, like a toy lighthouse, its revolving beam stretching out over the immediate darkness, its eye winking through the watches of the night.

The old fool must be quite mad! Though, Sonter admitted, he had seemed a sane, mild, pathetic sort of old man as he sat, smoking his pipe and talking.

A sound from the cabin set Sonter on the alert now. A single light moved within, then steadied; the door opened, and old Joe Weston stepped out into the faint moonlight. Sonter subsided to the ground, crouching low in the tall silky grass that hid him. Weston, moving over, examined the light, then took out a big key and wound up the clockwork. For a long time he stood in the silent night, looking into the north. The light fell in intermittent flashes on him; Sonter saw the peaked cap come off, the lips move in some unheard invocation. Then Joe Weston lighted his pipe, having replaced his old peaked cap, and

strolled along a short distance from the cabin, lost in the gloom.

Instantly, and as silently as a cat, Sonter took advantage. In twenty seconds he was inside the door, dark handkerchief masking his features, gun in hand—a figure of grim determination and evil purpose, waiting, biding its time behind the half-opened door.

A SMOKY oil lamp—the only light within—gave to the small and cluttered interior deep shadows in which a man might lurk. The door being ajar, faint pervasive moonlight hung in the entrance. Sonter tensed as footsteps sounded, and the knocking of a pipe against the outer wall. A moment later old Joe Weston came in, his figure substantial and ghostly in the moonlight.

“Stick ‘em up!” said Sonter. “Make a sound and you’re done for!”

Weston’s arms gave no response. Defiantly he stood, arms folded, facing toward the gloom whence the menacing voice had come.

“You’ve got the wrong party, son,” he said in an oddly calm voice. “I’ve got nothing worth taking—no goods and only the fag end of a life. Suppose you tell me what’s on your mind.”

Sonter was shaken. A man unafraid to die was something unfathomable. He heard a chuckle.

“Can’t understand it, mebber—heh? Well, son, you forget a man like me’s looked Death in the face so often it’s kind of familiar and friendly. There’s—there’s things I’d like to have done before I went, but if you’ve a mind to shoot an old man and take his last years from him, it’s your choice—and you’ve the most to lose.” His voice was startlingly calm. “What you aimin’ to get off of me? I’ve got no worldly goods.”

Sonter’s voice came in a harsh, uncertain croaking:

“You know where there’s gold. You’ve got a map of it hid somewhere? Well, come across!”

A new and potent silence filled the little cabin. Dimly Sonter could see old Weston’s face grow stern. Then the answer came with swift passion.

“I’d see us both dead first.”

“You’re like to be,” shrilled Sonter savagely.

He lurched forward and caught the old man’s throat. It sent the frail body hurtling backward against the table. Just in time Sonter sprang to save a toppling lamp, but the globe burned his hands, and broke, the lamp turned over and fell to the floor. Sonter’s heavy foot kicked at the rolling glass, and sent it spinning out the door to die smothered in the dirt, the glass shattering to pieces against a rock. Breathily heavily, Sonter controlled himself. Then he heard low groans from the floor and bent down, seizing the crumpled form of the half-conscious victim. Sonter managed in the near darkness to get the old fellow to his bunk, and revived him a little, then stood over him malevolently.

“Where’s that map?” he demanded.

“Nowhere you’ll find it!”

Sonter cursed again.

“Well, where’s another light? That lamp—”

“Ain’t but the one lamp in the place.”

Sonter’s blasphemous vocabulary increased. “We’ll see about that,” he said suddenly.

He started toward the door. As if divining his purpose, the old man cried out, for the first time with a note of pleading:

“No, no—not that!”

But Sonter was busy already at

the post, striving to remove from it the light that was a perpetual beacon for an old and severed friendship. Joe Weston dragged himself slowly from the bunk. Warm blood was running from a cut in his head; he put a hand up as if feeling, with dull surprise, the warm red flow that stained it. But that didn't matter; he must achieve the door. He must stop the vandalism going forward out there.

He reached the door, but breath almost deserted him. Sonter was wrenching at the light. Joe Weston covered the few yards and caught hold of the intruder's arm, in a fierce, clawlike grip.

"Not that," he appealed. "That there light hain't been out of commission for goin' on ten years. Ten years, every night, all weathers. Suppose Jim come by this one night and it wasn't goin'. Please, mister—"

The old voice held a sobbing note. Sonter grinned harshly. The old fellow was in his dotage all right. He lifted an arm and pushed the man away. Weston fell back. He stood against the wall of the cabin, holding hard to the door jamb, incapable—watching the thing happen. Sonter with a triumphant final jerk wrenched the lamp free. He heard a little cry, and focusing the strong light on the doorway, saw just within it old Joe Weston stretched out on the floor. He stepped over the body hastily; a feverish desire to be done and get away was upon him. The cabin was small; he had a hunch he'd find the thing soon enough.

"The map!" he kept telling himself hoarsely. "The map to the lost river." Vainly he searched, tumbling all the small possessions about, savagely rending and pulling and ripping, then—by luck, it seemed—there it was! A loose board in the

floor gave under his foot, and in a moment the secret was his.

Inarticulate, triumphant joy was Sonter's. There, made by a hand less shaky than it would be now, was the map, the directions. It would take a bit of deciphering, but he'd get it all right. Sonter, burning, consumed with elated desire, sat down at the table, turning the powerful light until its focus became tremendously brilliant on the fading paper. With his fingers he began tracing the route a man intent on gold must take. The utter silence of the night enfolded him. Only once, he glanced at the old man's body lying there on the floor. Sonter's eyes, red-rimmed, cruel, looked upon the spectacle with incredible detachment. He had no time for an old man, dead, dying, or unconscious—no time, when the way to a golden fortune, the lure of a lost river full of precious metal, awaited him.

IMMERSED, lost in his reading of the map, Sonter still sat while a clock ticked out the minutes. Then slowly there came to him a queer feeling of being watched. He glanced at the two small windows, but they seemed innocent; sent a quick uneasy glance at the door, but neither sight nor sound rewarded him. The nape of his neck twitched; his spine crawled. Superstitious terror ran in him. Suppose—suppose the old man was dead, or just passing out—and powers and forces of the unknown borderland were present! Up North he had heard strange tales, and half believed them; myths, some of them, from Indian lore.

He sprang up and knelt at last beside old Joe Weston, shaking him by the shoulders, looking at the blood congealing on his head.

The old man groaned.

Sonter almost shouted his relief.

"So you're not dead, you old coot! Well, I'd shed no tears——"

He broke off. Something stealthy was moving in the night—just outside the door. Could approaching Death be heard? He lifted frightened eyes to the dark oblong.

"Who's there?" he demanded in sibilant horror.

But it was no supernatural voice that spoke.

"Just some friends of old Joe Weston," said a hard and very material voice. "Just some friends of hisn who dropped round to see why in tarnation his light wasn't workin'. Suppose you stick 'em up, buddy. Quick—now."

Panic-stricken, Sonter took the only chance left him, plunging behind the table, and reaching for his gun. A bullet plowed the wood beside him, but missed. He raised his gun, trying to penetrate the gloom to his antagonist, then crouched back at the sound of splintering glass.

"Stick 'em high," said two other voices.

Sonter this time obeyed. Faces appeared at both the broken panes; men crowded in the doorway to seize the intruder, and minister to the old man.

"Better keep still if you don't want to be skinned alive," said one of the men holding Sonter. "I reckon the countryside for miles around is here or headin' this way for to see why old Joe's light wasn't on the job to-night!"

OLD Joe Weston, laid on his bunk, was being dealt with by men as concerned and tender as women, his wiry old self responding to treatment.

"Help me up a bit," he said. "I'll be all right now, boys. Good of you-all to come. But could you maybe

fix up that light again? Suppose it just happened Jim was to come to-night——" He broke off, staring at the doorway. His hand went over his yes. "Guess I'm plumb locoed still," he said. "Guess I'm seein' things——" His voice trailed off, his eyes grew more eager. "Jim," he cried; "Jim, it ain't you! It can't be you!"

Sonter, eyes bulging, saw the old-timer, companion of his trip out of the North, pushing his way forward, embracing Joe Weston.

"Forgive me, Joe," he said, "for bein' a dumb, ornery old fool. I might have gone on even now—just cussed stubbornness—only for seein' your light go out, and wondering was anything wrong." He breathed hard. "I got here soon's I could, Joe—only the drated slope got my breath. Not so young as I used to be."

He looked around at the group of men standing silent, shuffling their feet as men may do when embarrassed by some emotion to be discounted in a masculine world. "What happened anyway? Who's that? Why——" He ran across the little cabin and tore the handkerchief from Sonter's face. "So it's you," he said, "you that I told the story to—you——"

His hands lifted as if to strike down Sonter, and behind him a growl of approval and a menacing movement struck terror to Sonter's heart. Then some one spoke a quieting word:

"Easy, boys. Here's the sheriff now."

A quavering eager voice came from the bunk:

"I'll trouble you gents to keep off that map you're steppin' on. Me and Jim'll be wantin' that soon's we can get turned around and ready to hit the trail again."



LOST MUSTANG

By GUTHRIE BROWN

Author of "E Flat," etc.

THE nineteen horses and the two riders who were driving them topped the last rise above the narrow green valley of Blue Creek, and Pitt Buell grunted with relief.

"Maybe you think," he remarked, as his eyes picked out a group of ranch buildings below, dim through a sheet of rain, "that I'm not glad to see the last of this job."

"Two of us," agreed Riley Karnes emphatically, tilting his hat to let the water run off. "The trip has been a jinx from the beginning. And why Bill ever took it into his head to send this bunch of brones up

here to the Cartwright ranch to pasture, is beyond me."

"Bill Ainsley," said Pitt, referring to their boss, "always has a good reason for doing a thing, though he may not always state it. He did tell me that George Cartwright had offered him pasture cheap."

"Pasture for twenty-one head," said Riley, looking sidewise at his companion.

Pitt acknowledged with a wry smile, "I know I'll have to pay for the horse I lost."

"The horse?" repeated Riley. "There was two of 'em, Pitt."

"That little rat-tailed sorrel mustang? She's fifteen years old, if

she's a day. She's worth about five bucks, Mex. I guess Bill won't waste any grief over her. But the other bronc was a four-year-old. Gosh, I didn't mean to be careless! But it was storming so hard that day that we couldn't see fifty feet ahead of us. It's a wonder we didn't lose half of them."

An hour later the cowboys rode into the corrals of the Cartwright ranch, and a thin, wiry, nasal-voiced old man came out to meet them.

"Well," he observed irascibly, "I see you got here at last. You been long enough. Started last Thursday, didn't you? Where you been all this time?"

Pitt felt his blood pressure rise. "We been comin' all this time. What's it to you if we took the rest of the summer?" He got out of his saddle and removed his slicker. The sun was beginning to struggle through the clouds.

CARTWRIGHT had not answered. He climbed up on the corral fence and threw a spindly leg over the top pole. Pitt was pulling the saddle from his horse's back, when a sharp exclamation from the old man caused him to look around. Cartwright's tone was high and excited.

"Where's that mare?"

"What mare?" asked Pitt, honestly puzzled for a moment.

"That little sorrel mare!" shrilled Cartwright, growing more excited with each word. "Bill Ainsley sent her along with these horses of his. She was branded U 1 on her right shoulder. Where is she?" he demanded with mounting anger. He fairly tumbled off the fence and strode up to Pitt.

The two cowboys looked blankly at each other, then Pitt said:

"What the Sam Hill? That little

dried-up crowbait? Why, she's old enough to vote! She——"

"She's not!" cried the rancher. "She's only twelve years old, and she's the best—— Where is she? I order you to tell me at once what you've done with her!"

To Pitt, the old man's passion seemed out of all proportion to the cause of it.

"For the love o' mud!" he protested. "Such a blather over an old skate like that! If you're so set on her, I'll pay you for her. She isn't worth a fiver, but I'll give you twenty."

"Tw-twenty!" Cartwright fairly stuttered. "Tw-tw-twenty! Young man, if you know what's healthy for you, you tell me at once what you've done with that mare!"

"Done with her!" cried the exasperated Pitt. "We lost her, along with another horse. It was raining pitchforks that day, and——"

"Lost her!" exclaimed the old man, and his expression of blank dismay gave Pitt his first twinge of uneasiness. "Lost her!" repeated Cartwright in a stunned tone. Then his manner changed abruptly.

He said in an ominous tone: "Go to the bunk house and get dried out. Then come up to the house. You'll find me in the living room."

"Can you tie that?" Pitt wearily demanded of Riley as they dried out by the bunk-house stove. "After three of the worst days and nights we ever put in, this old jasper jumps down our throats because of a—— Oh, it don't make sense! There's forty broomtails running wild, within shooting distance of this ranch, better than that old plug!"

"He sure went up in the air," sympathized Riley. "How d'you s'pose Bill come to have that horse of Cartwright's in the first place?"

"How should I know?" asked the

disgusted Pitt. "Come on. Let's go see what the old pepper pot has to offer next."

The rancher received them in portentous silence. Finally he ordered them, he did not ask them, to sit down. Again a twinge of uneasiness ran through Pitt, though he could not tell why.

"You two," Cartwright began grimly, his eyes narrowed under bushy brows, "were intrusted with valuable property. You have failed grossly in that trust."

"See here!" Pitt broke in angrily. "There's no call for you to talk like that. I did lose the horses, but I offered to pay you for yours. And you can leave Riley out of this. I was responsible for the drive. Bill told me to get the horses over here and take along anybody I wanted for help. So I took Riley."

"So you took Riley!" mimicked old Cartwright. His eyes grew colder. "I'll tell you what I think, young man. I think that you and this Riley are in cahoots, and that you have another accomplice somewhere. I think you stole that mare from me!"

TO this preposterous charge the cowboys could, for the moment, respond with nothing but amazement. Then Pitt's short temper flared. He started to his feet.

"Why, you old——"

"Shut up and sit down!" barked the rancher, and Pitt found himself looking into the nose of a shiny revolver.

The cowboy sank back into his seat, now convinced that they were in the hands of a crazy man. Riley protested:

"Look here, Mr. Cartwright. You surely aren't making such a fuss over an old bag of bones——"

"Bag of bones, is it?" yelled Cartwright, waving the pistol wildly, to the acute discomfort of his audience. "You know better'n that! You know you do! That little mustang is the best brood mare in this part of the State! I paid five hundred dollars for her!"

The two cowboys looked at each other. There was no doubt of the sincerity of the statement. Moreover, both of them began to remember things, small items that they hadn't thought about before—the short back of the skinny little sorrel, the long, low pastern, the pointed ear and wide-set, intelligent eyes.

Cartwright was going on. "There was others that wanted her, and I was afraid she'd be stolen before I could get her home. So I asked Bill Ainsley to send her over with a bunch of horses, that I promised to pasture for him cheap, to pay for getting her here." The old man's words were tumbling out of him any way. "And he sends a pair of crooks to swipe her for him!"

Pitt came out of the chair this time, regardless of the pistol.

"Take that back, blast you! Maybe I was careless and lost your horse, but Bill isn't responsible for it. Keep your lying old tongue off his name! And now I'll go and find your pesky mare——"

Cartwright, somewhat taken aback at the outburst, recovered himself.

"You'll do nothing of the kind! I'm sure you're guilty, now, with all this noble defense of other people." His tone dripped sarcasm, then became deadly cold. "I said for you to sit down."

Pitt was walking toward the door, and Riley pleaded:

"Pitt, the old coot will plug you. Sit down and let's see if we can't talk some sense into him."

Pitt looked at the steady gun and gleaming eyes. Even his hot blood cooled a little at the very apparent danger.

"And now," said the rancher, getting up and backing to the wall telephone as he kept the two covered, "you'll sit mighty quiet while I call the sheriff."

Pitt grunted. "That's a good idea. Be a help to talk to somebody with a few brains in his head."

But it wasn't. Sheriff Orr was a comfortable, middle-aged member of the usual county-courthouse crowd, and he wanted to hold his job. George Cartwright carried considerably more weight in local politics than any pair of obscure cowboys.

"But for the love o' mud!" Pitt implored. "Will you listen to sense once? If that mare was stolen"—the cowboy was rapidly arriving at the unhappy conviction that that was just what had happened—"the thief will be clear out of the country before anybody gets on track of him. Let me go hunt that horse! Can't you see I wouldn't be fool enough to quit the country, with a charge like this hanging over me?"

Sheriff Orr replied unperturbedly: "That's just what you would do, what any man'd do, that knew which side his bread was buttered on."

Pitt looked at him in despair and admitted glumly:

"You're the kind that would see it that way, all right."

"What do you mean by that?" bristled the sheriff.

"Just what I said, wise guy."

Pitt looked at the clock. Ten thirty, and another rainy night. And to-morrow he would be taken down to the county seat. He looked at Riley, slumbering peacefully on the living-room couch. There

seemed nothing else to do, so he stretched out on the floor before the fireplace and slept for two hours, his eyes closing on sight of the sheriff, sitting bolt upright with a pistol on his knee.

WHEN the cowboy wakened, the rain was coming down heavily, and Riley's snores were as regular as the tick of the clock. Pitt turned his head to look at the sheriff. He stiffened. The minion of the law was fast asleep, sprawled in his chair, his gun still held in his relaxed hand.

Resolve hatched in Pitt's brain, full-fledged. He lay quiet until his heart resumed its normal beat. He had never heard the word, "psychic," but he knew that excitement was contagious, that it might even waken a man. When he acted, he was as cold as the muzzle of the sheriff's gun.

He covered twenty miles before dawn, and was once more in the canyon where he and Riley had first noticed the disappearance of the horses. With grim humor, Pitt remembered the story of the old prospector who lost his pack burros in a sand storm one night. The next morning, after a two-hour search in the desert, he came into camp with them. When asked how he did it, he responded placidly: "Well, I just figured where I'd go, if I was a burro; and I went there, and there they was."

Pitt figured what he'd do if he were a horse thief. He wouldn't go up the canyon, because that was the direction of the herd from which he'd just stolen. He wouldn't go downstream, because a ranch lay at the mouth of the canyon. He wouldn't climb out on the west side, because from the rim stretched eight or ten miles of treeless mesa. He

would turn east, into the broken, timbered terrain of the roughest part of the county.

So, by a slow process of elimination, and two or three freshly-broken tree branches, and a recent camp site, he followed for two days and came upon a cabin and a corral cleverly hidden in a grove of aspen. He made his discovery in the morning, stalked the place with the stealth of an Indian, glimpsed the sorrel mare through the trees, and went back to sleep near his grazing horse till night. The little grub that he had been able to secure at the Cartwright place was gone. He devoutly hoped that that cabin was well stocked with food, though he didn't know yet how he was to get it. Some one was there, for he had heard a door close. He had no gun, not having dared to try to take the one from the sleeping sheriff.

At dusk, he saw smoke rising from the cabin stovepipe. He waited until it was completely dark. Then, rope in hand, he found the corral gate, went through silently, and closed it behind him. He would make sure of the horse first. There were two other animals in the corral, and Pitt was disappointed to discover that neither was the second horse he had lost. Well, he'd just have to pay for that one.

When he walked up to the sorrel mare, she did not move. She stood with drooping head in one corner of the corral. She shrank when Pitt touched her, but let him slip the hackamore on without protest. When the cowboy started to lead her out, she stumbled a step and stopped. She was dead lame!

Pitt looked closely at her and could make out that her right shoulder was badly swollen. He risked a match. The blank rear wall of the cabin was toward him, and he

cupped the flame carefully in his hand. He looked, and cursed earnestly under his breath.

A clumsy attempt had been made to blot her brand, to change the U 1 to a Box E. The raw flesh had become infected, and the cold rain had not helped the matter. Proud flesh was already forming in the wound.

PITT was so angry that he promptly made for the cabin.

At the single window of the shack, he could see that there was only one man inside, busily engaged with supper. So far as Pitt could see, the fellow didn't have a gun, but there was no certainty of that. It was scarcely credible that a horse thief wasn't carrying a weapon.

The cowboy tossed a rock at the door and stepped quickly out of range. There was the sound of a wild scramble inside, and the light blinked out. He tossed another rock, and another, before a hoarse voice demanded:

"Who is it?"

Pitt did not answer, but kept up his rock throwing. Maybe he hadn't sized this fellow up right, in the glimpse he'd had of his face; but if the man wasn't both stupid and cowardly, the cowboy was badly mistaken. After ten minutes of the bombardment, the demand to know who it was became slightly hysterical.

Finally Pitt called: "If you wanta get outta this with a whole skin, throw your gun out the door. Then light your lamp and stand in the middle of the cabin, with your hands up. Up good and high, brother!"

"The devil I will!" was the vigorous answer, but Pitt caught the note of anxiety in the voice.

"Suit yourself," he answered with

an assurance that he by no means felt. "Try coming out that door, or wait till daylight. I don't give a whoop which. But you won't get hurt, if you obey orders *now*."

There was a long silence before the doorknob slowly turned. Pitt was pressed close to the wall, ready to leap upon the thief, if he should try coming out. But the gun came out instead, and the door slammed quickly shut. There was a pause before the hoarse voice demanded:

"How do I know you won't shoot me down?"

Pitt answered calmly, "That's a risk that a horse thief has to take." He had ascertained that the gun was loaded. "And if you have another gun on you, buddy, it'll be just too bad!"

"I ain't got one; honest, I aint!"

"You're safe, then. Light the lamp and reach for the ceiling."

With an eye at the corner of the window, Pitt saw that the order had been carried out in full. He stepped quickly to the door, opened it part way, and looked through the crack at the hinge. The man stood rigid.

Pitt stepped inside, gun ready. The jaw of the thief dropped.

"Why—why, you're one o' them guys that was drivin' the horses!"

Pitt nodded. "You'd never guess how much else I am, fella." He searched him carefully and then commanded, "Now, fix me some supper."

The order was sullenly obeyed, and soon Pitt was filling the cavern which he had begun to feel occupied his entire body. The thief stood against the wall, his hands in plain sight, and asked:

"How the devil did you find me?"

"Easy," lied Pitt, scooping up the last of the corned beef. "Now,

what's your— No. What name will I call you by?"

"Call me Lafe," was the sullen answer.

"Well, Lafe, you *should* be shot, for crippling that sorrel the way you've done."

"I didn't go fer to do it," Lafe defended himself.

"I s'pose not," Pitt agreed, "but what business you got, trying to blot a brand, when you're such a bum hand at it?"

The answer was a snarl. "I told him that I wasn't no good at that! But he said I had to do it, and keep the horse here till it healed up."

"Oh!" remarked Pitt. "And who is *he*?"

"None o' yer business!"

"Don't get funny with me," the cowboy advised. "You're working for somebody that don't like Cartwright, maybe? And also, maybe, somebody that wanted that sorrel pretty bad."

Lafe's expression told the cowboy that he had guessed close to the truth.

"And where do you come in?"

Pitt asked, watching him keenly. "You're no professional horse thief. You're too unhandy with an iron."

The casualness of Pitt's manner and a growing conviction of safety loosened Lafe's tongue.

"That old devil of a Cartwright fired me, year or so ago. He didn't have no reason to, either. I swore I'd get even with him, and when this—this was put up to me, I said I'd do it."

"For a consideration, no doubt," Pitt added. "Well, Lafe, I guess you've got your revenge on Cartwright. I'm afraid the sorrel's done for. Your best bet is to high-tail it for the timber before her owner— α , your boss—finds out what you've done."

This suggestion met with Lafe's complete approval. A little later Pitt saw the night swallow him.

Now, the cowboy turned to consideration of the crippled horse. He had nothing in the way of an anti-septic, or even grease to protect the wound from flies. He used the only remedy he could think of, the remedy that animals use when they are free to do so. He kept the wound covered with fresh mud from the spring he found in the grove.

After a day or more it began to show improvement, and the little mare nuzzled him gratefully whenever he came to treat her. She had got into bad condition since her capture. She had been thin enough before, but now she was little more than skin and bones. Pitt carried water and grass to her for three days, until she was able to hobble down to the spring.

He named her Troublesome, and told her hourly what a confounded nuisance she was. She followed him about like a crippled pup, her eyes taking in every move he made, her plaintive nicker reaching him when he disappeared. He felt safe in turning her loose to graze through the day, while he kept his saddle horse on a picket rope.

The cowboy was conscious of the risk he was running. He didn't doubt that Cartwright had the sheriff out with a posse, scouring the country for him. But he could not see anything else to do but just what he was doing. The grub problem had him worried. A sack of flour, a can of baking powder, and a few cans of beans comprised the commissary.

He dared not risk a shot, to replenish his larder, even if there had been any game in this region this time of year. He finally decided that he would go down-country a

few miles, into the pines, and see what he could do toward stalking rabbits and mourning doves. During these expeditions, he shut the mare in the corral, so that she would not try to follow him. The first two days he got nothing. Then he found a rabbit run and rigged a trap. That night he feasted. Thereafter he was in no danger of hunger.

In spite of the circumstances, Pitt was getting a certain satisfaction out of the adventure. He was proving himself adequate. He was taking care of himself and his animals. Troublesome was putting on flesh and she was limping less each day.

On the eighth day, the cowboy decided that she could travel, if he took the trip in easy stages.

BIG Bill Ainsley, who was usually a patient man, was on the verge of losing his temper. "Riley," he burst out, "there's no sense in your being so cussed stubborn! And it's going to go hard with you if you keep it up."

Riley's square jaw took on a more obstinate line than ever.

"Then it can just go hard with me, Bill." The cowboy looked coldly at his boss. "I thought you knew something about men. But here you are, beginning to believe the worst about Pitt, just because appearances are against him."

"Did I say anything of that kind?" demanded the harrassed Ainsley. "I never had a better man on the ranch than Pitt, but what the devil has become of him? If he's still hunting that horse, as you think, why hasn't he at least got some word to us? Here it's over a week since he broke arrest, and——"

"And started out to make up for his mistake," finished Riley. "You know Pitt. If he ever thinks he's pulled a boner, he'll turn all hell in-

side out, to fix it right. How should I know where he is? He may be in Mexico, for all I know."

"But if you'd just tell me," pleaded Ainsley once more, "where it was you lost the mare, or about where, I might go and help him."

"With that wool-headed sheriff on your tail," returned Riley darkly. "You can't make a move that Cartwright and Orr don't check on. No, Bill, I'm banking on Pitt. If something hasn't happened to him, he'll be back with that horse."

Ainsley walked out in disgust. He didn't tell his cowboy that the sheriff had eight men out hunting for the missing puncher.

PITT had only a few minutes' warning. He came down to the road where it dipped over the ridge toward the Cartwright ranch. Suddenly he heard voices, a few turns below him on the grade.

His next move was on impulse. He was determined to turn the mare over to Cartwright himself, and he wasn't going to let anything interfere with that plan at this late date. Quite possibly these men were sheriff's deputies. There were three of them, by the voices.

He led Troublesome well back into the timber above the road and tied her to a tree. If he had to do any quick moving, he couldn't have her with him. He rode back and had barely taken up his station in a grove when the three came along.

All of them were armed. "Officers," thought Pitt, "and they're certainly hunting somebody. It's aces to deuces that the somebody is me."

Then the heart of the cowboy did a sudden flop that left him gasping. He heard an anxious nicker from the hillside above him.

The three riders on the road halted and listened. The nicker was repeated. They looked at one another, then deployed swiftly up the hill in the direction of the sound. Pitt sat still and searched his rather extensive vocabulary for terms to fit himself. Why hadn't he stopped to remember that that horse always made a fuss when he left her?

He saw them bring her down the hill. They were talking excitedly among themselves. "So worked up over finding her," thought Pitt, "that they haven't thought of looking for whoever put her there. Likely cut off the same piece o' cloth as their bright boss. Well, I might as well beat it for home and let Cartwright think what he pleases."

One man was leading the mare. Another, behind, was hurrying her with a rope end, urging her into a run.

Troublesome was still lame, and the trip across the mountains hadn't helped her any. Frightened, she hobbled and stumbled forward, trying to get away from the stinging rope. Pitt stood the sight for a moment, then prudence took wing. He came down on the group like a whirlwind.

"Stop that, you infernal fools! Don't you see that she's lame? Give me that rope!" He snatched the lead rope from the man who held it. He growled at the man behind, "Don't you hit her again!" and stooped from his saddle to run a palm across the mare's neck.

He felt a gun in his ribs. "Oh, all right, all right! Take me in, but take it slow. Cartwright'll have your thick heads on a platter, if you hurt this pony any worse than she's been hurt."

They recognized the force of the words, and took heed, but got back

with: "Your head's already on a platter, guy."

Pitt refused to be drawn out. He said no more until they rode into the ranch. He looked over the group that came out to meet them, got out of his saddle, and said to Cartwright:

"Here's your horse."

"So I see," responded the rancher darkly. "And what have you done to her?"

"What have I?" Pitt nearly gurgled with fury. "Why, I've saved her life! Proud flesh had already started in that botched brand, when I found——"

"Yeah!" snarled Cartwright. "And you're the man that botched it! I suppose you made up your mind that the going would be just a little too hot, if you didn't fetch that horse in."

HE started to say more, but Pitt was tramping on his toes before any one could move to stop it.

"Will you dry up and listen?" he yelled. "I found where she was hidden, and I kept her there till she was well enough to travel. She was stolen by a puncher that hated you. He said his name was Lafe, which it likely wasn't, and he was glad enough to light out when he thought the pony was done for. I don't know who was hiring him, but it was somebody else that hated you. I wish to Pete," the cowboy added viciously, "that you were twenty years younger so that I could beat the daylight out of you!"

"See here!" roared Sheriff Orr, finally getting into action and laying a heavy hand on Pitt. "We've taken plenty off of you. Back up and keep a civil tongue in your head."

"Pitt," asked Bill Ainsley, "did you get a written confession out of that fellow?"

Pitt stared at his boss. "Of course I didn't! How was I to know that this hard-headed old loon wouldn't be satisfied when I brought him his horse? But I should have known!" He glowered at Cartwright, then whirled back on Ainsley.

"Bill, you sure handed me a dirty deal, when you didn't tell me about the sorrel. I'm not excusing myself for losing the horses, but nobody could 'a' got the mare away from me, if I'd known about her."

"I was wrong in that," Ainsley admitted frankly. "But Cartwright was so scared she'd be stolen that he made me promise solemn that I wouldn't tell a single one of my men."

"Him thinking," supplemented Pitt sarcastically, "that all cowboys are crooks. Well, do your worst," he told the sheriff wearily.

Bill Ainsley was stepping forward, his face grim, narrowed gaze on the officer, when he stopped himself. He saw that the cowboy was to have a better defense than any he could ever make. For Ainsley knew the one soft spot in the tough old heart of George Cartwright.

No one had been paying any attention to Troublesome. Pitt felt a gentle poke at his elbow. Quite unaware that there was any significance in the action, he reached into his pocket and took out a hard biscuit. He broke it in pieces and fed it to the mare from his palm. He watched the consumption of the last crumb with stormy, pre-occupied eyes. He suddenly felt a queer stillness about him, and looked up.

Cartwright said harshly: "Sheriff, we'll have no further use for your

services. You have acquitted yourself very well, and I shall so report."

He turned and walked to the house. For, whatever the shortcomings of George Cartwright, he did possess a genuine love for horses. The affection the little mare had shown convinced him of Pitt's in-

nocence as nothing else could have done.

Pitt started after him, then looked blankly at his boss and demanded:

"What's got into him?"

Bill Ainsley's voice was slightly husky. "You *wouldn't* know."

FINDS GOLD DUST WORTH \$4,000

A DISPATCH from Bannock, Idaho, to the Los Angeles *Times* says that Tom Underwood neglected shoveling gravel in his sluices long enough to repair an old cabin, which has stood in the district for more than fifty years.

He dug out an old stone chimney in the cabin—and found a buckskin "poke" containing approximately four thousand dollars in gold dust.

Residents believe the pioneer miner who put it away probably was killed in a mine accident or gun fight.

DON'T BELIEVE MOVING MOUNTAIN STORY

ENGINEERS of the United States Bureau of Geological Survey in Denver, Colorado, are interested in the latest reports of land movements on Carbon Mountain, near Durango, as a study in human gullibility rather than as a geological phenomenon.

Inspired residents of Durango have dubbed the mountain various names including:

"The Perambulating Peak."

"Restless Carbon Mountain."

"The Rambling Peak of the Rockies."

"The Ambling Alp."

The Federal men, none of whom want to be quoted on the matter, thus destroying a grand illusion, say Carbon Mountain is just another mountain with landslides on its slopes.

A report on its activity was made by a Federal engineer last year and submitted to Washington. It said, in brief, that burning of coal in abandoned coal mines near the base of the peak had caused the landslides.

There are many other such subterranean coal fires in Colorado, causing greater landslides than the one on Carbon Mountain. Charles Rankin, a commercial geologist, mentioned one at Coalmount as being more active than the one on Carbon Mountain.

But Carbon Mountain is the only "rambling peak" in the State that has a "hot-dog" stand and a burro route for the convenience of tourists.



SCALY JUSTICE

By ROLAND KREBS

Author of "Brutus and the Bad Man," etc.

DERN my scraggly hide, I'd be ashamed to tote home such a poor, measly, little critter as that one." "Red" Johns stared with consummate scorn at the one small fish which dangled unimportantly from the stringing line that "Hungry" Hosford held in his hand.

"I thought he might make a mouthful," Hungry said defensively as he peered curiously at his catch.

"It would have to weigh nine pounds to make one mouthful for you." "Shorty" Nolan sniffed at his fellow puncher.

"As a fisherman, you're a disgrace to the R Bar R," snorted old "Bifalo Bull," elderly dean of the

outfit. "Look at that poor, little pipsqueak of a fish! It's a rotten shame to take a life wantonly like you done."

Old Bifalo tugged at his mustache, crunched his chewing tobacco, made gurgly noises, and stared into space.

"Look, fellers! I'm a-scared this is goin' to remind Biff of one of his lyn' stories," Shorty moaned.

"It reminds me of a story, all right," Bifalo agreed easily. "But it's a true story."

"Oh, a true story!" Hungry exclaimed. "So you admit that them you been tellin' us was all a pack of lies."

"All my stories is true stories," the elderly plainsman contended.

"No truer one was ever told than this." And without any more ceremony he began:

THE feller I'm fixin' to tell you about was Harry Gladstone, owner of the Happy Hour saloon, dance hall, and gamblin' house in the bad man's town of Wildcat, in the late '80s. He was known to most folks as "Happy," on account of he was that way and also because he owned the Happy Hour. Sometimes folks called him "Happy Harry" and sometimes "Happy Glad" or else just "Happy."

Happy Harry had two peculiar hobbies—studyin' law by mail and his pet goldfish. He got interested in lawin' after somebody told him that his last name was the same as that of the most famous lawyer that ever lived. Of course, I guess you fellers all have heard of Gladstone, the great Philadelphia lawyer, as I recall it. Besides, Happy figured that some day the West would have laws like folks had back East and a man who knew law would be in a position to clean up a lot of money.

Happy Gladstone was really kind of daffy about his goldfish. I remember 'em well. There was Nebuchadrezzar, Hezekiah, Methuselah, and Old Horse-face. They was all horse-faced to me, but Happy Harry considered them very beautiful critters and used to send to a Chicago mail-order house for special food for them that looked like pieces of writin' paper—and tasted like it. I'd heard of goats eatin' paper, but never fish. I used to tell him he was makin' sissies of his fish; that flies and pretzel crumbs was plenty good enough. Harry was sentimental, though.

The owner of the Happy Hour almost got apoplexy one day when his

four fish narrowly missed bein' shot to death.

I know it sounds kind of silly to talk about goldfish in a bowl bein' almost shot to death, but just the same they came near to bein' the victims of one of the shootin' scrapes that happened every so often in the Happy Hour. Happy used to keep Nebuchadrezzar, Hezekiah, Methuselah, an' Old Horse-face on the back bar, where he could admire them and coo at them. One fine day this shootin' started—and it wasn't no pleasure shootin', neither—and two bullets busted a stack of glasses piled next to the fish bowl and broke the mirror of the back bar. Happy grabbed his precious fish and ducked deep behind the bar with 'em.

As near as could be found out, this had been a general shootin', but the instig—the instigat— The feller who had started it was a troublesome party known as "Redeye" Perkins, a sort of a free-lance puncher famous for his drinkin', his lightnin'-fast draw, and his quarrelsome when liquored up.

Nobody had been killed, and since Redeye was very apologetic and paid for the property damage done, why, Happy Harry was inclined to let bygones be has-beens. However, he did lecture Redeye a somewhat.

"Look here, Perk," Harry said, "you've been mixed up in nine shootin's in here in the last two years. That's more than a good average. I'm gettin' tired of it."

"Aw, all but two was pleasure shootin's, Harry," Redeye said. He meant that he had just shot out lights and fired through the roof and the likes of that while feelin' exuberant and frolicsome. "I always paid for the damage I done, didn't I?"

"Yes, but there's such a thing as

makin' a nuisance of yourself, you know," Happy reminded him. "The roof on this house would look like a sieve if it didn't look like a crazy quilt for patches. And, what's more, them two other shootin's don't give my place a good reputation. They was both killin's."

"Self-defense, Harry; self-defense," Redeye argued.

"Yeah—one was," the owner pointed out, "but that other one might have got you hanged if the witnesses could have contradicted you."

"Now, Harry," Redeye said, feelin' very hurt, "I thought that was all settled to everybody's satisfaction. I tell you the fellow made a grab at his vest pocket. I thought he was goin' after a gun. I didn't know he was unarmed."

WHAT he was talkin' about was the killin' of a stranger to Wildcat but evidently an old acquaintance of Redeye's. The feller was to all intents and purposes a gamblin' man, wearin' the frock coat, fancy vest, and such as that esteemed by professional card throwers. He came into Wildcat by stage and made a couple of tight-lipped inquiries as to where he could find Mr. Perkins. Eventually he caught up with Redeye, and they had a few drinks together at a far-corner table in the Happy Hour. Neither seemed to be in the best humor with the other, and once or twice their voices was raised in argument. Finally they both kicked their chairs back, and Redeye fired from the hip, killin' the stranger instantly.

Nobody had seen just what happened before the shootin', because, like I said, they was off to themselves in a corner. Redeye Perkins claimed the man, who he had

known in Texas, wanted to borrow money and picked a fight when it was refused him. Maybe that was true. Personally, I wondered if maybe he wasn't tryin' to collect some money. One thing was sure, though. The man hadn't been armed.

Well, followin' Happy's reminder about this matter, Redeye went on a big drinkin' spree. Two nights in a row he came into the Happy Hour and shot out a few lights, for which he cheerfully paid. Harry give orders that Mr. Perkins was not to be served no more liquor if he showed up drunk, and this almost caused a fight.

"I'm gettin' sick and tired of him rumpussin' in here so much," Happy Harry told me. "It ain't the way a place like this should be run. Besides, he almost ruined my goldfish with that gun fight here recently. Them fish has been off their feed ever since, and I think from the looks of them that both Hezekiah and Old Horse-face have contracted high blood pressure."

Several months went by, and then Redeye Perkins chalked up another killin' for hisself. This killin' didn't sit right with Happy Gladstone at all, because it happened to a friend of hisn that he thought a lot of. Jeff Purser, it was.

Jeff, who held about three hundred and fifty dollars' worth of Redeye's I O U's as a result of a series of stud games, had come into the Happy Hour and asked if he could take a bath in Happy's livin' quarters adjoinin' the saloon. Happy told him to go to it.

Of course, a man can't take a bath wearin' a gun. Well, Jeff done a very careless thing. When he finished bathin', he took a slight chill and stepped out to the bar in his shirt and pants, but without his

gun or belt. After downin' the liquor, he saw Redeye at a table, all by hisself, over in a corner and walked over and said somethin'. They had a mumbled conversation, followed by a few harsh words. Jeff, as a result of somethin' that Redeye growled to him in a undertone, leaped to his feet and reached for his hip—but his gun was lyin' on a chair in Happy's livin' quarters. Needless to say, the minute that that hand went for the hip, Redeye had both six-guns in action, and Jeff bumped into enough sudden death to kill five like him.

Redeye was—or pretended to be—very surprised.

"He went for a gun," he yelled to Happy.

"Yes—I seen it," Happy answered. "Didn't you know he wasn't armed?"

"How could I be expected to know it when he didn't know it his own self?" Redeye scoffed. "I just got a flash of his hand reachin'. I don't take no chances."

"You certainly don't," Harry agreed.

THE whole community was pretty sour about Jeff bein' killed, because he was well liked. But everybody agreed that the surface indications was that Redeye was justified in claimin' self-defense.

Happy was very silent for several days. He even neglected his goldfish a bit. He seemed to be thinkin' a heap.

Then one evenin' he remarked to a bunch of us: "Fellers, we ought to have a few laws in this town. For instance, accidents will happen and all that, but there should be laws that make people more careful not to have accidents. For instance, when a man shoots an unarmed man

and then commits the same accident a second time, why, then I say the law should make him more careful."

"How would you get such a law?" asked "Tubby" Bakewell, the deputy sheriff for the Wildcat neighborhood.

"The town council enacts them," Happy explained.

"But we ain't got any town council," I pointed out.

"Well, let's appoint one," Harry suggested. "You and Tub and Andy Skipworth and Bud Caruthers, and Joe Allison can be the council."

"What's the dues?" Joe wanted to know.

"Nothin'," Happy explained. "You get a salary whenever there's any money in the town treasury."

"Sure, we'll serve," Joe said. "What's the law?"

Well, the council agreed that Happy should write up the legislation on account of he was takin' lawyer lessons by mail from a correspondence school back East in St. Louis. So Happy wrote:

Know all men by these presents, **GREETING:** THAT any person who assaults another with a loaded firearm, or with any other deadly weapon, or by any other means or force likely to produce death, and the person thus assaulted is unarmed, the person doing the killing shall be adjudged guilty of a misdemeanor and his (or her) penalty shall be fixed at death.

Happy read this over six times—by request.

"I expect it's all right," said Tub, "but why couldn't we do it so people could understand it easier?"

So Happy chewed up another pencil and took a second stab at the law-makin'. This time he wrote:

OYEZ! OYEZ! OYEZ! Be it hereby enacted that from here on in, any person or persons, or both, who takes a life or lives

with firearms shall be judged guilty and condemned to die. P. S. This don't go unless the injured party or parties are unarmed.

"Now, that's more like it," Tubby Bakewell announced, "only I don't get this 'Oyez' business here in the beginnin'."

"That's court language," Happy Harry explained. "That makes it legal."

"Oh," said Tubby.

After bein' duly sworn, us councilmen signed the new law and we tacked it up on the wall where all could see it.

OF course, we was all wonderin' what effect it would have on Redeye Perkins, but the varmint didn't show up in Wildcat for five days, and so we just had to wonder. When he did put in his appearance, he was mildly lit up—mildly for him, more'n enough for anybody else. Seems he had heard about the new law and so, after grumblin' and actin' kind of nasty because he was refused another drink, he swaggered over to the wall and read the document thereon.

To our surprise, he was chucklin' and grinnin' when he come back to the bar.

"Kind of looks like maybe this here new law is aimed at me," he remarked.

"No," answered Happy Harry, lookin' Redeye square in the optics without returnin' the grin, "it ain't aimed at anybody specifically. It's aimed at whosoever violates it."

"That won't be me, Harry," Mr. Perkins declared. "Two unfortunate accidents like I had naturally make me want to be mighty careful in the future—mighty careful!"

Well, sir, a very remarkable change came over Redeye. He didn't drink too much. He didn't

pick no fights. He didn't pull no guns. It didn't seem like the same man. We had more'n two weeks of this, and I must say I was surprised fit to kill.

"Looks like our law has had a wholesome effect on Mr. Perkins," I remarked to Happy Harry one evenin'.

"It does that," the owner of the place agreed. "I honestly didn't expect the law to be as much of a success as it has been. Still, I don't trust that hombre any more'n I'd trust a Cheyenne."

With Redeye Perkins seemingly under double wraps, Happy Harry began takin' an interest in his goldfish again. Nebuchadrezzar, Hezekiah, Methuselah, and Old Horse-face seemed like they had recovered their old, happy dispositions and frolicked around freely once more.

"Think I'll send to Chicago for a bigger bowl for 'em," Happy told me. "The poor critters is cooped up in this bowl. They ought to have more range."

The next evenin' I came on Happy doin' somethin' that made me wonder if he had gone daffy. He was lightin' matches and holdin' them up close to the fish bowl.

"What's the matter?" I asked him. "Did one of your fish lose somethin'?"

"I was just noticin' how beautiful they look with the light playin' on 'em," Happy Harry told me. "Look at them gold scales shimmer, Biffalo. Ain't they a great sight?"

"Perfectly serumptious," I agreed with him. "What are you goin' to do about it—burn up matches by the boxful so you can gloat over them?"

"I just got an idea," he said. "I'm goin' to make a good, strong shelf up there at the top of that

cedar post holdin' up the roof and put my fish bowl on the shelf with a small, lighted lamp behind it. This place needs a little decoration of some kind."

So Happy borrowed him a saw, hammer, and nails and went about makin' hisself a shelf. He began these labors one evenin' and, come closin' time, he wasn't yet finished. After the place was locked up, I stuck around and helped him a trifle. Finally his big moment come. The shelf was ready. The light was in place. We put the bowl up there and turned out all the other lamps. I got to admit that Nebuchadrezzar, Methuselah, Hezekiah and Old Horse-face looked pretty snappy as they loped around in the lamplight that come from behind 'em.

You fellers got to realize that in towns like Wildcat, in times like them, almost anything and anybody was a novelty to folks. In fact, they'd come miles to see or hear somethin' that was out of the mine-run of things. Happy's goldfish with lightin' effects was a novelty. Customers stood and gawked at the four like they was somethin' off the moon. Talk about them spread. People who wasn't at all regular visitors to the Happy Hour dropped in for a friendly glass and a stare at the fish. Happy was quite some pleased at the interest the community was takin' in his idea.

AS I recall it now, the one person who hadn't seen the lighted fish was Mr. Redeye Perkins. In fact, several of us was beginnin' to wonder what had happened to Redeye on account of he hadn't showed his ugly mug for several days. I say we wondered what *had* happened to him. Nobody suspected what was *goin'* to happen to him.

About five in the p. m. one day I dropped into the Happy Hour and told Happy Harry that I'd heard Redeye was in town, stupendously drunk and lookin' for trouble from all accounts.

Well, sir, it was nine o'clock before Redeye's activities brought him around to the Happy Hour. When he arrived, he arrived with a bang. I mean to say he had both his guns out for what he called a "pleasure shootin'."

Redeye Perkins kind of improved on his past methods. He started shootin' before he staggered through the swingin' doors of the saloon. He fired a couple of celebration shots into the air outside and then strode in, lookin' for a target. The handiest target was a hangin' lamp right in front of him. He shot it out. The next handiest target was another hangin' lamp, over the bar. Redeye shot that out.

With this much darkness created in the front of the Happy Hour, the lighted goldfish bowl was brought out sharply. Redeye stared at it. He lowered his guns and blinked with a stupid frown. Then a silly grin stole over his face. He deliberately raised the six-gun in his right hand and emptied it into the lighted bowl. Needless to say, there was a crash of glass, a splash of water, and a *pfft!* as the lamp went out.

"What a target!" roared Redeye with a lunaticlike laugh.

"What a target!" roared Happy Harry back at him, firin' from a .38 in each hand.

Redeye Perkins gave Happy one terrified look from a pasty face and then slid chin-forward in the sawdust on the floor. He was still clutchin' a smokin' revolver in each hand when he give his last wiggle and stretched out.

Happy Harry calmly laid his guns down on the bar, relit his cigar, and ambled out toward the body. He gingerly felt at Redeye's heart with one hand and then calmly announced:

"He's dead!"

The silence that fell over the Happy Hour saloon must have lasted for a full minute. Then Tubby Bakewell, the deputy sheriff, spoke up.

"Well," he said, "I must say!"

"You must say what?" asked Happy easily.

"Uh—why—uh," Tubby mumbled, "did you think he was shootin' at you? Or, I should say, was he shootin' at you?"

"No," Happy answered, throwin' away his cigar and lightin' a fresh one. "But he killed my fish—and that's agin' the law in this town."

The situation changed quick. Tubby representin' the law, seemed like he felt he was on trial before the bar of public opinion, you might say.

"Why—um—which law did you refer to?" he asked cautiously.

"The legislation recently enacted by our town council," Happy answered.

We all exchanged puzzled glances.

"Maybe," I suggested, "we had better have Happy explain the law. After all, he is takin' lessons in law by mail and he ought to, by rights, know more'n us laymen about it."

"There ain't must to explain," Happy Harry said simply. "The law is that whosoever shoots anybody which is unarmed shall die."

"Yeah, but a fish ain't a body," Tub pointed out.

"I was speakin' colloquially," Harry explained.

"Speakin' how?"

"Colloquially."

"Oh," Tub oh-ed.

"Speakin' literally," our law ex-

pert went on, "the law says that whosoever shall take a life or lives shall get death. It don't take into consideration whether they are human lives, animal, fowl, or fish lives. It just says 'lives,' the law does. Well, Redeye took four lives when he shot up my fish bowl, didn't he? I was doin' the community a favor when I killed him off. It saved us hirin' a hangman."

"Oh," said Tubby Bakewell, pourin' hisself a stiff drink with a sleek smile, "I see it all now. There's a fine point of law involved there. I'm derved glad we got somebody among our midst who can interpret our laws for us—or our law for us, I should say."

And so we buried Redeye over the hill—and a legal holiday was declared by the town council in honor of the event.

BIFFALO indulged himself a mighty yawn, either from the fatigue of telling the story or, possibly, from the ordeal of listening to himself.

"That was a funny kind of a law," Hungry Hosford observed.

"Why?" Biffalo demanded.

"Well—um—I mean to say that it's kind of hard on a guy to kill him off because he kills goldfish," Hungry argued.

"I can answer that," the old puncher replied. "Law is wrote to do the greatest good for the greatest number. That's what Happy's law done. Besides, his goldfish wasn't killed."

"Wasn't killed?" Shorty Nolan exclaimed.

"Naw," said Biffalo. "Happy was figurin' all the time when he put the light behind his fish bowl that Redeye would take a shot at the bowl on account of his weakness for

shootin' out lights in what he called 'pleasure shootin's.' So he put the bowl, with its moss and little castle and pebbles and all, up there, but took the fish out. In the place of Nebuchadrezzar, Hezekiah, Methuselah, and Old Horse-face he put some little celluloid fish that the general-merchandise store had on sale for mothers to put in their kids' bath tubs to amuse the little critters when they got scrubbed."

"Didn't the town council know that no fish was killed?" Red Johns demanded.

"Officially, we didn't." Biff chuckled. "We did hear some talk

about it—but we was afraid to raise the question on account of Happy knew more about lawin' than we did. You see, he had had three of them by-mail lessons up to that time. There ain't no use contradictin' a expert."

"Say no more," Hungry put in. "I agree with you. I won't contradict you no more. You're a expert—a expert liar."

"Hungry," Biffalo Bull answered with a grin, "every word of what I told you is the truth, the whole truth, and——"

"And nothin' but a lot of lies," Hungry finished.

LAKE OF PURE GASOLINE DISCOVERED

A HUGE underground lake of pure gasoline was discovered in the harbor district of Los Angeles, near Wilmington, recently, causing hundreds of persons to stampede to the scene. Shallow wells, most of them dug to a depth of only two feet, were producing from four to six gallons of gasoline an hour.

The scene, a low area about two blocks square, was dotted with hundreds of gasoline "prospectors," some of whom brought hand pumps to speed up production. Motorists filled the tanks of their automobiles and trucks.

Fire Chief Ralph Scott, at a loss to account for the gasoline reservoir beneath the earth's surface, said, however, it probably came from a leak many years ago in a pipe line leading from a refinery to a harbor terminal. Inspector Alonzo Ogle, of the fire prevention bureau, said the appearance of gasoline at the location had been brought to his attention before. He said it usually occurred after intense warm spells or when there had been a seismic disturbance.

Chief Scott said the wholesale "drilling" of wells by amateurs in the location created an intense fire hazard, and immediately ordered his men to serve notice that drillers must post five-thousand-dollar bonds under a State law.

The gasoline was discovered by Cristobal Salcido, when he dug for water in the front yard of his Wilmington home. Those to whom he talked of his discovery laughed until he got enough money to buy a three-hundred-gallon tank truck. With the aid of his wife and ten children he began pumping out gasoline and selling it.

Salcido had pumped out eight hundred gallons when authorities issued the order that drillers could not operate without posting bonds.

Interesting And True

By H. FREDRIC YOUNG



THE TAILOR BIRD STITCHES LEAVES TOGETHER AND BUILDS ITS NEST WITHIN THE RECEPTACLE THUS MADE. THE STITCHING IS QUITE AS GOOD AS IF IT HAD BEEN DONE BY HUMAN HAND.



BUFFALO BILL, NEVER KILLED A BUFFALO IN HIS LIFE!

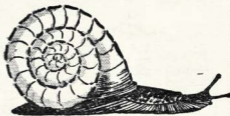


JOHN CONROY, OF CASTELLA, CALIFORNIA, BROKE OPEN AN EGG WHICH, IN ADDITION TO THE REGULAR YOLK AND WHITE, CONTAINED A SECOND HARD-SHELLED EGG.

A RABBIT CAN RUN FASTER UP A HILL THAN IT CAN DOWN ONE. ITS LONG HIND LEGS HINDER IT ON A DOWNGRADE RUN.



QUARTER BY T. STURINGER, MINNEAPOLIS, MINN.



THE SPEED OF A SNAIL IS ABOUT A HALF MILE A WEEK.

Mr. Young will pay one dollar for any usable Western "Interesting and True" features which readers may send him in care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Return postage must be included for suggestions found unsuitable.



Western Varmints

(Pack Rats)

By CHARLES L. McNICHOLS

SEVERAL years ago in Arizona there were three prospectors camped around a spring far out in the desert.

Each had his individual tent and camp outfit, for they were not partners, but lone workers on widely separate desert claims. One, named Sandberg, had false teeth; another, Harris, wore spectacles; and the third, Howard, owned the only remaining cake of soap. One morning Sandberg, Harris, and Howard rolled out of their respective blankets and found the teeth, the glasses, and the soap gone. Their tempers were pretty much on the hair trigger, as the tempers of men in isolated places are likely to be. They ran out of their tents and began to accuse each other of "high-grading" their respective property. The argument got so hot that each one dived back into his tent after his gun.

Only Harris came out again. Sandberg and Howard stayed in their tents, for Sandberg, on taking a second look, had found Harris's glasses near where he had put his false teeth, and Howard had found Sandberg's teeth back of his own soap dish.

Now these men were old-timers and should have recognized all this as the work of a pack rat, or trade rat—as miners frequently call them. As a matter of fact they did, after a day of mutual siege in which each one sat in his tent with his six-shooter in his fist, broiling in the stifling desert heat, and waiting for the other fellow to make a hostile move. Toward evening Harris got the bright idea of investigating a rat's nest he had seen under a near-by mesquite. Here he found Howard's soap. The affair ended in a laugh and a handshake all around.

Why pack rats should carry off

such apparently useless articles as soap, glasses, and false teeth brings up the nature of their nest. Over a little bed of grass, paper, or leaves, usually located between the roots of a tree or in a cleft of a rock, the rats pile the greatest possible amount of sticks, chips, cactus stems, and assorted trash to protect it from coyotes, foxes, skunks, and the like. Most of these predatory beasts can dig into the ground easily enough, but they have a great deal of trouble clawing their way through a miniature woodpile.

These animals that prey on the pack rats have, in most cases, a great fear of anything that has been handled by men. The "man smell" is a signal of alarm to them. Pack rats seem to have acquired some sort of an instinctive understanding of this fear, from the diligent way they hunt for objects possession this alarming "man smell" to put into the protective pile over their nests—evidently to keep their enemies away.

This is entirely a matter of instinct, and not of intellect, for these same pack rats are among the most dim-witted and fickle-minded creatures in the animal kingdom. Take for example the rat that stole Harris's glasses. He should have carried them directly to his nest and then returned for more loot. But following the imbecile habit of his tribe, he went on snooping around camp carrying the glasses, dropped them to pick up the false teeth, which he in turn discarded for the soap that he finally carried to his nest.

IT is because of this habit of discarding one bit of loot to pick up another that pack rats came to be called trade rats in certain parts of the West. Some people maintain this trade is due to a latent

moral sense in the pack rat's make-up, instead of the lack of any sense at all. They will tell you about some notable trades the rats have made. One California miner got a three-ounce gold nugget for a Barlow knife!

The size and content of some rats' nests, particularly old ones that are the product of the labor of many generations, are really amazing. One in Arizona is said to have been "a wagon load of sticks, chips, and cactus joints, among which there were enough knives, forks, spoons, shotgun shells, cartridges, and nails to fill a bucket." Another, discovered by CCC workers in the Santa Barbara National Forest in California, was found to contain two knives, a watch, a mirror, several letters, a purse, and the scraps of many newspapers, some of them more than forty years old.

Technically pack rats are all "wood rats." That is what they are called in the books on zoology. There are a great many species of these short-tailed, big-eared, big-eyed rats in the West. Some live in heavy timber, some in the high mountains, but most of them inhabit deserts or near-deserts. Though they vary a good deal in color and size, as well as in nesting and feeding habits, they are all really very much alike—busy, squeaky little balls or soft fur that go pestering around at night making quick short dashes at nothing at all with their curious little spikes of tails stuck straight out behind them. They are as unlike the alien alley rats of the cities as hill-billy comedians are unlike machine-gun gangsters.

It seems that with all their liking for human possessions pack rats would naturally move right in with humans and become house rats whenever the opportunity affords.

But that isn't so. Pack rats refuse to leave the big pile of sticks they know as home to become parasites in another's dwelling. They will move into a deserted mountain cabin and make an awful mess of it, building their untidy nests everywhere, even in the oven of the stove. They will make life miserable for lone campers in the desert with their continual pilfering, but when humans and their houses get too thick, the pack rats leave the country.

By the way, that instinct pack rats have for picking up objects that have the "man smell" has been put to a grim use lately. An Interna-

tional News item carried by many papers states that Roy Orttio, Idaho mountaineer, has claimed a thousand-dollar reward for finding the body of R. H. Robertson of Boise, who disappeared in a precipitous canyon thicket while hunting. Orttio said his pet pack rats made the find, just as they have found other bodies. He took them to the place where the missing man was last known to have been, turned them loose, and waited. The rats hunted through impenetrable brush and in hidden crevasses, until they found the body. Then they started packing buttons, bits of cloth, and the like to their nest.

*A Complete Novel, "PAWNEE JOE'S PATHLESS PERIL,"
by H. BEDFORD-JONES, in Next Week's Issue.*



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BAD MEDICINE

By CLIFF WALTERS

Author of "Range Ruse," etc.

BRUCE SHOMO'S thin lips twitched impatiently as he walked from the Arrowville post office back across the street to the livery stable in which he was half owner.

"Any mail?" inquired big Emil Dowd, the other partner, who sprawled comfortably in the musty-smelling office.

"Yes," said the businesslike Shomo. "Harkins, the cattle dealer up in Billings, wants us to pick up a couple hundred head of fat

weanin' calves for him. He'll pay us eighteen dollars a head for 'em. Which means I'm ridin' to Pole Crick to see Dud Ellingsworth. He's got that many weaners."

"Gosh!" gulped the interested Dowd, coming to his feet. "If we could buy 'em for about fifteen dollars a head, and then sell 'em for——"

"We'd be makin' six hundred on the deal," interrupted the sharp-nosed Shomo, already on his way to saddle a horse munching hay at the manger in the first stall. "But if I

can buy 'em for thirteen a head, we'll make an even thousand on the deal."

"Yeah, but old Dud won't sell for that money. He'd be crazy to."

"And we'll be crazy if we don't buy them calves as cheap as we can," the smaller partner said. "Keep an eye on things, Emil. And don't let that strange cow-puncher take his roan outta this barn till he's paid the feed bill. Savvy?"

"I won't," the big Dowd promised, already moving back toward the chair he had left.

Bruce Shomo rode fast across those six intervening miles between Arrowville and Pole Creek. But when he topped the low rise overlooking the Ellingsworth ranch, he slowed down to a walk, allowing the crisp autumn air to cool the heaving flanks of his horse. Leisurely then he rode on down to the corrals where old Dud Ellingsworth, small, mild-eyed, was working over a sick colt.

"Howdy, Bruce!" the old cattleman called. "I'm glad you happened along. I was wishin' for a vet'narian. This dag-gone colt's colicky, I guess, and——"

But the alert-eyed Shomo wasn't interested in the colt. His gaze was riveted on the two hundred weaning calves bunched in the pasture below the Ellingsworth house.

"Will you sell them weaners, Dud?" he asked casually.

"I think I'll keep 'em," the cattleman replied. "Why? You and Dowd wantin' to buy some?"

"Oh, not 'specially," the visitor answered. "Thought we might pick up a couple hundred—if we can buy 'em right."

"I wouldn't want to sell at a bargain price, Bruce. Say, will you get down and take a look at this colt? You do a lot of stock doctorin' and——"

"I'll give you eleven dollars a head for them calves—straight through," Shomo interrupted.

"Nope. Not interested."

"Well, I'll make it twelve."

Still the elderly cattleman shook his gray head.

"Thirteen!" said Shomo, his thin lips twitching again. "And that's the best I'll do. I buy and sell enough cattle to know what they're worth. And that's all them weaners is worth!"

"Maybe so," old Dud Ellingsworth drawled. "But I ain't sellin' for that price."

"All right!" the visitor snapped, a hint of ire in his nasal voice. "Fourteen dollars a head!"

"Make it seventeen, and I'll talk business," the cowman parried.

"Fifteen—and that's my limit!" There was almost a snarl in Shomo's tone now. "If you don't take that price, you're a fool, Ellingsworth."

"Then I reckon I'm a fool." The old man grinned good-naturedly. "But forget the calf buyin' for a little while, Bruce. This colt's prob'ly dyin'. I can't get him up on his feet. Won't you——"

"Will you sell them weaners to me—for fifteen a head?" Shomo countered.

"Nope, I can't part with 'em for that. I think I'll keep 'em." Ellingsworth pointed to a bucket setting just outside the corral. "I'm vac-snatin' 'em for blackleg to-morrow. And that's somethin' else I'd like to ask you about while you're here. I've ground up them little brown pills and added some water, but I don't know just how to——"

"I'm not makin' a veterinarian call to-day!" Shomo retorted, eying the concoction in the bucket. "If you want me to stay around, sell me them calves for fifteen dollars!"

"I won't sell 'em for that," Ellingsworth said. "But you don't have to get riled about it, Shomo. They're my cattle, and if I want to keep 'em——"

"Keep 'em!" the visitor rasped, a surge of anger coloring his sallow cheeks. Then, roweling his mount with the spurs, he whirled and loped away, leaving the surprised Dud Ellingsworth staring after him.

BACK at the stable in Arrowville, the fuming Shomo reported his failure to his partner, big Emil Dowd.

"Why didn't you offer him sixteen a head?" the latter wanted to know. "Shucks! That would've made us a profit of four hundred. Yeah, or even seventeen, if you'd had to pay that much."

"A dollar a head margin!" Shomo snorted disgustedly. "I wouldn't touch 'em for that much profit. Besides, I wouldn't give that bull-headed old fool the satisfaction of payin' him that price. Let him keep his calves! I'll get even with him!"

"I think I'd paid him the seventeen dollars he asked," the calmer Dowd contended. "I'd rather have two hundred profit than nothin'!"

"That's 'cause you ain't got no head for business!" his wrathful associate snarled. "If it wasn't for my brains, you'd be out drivin' a freight team again! Where's that roan horse belongin' to that stranded puncher? Did he pay the bill on him?"

"Well," gulped the big Dowd, "he paid part of it. He's got a job ridin' for the TK outfit, and said that he'd pay the balance next Saturday when——"

"Aw, you big overgrown jackass!" ranted Bruce Shomo—and stalked away in the direction of the saloon

across the street, where was vended tonic for upset nerves.

Bruce Shomo imbibed several glasses of "tonic" that evening, and silently called old Dud Ellingsworth hard names. The more he brooded over his failure to negotiate the calf deal, the more vengeful he became. So much so that after Arrowville had gone to bed for the night, he went to his darkened stable and procured from a shelf a certain bottle of poison which, if administered in small quantity, would cause death, slow but sure, to cattle. Then the amateur veterinarian saddled a horse and headed once more for the Ellingsworth ranch on Pole Creek.

Arrived at his destination, he stole quietly about in the darkness until he found the bucket containing the blackleg vaccine, the early type of vaccine which was made from water and brown pills. Into this the crafty Shomo poured the contents of the bottle which he had brought from town. And soon he was sneaking away from the deserted corrals, mounting his horse, and heading back toward town. Being the kind of man he was, the cunning Shomo was more than satisfied with his night's work. Adding to this satisfaction was the fact that the colt, which he had refused to help Dud Ellingsworth doctor, was lying dead back there.

"There'll be more carcasses layin' around Pole Crick one of these days," mused the rider.

THE following morning Bruce Shomo sent his partner, big Emil Dowd, out to see if any weaning calves could be purchased for less than fifteen dollars per head. But when Dowd returned that evening, he reported that he had had no luck in making a deal.

The next day he went out again. And when he returned that evening, he said:

"I went to every ranch I could think of, Bruce. But nobody's got two hundred head of weaners except old Dud Ellingsworth."

"We won't buy his!" Shomo snapped.

"We've already bought 'em," Emil Dowd calmly announced. "And for seventeen dollars a head. Dud rode to town with me and cashed the check I give him."

"What!" Shomo yelled, his mouth flopping open.

"Two hundred profit's better than none," Dowd said doggedly. "That's what I figure, anyhow. And I own a half of this partnership. What's the matter? What are you reachin' for your gun——"

"I'd like to kill you!" the ash-faced Shomo choked. "Did—did Ellingsworth vaccinate them calves—for blackleg?"

"Yeah, he did. But that won't matter when it comes to——"

"Won't it! You stay here, you big lummox! I'm goin' to Pole Crick!" And the frantic Shomo, a vision of a bottle of poison floating before his eyes, rushed away to saddle his horse.

By merciless use of the spurs, he managed to overtake Dud Ellingsworth before the latter had reached his home on Pole Creek.

"Hey, Dud!" he called, reining up his winded mount. "Uh—my pard bought them weaners from you and—and——"

"Yeah?" the old cowman prompted. "What about it?"

"Well—uh," Shomo faltered, "we don't want 'em now. Here's your bill of sale for 'em. You give us back our money and—and keep your calves!"

Old Dud Ellingsworth's eyes grew stern.

"Nope," he said. "I'm not accommodatin' you, Shomo. When I wanted you to accommodate me, you rode off and let one of my colts die. Not that that colt meant so much from a money standpoint. But he was sufferin' when you could've helped him. And you wouldn't. That trick soured me on you for keeps!"

"I'll sell you them calves back for—for sixteen dollars a head!" the desperate Shomo shouted. "Yes—for fifteen!"

"What's wrong with you?" asked the suspicious Ellingsworth.

"Why, nothin'," the nervous Shomo replied. "Only me and Emil thought we had a market for them calves. Now we find out we haven't."

"That's too bad," retorted the inexorable Ellingsworth. "But the deal's closed, you money-grabbin' shark. If you want me to buy them calves back, I'll pay you exactly twelve dollars a head for 'em. Not but what they're worth more'n that, but because you acted like you did about that sick colt!"

Bruce Shomo swallowed hard. "All right," he said hoarsely. "Twelve dollars a head. That's a thousand dollars profit for you."

"And a thousand-dollar lesson to you!" the old cowman parried. "Here's your twenty-four hundred cash, Shomo. Make out another bill of sale."

Shomo obeyed. If two hundred head of calves had been vaccinated with a poison solution, anything he could recover from the deal was acceptable. Besides, he thought, there would be the satisfaction of hearing about Ellingsworth's dying critters.

"I was goin' to give you the job of vac'snatin' them calves," the old cowman said, taking the bill of sale proffered him, "if you hadn't acted like you did about that colt. As it was, I made a mess of that first batch off vaccine. I found I hadn't made it accordin' to directions, and had to dump it out—that bucket of stuff you seen by the corral."

Bruce Shomo gulped; hesitated; then swore and went for his gun. But old Ellingsworth, whipping out his own weapon with uncanny speed, drawled:

"Oh, no, you don't, Shomo! If

you're figgurin' to hold me up for the rest of this cash I'm packin', guess again—or take a dose of hot lead through your middle!"

Shomo growled and rode back toward Arrowville. An hour later two cow-punchers, passing the town livery stable, heard a commotion in the musty little office.

"Huh!" said one. "Shomo and big Dowdy's rowin' about somethin'—plenty! And look at the way that big hombre's poundin' Bruce Shomo! Let 'em go at it! Shomo deserves what he's gettin'—allus bawlin' that big pard of his out!"

Coming Next Week, "FRAMING THE FRAMER,"

by *RAY HUMPHREYS.*

DOG TEAM CATCHES COYOTE

RUNNING down and capturing a coyote with a dog team hitched to a sled was the feat performed near Fairbanks, Alaska, by Joseph Doleshal and Robert Gallagher.

Doleshal had been on a trail-breaking trip down the Chena River, and after going about six miles, turned around to come home. Soon the coyote was observed about three hundred yards ahead of the dog team.

The coyote kept to the trail, disliking to take to the deep snow on either side. Finally, when the pursuit became close, it took to the side of the trail, and the wheel dog of the team leaped after the fugitive and caught it.

Doleshal and young Gallagher took the prize away from the dog, hog-tied the coyote and took it to Doleshal's home at Fairbanks.

SEEKS RELICS OF FIRST AMERICAN

DR. ALES HRDLICKA, the noted anthropologist, left Seattle recently for his fourth visit to the ruins of an ancient village on Kodiak Island, in Alaskan waters, in quest of further information about the "first American."

He said that excavations on the site have already produced relics of two different cultures, the older of which may have been the first on the American continent.



THE OUTDOOR WEST TO-DAY

(New Mexico)

By E. E. WILSON

NEW MEXICO is a land of such startling contrasts and fantastic beauty that it seems almost unreal. With its lofty mountains and mysterious deserts, its fertile valleys and color-splotched mesas, its bottomless lakes and petrified forests, it offers a never-ending variety of scenic attractions. Here, too, in prehistoric ruins and cliff dwellings an age-old civilization romantically keeps watch side by side with the active life carried on to-day on the range, in forest, and in mine.

Furthermore, this Southwest State possesses the vastness associated with the outdoor West. The fourth largest State in the Union, it would hold within its boundaries, with only the slightest squeezing, New York, Pennsylvania, and Maine. Its steep mountain ranges tower to heights exceeded by only one or two spots on the American continent, the loftiest one, Truchas, rising thirteen thousand three hundred and six feet above the sea. Its plains stretch away in distances so limitless that the world's greatest cities would be but specks upon them, while its

peaceful valleys thread far-reaching mesas of stone and sand, with green fields of corn and wheat giving way to boundless miles of cacti and mesquite. In addition there are millions of acres of dense forests, and many wilderness areas where there is no evidence of the advance of civilization.

In spite of its great size, however, the population of New Mexico is small, the State as a whole averaging fewer than four people to the square mile. The inhabitants consist of three distinct races: the Pueblo, Navajo, and Apache Indians; Spanish-Americans, who speak their own language and maintain their own customs; and finally the Anglo, as the American is called locally to distinguish him from the preëminent Spanish-American.

But of whatever race, all the residents of this State enjoy alike the wonderful climate, with its dry, clear air and maximum amount of sunshine, which has given New Mexico the title of the "Sunshine State."

With great grazing areas, live-stock interests in New Mexico are extensive, and more than a million head of cattle and almost three million head of sheep roam its wide ranges. Huge stock ranches are the rule instead of the exception, and down in the southwest corner of the State near the Mexican border are found some of the largest cattle ranches in America. Here at round-up time thousands of head are branded, and cowmen, eyes shaded by the traditional sombrero and feet clad in high-heeled boots, are still the barons of hundreds of square miles of open range.

An outgrowth of the live-stock industry are the many ranches which accommodate guests or, in the parlance of the plains, dudes. Visitors take part in the daily life of

the ranch and range and are introduced to the romance and adventure of the outdoor West. Some of the most notable of these outfits are located in the vicinity of Las Vegas, where the Rodeo and Cowboy's Reunion is held annually around the Fourth of July.

SECOND to stock raising in importance is mining. This industry dates back to early days, for the existence of valuable mineral deposits was known to the Indians of New Mexico before the first Conquistadores stumbled upon their primitive workings, where ore was chipped off by hand and hauled to the surface in buffalo-hide buckets. To-day modern methods prevail, and such rich veins of copper as that of the Santa Rita Mine near Silver City, one of the largest open-pit copper mines in the world, are worked on a gigantic scale by up-to-date machinery.

At the present time gold, silver, copper, lead, and zinc are mined in paying quantities in the Sunshine State. The most important mineral product, however, is coal, the coal area being greater than that of Belgium and France combined, or that of Germany. According to the estimate of the United States Geological Survey the undeveloped coal lands of New Mexico contain one hundred and ninety-two billion tons. Petroleum and natural gas are produced in the southeastern and northwestern sections of the State, while the presence of potash in the southeastern part has established America's independence of foreign countries for this valuable peace-time fertilizer and chemical, and war-time necessity for munitions. Gypsum ranks high, too, in mineral wealth, with deposits of thirty-three million tons.

Just as mining in the Sunshine State dates back to prehistoric times, so does farming, for although much of its area consists of desert, forest, and mountains, the waters of New Mexico's rivers were utilized by the Pueblo Indians for irrigation centuries ago. To-day the erection of great modern dams has made possible the blossoming of thousands of once-arid acres.

Outstanding among these undertakings is the Elephant Butte Dam, a gigantic wall of masonry which holds back the Rio Grande where once it flowed unhindered through a rocky gorge, and by impounding its waters makes possible the irrigation of thousands of acres in the Federal project named for this famous river of the Southwest. The reservoir formed by the Elephant Butte Dam is one of the largest artificial bodies of water in the world, the capacity being two million six hundred and forty-two thousand acre-feet, or eight hundred sixty-two billion two hundred million gallons—enough water, if spread out, to cover the State of Delaware two feet deep. About thirteen thousand farms are under irrigation.

Other United States reclamation projects at Carlsbad, Hondo, and in the Rio Grande Valley include one hundred eighty-five thousand two hundred seven-seven acres. Although there are more than nine hundred forty-five thousand acres contained in irrigation projects, with five hundred fifty-one thousand four hundred twenty under water. The principal crops grown in these fertile areas show a fine yield. They are cotton, alfalfa, corn, wheat, oats, and the vegetables and fruits of the temperate zone.

In addition to farming by irrigation, dry farming is practiced in many sections of New Mexico. By

this modern scientific process dry, almost arid lands, become productive, and although the range of crops grown is naturally limited, cereals and many vegetables are raised with success.

Another industry which contributes its share to the outdoor activity of the Sunshine State is lumbering, for New Mexico is rich in timber, possessing a forest area of more than eight million five hundred thousand acres or eleven per cent of its total. A large portion of this area is contained in the Apache, Carson, Coronado, Datil, Gila, Lincoln, Manzano, and Santa Fe national forests.

AS well as contributing to the industrial wealth of the State, this forest area also provides unsurpassed recreational regions. In their deep wilderness reserve the sportsman finds wild life still in existence as in the days when the Indians alone hunted and fished in the mountains and along the streams. To preserve these primitive spots, portions of the national forests of New Mexico, totaling one million acres, have been set aside in their virgin form.

Within these areas the cutting of timber is prohibited, and the construction of roads or other means of communication is limited to what is absolutely necessary for the protection and administration of the area itself. Accessible only by trail, on horseback or by foot travel, these wilderness tracts provide happy hunting grounds for the hunter and angler. Here the Nimrod finds big game plentiful, while the follower of Izaak Walton revels in the fine fishing waters of this State.

In the midst of so much virgin wilderness the large Indian population of New Mexico fits har-

moniously into the scene. Some twenty-eight thousand nine hundred and forty-one Indians reside on government reservations. The Navajo Indian Reservation includes the northwest corner of the State, to the east lies the Jicarilla Apache Reservation, while the Mescalero Apaches dwell in the south central section. There are also eighteen Indian pueblos, with a population of ten thousand five hundred sixty-five. Among the most famous of these are Zuni, the largest in New Mexico, and Acoma, perched atop its four-hundred-foot rock.

Contributing color to the outdoor life of the Sunshine State are the numerous Indian dances, festivals, and ceremonials which dot the calendar with red-letter days the year round. Among the most important is the mammoth Intertribal Indian Ceremonial which takes place annually in August in Gallup, a picturesque spot situated in the romantic Navajo country of canyons and cedar-covered mesas. At this time the streets of this Southwestern town, called the In-

dian capital of the world, are thronged with blanketed braves and jewelry-bedecked squaws. More than twenty tribes participate in this three-day celebration of rodeo, races, chants, and dances.

Of natural wonders in the Sunshine State, there is a long and thrilling list, ranging from awesome canyons and petrified forests to the mysterious White Sands, a sixty-mile desert of pure gypsum, and the weird Bottomless Lakes, near Roswell. Preëminent, however, are the famous Carlsbad Caverns, the largest-known caves in the world, which draw more than one million visitors every year.

But even more refreshing than the scenic beauty of the Sunshine State is that intangible spirit of the outdoor West, as tonic as a breeze from the great open spaces, and as nostalgic as the click of a cowboy's high-heeled boots. This spirit it is which meets the newcomer to-day with the greeting extended the pioneer of early times, a hearty "*Bien venido!*" or "Welcome, stranger, to New Mexico."

SOME HOG!

OUT in Manhattan, Montana, Farmer Jim Scollard read a newspaper item, which told as how a Pennsylvania farmer had raised a hog that weighed seven hundred and forty-seven pounds. The reading of this caused Farmer Scollard no surprise. When asked why, he said that he had raised a hog that weighed eight hundred and eight pounds, and didn't consider it such an awful big hog at that. Some hog, we'd say!

MISPLACED HEART

IT is said about some humans that they wear their hearts on their sleeves, but on the farm of Howard Dalamatre, near Vermilion, Ohio, a calf was born with its heart in its mouth. That is, the heart is high up in the calf's throat, and by putting your hand on the animal's throat, you can feel the heart beat.



DESERT DOOM

By RONALD G. EVERSON

Author of "Peaceful Gun-fighter," etc.

FROM horizon to horizon the desert spread in a vast mottled reddish expanse that seemed empty of all life, yet it was teeming with thousands of sly, fierce forms of life that hunted or fled, that fought and won, or fought and died. Under the full glare of midday, heat hazed danced, pirouetting among the gaudy cluster-headed strawberry cactus and the scraggly mesquite. Across this wilderness, two steel rails kept each other company, and over them the heat dance was more tumultuous than anywhere else, rising in a long wavering ridge of dazzling brilliance, shimmering, unreal.

Presently the rails set up a hum-

ming sound, softer than that of a cicada, but like it in tonal quality. From far off to the northeastward, smoke smudged up above the land rim. Under the smoke, after a time, appeared the black indefinite speck of a locomotive. It came on, scarcely seeming to move, yet growing in size and in the elaboration of detail, until the sun glistened from its headlight glass and from bits of polished metal. The humming of the rails was lost in the increasingly deep rumble of the train itself.

From the spiny shelter of a yellow-flowered prickly pear, a bird, a cock of the plains, with the tail of its half-digested lizard dinner hanging from its beak, looked out in con-

tented contemplation at the switch and siding that waited here in the midst of the dry wastes. Close to the siding stood a whitewashed stock pen, with the slatted sides of its runway ramp showing the gouges made by the horns of cattle, frantic in past loadings. The pen was empty now. There were no cattle visible near the siding or anywhere about.

The train—a freight—came to a stop by the switch, shunted back and forth, and finally snorted away again, leaving two cattle cars and a box car on the siding. The sounds of the train diminished into the distance; soon the humming faded out of the rails. Silence settled again over the desert. A vast hot silence!

A MAN pushed back the box-car door and stuck his head out inquiringly. For a long moment he squinted into the glare. Then he dropped to the ground to widen and improve his view. Perspiration trickled down his forehead as he shaded his eyes with both hands.

"Well, I'll be——" Slowly he walked over to an eight-foot post to which was nailed a white-painted board with black letters and figures. The sign read:

MESA JUNCTION: 152.7 Miles

Desperately the man looked all about him. There was no dwelling, no building at all except the stock pen with its ramp. Worst of all—there was no water tower. He went back to the shade of the box car and sat down on the ballast.

He was a stockily built fellow in his forties. Several days' growth of beard bristled darkly on a convex face that was dominated by a long, bent nose. His eyes were set so close together as to give him the appear-

ance of a habitual peering expression. He wore "gas-pipe pants" and calf-high boots without spurs. His checkered shirt was open at the throat, about which was draped a grime-glazed bandanna. Pushed to the back of his tousled head was a wide-brimmed hat of no particular color.

In a way, he fitted into the desert. He fitted it better than did the railway with its cars. And yet there was a quality of the desert which the man vaguely seemed to lack. There was something sublime about the desert. There was nothing sublime about "Killer" Ware.

The two cartridge belts, their loops filled with live shells, marked the kind of man he was. The mouths of the holsters were shiny where the leather had been polished by hands that drew out the six-guns.

"A hundred and fifty miles from Mesa Junction!" said Killer Ware, savoring the idea bitterly. Then he launched into a complicated cursing. He cursed the mission that had brought him down into this end of the State. He cursed the box car in which he had thought to ride into Mesa Junction. He cursed the sotol which he had drunk en route to ease the joltings of the trucks.

"Filthy stuff—that sotol!" he complained. "I maybe should ha' knowed it would put me to sleep."

On a sudden thought, he arose and crawled back into the car, emerging a moment later with a bottle.

"One shot left!" He took it off expertly, with his upper lip over the mouth of the bottle to let air get up behind the sotol. Thus the liquid ran unhindered into his burning throat.

He hurled the bottle away from him. Too bad there were always ten drops left in a bottle. Ten drops that you couldn't drain off!

Startled by the fall of the bottle, a bird darted from a covert. It was the cock of the plains. Killer Ware's right gun came out in a careless streak of light. He fired and reholstered the weapon, all in one motion. The bird died. Inside it was the lizard which it had killed. The desert was full of things that hunted and fought and died. Killer Ware fitted rather well into the scheme of things. Only, he lacked that touch of dignity that wild things have.

His mission to this part of the State was undignified. He had come to kill a man for money.

FROM his shirt he took out a dog-eared photograph. It showed a young fellow, a rancher, by the look of his clothes. He was smiling, probably because he had an arm about his pretty wife, and his little son stood in front of him. Ware turned the picture over. Some one had scrawled on the back: "Jim Osborne." That some one had been a man up north. Jim Osborne was interfering with his business, which was the procuring of dressed beef for market. The man had a good many helpers collecting the meat for him without paying for it. Conducted over a wide territory, it was a profitable business. At least, it had been profitable until Jim Osborne had organized his neighbor ranchers to put a stop to it. Thus Killer Ware had been hired.

"I should ha' rode down here on a hoss," Ware told himself. "A hoss don't get shunted off on a siding in the middle of nowhere while you're sleepin' off a sotol jag. But I was in too blamed much of a hurry to get along with the job of earnin' them two hundred dollars that's offered for this Jim Osborne. I had to come snortin' here fast by train. That just goes to show you—"

He interrupted himself because he was putting the photograph back inside his shirt, and his hand touched something else there. He drew it out—a rough map of the district, drawn by the same hand that had named Jim Osborne on the photograph. Wade had forgotten about this map. He began to study it, his lips moving.

A passenger train came up out of the southward. Wade went around the box car, into the sun, and stood near the main line. He waved the small crinkled paper of the map. He yelled for the train to stop and rescue him from the waterless wastes. But the locomotive and its gleaming steel string roared on past.

Ware went back to the box car, taking a place several feet east of his former position, for the shadow had moved with the afternoon. He resumed his study of the map.

"Looks like I can make a short cut to this Jim Osborne's place by lightin' out right across this here desert," he said. "No real need to go down to Mesa Junction and come up that way. Osborne lives right across there."

He pointed a bony finger. Many, many hours—days—away across those shimmering flats was his goal. His goal meant money. Money could buy liquor. What did thirst matter, a little thirst, if you could get money to buy liquor! Thirst for water was a trifle compared to the money that might come to buy a liquid that was better even than sotol. Such was Killer Ware's creed.

But he waited until nearly sundown before he started afoot across the desert. He was sure of himself, but careful, thinking of the money he wanted so badly. At first he steered by the last of the sun, and then by the glow in the place where

it had been. With the sudden night of the desert, the stars appeared, and he traced the Dipper's pointers to the polestar, calculating his way from that.

The desert was beautiful in the gloom, and Ware almost felt some of this beauty. The dark outline of a candelabra cactus reared mysteriously. A coyote gave tongue afar off.

Toward dawn some cattle stirred in the man's path. He halted while a young bull pawed the ground, threatening him. After a time, the cattle moved away uncertainly, and Ware followed at a respectful distance. The cattle began to travel as with a definite objective, head to tail. They led him to the water hole of their morning drink. He crowded in with them, frightening them, not caring about them in his burning desire for water.

HE had no canteen, so he drank as much as he dared, pausing for long intervals in his drinking. Then he drew back a few rods and slept on the ground.

The growing heat woke him, and he stood up, giving a routine curse for the new day with its untroubled sun. He went to the water hole, which was limpid again, for the cattle were gone, and he drank. Then he calculated his position from the sun and took up his journey.

By noon hunger assailed him, adding to his thirst. He had brought some food with him from the box car, but this he had finished during the night. A steer, seen in the distance to his right, settled all problems. He maneuvered closer and brought the beast down with a well-directed shot. Then he had blood to drink and meat to eat, as soon as it was broiled over the mesquite fire which he made.

He slept for an hour in the dubious shade of a white cholla. Then he went on, carrying meat for his evening meal. Always his mind centered on the money he sought to earn. Money was the great thing. With it he could buy liquor far superior to the fiery sotol. Nothing mattered—hardship or danger—when there was a chance for money. He thought of the placer gold that was supposed to lie hidden in some of the dry stream beds of this part of the country. Gold was the very essence of money—the raw richness that you could hold in your hands and say, "Power!" Power to buy whisky in some town up north. Power to hire people to wait on you while you lolled, drinking, in a cool room, also paid for with gold. These were heady thoughts for a man afoot in the blazing day. They were thoughts to make a man reckless.

The character of the country changed somewhat toward nightfall. There was more grass, less sand showing. There was water in springs and trickles. Cattle appeared in increasing numbers, and once Ware dropped flat at the sight of a horseman, a cowboy, evidently.

That night the man who had been sent to kill Jim Osborne slept under a limestone ledge while rain drizzled down. In the morning he shot another steer, and had fresh meat for his breakfast. He went on, refreshed with water from a spring; but it was whisky he wanted. You had to have money to buy whisky. One hand dropped to a gun butt as he walked.

"I'm goin' to earn that money right soon," he told himself.

Late in the forenoon, the desert came around him again. He was forced to eat his dinner meat without a chaser of water. All through the afternoon he went on, very

thirsty. And he was growing tired. After all, walking was an unusual exercise with him. He began to wish that he had shot the horseman whom he had seen the previous day. If he could have taken the man's horse, all would have been easy. But this walking was a parching business.

Night came—the quick night of the desert, like the flap of a black wing. Ware's close-set eyes picked out the polestar. He had begun to hate it as he hated the sun and the yielding, yet persistent, sand underfoot. He was staggering when the polestar brought him to a rude dwelling.

It was the first habitation of man that he had seen for a long time. Almost there welled in him a feeling of the comradeship for whoever might be inside. He shouted, and his voice was an astonishingly faint croak.

WARE recognized the dwelling to be a Navajo hogan, so he expected to see an Indian come out, but the excited voice of a white man called to him, bidding him enter.

On unsteady legs, he moved eagerly to the doorway. Then, one hand hovering near to a gun butt, he went warily inside. Three men were there, white men all, desert rats. He placed them instantly as seekers after gold. Grub hooks, a shovel, and a pick leaned against the tattered bark of the circular log wall. Ware saw a mortar and pestle, used among the more experienced prospectors for breaking up rock.

The three men spoke very little. They gave him water, a little at a time. They fed him thin flapjacks of ground maize meal, cooked on a hot stone, in the ashes of a mesquite fire which they had made outdoors. Afterwards, one of them rolled a

cigarette for him, and he smoked luxuriously, sitting on the earthen floor, his tired back against the wall.

"Where's this Jim Osborne live?" Ware asked then.

"Less'n a day's tramp, over that way," a bald-headed desert rat said, pointing accurately. "Mostly dry country, when you go into it from this way."

"This Osborne got a big spread?"

"Not very. He's just a young hombre. Just gettin' started. He's got a mighty fine wife and a cracker-jack of a son."

The bald-headed man relapsed into silence, smoking meditatively on a short-stemmed pipe. He did not ask Ware's business with Jim Osborne, did not ask Ware's name, for that matter. None of the prospectors asked questions.

One of them gave Ware a blanket. He was glad of that, after the chilly nights in the open. He rolled up and appeared to sink immediately into a deep slumber. But it was not his nature often to sleep when there was cause for wakefulness that might bring him gain. He smelled opportunity here. There was an undercurrent of excitement about the three dry-country miners. And he well knew that only one thing could make them excited. Gold!

So he watched slyly. If they had gold, and if they were like other miners he had known, they would have to look at that gold. An hour ebbed out by the flickering light of a candle. The bald-headed man moved over and peered down at Ware, listening to his deep and regular breathing.

"Sound asleep!" the bald-headed man said.

He was a big, rugged fellow, with mild blue eyes. From the weathering of his skin, Ware guessed the man had hunted gold for a long time

through these arid plains. Well, he had found some gold now.

There it was, sure enough! The bald-headed one was bringing it out of a pack sack that lay against the wall at a point farthest from the door. The other two crowded close about. They poured gold dust through their fingers; their eyes danced.

"Children!" thought Ware. "Children playing with a dangerous toy?"

The bald-headed man came over and examined Ware again. Then he went to the door and looked quickly outside.

"Makes me kinda nervous, boys," he whispered. "I been peckin' around these parts for a good many years, and now to run plumb onto this here stuff! Fair makes me nervous! Somethin' is sure to happen."

"Forget it, Ed," the smallest prospector said, keeping his voice down. "Be thankful for your luck. We got enough to make our women-folk purty comfortable—be thankful for that."

"I am thankful," bald-headed big Ed whispered. "I feel like gettin' down on my knees this minute."

To Killer Ware's extreme wonderment, the fellow *did* get down on his knees. The muttered prayer of thankfulness that he offered up was crude enough in its wording, but it had a heart behind it, a heart and a soul. Ware could scarcely refrain from a guffaw.

ED arose after a time and put away the gold in its former hiding place. He and the others began to arrange themselves for sleep.

Ware stirred. He sat up, rubbing his close-set eyes.

"Mornin' already?" he inquired.

"Naw," Ed told him. "Some

night left yet. Make yourself comfortable. Want another blanket?"

Ware shook his head. "I feel about ready to pull out now," he said.

Ed looked at him in surprise.

"You sure come around fast," he praised the guest. "Well, if you want to light out early, here's some flapjacks we got made up. And here's a canteen of water. Better be careful with that water, there's plenty of dry goin' toward Jim Osborne's."

"Who said I was goin' to Osborne's?" flared Ware. For the life of him, he could not wear the velvet glove all the time. The furious nature of him had to show through, despite himself.

"Excuse me," he said slowly. "Reckon I do need more sleep. And I'm mighty obliged to you all for the grub and water."

He lay down. Before the candle was blown out, he marked the location of the canteen and the tightly packaged flapjacks. He noted the other two canteens which the men had, but they were between Ed and the smallest prospector. The gold was over beyond them; not so very difficult to reach. The three desert rats had weapons, of sorts, though they kept them more or less out of sight, in deference to their guest.

Ed puffed away the flame of the candles. The hogan was, on the instant, black. But Ware closed his eyes and counted sixty. When he opened his eyes, he could see faintly the forms of the men, the general scheme of the rough dwelling. He thought of the Navajo who must have built it, and gone on to better hunting. Many men must have spent occasionally nights in this shelter. But not likely had there ever been such a fierce conflict of desires as now.

Ware watched for an hour, breathing with studied care. He listened to the breathing of the others, for he was learned in the tricks of men, so that he knew it would be difficult to deceive him. All three of the desert rats slept. Of that he was sure.

And being sure, he began little by little to move. He kept one hand on a gun butt. There was always that way; but three opposed to one was a ratio that he did not wish to accept.

So he reached the gold in silence, and for many minutes of silence he was employed there in the darkness. At last, with a creaking of the door, he was outside. Almost immediately, big Ed, the bald-headed prospector with the mild eyes, came out after him. There was the bulge of a pistol inside Ed's shirt. In the faint light, he looked at Killer Ware.

"I'm pullin' out," said Ware. "Much obliged for everythin'." He had the flapjacks and the canteen showing.

Ed looked him over. There was nothing to attract suspicion. Ed, as the creaking door wakened him, had tested the weight of the gold pack sack before he had come out to see Ware. He did not suspect that there was only sand, from the floor, in the pack sack now. The other two prospectors, crowding behind Ed, had also tested the weight of what they thought was their hidden treasure. They looked at Ware's clothes and found no betraying bulge in them. They waved him good luck as their guest started off toward the south.

"Jim Osborne's spread is over there across the desert to the west," Ed directed.

"The devil with Osborne," flared Ware. "I'm goin' south."

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He kept on for a few miles, until a rocky upland allowed him to change direction without leaving much of a trail to tell which way he had gone. Then he turned west.

"Might as well pick up them two hundred dollars for shootin' this Jim Osborne," he told himself. "Two hundred dollars'll pay for a sight of drinkin'." He began to go over in his mind how wonderful a thing drink was. It had put him to sleep there in the box car—he who practically never slept when there was danger to his plans. But drink had shifted his plans for him, casting him adrift upon a remote siding, forcing him to come where toil-gnarled prospectors sat late into the night, happy over their sudden riches. Drink had led him to wealth for which a man might labor all his long years—and never gain. Drink was a wonderful thing; and two hundred dollars, paid for the removing of a rancher who was a thorn in the flesh to the collectors of dressed beef, would buy a lot of excellent whisky.

So Killer Ware trudged westward across the broad land where creosote bushes grew, and paloverdes. To the southward, he knew, from a study of his map, lay a stretch of country that was broader still and as arid. He could not hope to cross that. But Jim Osborne's place was "less'n a day's tramp" to the west. He calculated that he could make that. He was sure of himself.

YOUNG Jim Osborne was not sure of himself. He had learned on good authority that the ring of rustlers he was working against had sent a two-gun man down to get him. He even knew the man's name—Ware—and the sheriff of a county to the north had sent Ware's full-face and profile photographs, taken when the man had

been apprehended for the theft of a horse. Two deputies had ridden up from Mesa Junction to protect Osborne; but they had gone away the day before, to verify the rumor of some beef takings.

Over the supper table in his tidy new ranch house, Jim Osborne smiled at Alice, his wife. "Give me another week," he said, "and I'll have these beef thieves done with for good. The organization against them is almost perfect now. Another week is all I ask."

"I want more than a week for you," Alice told him, her eyes somber with the fear that was possessing her. "I want a lifetime for you, Jim. I want you for me—and little Jim."

The boy had finished his meal and been excused to go out and play. They could see him through a window, throwing a stick for his dog to run after.

Jim Osborne pushed back his chair and stood up. The thinness of his regular-featured face showed the tension he had been under ever since this beef-killing trouble had come upon him. He did not know that it was his honesty and his courage and his buoyant youth that made the other ranchers trust him in this crisis; but he did know that events had centered on him, and that the responsibility for the prosperity of the countryside and the safety of its citizens depended on him for the next few days. He *had* to live.

He felt keenly his lack of ability. He was only a fair shot, and he had spent too much time at hard work to have learned and practiced the art of the swift drawing out of his pistol. His right hand strayed now to his pistol butt, but there was no confidence in that gesture.

"Every man," said Alice, "has within himself the seeds of his own

destruction. This Killer Ware! We must learn how to overcome him."

Jim smiled again, but it was a false smile that tried only to hearten his wife. He kissed her and went outside to catch little Jim and give him one great hug. Then the father went down to the corral and roped out his dun mare, saddled and bridled her. He mounted and rode straight away from the ranch buildings. Rode east. There was in him the premonition that it was from that direction danger would come. The railway lay in that direction. If Killer Ware came from Mesa Junction, he would be traveling from the east when he arrived near to the ranch. For several days Jim had patrolled the land that flattened away into the desert along the edge of his property. He wanted to meet the killer there, away from the ranch house, away from Alice and little Jim.

"Every man carries the seeds of his own destruction within himself," he thought, meditating on his wife's words, as he rode off the grasslands and into a jumble of rocks that flanked the desert.

HE saw a man on foot to the left of him and somewhat above him. With a terrible sense of doom, he realized that the man had seen him already, probably had been watching him during these last few seconds, as he, Jim Osborne, rode, deep in meditation.

He reached for his pistol. But he knew that the other could shoot him before he might have the weapon out.

"I've got to win—got to!" gasped Jim.

And then he saw that the other man was waving to him. He heard the man hailing him, calling him by name:

"Osborne! Jim Osborne!"

Jim reined around and watched the fellow scrambling down among the rocks. He saw that the fellow was one of the desert's numerous prospectors.

"Hello, Ed," he called heartily, his voice loud with relief.

But there was anxiety on big Ed's face.

"Will you come along up here and help me?" he shouted.

Jim rode up a little draw and came beside Ed, who promptly led the way farther back among the rocks, until the dazzling vista of the desert spread before them both.

"I need help getting this hombre to a doctor," Ed said, pointing.

Jim looked down and saw below him the prostrate figure of a man. The memory of that man's photograph was so well burned into his mind that he immediately recognized Killer Ware.

"Found him out in the desert—near done in," said Ed, mopping his bald pate. "Me and my pards have been huntin' him all day. The other two lost the track, I reckon."

"What did you want him for?" Jim asked quietly, thinking of Alice's words, that a man's own desires and general nature might bring him to destruction.

"He took most of our gold," said

the prospector, working his way down to the insensible Killer Ware, as Jim followed more slowly, leading the sure-footed mare. "He got away with the gold right under our eyes," Ed went on. "We couldn't see a sign of it on him. And it wasn't till we come to look in our pack sack that we knew. By that time he had a big lead. If it hadn't been that he cared more for gold than anything else, I reckon he'd have got clean through to your ranch. I been feedin' him dribs of water, but the sun near baked the life out of the ornery critter—out there in the desert with a dry canteen!"

Jim came up and bent over Killer Ware. He noticed the canteen which the inert man had, and lifted it.

"But it's full," he said. "How can you say the man had no water?"

"It's full, all right!" Ed laughed bitterly. "But the cuss poured the water out on our hogan floor, under a blanket, where we didn't notice at first. And he filled the canteen with somethin' else—somethin' he figured he needed more than water."

Ed unscrewed the top of the canteen and poured out a handful of yellow dust.

"Gold!" he said.

And Jim Osborne murmured softly, wonderingly: "Seeds of destruction!"

In Next Week's Issue, "BETWEEN SNOWS," by LLOYD ERIC REEVE.

RAILROAD SAVES ROBIN'S HOME

A MOTHER robin interrupted a railroad's schedule near Chicago, Illinois, when she selected a box car for her nest of four eggs. A brakeman who discovered the nest called his foreman.

"Switch the car to a siding," the foreman ordered. "We can't disturb that family."



THE THREE MESQUITEERS

A Serial

By WILLIAM COLT MacDONALD

BARRY HEENAN, boss of the Hatchet Ranch near the town of Spanish Tanks, forms a racketeering organization known as the Herdsmen's Protective Society, with the aid of his crooked associates, Tombstone Eades, Duke Marsh, and Lee Crampton. Tucson Smith, who with Lullaby Joslin and Stony Brooke owns the 3 Bar O Ranch near Los Potros, is approached by Lee Crampton, alias Brownlee, and a Hatchet gunman, Waco Royce, alias Dowling. They

tell Smith that for five dollars a head the 3 Bar O trail herds will be protected from rustlers.

Although the 3 Bar O plans to drive cattle through to Fortune City, because of exorbitant freight rates charged by the San Mateo & Escabrosa Railroad, Smith refuses the offer and calls the scheme crooked. In a gun play which follows, he wounds Royce.

Heenan secretly gets the financial backing of V. N. Morehouse, principal stockholder of the railroad.

He then recruits men, in preparation for his war on the 3 Bar O.

On the trail the 3 Bar O drive comes without incident to within a day's march of Spanish Tanks. Then they encounter five strange riders. Tige Bodley, their spokesman, claims to be running the Circle B outfit near by, and demands to inspect the herd to see if any of his strays have been picked up. The 3 Bar O trio refuse to be delayed on this pretext. Trouble starts, and Stony shoots one of the strangers, and the others are disarmed, before they ride away.

When the drive camps for the night a mile from Spanish Tanks, only two hands are allowed to go to town. Later one returns alone.

CHAPTER VIII.

TUCSON SWALLOWS THE BAIT.

TEX MALCOLM came riding into the circle of firelight, a grin crossing his face as he noted the apprehensive looks of his mates who had all gained their feet.

Tucson said quickly, "What's happened to Bat?"

Malcolm's grin widened. "I'd say, offhand, that he might get a stomach ache. Last I saw him, he was eatin' choc'late cake and sure stowin' it away. Don't worry, Tucson; he's all right."

The men relaxed somewhat.

Tucson asked, "What's up?"

"Bat and I talked it over"—Malcolm stepped down from his saddle—"and decided you ought to know. We've heard you mention a couple of times that you wished you could be drivin' a larger herd. Well, mebbe you can."

"I'm waitin' to hear," Tucson said patiently.

"You know this afternoon, when

we pulled into town," Malcolm continued, "we saw a small herd, over tother side of town?"

Tucson remembered. "About five hundred Herefords, I'd say."

"Five hundred twenty by actual count. Pothook brand. Owned by a feller named Frank Perrine, from the southeast part of this State. Four days ago, those hombres that tried to stop us yesterday—Tige Bodley and his crew—stopped Perrine and his herd with the same excuse they give us—wanted to look at the herd for Circle B cows. Perrine accommodated him. By the time Bodley and his crew had got the herd millin' and nervous, without findin' any Circle B stock, they rode away. Perrine decided to camp right there. That night, somethin' stampeded his cows. The next mornin', out of twelve hundred head, all Perrine and his punchers could locate was five hundred twenty."

Tucson swore softly. "The skunks! So that's their game! What next, Tex?"

"Perrine made Spanish Tanks without further trouble, but now he's plumb reluctant to pull out again. A passin' rider told him we were headed this way, so Perrine decided to wait and talk to you."

"What have I got to do with it?"

"Perrine wonders if you'd object to him and his herd trailin' along with us. Says he'd feel safer travelin' with a big outfit. He's heard of you and Lullaby and Stony, and to listen to him tell it, you'd think rustlers wouldn't dare try to stop us. Perrine just got the scare of his life—"

"Yellow streak?" Rube Phelps asked.

"I don't think so," said Malcolm. "He'd just like to play safe. Struck me as bein' rather green at the busi-

ness. Admitted this was the first year he'd owned an outfit."

"Where's his crew?" Lullaby asked.

"Takin' care of the cows."

Stony frowned. "I dunno about throwin' in with a strange crew. Can't tell how we'd get along. We don't want any fights at this stage, to hold up the drive."

Malcolm nodded. "I said somethin' like that to Perrine. He understands how you might feel. If you don't want to let him trail with us, he'll sell us his cows at a bargain."

"How much is a bargain?" Tucson asked.

"He didn't say," Malcolm replied, "but from the way Perrine talks, I got a hunch you can get his cows dirt cheap. He wants to talk to you."

"Where'd you meet him?"

"Bat and me strolled around the town and finally dropped into the Lone Star Saloon. It looked like the best place in town. We'd just taken one drink, when Perrine, who was drinkin' there, asked if we were trailin' through. When he learned we were 3 Bar O, he like to kiss us, he was that pleased. Please notice, Tucson, Bat and me had only had one drink."

Tucson smiled. "What next?"

"Perrine told us his story. He seems like a right friendly hombre. He's from over east of the Black Coffin range, and you should hear what he has to say about the H. P. S. Perrine thinks they're nothin' but a bunch of crooks. Anyway, he insisted on takin' us up to his sister's place—"

"Is she young?" Tucson asked quickly. "Pretty?"

"Neither one." Tex laughed.

"She's married to boot. Lives in Spanish Tanks. A middle-aged

woman, but seemed right nice. And from the way Bat was layin' into her cake and coffee when I pulled out for camp, she's a good cook. I had some of her pie myself, before tellin' Perrine I'd ride out and speak to you fellers. What do you think?"

Tucson scratched his head. "Well, I'd sort of like to help out a cowman in trouble—especially one that had the nerve to buck the Herdsmen's Protective Society. He can't be very yellow. If he's sort of green at the business, it may account for his attitude. I don't like the idea of havin' another crew with us. I wouldn't buy Perrine's cows unless they shaped up with ours and the price was right."

"I don't think you'd have any trouble about price," Malcolm said. "Perrine would sooner sell than drive. Course, you'd have to see the cows first."

"What we might do," Lullaby put in, "is to drive the cows up to Fortune City for Perrine and just charge him for expenses. I mean if we didn't want to buy 'em. I'd like to lend the feller our help, if possible."

"That's an idea, Lullaby," Tucson said. "C'mon; you and Lullaby grab yore brons, and we'll ride in to Spanish Tanks and talk to Perrine, anyway. Mebbe we can figure some way to pull him out of his trouble. Ananias, you take charge of the camp while we're gone."

Malcom grinned. "Reckon I better go back with you. I was to have two drinks and I've only had one. Besides, I'll have to show you where Perrine's sister and her husband live. Their name's Eades. Old Eades is a pessimistic old duffer that don't say much, but I reckon his heart's in the right place. But don't mention drinkin' or smokin'.

He's death on both of 'em. He nigh to died when I lit a cigarette."

"All right, Tex, you'll return with us. Wait until we get our hawsses."

Tex whirled his pony back toward town, then slowed to a walk. In a few minutes, the Three Mesquiteers caught up with him, and the four men loped off toward Spanish Tanks.

FIFTEEN minutes later, a cowhand entered the back room of Ballou's Lone Star Saloon where Barry Heenan, Duke Marsh, Lee Crampton, and Waco Royce were grouped about a table beneath a swinging kerosene lamp. Heenan, as usual, was in good spirits. Marsh, Royce, and Crampton showed the strain of waiting. The cowhand stepped inside, closed the door carefully behind him, and disclosed a grinning countenance.

"News and glad tidings, courier?" Heenan smiled.

"I reckon." The cowboy chuckled. "Smith, his two pals, and that Malcolm feller just hit town and are headed down to the house."

Heenan laughed softly. "Smith has swallowed the bait! Now, things simply can't help working out. You're sure, Quist?"

"Saw 'em with my own eyes," the cowhand said.

Heenan's eyes lighted with joy. "What a game this is! Lee—Duke—Waco! The sun is shining. They've fallen for the idea!"

Crampton nodded. "Looks that way. I hope nothing slips——"

"Hasn't it worked out, to date, just like I said?"

Marsh admitted the truth of the statement, adding, "What's the next move?"

Heenan said: "All right, Quist, ride to the 3 Bar O camp and do your part. Duke, you round up

what men you need, and go to the house. I've explained what you're to do. And don't take any chances."

Waco Royce said: "I go with Duke, don't I? I'm sort of anxious to get a crack at that Smith hombre. My arm's still lame——"

"Now, Waco," Heenan chided, "don't let personal animosity confuse our aims."

"Barry," Waco complained, "I wish you'd talk American. Them foreign words you use——"

Heenan's laugh cut him short. "Waco, you know your part. Gather your crew and pick up the cows when the time comes."

"My arm's still pretty sore, Barry."

"Bosh, Waco. I know better. That arm didn't seem to bother you yesterday when you were shoeing that horse. Duty before pleasure, you know. You'll have a chance at Smith later."

Heenan turned to Crampton. "Lee, just as soon as Duke has turned his trick, you get Flora out of the house, hire a rig, and drive her to the nearest town where she can get a stage. Pay her what she asks. Flora is a perfect actress when she stays away from drink, but she talks too much when she's in her cups. I don't want her hanging around town."

"She said something this afternoon about wanting that house where we're putting on our show for the 3 Bar O," Crampton said.

Heenan raised his eyebrows. "Raisin' the price on us, eh?"

"Flora claims it's worth more money just to pose as Tombstone's wife."

Heenan chuckled. "Perhaps she's right, at that. All right, we'll give her the house, furniture and all, just as we bought it. We won't have any further use for it after a week

or so. You've got the deed, Lee. Register the transfer at the county seat when we get things settled, and tell Flora not to show her face in Spanish Tanks for the next six months."

Heenan turned back to Waco. "Now, once you've gathered that herd, don't waste time. Push 'em along fast. Once they've arrived, they'll have plenty time to take on fat again. There's good water and grass there. And enough food to feed an army. The rest of us will be showing up within a few days, I hope. If we don't, you just sit pat until you hear from me."

"Right, Barry."

Quist, Crampton, Marsh, and Royce rose and left the room. The door closed softly. Sounds from the barroom drifted back to Heenan's ears. He sat, lost in thought, a smile of complete satisfaction on his features. Finally he reached to the table, tilted a brown bottle over a small tumbler, poured a neat half inch of whisky and drank it.

"Life is real, life is earnest," he quoted softly. Rolling a cigarette with long, steady fingers, he sat back to await the next news of his various machinations.

CHAPTER IX.

"GIT THEM CATTLE MOVIN'!"

IN something less than an hour after Tucson and the other three had left the 3 Bar O camp, the sounds of an approaching rider were heard, then a long hail:

"Hello, the camp-p-p!"

"Hello yoreself!" Sourdough shouted back. "C'mon in an' light!"

Rube Phelps and Ananias, lounging not far from the fire, propped themselves on elbows.

"Who's that?" Rube asked.

"Voice didn't sound familiar," said Ananias.

Bud Taggart got to his feet, peering through the darkness. The stars didn't furnish much light.

The horse came nearer, drew to a stop, its rider dismounting and dropping reins to the earth. He stepped into the circle of firelight, a lean length of cowhand with leathery skin and high cheek bones.

"3 Bar O camp, ain't it?" he asked cheerfully. "Thought I'd drop around and get acquainted. Name's Quist—Ed Quist. I'm ridin' for the Pothook iron."

"Shore, shore, come in an' sit," Sourdough invited cordially.

He introduced Quist to the others, who shook hands. Quist found a place between Sourdough and Taggart.

Sourdough went on: "You're one of Perrine's men, ain't you? Had some tough luck four days back and——"

"Blast Bodley, or whoever he is!" Quist's features darkened. "We was agin' lettin' his crew cut our herd wide open that a way, but Perrine wanted to be accommodatin'. Imagine us losin' nigh seven hundred cows. I bet Bodley was back of that. We been hopin' Perrine would drive through anyway, but he acts like his nerve was shook. Course, he's young."

"Just how did it happen?" Ananias wanted to know.

Quist supplied glib details. "Don't know much myself," he ended. "I was in my blankets when the stam-pede come. After we gathered what we could, we pushed on to Spanish Tanks. Perrine's got a married sister livin' there. Ain't seen her for a year or more. But he maintains he won't go no farther. Knew you fellers was behind and planned mebbe to get help or sell his cows.

Say, I sort of expected to meet your bosses——”

“Tucson Smith and his pards already heard from yore boss,” Ananias explained. “They’ve rid to town to talk it over with him.”

“That’s fine.” Quist smiled. He wasn’t a bad-looking fellow, and the 3 Bar O men felt friendly toward him. “In case you people take over our herd, do you s’pose you’ll need any extra hands?”

“You’ll have to talk to our owners, I reckon,” Ananias replied.

“Well, thought I’d drop over and get acquainted, anyway,” Quist said.

The subject was dropped for a few moments, the conversation veering to other matters, including the weather.

“Yeah, this is sort of nice country,” Quist was saying, “but the nights are sure nippy. And the days hot. But at night you need a good fire if you ain’t in your blankets.”

“That fire’s needin’ wood right now,” Sourdough hinted.

Quist was nearest the fire. He reached over and covered the glowing embers with two fresh chunks of wood, then eyed the coffeepot longingly where it stood among the hot ashes.

“How’s for a cup of coffee to warm a man’s blood, cookie?” he asked.

“Help yoreself,” Sourdough said. “You’ll find a cup in the wagon.”

QUIST went to the rear of the chuck wagon, groped in the box of tinware, and returned bearing a tin cup. The idea seemed to be contagious; Ananias, Taggart, and Phelps also went for cups. Flames leaped high from the fresh fuel on the fire, partially concealing the actions of Quist from Ananias

who was on the opposite side of the flames. Quist was kneeling on one knee.

Quist poured his cup full, then lifted the lid of the coffeepot to sniff at the aroma of hot Java.

“Sure smells good,” he commented, one hand passing swiftly over the open pot before he dropped the lid.

At that moment, Ananias, Rube Phelps, and Taggart trooped up, bearing cups. Quist handed the pot to Ananias, rose, and, carrying his steaming cup, rejoined Sourdough.

“Don’t you fellers start no ‘man-on-the-pot’ horseplay, now,” Sourdough ordered crustily. “I didn’t aim, when I b’iled that potful, to have it used all up, jest so idjits could keep one man pourin’. There’s nighthawks needin’ that coffee. An’, somethin’ else, don’t forgit to wash them cups when you’ve through.”

“Right you are, big-hearted,” Ananias snapped sarcastically.

“You better get in on it yoreself,” Quist advised Sourdough, “before it’s all gone.”

Sourdough shook his head. “I never drink coffee this time o’ night,” he said grumpily. “It keeps me from sleepin’.”

“I bet this coffee wouldn’t,” Quist observed politely. “This is mighty good brew.”

He drained his cup, shifted his position on the earth to reach for tobacco and cigarette papers. The “makin’s” were offered first to Sourdough, who refused in favor of a smelly corncob pipe. When Quist had finished his cigarette, he went to the wagon, as cow-camp convention dictated, washed his cup, and replaced it. By this time the others had also put their cups away. Conversation filled in the next five minutes.

Ananias finally said: “Rube, it’s

nigh on to eleven thuty. Time to relieve Luke and Joe. Bud, you ride herd in my place with Rube. Tucson told me to run the camp until he got back. I'll keep an eye on yore cavvy, so you won't have them hawsses to fret you."

Rube and Bud Taggart rose from the fire and in a few minutes were riding out to the herd. Five minutes later, Luke Ford and Joe Adams dismounted near the wagon and stripped saddles from their mounts. They came wearily up to the fire, stretching tired muscles and carrying cups in their hands.

"Hows' the coffee, cookie?" Luke asked.

"There's been a bunch of hyenas messin' into it," Sourdough said, "but I reckon they's some left for you and Joe."

Adams and Ford brought their cups to the fire. Sourdough introduced them to Quist. Quist retold the story relating to the stampeding of Pothook cattle by trail cutters. Ananias yawned sleepily.

"Reckon I'll get out my bed. I ain't figurin' to sleep none until Tucson gets back, but it'll be a mite easier to rest." However, he made no move to rise, but sat staring, dull-eyed, into the fire.

"These nippy nights shore makes a man want his blankets," Adams observed. "I'll be ready for sleep myself."

"You an' me both," Ford said. "We can be thankful to sleep until mornin', Joe. An' I'm plumb weary."

ANANIAS gave vent to a jaw-breaking yawn, settled to a more comfortable position on the earth. Suddenly a snore parted his lips.

"Dog-gone if the ol' coot ain't fell sound asleep," Sourdough laughed.

"Pro'bly tired his brain all out thinkin' up that windy he spun to-night."

Luke Ford asked, "Ananias spill another of his stories?"

"The wildest yet," Sourdough snorted. "All about cows learnin' to skate."

The old cook repeated the story, adding graphic details. Adams, Ford, and Quist laughed heartily. Quist took up the conversation, telling stories of his own. Adams finally yawned. Ford's head commenced to nod.

"Adams," Quist said, laughing, "Ananias's sleepin' must be catchin'. I can hardly keep my own eyes open." But he made no move to rise.

"I'm havin' the same trouble," Ford said. "Reckon I'll turn in. C'mon, Joe."

He and Adams rose, went to the chuck wagon and hauled out their bed rolls, spread them on the earth. Quist went on talking to Sourdough who sat bright-eyed, gazing at the fire.

Quist said, "Yore coffee didn't keep them awake, cookie."

"It affects folks different. Jest the same, I'm glad I didn't take none. Reckon I better stir Ananias up before Tucson gets back."

"Aw, let him sleep," Quist protested. "Those old codgers may be hard as nails, but they need sleep to stay that way. Me, I'm ready to get into the hay myself."

The two talked a few minutes longer. Snores from Adams's and Ford's bed rolls were now mingling with those of Ananias Jones. Quist continued to talk, but noticed suddenly that Sourdough wasn't listening.

"Kind of funny," the old cook muttered.

"What's the matter?" Quist asked

lazily, his eyes watching Sourdough through narrowed lids.

"It's mighty quiet all of a sudden."

"You meanin' them snores?" Quist laughed.

Sourdough shook his head, sat a trifle straighter.

"Usually you can hear the night-hawks singin' to the cattle," he explained. "I don't hear a sound."

"Wind's in the wrong direction, mebbe," Quist speculated. He rose to his feet. "Well, I reckon I'll be gettin' back to camp. Mebbe I'll see you fellers to-morrow."

"Mebbe," Sourdough replied absent-mindedly.

He was still listening when Quist turned and started to pass behind him. For a moment Quist paused, gazing down on the defenseless head below him.

"Shore enjoyed my visit," Quist said. "You make fine coffee."

"You're welcome——"

And in that instant, Quist drew his six-shooter, raised it, then slammed the heavy barrel alongside Sourdough's head. Sourdough groaned briefly and slumped on his side!

Quist knelt, examined the unconscious figure, then quickly rose to his feet and listened. Except for the snoring sleepers, and a few sounds from the herd bedded down some distance away, there wasn't a thing to be heard.

Quist laughed, looked off to the southeast, and gave a peculiar whistle with superb carrying qualities in the night air. A quarter of a mile away the whistle was taken up and repeated. Quist nodded, knelt by Sourdough's motionless form, and commenced to drag it toward the wagon. Five minutes later he had Sourdough bound and gagged

and stretched in the wagon bed on a tumbled heap of bed rolls.

Stepping down from the wagon, his ear caught the sounds of approaching hoofbeats. The riders came nearer and finally swept to a halt around the camp. There were at least twenty-five men, hard-bitten, tough-looking individuals, headed by Waco Royce.

Royce laughed long and loud as he eyed the sleeping figures in camp. Quist said, "It worked, Waco."

"Barry's plans always work."

"That dang old cook wouldn't drink coffee. I had to knock him out with my gun barrel. Got him trussed up in his wagon."

One of the other riders said, "Coffee? I could drink a cup."

Quist said quickly: "Not out of that pot you won't. I got the last cup that was drinkable and wakable at the same time. You touch that java and you'll sleep like a bear holed up in winter."

"How about the nighthawks?" Royce asked.

"They drank the coffee. Sleepin' in their saddles, if they ain't already fell out. Brush 'em to one side if they get in yore way. Barry didn't want no killin' lessn it was necessary. He's wise. Bein' laughed at will hurt this 3 Bar O worse."

Royce laughed softly, shifted in his saddle, called out orders:

"All right, men, you know where the herd is and where to take it. Work fast, get them cattle strung out and coverin' distance. Jump pronto! Don't excite that herd none, but git them cows movin'! C'mon, Ed"—to Quist—"you an' me can take a look at them riders—if they're still ridin'. Cowboy, we'll make a laughin'stock of these so-called hard-boiled 3 Bar O pokes. This time we've made a real haul!"

Laughing, swearing gleefully, the

riders whirled their ponies in the direction of the herd.

In less than an hour the 3 Bar O cattle had been moved from their bedding ground and were being urged at a swift gait along the trail that led northward. At the spot where the cattle had been held, a pair of uncertain ponies, carrying sleeping riders who clung automatically to saddle horns, wandered aimlessly about.

Back in the 3 Bar O camp, where the fire had long since died down, three cowhands snored peacefully in unbroken slumber. Inside the chuck wagon an old cook struggled futilely against his bonds and, through a bandanna gag, voiced feeble, unintelligible curses relative to a throbbing headache and dirty crooks.

CHAPTER X.

SCATTERGUNS FOR SUCKERS.

MEANWHILE, the Three Mesquiteers, led by Tex Malcolm, had arrived in Spanish Tanks. Reaching the main street of the town, the men drew their ponies to a walk. Spanish Tanks looked like any other South-western cow town of the period and contained one principal thoroughfare and two or three smaller cross streets. The buildings were mostly of squat adobe or false-fronted frame construction.

Passing Ballou's Lone Star Saloon, Tex waved one hand and said to the Mesquiteers:

"That's the bar we met Perrine in. Best saloon in town, I reckon. Seemed quieter and more orderly than the others."

Tucson nodded. "We'll have that second drink of yores, Tex, on our way back. Where's this Perrine's sister live?"

"Opposite end of town, on one of

the cross streets. Nice quiet section, decent-lookin' houses, too."

At the second cross street, the riders turned the corner, and drew rein in front of a two-story frame house, surrounded by a white picket fence. A huge cottonwood tree spread wide branches above the eaves and, in summer, doubtless afforded a cool, shadowed front yard for residents of the house.

Tucson and his friends dismounted, tossing reins over the picket fence, and gazed at the house. There were curtains at the windows. It all looked very neat and home-like. In the front room, Tucson could see a woman seated at a melodeon, and the soft strains of an old hymn were dimly heard.

"That's Missis Eades at the organ," Tex said. "Bat is pro'bly still in the dinin' room eatin' choc'late cake. We should stop him before he founders. C'mon; we'll go in."

Tex led the way and knocked at the door. The melodeon music came to an abrupt stop. Footsteps were heard, and the door opened. A comely, middle-aged woman with placid eyes stood there.

"It's us, Missis Eades," Tex said.

"Oh, Mr. Malcolm and your friends! Lan' sakes, I didn't go to see you back so soon. Come right in, gentlemen. I've been expecting you."

The men stepped inside the door. Tex introduced his friends. The woman shook hands in friendly fashion.

"Mr. Wing is out in the dining room talking to Frank and my husband. Sakes alive!" She laughed, speaking to Tucson: "I never in all my born days see a body put away food like that boy can. But don't you worry, I've been expecting you. There's coffee hot and another cake waiting. Just make yourself com-

fortable. You can hang your things in the hall here."

A long stairway led up to a second floor from the hall, and to one side, on the wall, was a row of coat hooks. Tucson and the others hung up their sombreros, then divested themselves of cartridge belts and holstered guns, as cow-country courtesy demanded, to place them beside the guns and hat of Bat Wing, already suspended on the wall.

The woman led the way through a parlor furnished with horsehair furniture, a rose-patterned, well-worn carpet, and several gilt-framed chromes depicting subjects that ranged from the "Battle of Gettysburg" to the well-known "Rock of Ages." In one corner, near the lace-draped melodeon, a large crayon portrait of a long-whiskered individual, in ministerial garb, rested on an easel.

"My poor dead and gone father," she explained. "He was pastor of the church at Jericho Springs, Indiana, when I was a girl. Poor father, he departed this vale of tears nigh onto twenty years ago come next Easter." The woman dabbed at her eyes with a bit of cambric then smiled brightly at Tucson and his mates. "My grief! How I do run on. But it's a joy to a body to see some one new to talk to in this godless world. There's poor Frank and all his trouble with those wicked cattle thieves. But come right out to the dining room, gentlemen. You can talk to Frank himself."

THE dining room was placed at the rear of the house, and here Tucson and his companions found Bat Wing, seated comfortably at a large table and looking as satisfied as the cat that just ate the canary. Tombstone

Eades sat across from him, drinking a glass of milk, and at the nearer end of the table was Frank Perrine, a youngish man, mild-mannered and, apparently, not at all sure of himself, though he wore the typical clothes of the range.

Bat Wing performed introductions. Perrine clutched Tucson's hand eagerly.

"Shore glad to meet up with you, Mr. Smith."

"My friends call me Tucson. I understand you're havin' difficulties with yore herd, Perrine."

Perrine looked worried, shook his head in troubled fashion. "I've been hopin' we might get together on that. Mebbe Tex told you how I felt about takin' them cows any farther."

"Now, now, Frank," Eades interposed, "no business until Mr. Smith and his friends have had time to refresh themselves. Sit down, gentlemen, sit down." To the pseudo Mrs. Eades: "Flora, can't you find a mite of somethin' to eat for these weary sojourners through Israel?"

"I reckon he means us," Stony said to Lullaby in a hoarse whisper. "Do they call this the Is'ral range?"

"I certainly can," Flora answered. "You men just make yourselves to home now. I'll have your coffee and fixin's in a jiffy."

"Look here, Mrs. Eades," Tucson started a protest; "don't you go to any bother on our account. We'll talk to yore brother, and——"

"Now you leave this to me, Mr. Smith. I'll be right in."

"Don't you pass up her cake, Tucson," Bat Wing advised.

Chairs were found, Eades and Perrine making room nearer the door through which the Mesquiteers had just entered and moving to the back of the room. The woman came

bustling in, carrying a steaming pot and food.

"Them peach preserves I put up last year," she stated. "Horatio"—glancing at Eades—"allows as they've brandied some, but I don't hold with him. But if you'll just help get shet of 'em, I think Horatio will sleep easier o' nights."

"Horatio" glared at her, then dropped his eyes.

"I don't approve of alkyhol in any form," he mumbled.

The woman hurried around, placing dishes before her guests. All in all, it was little wonder that not a trace of suspicion crossed Tucson's mind. Within a few minutes, he and his companions were agreeing with everything Bat Wing maintained regarding "Mrs. Eades's" food. Stony reached for the coffeepot to refill his cup.

"Won't you have some coffee, Mr. Eades?" he inquired politely.

Eades frowned and shook his head. "I don't hold with such highfalutin' bev'rages. Nor tea, nuther. Milk and water is the only——"

The kerosene lamp, suspended from the ceiling above the table, swayed slightly. Tucson noted the movement, then heard footsteps on the upper floor.

Flora, her eyes on Tucson, said quietly: "Them's my boarders you hear, Mr. Smith. Most gen'rally they're quiet as church mice. Now, Horatio don't hold with me takin' in boarders, but with things the way they are and no honest work to be had, it's all a person can do to hold body and soul together."

"I reckon," Tucson agreed.

He again mentioned the business that had brought him to town. The woman rose from the table.

"If you'll excuse me," she said, "I'll clear off this mess and wash up my dishes."

"We're sure much obliged, Mrs. Eades," Tucson said.

The others voiced similar remarks. Dishes were carried to the kitchen. Finally the men had the dining room to themselves.

FRANK PERRINE told the story of the men who had stopped his herd and of the stampede and loss of cattle that followed, ending, "You men had better luck than me, I understand from Bat."

"I told him about what happened, Tucson," Bat Wing put in. "How you and Lullaby and Stony handled those skunks. I tell you, Perrine, anybody that beats the 3 Bar O has got to get up mighty early and arrive with their guns smokin'."

Eades muttered sourly, "Pride goeth before a fall, young feller."

"It shore does," Tucson agreed. "As Perrine said, we were just lucky. Now about this herd of yours, Perrine. I understand you got five hundred twenty head left."

"That's correct, and I sure refuse to budge 'em an inch farther up the trail. I'll sell 'em cheap."

"Me and my pards would have to look 'em over first," Tucson reminded, "even if the price was right. We haven't enough money with us for a herd of that size, but if you'll take a check——"

"Forget the money," Perrine cut in, "until the cows are sold."

"That's fine." Tucson nodded. "We had another idea. How'd you like for us to take your cows to Fortune City for you? We've got a crew big enough to handle 'em, and we'd just charge you what it cost us to move 'em."

"Mr. Smith, I never heard a fairer offer," replied Perrine. "It's what I'd expect after what I've heard of you 3 Bar O pokes. You're white!"

"We'll forget that part of it." Tucson smiled. "Always glad to help out an honest stockman. If we can put your Pothook cows up the trail, we'll be plumb pleased. By the way, what's your road brand? And have you got papers?"

"My papers are in order," Perrine stated. "You see, my spread is in this State, over east of the Black Coffins. We was inspected before we started. The papers are in my coat. I'll get 'em."

He rose, passed Tucson and his friends, and headed toward the hall. In a few minutes he called back:

"Horatio, did you see my coat?"

Eades raised his voice: "Took it up to that spare bedroom, figurin' you'd be sleepin' here to-night. We needed space on them hooks, with all this company comin' in."

"Where's the spare bedroom?" Perrine called back.

"I'll get yore coat," Eades replied. "You come back an' entertain yore visitors." He rose stiffly to his feet. "By Hanner," he complained, "I don't know what's come over this here younger generation. They can't seem to find anythin'. Now, I'll have to climb them pesky stairs and me with rheumatics in both laigs."

Eades limped from the room. Tucson heard his footsteps crossing the parlor, then the voices of Eades and Perrine reached him from the hall. Tucson couldn't distinguish the words, but the two appeared to be arguing.

Bat Wing said, "*Muy buen chow, huh?*"

"Never tasted nothin' better," said Lullaby.

"We'll prob'ly get a late start tomorrow, Tucson, if we have to look over those Pothook cows," Stony said.

Tucson nodded. "It won't hurt us to lay over a day. We been pushin' along fast, and there's nobody crowdin' us on the trail that I know of."

Tex Malcolm yawned. "It'll be good to take it easy for a day. Course, if we take them Pothooks, it'll take us a little time to throw 'em onto our bed grounds."

STEPS were heard nearing the doorway. Tucson and his companions didn't turn around. It sounded like Eades's walk. Then, Eades's voice from the doorway—the voice of a different Eades:

"We didn't bring them papers, gents, but we did bring scatterguns for suckers. Hurry it up, Frank!"

Only dimly comprehending the meaning of the words, Tucson and his friends were slow to turn around in their chairs. Suddenly, realizing something was wrong, they leaped to their feet, facing the doorway. There stood Eades and Frank Perrine, each holding double-barreled shotguns that effectively covered the room!

"Up with 'em, you fellers!" Eades snarled. "These guns are loaded with buckshot. We'll blast you if you make one move. You ain't got a chance."

"Put 'em up, hombres!" Perrine snapped. "These guns is cocked and ready to go."

Tucson and his friends were trapped. None of them said a word until Bat Wing burst out:

"You dirty, crooked coyotes——"

"Hold yore temper, Bat," Tucson said quickly. "We're covered." He shifted slightly, moving nearer the table.

Eades laughed harshly, said: "Frank, in just about a second Smith is aimin' to yank that lamp

from the ceilin'. Get ready to blast, first move he makes."

"Good mind readin', Eades," Tucson said softly. "I'm glad you warned me." Slowly he relaxed and put his arms into the air. His friends were already reaching toward the roof.

"I ain't takin' any chances with you, Smith." Eades sneered. "I've heard plenty about you. It don't pay to get risky. I wa'n't runnin' a whizzer when I said I'd blow yore heads off if you got proddy."

Gazing into the eyes of the old villain, Tucson could well believe every word he said.

Stony gulped, "We swallowed a bait!"

"It's me an' Bat that got you into this," Tex Malcolm said contritely.

Lullaby growled: "It ain't yore fault. These skunks put the bee on us, too. I'm just wonderin'—"

"Don't do it, Joslin," Eades snapped. "You can't rush us and get away. A six-gun will score misses, but not four shotgun bar'ls loaded with buckshot. We'd spray you from—"

"Cut the talk, Eades," Tucson snapped. "What's yore next move?"

"You'll find out."

Eades whistled, and steps were heard at the front of the house. The heads of a dozen vicious-looking men appeared in the doorway. Some of them stepped into the room. All of them carried six-shooters.

"Bring them ropes," Perrine ordered.

Eades said: "Remember what I said about these shotguns. They don't miss. Smith, come here—no, not too close. That's it. Now, turn around, yore back this way."

Tucson did as directed.

"Rope him!" Eades went on.

Two men seized Tucson's arms, deftly wound hempen loops tightly

about his wrists, his hands behind him. When they had finished, Eades ordered:

"Get over against that side wall."

Tucson strained against his bonds, then stepped across the room. The ropes were so tightly tied they cut into the flesh.

Eades went on: "You other 3 Bar O hombres get the idea? Come up, one at a time, for yore trussin'. Joslin, you're next. No sudden moves now."

Tucson said quickly, "Take it easy, Lullaby." Tucson had seen the murderous gleam in Eades's eyes and realized their only chance lay in passive submission.

Lullaby gulped, nodded, and strode forward to have his hands bound.

Stony's face was crimson with anger. "You skunks—" he commented.

"Shut up!" came a new voice as Duke Marsh stepped into the room, brandishing his .45. "Frank—Brother Horatio—you've done fine!"

"Blast you and yore 'Brother Horatio,'" Eades growled. "Get these birds tied, and I'll feel better. C'mon, Joslin; take yore medicine."

WITH the guns of the 3 Bar O men hanging in the hall, they didn't have a chance. Lullaby, Stony, Tucson, and Tex were soon standing helpless against the wall, their eyes sharp with anger. But common sense dictated this as no time to show resistance; the odds against them were too great.

Only Bat Wing lost his head. When he was called forward to be tied like the others, his temper suddenly got the best of him. With a yell of rage he leaped forward. Eades braced himself, raising the gun, waiting for Bat to come closer.

"No shootin'!" Duke Marsh yelled.

"Bat, you fool!" was torn from Tucson's anguished lips.

But Marsh saved the young puncher from being murdered. As Bat leaped forward, Marsh put out one foot. Bat tripped and dived headlong toward the floor, and as he passed Marsh, Marsh clipped the puncher on the head with the barrel of his six-shooter. Bat struck the floor with a groan and lay quiet.

"Tie him up," Marsh snapped. Then to Tucson, "All yore outfit don't show the same good sense."

"I reckon." Tucson swallowed hard, checking the hot words that rose to his lips. "And wait until the rest of the outfit hears about this."

"Wait until they do," Marsh jeered. "Smith, yore outfit is as helpless as you right now, every man of it. As for yore cows—shucks, hombre, you ain't got none!"

Stony started to swear and was given able assistance by Tex Malcolm. Marsh's face flamed.

"You hombres want a taste of this?" he said, lifting his six-shooter.

"Take it easy fellers," Tucson begged. "This game ain't finished yet. We'll square with these coyotes. We was fooled, tryin' to help a cowman in trouble. We got to admit that. But just hold steady for a spell."

"Smith talks sense," Eades growled. "You others better take heed."

At that moment the woman, Flora, stuck her head in the doorway. A hat with red roses bobbed on her head, and she wore a long coat.

"I see the suckers bit." She smiled.

"One of 'em bit too hard." Per-rine grinned. "Reckon he had too

much chocolate cake, Flora. He gestured toward the unconscious Bat Wing. "It's a good thing you didn't give him the address where you bought them cakes. He'd sure kill hisself."

The woman gazed coldly at the stricken cowboy.

"Maybe them brandied peaches went to his head. Well, I'm leavin'. Good night, Horatio. As a husband, you don't suit me none."

"That goes two ways, Flora," Eades stated grouchyly.

The woman laughed harshly and passed out of sight. A moment later the front door slammed shut.

Duke Marsh spoke to Tucson and the others. "We're takin' you fellers upstairs. Got a nice room just built in for you hombres. Raise a fuss, and we'll feed you a dose of lead. Do as we tell you, and mebbe you'll be lucky. I got a hunch yore luck has left for a spell though. Somebody certain lied when they said the 3 Bar O was tough to buck. I never seen such easy suckers in all my born days."

Marsh's tones changed suddenly, grew hard. "Get movin', tough guys. Your finish ain't come yet. But it's on the way, hombres, it's on the way!"

CHAPTER XI.

CLEANED OUT!

BUD TAGGERT awakened suddenly to the fact that it was broad daylight. Beyond that, for a moment, he couldn't think. Grass grew thickly all around him. The earth was warm under the afternoon sun. Bud glanced around for his blankets. They weren't there. He sat up, his head feeling thick, his mind dazed.

"My gosh," Bud mumbled. "My mouth feels like—like"—his mind groped for an appropriate simile—

"like a hunk of hoof parin'. What the devil? I don't remember gettin' drunk. What's happened? Where's everybody?"

A few yards away his horse was peacefully cropping grass. Past events commenced to parade slowly through Bud's brain. He remembered Tucson and the others leaving for Spanish Tanks, the arrival of the Pothook puncher, Ed Quist; certain details of the conversation that followed. Then, he and Rube Phelps had gone out on night herd. They should have been relieved—

That started a new train of thought. Where were the other riders? Where was Rube Phelps? Was this a joke? Bud pondered the question. After a time he remembered he had grown drowsy shortly after going on herd. Unable to shake off the feeling, he had finally decided to descend from the saddle and walk a few minutes. After that—nothing but a blank.

Bud got to his feet and refused to believe his eyes. There wasn't a trace of the cows he'd come to watch the evening before. His remuda was gone, too. However, standing plainly in the rays of the afternoon sun was the chuck wagon. Bud thought he could make out two or three forms on the earth not far from the wagon.

But where were the cows? For a moment Bud thought that through some strange happening he had been carried to another part of the country, but, no, there was that same low ridge of waving grass beyond which was Spanish Tanks. There were the cottonwoods along the banks of the north fork of the Sutter River. Other landmarks confirmed Bud's dawning suspicions that something was radically wrong. His brain was clearing fast now.

Suddenly he gave a sharp exclamation

and moved toward his grazing horse. Luckily the animal didn't try to bolt, and he climbed quickly into the saddle. Happening to glance back toward the river, he had seen Rube's horse stepping toward the water. It looked as though Rube, one foot caught in a stirrup, were being dragged along the earth. In a few moments more his form might be submerged beneath the river.

Bud spurred to the rescue and caught the pony's reins just as it was about to step into the water. Sure enough, there was Rube Phelps, one foot caught in a stirrup, but still half asleep as he struggled feebly on the ground.

Bud got down from his saddle, released Rube's booted foot, and shook the sleeping man. How long it had been since he had fallen from the saddle, how long the horse had dragged him about, was never learned, though Rube's clothing below his waist was wet. Evidently it wasn't the first time his horse had gone to the river to drink, and only a miracle had saved Rube from drowning. He may have fallen off, climbed back, fallen again.

Bud realized he himself was thirsty now. He hurried down and swallowed copious drafts of water, then filled his sombrero and returned quickly to Rube's side.

Splash! The water landed squarely in Rube's face. Rube renewed his struggles, mouthed a few feeble oaths, then opened his eyes.

For a moment they gazed vacantly into space, then gradually focused on Bud's worried features. Rube commenced to get angry.

"If that's a joke—" he commenced.

"Joke, nothing!" Bud snapped. "Somethin's gone almighty wrong—I don't know what! I woke up

to find myself on the ground. You'd fell out of the saddle, sometime, and your horse was draggin' you around by one stirrup. He was just draggin' you down to the river and——"

Bud gave terse details. Rube stumbled to his feet, looking wildly about.

"Where's the herd?"

"You tell me," Bud said bitterly.

"But there's the chuck wagon."

"Get your horse. We're goin' over, mighty pronto, and see if it's really there, or if this is all a dream."

THE two mounted and hastened toward the chuck wagon. A few minutes later, they were chasing wildly back and forth trying to rouse Ananias, stretched near the cold ashes of the camp fire, and Joe Adams and Luke Ford, who had been peacefully snoring in their bed rolls.

For a few minutes all was confusion, as the sleeping men fought to get their eyes opened. Questions and vague replies crisscrossed between the men. Ananias Jones was on his feet, stumbling about, trying to get his mind working.

"First thing we all better do," Ananias mumbled, "is build up a fire and heat this coffee." He was examining the coffee remaining in the cold pot. "A mite of black coffee——"

"Where's that darn cookie?" Luke Ford wanted to know.

"Where's Tucson and Lullaby—and the others?" Joe Adams asked.

"An' the cows and my remuda?" added Bud Taggart.

"Way it 'pears to me," Ananias said grimly, "some gang has put one over on us. We been cleaned out." He passed one hand wearily across his forehead. "I can't think. Let's get this coffee——"

He paused, looked around. "You hombres hear anythin'?"

For some moments a choked gurgling and thrashing about had been going on in the chuck wagon. Bud Taggart went to investigate, then gave vent to a startled yell, as he crawled inside the vehicle. Then he called:

"Here's Sourdough!"

Ropes were untied, the gag removed, and a second later the wild-eyed cook staggered out of the wagon, pushed back restraining hands, ignored all questions, and went straight to the pot of cold coffee. His foot swung in a swift arc that scattered pot and the remaining coffee in all directions.

"You gone crazy?" Ananias demanded wrathfully.

"Dang nigh," Sourdough snapped. "Shore thought I'd lose my mind when I was in that wagon and couldn't make you hombres hear me. And Ananias talkin' about drinkin' that coffee——"

"What's wrong with the coffee?" Ananias asked. "It wa'n't no worse than any of the coffee you make."

Sourdough growled: "We'll let that pass. What I'm tryin' to tell you hombres is this: If that coffee wa'n't drugged, I'm an idjit!"

"We take the latter for granted," Ananias said. "But what makes you think that coffee was drugged?"

"I'm the only one what didn't drink it," Sourdough explained patiently. "All you fellers drunk it and passed out. There must have been somethin' put in it to make you sleep."

"But who——" Taggart commenced.

"Quist," Sourdough snapped angrily. "The dirty coyote that——"

"Quist?"

In the excitement of the moment every one but Sourdough had for-

gotten the visitor of the night before who had called representing himself as a Pothook puncher.

"Yes, the feller what called himself Ed Quist," said the cook.

"But Quist drank some of that coffee," Ananias reminded. "I saw him."

"You let me tell this, Ananias," Sourdough cut in. "Quist had the first cup out of that pot, after I b'iled it. I 'member him openin' the top and opinin' how good it smelled. He had plenty of time to drop somethin' into it before you fellers got there."

"Mebbe, but that's sort of hard to believe," Rube Phelps said. "He seemed like a nice feller."

"That's the way he struck me, too." Bud nodded.

"That ain't how he struck me," Sourdough said hotly. "He struck me with his gun bar'l, or somethin' just as hard, the mealy-mouthed sidewinder. Says he, 'I reckon I'll be goin'.' The next minute—*wham!* and I saw stars. When I come to, everything was quiet and my head felt like a steam injine had run over it. I tried to yell, but that gag stopped me makin' much noise. With you fellers sleepin' that way, I might have saved my breath. I couldn't wiggle loose o' the ropes and—"

Rube Phelps snapped: "Let's ride over to that Pothook herd and see—"

"If that Pothook herd is still there, you'll find they never heard of Quist," Ananias said seriously. "I think you'll find them cows have moved, disappeared, took wings—just like ourn. Nope, we got to find Tucson and the others. Our remuda's gone, too!"

"Luke's and Joe's saddles are over there near the wagon, where they dropped 'em last night."

"They took our broncs, though," Luke said bitterly. "I'd figured to turn 'em into the remuda—"

"My mules is tied to them off wheels," Sourdough said. "Reckon they didn't want to bother with 'em. And Rube and Bud still got their ponies. We could—"

"We'll do this." Ananias took charge of the situation. "Cookie, you hitch up yore wagon and head for Spanish Tanks. Us that ain't got horses will ride with you. Bud and Rube can fork their saddles and see can they find any trace of our stock. Us hombres that hit town can do the searchin' job on Tucson and the others."

"And wait until Tucson and the rest learn what's happened," Luke Ford snapped. "Once we get organized we'll make it hot for somebody."

"Providin' we find Tucson and the others," Ananias said ominously. "They'd been back by this time, if somethin' serious hadn't detained 'em. I only hope no more than a dose of drugged coffee has kept them from returnin' to camp."

The mules were hitched to the wagon, Ananias, Luke, and Joe riding with Sourdough. Rube and Bud mounted their ponies and set off toward the spot where the Pothook herd was supposed to have been bedded down. They weren't greatly surprised a half hour later to find no trace of the Pothook-brand animals. The herd had vanished as though by magic.

Glancing back, Bud saw that the chuck wagon was out of sight.

"Reckon Sourdough has reached town," he commented. "I shore wish we was with him and the others. I'd like to find Tucson."

"You and me both," Rube said moodily. "But Ananias was left in charge of the camp and he said we

were to try and find trace of the cows. Let's go."

"Where?"

"Seems to me," Rube said slowly, "that any one stealin' cows would want to push 'em on to Fortune City an' sell 'em. The trail leads north and—"

"I suppose you can distinguish the sign of 3 Bar O cows from others on this chopped-up trail?" Bud said scornfully.

"Now, let's not you an' me get to arguin'," Rube said, his cheeks flushing. "I can't do anythin' of the kind, certainly. But if the herd is on the trail, we could catch up—"

"And clean out an outfit that's big enough to drive it, I suppose. Just you an' me?"

"Anyway, we'd see what's what," Rube said doggedly. "If you're afraid to—"

"Who's afraid?" Bud said belligerently.

"I'm plumb sorry I said that, Bud," Rube apologized. "Reckon both our tempers is sort of quick. Mebbe we better not talk, but just push on."

Bud nodded in silence. With heavy hearts the two men headed north. Finally, Rube said:

"We're lucky them coyotes didn't take our guns."

"They took my self-respect," Bud snapped, "which same is far worse. It shore gravels me to think how they took us in and then cleaned us out—lock, stock, and bar'l."

"Tucson will square the account, you watch," Rube prophesied. "And we'll all help him."

Bud sighed, "I hope so," and then added, "You're shore right!"

But somehow, despite the heated tones, his words didn't carry conviction.

CHAPTER XII.

TRAPPED.

IT was a very dark room. There weren't any windows. The one door was a heavy oaken plank affair with a stout bolt, fastened securely on the outside. Walls, floor, and ceiling were lined with tightly fitting boards—also of heavy oak. In effect, the chamber was a very competent and almost sound-proof vault. Inside the room the air was foul. And tremendously hot at this hour in the afternoon.

For nearly fifteen hours Tucson and his four companions had been held prisoner in the small upstairs room of the house at which they'd arrived the previous night. Their captors weren't taking any chances of their escaping. Water and some cold bacon and biscuits had already been placed in the room before the 3 Bar O men had been incarcerated. Then, after a vicious warning not to "kick up a fuss of any kind," their captors had closed them in the small chamber and slammed the door.

Within an hour after the 3 Bar O men had been placed in the room, Lullaby had backed up to Tucson's knotted wrists, and after considerable difficulty had succeeded in manipulating his own fingers to release Tucson's bonds. After that it was only a matter of minutes before the ropes of all the men had been untied.

There had been quite a bit of hot-voiced conversation on the part of all except Tucson, before the men settled down to a philosophical and stoical acceptance of their captivity. Tucson's steadier influence had restrained the angry outbursts of the others to no small extent.

Now, they were sitting on the floor, backs to one wall. They

couldn't see each other's faces in the Stygian gloom. Sweat poured from their foreheads. Their clothing was wet. Their breathing came hard in the stuffy atmosphere.

Finally Bat Wing spoke, "Gosh, fellers, let's have another cigarette."

The contents of their pockets hadn't been touched, and the 3 Bar O men had at first thought themselves fortunate in possessing smoking tobacco. But the smoke only made the air worse. After a while it was agreed that only one cigarette at a time was to be rolled, and all five men took turns in drawing on it.

Tucson's voice sounded through the darkness. "All right, Bat, you roll it if the rest are willin'."

The rest were willing. Bat could be heard fumbling in the darkness. Then came the sharp scratching of a match along boot sole. The men sought each other's faces in the sudden light and smiled grimly at each other. Perspiration rolled down their grime-streaked countenances. The match went out, leaving only a small crimson ember glowing in the blackness. Twice it brightened and then died down before Bat gave a long sigh of relief and said:

"Here, Stony, you're next."

The cigarette passed from hand to hand and was finally extinguished. Silence reigned for a time. The men had almost talked themselves out. Their steady breathing could be heard in the darkness.

Lullaby finally said: "If I thought that corrugated iron didn't stretch all around this room, I'd be inclined to try and start a fire and burn our way out."

"And smother in smoke, eh?" said Tucson.

Tex Malcolm swore bitterly. "Gosh, that was a body blow if I ever got one. Me an' Bat dillin'

two good knives and raisin' blisters tryin' to cut a hole in this wall. And then findin' we struck corrugated iron——"

"We all raised blisters," Stony growled. To Tucson, "Think we could burn our way out?"

"I don't reckon so, Stony. I got a hunch corrugated iron was laid against the old walls, then planks placed next to the iron. Whoever planned to hole us up in here knew what he was doin'. He's laid his plans well and started away back. Those hombres wouldn't have been so careless about leavin' things in our pockets, if they hadn't known we couldn't get out of here. We're trapped, and we might as well face it."

"I been sort of hopin' Ananias and the others would get here——" Bat Wing commenced.

"I give up that idea some time back," said Tucson. "If they'd known where to come, they'd been here by this time. But who'd ever suspect we'd be held captive right in town. Pard, there's brains back of this move. Trouble is, I got too confident. I thought everythin' was goin' right——"

"It wa'n't yore fault," Lullaby burst in, and the other voiced similar exclamations. "We just been outgussed for a time."

Tucson went on: "We got to face that fact—and more. I'm worried about what may have happened at camp. This whole thing worked so dang smooth. We were plumb taken off our guard. I doubt if anybody saw us come in here. Nobody knows we're here except the coyotes what's caught us."

"Well, how long we goin' to sit doin' nothin'?" Bat Wing's voice sound high-pitched, full of strain.

"Take it easy, youngster," Tucson said steadily. "Don't lose yore

head. We been in worse situations and escaped. Mebbe this is the end. Well, a feller can only die once. If it ain't, let's keep cool, so we'll know what to do if we ever get a chance to——"

"We all got knives," Tex Malcolm cut in. "Now, if those skunks would only open that door——"

"No good," Tucson said. "You can tell by the way they've acted so far that they won't take chances. Knives wouldn't be any good against hot lead. Pard, we're up against a gang that's planned every move."

"Yeah," Stony said bitterly, "we was took in right. But who wouldn't have been, with that Missis Eades playin' hymns and talkin' so genteel-like? And her choc'late cake——"

"Aw, cut it, will you?" Bat groaned. "No need to rub it in."

"It was Bat and me got you fellers into this," Tex Malcolm said seriously. "That shore don't make us feel——"

"Forget it," Tucson said quietly. "We fell just as hard as you did."

"Got to hand it to that old villain, Eades," Lullaby said reluctantly. "If he wa'n't a good actor, I've——"

"Bad actor," Stony put in.

"—I never seen one," Lullaby continued, not noticing the interruption. "Suckers," he called us. I reckon he was c'rect. Horatio! I'll bet his name is Cemetery or Skull-an'-crossbones, or somethin'. It'd fit that old devil a heap better than Horatio."

"And him preachin' against the evils of drink an' tobacco," Tex Malcolm growled. "Sittin' there with a glass of milk in his hand and——"

"Wouldn't mind a glass of milk, myself, right now," Stony said, "if it was good and cold."

"Me, neither," said Lullaby. "'Member, Stony, when you was just a button, the first time you ever tried to milk a cow? Me, I didn't have much success, until I'd learned how."

"Me, neither," Stony said, "no matter how I tried. I remember that fool bossy wouldn't give down for me."

"You should have tried a goose," Lullaby advised.

"Huh?" Stony sounded perplexed. "What do you mean?"

"Most folks get down from geese."

Bat Wing giggled boyishly. "You two will probably tell jokes at your own funerals."

Stony snapped, "Lullaby's one joke you can't tell nothin' sensible to. Down from a goose!"

"Well, where does it come from?" Lullaby chuckled through the gloom.

"Judgin' from your immature statements," Stony said, "it's just commencin' to appear—on your face."

"Meanin' I ain't growed up?" Lullaby demanded.

"I ain't said nothin' about your body," Stony denied. "I was referin' to your mind. It sort of fell behind in the race."

"I reckon," Tucson said with grave humor, "considerin' our present fix, none of our horns have growed very much. Whoever it was set the stage for this game—I'm handin' it to him for bein' plumb brainy an' no shorthorn. All's I want to do is get out an' have another try at the hombre."

"When's that goin' to happen?" Tex asked.

"Somethin' ought to happen right soon," Tucson said grimly. "I been expectin' somebody to show up, but nobody does. I kinda thought once or twice I heard somebody other

side of that door, but it fits tight an' I can't be certain. They prob'ly got rags or sacks or somethin' stuffed against the cracks."

"Wish I had a nice cool rag stuffed against that crack on my head," Bat Wing said.

"Head hurt much?" Tucson asked.

"Not so much now. Lettin' up some. Just a sort of steady ache, but nothin' I can't tough out."

"That was a wallop that feller give you last night," Tucson went on. "Good thing he did though. That Eades was all set to blast you wide with his scattergun."

"I was a dang fool to lose my head that way," Bat confessed ruefully. "Only it made me so mad, seem' you hombres hawg tied that a way. I kind of thought I could rush 'em and get away from it."

"The right spirit, but not the right headwork," Stony said.

CONVERSATION languished after a time. The men sat in the darkness. Somebody proposed another cigarette, but the idea was vetoed by the others, due to the bad air in the room. Tex finally discovered that the water bucket was nearly empty.

Tucson rose to his feet with sudden decision.

"I just heard somebody outside that door, I think. I'm goin' to see."

He crossed the floor, groped in the blackness until he had found the door, and pounded heavily on it. There was no sign that he had been heard. Then he raised his foot and gave the door two solid kicks. The door didn't give a particle.

Abruptly a foot-square opening in the door, head high, allowed light to enter. Tucson blinked. The other men got to their feet. A small door,

within the door, had been swung back by "Tige" Bodley. The 3 Bar O men hadn't realized the existence of this smaller door before.

Then came Bodley's mocking voice: "How'dye do, gentlemen. I hope you ain't been callin' for me. Like yore room? Sort of reminds me of a bunch of gophers livin' underground. That's it—a gopher trap. Trapped like a family of gophers. An' nobody ain't come to dig you out yet. Now that's a pity. Haw-haw-haw! The gopher trap. I always did hate gophers. They're pesky nuisances. Haw-haw-haw!"

For a few moments the 3 Bar O men paid no attention to the sneering remarks, so intent they were on drinking in the cooler air that flowed through the small opening in the door.

"It's Bodley. That Circle B man," Stony said.

"Circle B skunk," Lullaby contradicted.

"Just leave off the Circle B and mebbe you got it," Stony said.

"Right you are, my buckos," Bodley guffawed. "There ain't no Circle B around here an' never was. There's a Rafter B, but they ain't got no cows no more."

"Not if you had anythin' to do with it, they ain't," Stony snapped.

Bodley's grin vanished. "Now don't try to get tough with me, hombre. I ain't forgot you plugged one of my pals. You fellers thought you was awful smart, didn't you? We outguessed you. How do you like it, huh?"

"We'd like some air in here," Tucson cut in coldly. "And we want fresh water."

"Oh, you do, eh?" Bodley sneered. "Who are you to be givin' orders? You 3 Bar O's got yore come-uppance for once, and we ain't through with you yet. If it wa'n't

for the boss's orders, I'd blast you offn the range right now."

"Who's your boss?" Tucson asked.

"Like to know, wouldn't you? Well, I got orders not to talk. I see you got yore ropes untied. The boss expected that. We only tied you up so you wouldn't make no fuss comin' up here. Once inside yore gopher trap you ain't got a chance to get loose. Yell if you want, but nobody ain't likely to hear you outside. Besides, if the yellin' got too bad, my gun hammers might slip sudden."

"You keep us in this room much longer and we'll die anyhow," Tucson said. "It's suffocatin' in here."

"Well, I ain't openin' this door. I'll leave this little door open, once in a while, but I ain't takin' chances on gettin' within yore reach. I got my orders on that. An' every minute this little door is open, I'll be standin' here, an' there's two loads of buckshot right here ready. So don't start nothin' you can't finish."

"How long you aimin' to keep us here?" Tucson asked.

"Depends on whether you can be reasonable or not."

"Meanin'?" Tucson snapped.

"Any time you 3 Bar O owners want to pass over a signed bill of sale for yore herd, we'll consider lettin' you out, a coupla weeks later."

"You grabbed our herd?" Bat Wing burst out.

"What do you think?" Bodley laughed.

"What's happened to our pards?" Tucson demanded.

"Haw-haw-haw! Them fellers was plumb tired out after travelin' so far. Last I see they was sleepin' peaceful."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Them was the reports, anyway.

Reckon they didn't give a hoot about yore herd. Plumb lazy, I calls it."

Tex Malcolm commenced to swear.

Bodley's face darkened. "All right, tough guys, I'm through wastin' time here. Will you give Duke a signed bill of sale——"

"Who?" Tucson asked quickly.

Bodley's lips tightened. "Nev' mind who," he growled. "Will you sign a paper——"

"Nothing doing," Tucson said flatly. "You give us some fresh water an' let us have some air. That's all we're askin' of you. I'll talk to yore boss when he comes."

Bodley slammed shut the small opening and bolted the door. In a short time he returned, opened the small door again, and passed through a bucket of fresh water. Tucson passed out the empty bucket. For a time, Bodley allowed fresh air to enter the room, but he refused to talk further. Finally, without a word, he slammed the little door closed.

There was a moment's silence, then Tucson said:

"Well, the air's a mite fresher in here, now, anyway. Let's all have cigarettes."

Lullaby asked, "Tucson, how do you feel about makin' over a bill of sale for the stock?"

"Not yet, anyway," Tucson said grimly. "We can stand this for a spell, if we have to. Only thing I'm afraid of, once we give a bill of sale, we never would get out."

"Meanin' they'd bump us off?"

"It wouldn't be surprisin' if they did. I'd like to stall them a while and see if their boss comes up to talk it over. I want a good look at that coyote. Mebbe, if things shape up right, we'll give 'em that bill."

"And once out," Lullaby said quickly, "go after 'em and get our cows back, eh?"

"You get the idea, Lullaby. But I want to see the boss first, see if he's the sort of hombre who could be trusted to let us go, once he had a paper bearin' our names."

Sometime during the evening, Bodley again opened the little door and passed food through. After an hour it was again closed, and the 3 Bar O men settled to the long wait in the darkness, knowing no more than they had before. Bodley had refused to talk further. Nor would he say whether or not the boss of the rustlers would come to talk to Tucson.

"All we can do, fellers," Tucson said grimly, "is sit tight and keep our heads. If we lose 'em, it's the end. I know this is tough, but we'll make it all square once we get out. I don't know why, but I ain't yet give up hope. Remember our slogan."

"Jerk yore iron, or get out of our way," the others replied.

Tucson nodded grimly in the darkness. "From now on," he stated, "our slogan is cut down to the use of the first three words only."

"Providin' we ever get our irons back," Lullaby said.

"We'll get 'em, pards, and when we do," Tucson said softly, "we'll be jerkin' 'em plenty!"

CHAPTER XIII.

ENTER SUNDOWN SAUNDERS.

A YOUNG puncher limped into Spanish Tanks, carrying saddle and other gear. Two guns were suspended at his hips. He was of medium height with rather harsh, tanned features. His eyes were dark and glanced suspiciously,

though directly, at those who passed. His corduroy trousers, tucked into knee boots, were well worn. A woolen shirt and black sombrero, with wide brim jerked low, completed his attire. His name was Saunders, and he was known as "Sundown." A year before he had been a much-feared gunman, former enemy of Tucson Smith's.

But Tucson had somewhat changed that by first beating Sundown in a gun fight and then befriending him. Fitting Saunders into the 3 Bar O outfit had proved to be something entirely different. Saunders, in full realization of his own past record, had viewed with suspicion the friendly overtures of the 3 Bar O men, and had never, much as he wanted to, felt quite at home on the 3 Bar O. So long as Tucson had been near, the man felt not quite so friendless, but after Tucson and the others had left on trail, loneliness and a desire to travel far away had overcome him.

Saunders shifted his saddle from right shoulder to left and plodded on through the dust of the main street. He walked as though his feet pained him; now and then he raised the bandanna at his throat to mop his face which was streaming with perspiration under the mid-morning sun.

Finally, when buildings on either side of the street became more thickly bunched and the plank sidewalks commenced, Saunders stepped up to the walk, his high heels clumping with hollow regularity along the boards. As he walked, his eyes were constantly alert for a face he might recognize.

"Tucson and the rest must be makin' right good time," he mused. "Nearin' Fortune City, mebbe. I dunno much about cows though. Mebbe I'll learn in time, but I doubt

if I'll stay with 'em long enough to——"

He broke off, stiffening suddenly. Some distance ahead he had seen a man leave a small store and mount a horse, then jog slowly away.

"That hombre," Sundown cogitated, "sure looked like Duke Marsh. Wonder if it was. There's sure to be devilry afoot where that bird hangs his hat. Let's see, I ain't see him in——" Again Saunders broke off, his thoughts shifting. "Let me figure it out. It's three years since I saw Marsh last. If he's here, he's mixed into somethin' crooked. Tucson said if the herd met trouble, it would be near Spanish Tanks. Huh! I aim to look into this."

He quickened his limping footsteps until he had reached the small shop from which Duke Marsh had emerged. It was a tiny place, painted white, with a door at one side and a window on the other, the window bearing in large letters the words, "Bread, Cakes, Pies."

"Huh!" Sundown grunted. "That couldn't have been Duke. Still, a feller never knows. I'll go in anyway."

He entered the shop, closed the door behind him. A bell tinkled overhead. There wasn't any one in the shop. To Sundown it looked clean. "Smells nice," he mused, wrinkling his nose. There were two chairs and a small table at one side of the room. At the other, in a show case of extremely modest dimensions were ranged several cakes and pies. Behind the show case was a rack filled with bread.

SUNDOWN placed his saddle and gear on the floor, near the door, as a girl brushed aside a curtain leading to a back room and stepped into the shop. She was

a rather pretty girl with reddish hair and long lashes. Saunders guessed she would come somewhere near his shoulder. Her eyes were of the deepest blue Saunders had ever seen, her teeth, when she smiled, small, white, and even.

Sundown didn't know much about girls. He was shy in their presence. And yet, he found himself liking this girl instantly. He stammered a little when she repeated her question:

"Something I can sell you?"

Sundown gulped. "I—I wouldn't think of asking you to give me your goods for nothin'."

The girl laughed, moving around behind the show case. There was something bashful about this man that appealed to her. He looked hard and capable; there was even a trace of bitterness about the firm lips. Yet through it all Charlotte Behr found a boyish, lonely something in Sundown Saunders that cried out to the loneliness in her own heart.

"Those pies are yesterday's," the girl was saying, "but the bread is fresh, and so are the cakes. I just brought them in this morning."

Sundown moved up to the show case. He had had no intention of buying anything, but now he suddenly found himself wanting to help the girl out in any way possible. His eyes roamed about the show case, and he finally pointed out a big cake with pink and white frosting.

"I'll take that one, I reckon—the three-decker."

The girls' eyes opened wide. "Unless somebody's going to help you eat it, that's a pretty large cake. These smaller ones are quite popular among the cowboys around here."

"It's the big one I want," Sun-

down said doggedly. He laid a bill on the show case. "Is that enough?"

"My grief, yes." The girl laughed, taking the cake out of the case. "Do you want me to wrap it up or eat it here?"

Sundown had been wondering what he'd do with the cake. Now he was suddenly relieved. "Eat it here, if you don't mind, miss."

The girl left the case and set the cake on the small table, then went to procure a plate and knife. Sundown sat down, his face growing red as he said:

"That is a right large cake. Would you eat some of it with me?"

The girl nodded without hesitation. "And look; I've a pitcher of milk in the back room. I'll get it. Do you like milk?"

"Never drink anythin' stronger, less'n it's coffee."

Five minutes later the two were fast becoming acquainted over the pink-and-white cake and milk. They'd exchanged names. Sundown had learned that hers was Charlotte Behr but that her friends called her "Chuck." She'd come from the East six months before to live with a distant relative named Herman Behr, owner of the Rafter B Ranch near Spanish Tanks. Behr had been an elderly man and Charlotte an orphan, and Behr had wished to leave the property to the girl when he died.

But the day Chuck Behr had left her place in the East, Herman Behr had been found dead on the range with a bullet in his breast.

"I arrived in time for the funeral, that was all," the girl was saying. "I couldn't run the ranch, of course so—"

"Who runs it for you?" Sundown asked.

The girl smiled. "I don't run it. You see, there were scarcely any

cows left. People here tell me rustlers got them. I don't know. The ranch is for sale, but no buyers have put in an appearance. The people of Spanish Tanks were awfully good to me. They helped me gather about two hundred cows—that is, they hired the men to do it—and Mr. Heenan, of the Hatchet Ranch, bought the cows from me. Everybody says he gave a real good price."

"But you stayed here anyway. Why didn't you go back East?"

"I have no relatives back there, and no friends I really care about. I like this country better than any place I've ever been. I worked in a bakery back there. It's about all I know. And so I started a bakery in Spanish Tanks. It's been real successful. I do all my baking at the ranch—"

"You live there alone?" Sundown asked quickly.

"I have an old lady living with me. She helps with the baking, and each morning I drive into town with it. It's only twelve miles. And we have a Mexican boy to do the housework. Of course, there aren't any cowboys there. You're a cowboy, aren't you?"

"If you mean can I ride and shoot, yes. I can handle a rope some, too. But I don't know cows like a real stockman—you know, like knowin' how to breed cattle and fatten 'em for market, and how to cure diseases they get and so on. But I sure hope to learn some day."

"What ranch do you work for?"

"None, right now. I quit my job and started out to see some more of the country. Leastwise, that was part of my reason. Two miles south of here my hawss stumbled and broke a leg when he fell. I had to shoot him, o' course."

"That's too bad. And you walked all the way to town?"

Sundown nodded, then asked: "Say, just before I come in here did I see a man comin' out—feller name of Duke Marsh?"

"Do you know him?" The girl looked disappointed. "Yes, Mr. Marsh was in here. 'Friend of yours?"

"I wouldn't say that."

Chuck Behr looked relieved. "He came in to pay for three chocolate cakes he bought several days ago—it's a week, more or less. I didn't have change enough to break the big bill he gave me at the time. Today he came in and brought the money."

Sundown frowned. "The Duke Marsh I knew didn't go in for cakes and such. Mostly he was a booze h'ister."

"I guess he still is." Chuck wrinkled her nose. "He usually smells that way. But he was gettin' the cakes for somebody in town. I don't know who. He works for Barry Heenan's outfit, you know. The Hatchet. I like Mr. Heenan. He's always happy and smiling, but I don't care for Duke Marsh."

"Bother you any?" Sundown asked quickly.

"Mr. Heenan chased him out of here one time when Marsh had been drinking too much." The girl didn't say more.

Sundown made a mental note to take the matter up with Marsh sometime. He was liking Charlotte Behr more all of the time. Finally he asked:

"You didn't hear of a herd branded with the 3 Bar O iron coming up this way, did you? I have some friends on that outfit."

"3 Bar O?" the girl said, then suddenly: "Oh, surely, you must mean

the men who lost all their cattle and they can't locate their owners?"

Sundown choked suddenly on a pink-and-white bit of frosting he'd just popped into his mouth. The color left his face.

"Say, did I hear you right?"

The girl sobered, repeated her words. Sundown asked for details. Chuck Behr told him as much as she'd heard. Sundown got suddenly to his feet, his face white. For a moment the look in his eyes frightened the girl. Seeing her face, his gaze softened a trifle. He laughed harshly.

"I got to go out and see what I can pick up. That Tucson Smith is— Oh, if anything has happened to him! Say, can I leave my saddle and truck here? I'll be back for it."

"Surely, but, Sundown, where are you going?"

Sundown whirled toward the door.

"I'll tell you later when I find out myself," he jerked out. "Adios!"

The door slammed behind him, and the girl slipped weakly back to her chair.

"My grief! I've never seen such a change come over a man. I'd be afraid to have him angry at me."

CHAPTER XIV.

A DEFINITE CLEW.

HIS mind in a turmoil of emotions, Sundown left Chuck Behr's baked-goods shop and strode grimly along the sidewalk. Forgotten were the blisters on his feet induced by his long walk in high-heeled boots. He looked to left and right continually, seeking some sign of Duke Marsh or a 3 Bar O hand. And suddenly his gaze was rewarded.

Standing before a barber shop on the side of the street along which

Sundown was walking, were Ananias Jones and Bud Taggart, looking hopelessly lost, Bud Taggart drawing hopefully on a cigarette, Ananias puffing at his brier which had long since gone cold.

Sundown descended on the pair like a whirlwind and without preliminaries demanded fiercely:

"Where's Tucson?"

"Sundown!" Bud exclaimed, cigarette falling from his lips.

"Sundown, boy, I'm sure glad to see you!" Ananias reached for Sundown's hand. "What are you——"

Savagely, Sundown brushed the hand away. "Never mind that. I asked where Tucson was. I've been hearin' things I don't like to hear. I want the straight of it. Is the herd gone? Where are all the boys?"

Ananias gulped. "It's all true, boy. We been cleaned out for fair. There's a bunch of coyotes——"

"Out with the story! Start at the beginnin' and tell me what's happened."

Ananias commenced with the arrival of the herd outside of Spanish Tanks and the departure of the Three Mesquiteers, led by Tex Malcolm, for town.

"When was this?" Sundown cut in.

"Let me see." Ananias considered, and started to refill his brier.

Sundown knocked the brier from his hand.

"Talk!" he snapped.

Ananias looked angry, held his temper in check and went on:

"This is Monday. It's just a week ago Saturday night—or was it Sunday night?"

Sundown groaned. "Call it a week ago, and get on with your story."

Details were finally pieced together for Sundown's impatient ears up to the time of the awakening from the drugged-coffee sleep, and

the departure of Bud Taggart and Rube Phelps to see if they could find sign of the vanished herd.

Sundown whirled on Bud. "What did you find?"

"We traveled until we was dead beat, lookin' for sign. Next mornin' we found where a lot of cows had cut from right angles from the trail and headed straight toward them big bluffs that range along Black Coffin Mountains. Sundown, you'll never believe it, but them tracks disappeared right under big masses of piled-up rock."

"I suppose a landslide covered them cows?" Sundown sneered.

Bud Taggart flushed crimson, started to swear, then checked the hot words.

Ananias cut in sternly: "Sundown, you needn't to get nasty. We been havin' our troubles. Bud and Rube rode as fast as they could to tell me what they'd discovered. Meanwhile, me and the rest had reached town. I'd reported the whole business to the deputy sheriff here. He's a good peace officer and has been ridin' for sign hisself on anythin' that might be picked up, but he didn't learn nothin'. Met a right nice hombre, owner of the Hatchet outfit, named Heenan. He told us there used to be a narrow cut through the Black Coffins—just a big crack in the rock——"

"I ain't askin' for no geography lesson," Sundown asserted coldly.

"You're gettin' it, anyway," Ananias said huffily. "This is all necessary. This big crack was knowed as Escaso Pass. Heenan told us how outfits trailed cows through there sometimes on the way to Fortune City. It's a short cut and saves quite a few miles, but it means a long stretch without water. To cut a long story short, Heenan was real helpful. Knowin' we was shy of

hawssflesh, he sent one of his hands in with several ponies for us to use. Now if that wa'n't dang accommodatin' of Heenan——"

"Did you kiss him on both cheeks?" Sundown growled.

Ananias clenched his fists and swallowed hard, then went on:

"We left Sourdough camped with the wagon, just other side of town. The rest of us forked saddles and headed for this Escaso Pass. Reachin' there, we done some investigatin'. That pass wa'n't only wide enough for about three horses to pass abreast. What had happened was this, as we figured it out: After runnin' our cows through the pass, somebody had dynamited and started them straight-up walls to fallin', chokin' the pass. A horse couldn't get over that piled-up rock. All a man could do to scramble up with his hands and feet."

"What next?" Sundown asked tersely.

"Fillin' up that pass, that a way," Ananias went on, "proved two things to me: one, that the rustlers was headed toward Fortune City to sell our cattle; second, they wanted to delay our trailin' 'em. So we all headed for Fortune City by the longer route, hopin' to get there first."

"You been to Fortune City?" Sundown cut in.

Ananias nodded. "And scoured the country all around there. Not a sign of a 3 Bar O cow could we find, nor was there any news of such a herd reachin' Fortune City. We just got back, plumb tuckered out, yesterday mornin'."

"But where's Tucson and Lullaby and——"

"I wish I knew," Ananias groaned. "We don't know what way to turn next."

Sundown considered grimly. "I

dunno," he said at last. "I don't pretend to a lot of cow knowledge, but I got other things I know. I doubt that our cows ever went through Escaso Pass. I think that was just a stall to draw you out of the country so you wouldn't be lookin' for Tucson——"

"For all we knowed, the rustlers might have carried Tucson and the rest along with 'em," Bud pointed out.

"Where's the rest of the boys?" Sundown asked. "I mean the ones that ain't disappeared."

Ananias shrugged lean shoulders. "Round town, some place, mebber. Or they might be at the wagon with Sourdough."

"Gosh, you're a helpless lot," Sundown snapped.

"Plumb helpless," Ananias agreed. "But we done everythin' we know."

"Know a feller in town named Duke Marsh?" Sundown asked.

Bud Taggart nodded. "Yeah, we've run across him once or twice. Works for the Hatchet. Heavy drinker. He's been the worst, though I can't say I blame him."

"What do you mean?"

"We been gettin' a sort of ribbin' on the sly," Ananias explained. "The 3 Bar O had a good rep as a fightin' outfit until now. While everybody is plumb sympathetic, there's a lot of folks can't help kiddin' us about it. Dang Marsh! Every time I see him, he suggests that I buy drinks for the crowd. I'm gettin' so I don't dast go near a saloon."

Sundown turned and started away.

Ananias said, "Where you goin'?"

"Mebber I got an idea."

"We'll go with you," Bud said.

"You'll stay away from me," Sundown snarled. "As far as you can. And tell the rest of the boys I don't

want 'em recognizin' me. I had a bad rep once. Mebbe it'll be useful." He repeated, "Mebbe I got an idea," and walked rapidly away from the open-mouthed pair standing before the barber shop.

At the third saloon Sundown visited, the Lone Star, Sundown's request for information was rewarded.

"Duke Marsh?" Fats Ballou said. "Yeah, he's in my back room there, catchin' up his drinkin'—as usual."

SUNDOWN nodded curtly and passed on to the back room, entered and closed the door behind him. Duke Marsh was seated, alone, at the round table, a bottle of liquor and glass before him. He was already quite drunk and frowned up at the intrusion. Then his eyes cleared a trifle, and he staggered to his feet.

"Sundown Saunders! You fast-shootin' son of a gun. Shake! I ain't seen you since—"

"Since that time in Yuma," Sundown said. "You left just two jumps ahead of the sheriff's posse. You should have stayed. The gang pulled through all right."

"Them bullets was makin' it too hot for me. Good thing I left. I fell into somethin' soft up here. Got the grandest thing ever. Makin' money, too. Here, I'll get a glass. You ain't drinkin'."

"Didn't drink in the old days. Ain't changed none."

"That's right. You always was a—hic—teetotaler. Oh, well, I'll drink for both of us." Marsh suited the action to the word and went on, "You still trailin' with the old gang?"

"Oh, I get around some—mostly alone."

"You come to Spanish Tanks to do a job?"

Sundown shook his head. "Just passin' through."

"Ridin' fast?"—meaningly.

"Was—until a spell back. Hawss fell and broke his leg. Shot him and then walked into town. I got to get a new hawss and keep goin'. Don't happen to know of any good hawssflesh for sale, do you?"

Marsh hiccuped a couple of times and considered. "I might. We'll talk about it in a minute. First, how'd you like to join up with a good crew that would give you plenty of protection in a tight?"

"Who's the crew?"

"We won't mention no names yet. I'd have to talk to the boss first." Marsh laughed rather sillily. "Ever hear of an outfit called 3 Bar O?"

Sundown stiffened inwardly, but said, "3 Bar O? I don't remember for shore."

"You'd remember this gang if you'd ever heard of 'em. They always been poison to law busters. They was trailin' a herd past here a week back. *Somebody* run off their cows. Now their owners has plumb disappeared, too. An' their remuda has plumb vanished. Funniest thing I ever hear of. An' the crew is runnin' frantic around town, like chickens with their heads cut off. There's one ol' coot called Ananias. All you have to do is say, 'Little *Bopeep* has lost her sheep,' an' his face gets so red it like to bust."

"Who done the job?" Sundown asked idly.

"Thash for me to—hic—and you to find out. Mebbe we'll all know more later. I got a hunch the boss could use your guns—hic!"

"Yore boss in town?"

"Don'—hic—know where he is right now. Mebbe we could find him if you had a hawss and felt like ridin'."

"Mebbe. What outfit you with?"

Marsh looked owlishly at his questioner, and wagged a finger in his face.

"You're—hic—tryin' to find out somethin'. I'm with the Hatchet, but—hic!—thash anosh'er matter. The Hatchet is run by Barry—hic!—Heenan. Nice hones' feller."

"Well, let's go look at this horse you said might be for sale."

"Not horsh—horshes." Marsh giggled foolishly. "An' if you don' find one to suit, I'll—hic!—show you lot more to choose from. You wouldn't want to buy some cows, would you?"

"I'm lookin' for a good hawss. C'mon."

WITH an effort, Marsh heaved his form up from the table, swayed a moment on uncertain legs, then stiffened and walked with only a slight stagger out of the Lone Star, with Sundown close at his side. Marsh lurched out to the tie rail, then stopped.

"Reckon we better walk," he muttered. "You ain't got no hawss, an' it'll do me good. Fats sure does carrypow'ful liquor."

Together the two made their way along the main street, turned at a side street, and finally stopped at a house with a white picket fence around it. Marsh opened the gate, and the two passed through.

Sundown said, "You keepin' horses in a house now?"

"Jus'—just frien's o' mine in there. Big barn around back."

Marsh led the way around to the back of the house where a barn, painted white, stood with its door partly open. The two went inside. A series of stalls held five horses. Sundown looked at the horses, recognized a 3 Bar O brand on the left

jaw. His hand went suddenly to his gun, then slowly lifted without having touched walnut butt. He glanced around the barn. At one side was a tumbled heap of saddles. Sundown's lips tightened as he recognized Tucson's rig. With an effort he held in check the hot words that leaped to his tongue. Here was the first definite clew—or clews—but Sundown realized he'd have to go slow if he wanted to learn more. It would do no good to shoot or threaten Marsh at this stage of the game. Marsh had mentioned having friends inside the house. Again, it might be wise to get—

"Well, what you think of them ponies?" Marsh asked, cutting in on Sundown's abstractions. "Look 'em over good. Not a blemish in the lot, and you can have one cheap. I might even give you a bronc if you—"

"What you askin' for 'em?"

Marsh considered, scratching his head. Then, in a sudden rush of generosity: "Oh, I can't charge a friend for what didn't cost me nothin'. Take yore pick. But don't ride him out of town in daylight. We'll talk to the boss after I've seen him to ask if he wants to take you on. We got a man in the crew what's a real wizard at forgin' signatures and sech, and if we can't fix you up with a slap-up bill of sale when he gets back, I'll—"

"Where's he gone?"

"Away on the boss's business."

"Uh-huh. Look here, Duke. I can't take a horse for nothin'. I'll tell you what. Suppose I give you a bottle of the finest liquor this town affords?"

"It's a bargain! Whoop! Sundown, you're sure goin' to be sorry you said that. I know where said

bottle can be found. Barry Heenan's private brand, but Fats Ballou will sell us a bottle. Boy, you'd take up drinkin' as your fav'rite sport if you once tasted liquor as mellow as what——"

"C'mon, then. Let's go get it," Sundown urged.

Holding Marsh by one arm, Sundown escorted the unsteady-legged man back toward the Lone Star Saloon.

One hour later, Sundown rose from his chair in the back room of the saloon and gazed contemptuously down on the sodden form of Duke Marsh. Marsh's head had dropped forward on the table. Loud snores left his open mouth. On the table was a nearly empty bottle of liquor.

"How that hombre can put it away," Sundown muttered, "but he can't handle it. An' anybody that can't handle his liquor ought to stay as far away from it as possible. Well, he should be quiet for quite a spell. Reckon I'll drift back to that house and see what can I learn. The trail seems to be gettin' hot!"

With quick strides he strode to the outer door, nodding to the bar-keeper on the way past, and saying: "Duke is restin' comfortable. Better not bother him."

Fats Ballou nodded. "I know. I'm gettin' used to them sessions of his. He's gettin' worse all the time."

"And the end's yet to come," Sundown said savagely, as he pushed through the swing doors.

To be concluded in next week's issue.

In Next Week's Issue

A Complete Novel

PAWNEE JOE'S PATHLESS PERIL

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Pawnee Joe investigates a mystery of the border bad lands.

BETWEEN SNOWS

By LLOYD ERIC REEVE

"The truth is not to be found in the mind, but in the heart," declared Henri Chappelle, fur trapper of Midas.

Also Features by

WILLIAM COLT MacDONALD RAY HUMPHREYS

And Others

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At All News Stands



FOLKS, having had a close association with horses and dogs, an association closer, perhaps, than we have had with human beings, we have often wondered how much those animals really did know of what was going on about them. One thing we have tried to learn is this: Does a horse, or a dog, when shown a picture, a painting, or photograph—anything you like—get anything at all out of it?

Recently an experiment to determine whether a movie race-track scene would have any effect on a horse resulted in a portion of the theater, where the experiment was taking place, being wrecked.

The horse, a hunter mare, was taken to a private showing of the film and watched calmly enough while earlier parts of the picture were screened.

Once the pictured race got under way, however, the mare pricked up her ears, whinnied shrilly, and started a wild rampage.

It is reported that twenty seats and stalls were smashed before she could be quieted.

Of course this picture was not a still. Now, we do feel sure of this. The vision of a horse and the vision of a dog are not the same as that of a human being.

For many years we thought a dog stupid, for when we approached him, though he had known us for years, he wouldn't recognize us until we got apparently close to him. We had a terrier that, for a couple of years, laid for a woodchuck that had a den on a little hill back of the barn. The woodchuck would come out and sit on the edge of his hole, look all around, and then head down toward the barn and eat some clover. We would get that terrier, hold him up, grab his head, whisper in his ear, and try to get him to see that woodchuck. We thought it was dumbness on his part because he couldn't spot him. At last we found it wasn't dumbness, but just that he was nearsighted, and then we were told that all dogs were prone to nearsightedness. We made up our mind that horses couldn't see very far, either. We also wondered a good deal as to their close sight. Suppose, for instance, a dog

and a horse were shown a life-size photograph of the man who had taken care of them all their lives. Would they recognize him?

We have often thought that a dog would be very much surprised if he saw himself in a looking-glass, but we've tried that experiment many times, and have never had a dog take any interest whatsoever over his reflection in the glass. Of course the dog didn't know what he, himself, looked like, but you'd have thought that he would've liked to have turned to look at what he might have thought was another dog.

What do you dog and horse experts think as to the ability of the horse or dog to recognize persons they have known all their lives when they see them depicted either on canvas, as photographic stills, or in movies?

A stalwart Texan, R. K. Horn, of Richards, in the Lone Star State, comes to the defense of Roland Krebs:

"DEAR BOSS AND FOLKS: I have been a reader of dear old Western Story Magazine for about fifteen years and I have read The Round-up Department with interest.

"I have roamed the West a great deal. I rode bronchos four years. I worked with cattle on the ranches, so I know something of the West and horses. I'll say your writers for Western Story Magazine pretty well know their stuff. There are none of us perfect. Anybody is liable to make a mistake once in a while.

"I notice where some readers don't like Roland Krebs's 'Bifflalo Bull' stories. I'll say they are mighty good. We need a humorous story or two to make Western Story complete. Let's have lots more of them.

"It would take too long for me to

say what I would like to for all the writers, but they are all mighty good. Long live Western Story!"

And now, having witnessed the patting on the back of Roland Krebs and Bifflalo Bull, rides into the firelight A. B. Cowdery, 8 Oak Knoll Terrace, Needham, Massachusetts, to knock where we have boosted.

"DEAR BOSS: Several times I have brought this to your attention and once more—and this is the last time—I advise you, and probably many thousands of readers feel the same, that if you continue to publish such nonsense as Roland Krebs writes, I am through. As many articles are planned ahead, I give you one month more of this nonsense, and if you desire to continue, no more fifteen cents a week from me.

"I have been a regular reader for over fifteen years, but cannot stand such foolishness in fiction if it continues to appear. I had rather have as many blank pages.

"Think it over!"

Well, folks, you just can't tell, can you, eh? Make one happy, make one mad. Now in the next issue R. K. Horn will be disappointed because there is no Bifflalo Bull—not a single line, not even a word by Krebs—but because of this, A. B. Cowdery will be happy and gay.

For instance, there is the fourth part of that real fine serial by William Colt MacDonald; there are good shorts by Lloyd Eric Reeve, Ray Humphreys, Harry Keller, and Ronald G. Everson. Also there is a Pawnee Joe story entitled "Pawnee Joe's Pathless Peril," by H. Bedford-Jones. The departments are even more interesting than usual.

Good night, and good reading to you all, folks!



MINES AND MINING

By J. A. THOMPSON

This department is intended to be of real help to readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be answered in this department in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

ABOUT five miles north and west of Searles in Kern County in southern California lies a mighty good gold-lode district. There are veins and indications of the yellow metal in the low range of hills marking the northeast end of the El Paso Mountains. The district is some fifteen miles north of an already-famous gold-mining area in southern California—Randsburg. In an area comprising not more than twenty square miles Randsburg has already produced roughly seventeen million dollars in gold, a nearly like amount in silver, and thirteen million five hundred thousand in tungsten. The figures are from a report of the California State mineralogist, and fairly recent.

However, it is not the more fully developed Randsburg area but the gold country farther north—the so-called Rademacher district in which K. M., of Paterson, New Jersey, is interested.

"It seems to me, Mr. Thompson," he writes, "that the old Rademacher district in Kern County, California, ought to be a favorable section for the modern hard-rock prospector who is looking to locate in a good gold-lode country.

A good bet, K. M. Though the district is a fairly old one, it has lain quiescent for a long time. Probably to some extent discovery of the rich veins around Randsburg tended to draw prospectors into the latter area like a magnet attracting steel filings, and the possibilities of the outlying Rademacher section were temporarily neglected by the crowd.

But the revived intense interest in gold mining throughout the West has caused a surge of prospectors out to the northeast end of the El Paso Mountains. The Rademacher district has been remembered. It has lately become the object of considerable attention. And deservedly.

The country rock is granite, crossed by numerous dikes, or

masses of igneous rock which in past geologic ages have been forced into the cracks and fissures of surrounding rock formations. The result is a situation highly favorable for mineral deposition.

The ore-bearing veins in this district as a rule cut these dikes at sharp angles and run into the granite. The veins are largely quartz and are apt to pinch and swell within comparatively short distances along their course from a width of a few inches to one of several feet.

In this section relatively short, narrow ore shoots or zones of high mineralization may be expected.

While this might tend to keep large-scale operators, seeking vast uniform-grade ore bodies, out of the district, it gives the smaller miner and producer a chance to snag on to a shorter, relatively rich ore shoot that can be handled profitably. In fact, in several such instances, the free-milling gold is coarse enough to enable effective recovery by more or less elementary gold-milling processes. Arrastre grinding, amalgam-plate gold saving, and so forth.

The free gold in this section is frequently associated with iron pyrites or fool's gold, copper pyrites, weathered iron oxide, and also the blackish oxide of manganese.

Finally, B. M., the region is quite accessible by car from Bakersfield, Mojave, or Barstow. Searles is a station on the Owens Valley branch of the Southern Pacific Railroad. And mining can be done virtually all year round. Water is available in Indian Wells Valley from two to four miles distant from the gold properties already being worked in the neighborhood.

B. Walker, writing from Chicago, Illinois, says, "I'm interested in prospecting in Idaho, and always

enjoy the Mines and Mining articles in Western Story Magazine. Can you list for me the principal and most important gold-mining counties."

Gold is found in most nearly all the counties in Idaho, Walker. In fact, it is one of the State's most widely distributed minerals. Among the more important counties in which gold deposits occur are: Boise, Idaho; Lemhi, Owyhee, Elmore, Shoshone, Custer, Blaine, Camas, Clearwater, Gem, and Valley, according to the latest "Annual Report of the Mining Industry in Idaho."

And Henry Tucker, of Boston, Massachusetts, brings up the often-correlated question of firearms and prospecting, with particular reference to the need or use of them by any one contemplating prospecting in British Columbia.

Firearms are not necessary, unless of course, you plan to hunt game *in season*. Many, in fact, perhaps the majority of prospectors, carry firearms only on long trips remote from civilization and established camps. In such cases a .30-30 carbine makes a serviceable firearm, not too heavy, short, and easy to pack. Of course if game is desired, such as ducks, partridge, et cetera, take along your favorite shotgun, and don't forget to take out a regular hunting license which may be procured from local game wardens, or from British Columbia Provincial Police offices, scattered throughout the Province. And obey the hunting laws. After all, they are established for the ultimate benefit of the hunter and sportsman.

For further details and information on guns and ammunition, Tucker, make use of Lieutenant Chapel's Guns And Gunners Department in this magazine.

The HOLLOW TREE



Conducted by
HELEN RIVERS

It is a natural impulse and it is a good impulse to desire to wander and to roam. Not too much, of course. But the desire to go places and see things should be and is in all of us—in all of us who amount to anything, at least, for traveling educates us, and changing our geographic location often is of great benefit to health, mind, and economic well-being. A wise man once said, "A rolling stone gathers no moss," but a wiser man, we think, added, "but a standing pool stagnates."

If you are one who would travel, it is a mighty good thing to have man's best asset along the way, and at your destination. We mean, of course, friends.

If you would like a friend or friends in a certain section, write to Miss Helen Rivers, who conducts this department, and she will put you in touch with readers who want to correspond with folks in your part of the world.

It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

Address: Helen Rivers, care The Hollow Tree, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

SOUTHWESTERN Utah is a country for the prospective rancher and homesteader. "Utah Hombre" can tell you folks what you will find in that Southwest Land.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Quite frequently I see a few words in The Hollow Tree from some one who wants to go back on the farm or a homestead. Now it so happens that I am one of these, but I have not the necessary grubstake to go it alone. I have three hundred and twenty acres of good land—unimproved—in

southwestern Utah that I would like to get three or four good reliable fellows to go in with me to develop. The soil is very good, and there's an abundance of water fifty to sixty feet from the surface. We could raise alfalfa, spuds, beans, small grains, and garden stuff. Land is cheap around there, and in a few years we could develop a ranch to be proud of. I believe that three or four good industrious men could do very well in that country.

I have two trucks, a one-ton and a two-ton, and a few tools that I would put in the jack pot, and I am a good worker and have had quite a lot of farm experience. I would prefer two single men and one married man to go in partnership with me on

an equal basis, myself to furnish the land and trucks and the partners to furnish the necessary grubstake and all of us do our share of work and divide the profits equally. I am a single man, forty-seven years old, and I would prefer men of twenty-five or over as partners as I believe they would be more inclined to be steady and reliable.

I will answer all letters and do my best to answer any questions. I can give very good references and would expect the same from others. I am sure that within a very few years we could develop a very nice and paying ranch.

UTAH HOMBRE.

Care of The Tree.

Jim is mighty lonesome when he's not following the trap line.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Every story I read about the West brings back memories of home. When I was ten years old, we moved from Texas, and dad took up mining. I was not suited until I started to trap—then pleasure came my way. It sure was the life, and is yet! However I still get homesick to see the Western sunsets and hear the yip of the coyotes. Some day I'll go back to see my Texas.

Well, folks, trapping season is over and I'm lonesome, so rush the letters, everybody—don't lose any time in writing to a real mountaineer, trapping up in the mountains of old Pennsylvania. JIM MALONE.

Route 3, Box 123,

Reynoldsville, Pennsylvania.

Ex-doughboy is wanting to get back West.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a World War veteran, thirty-seven years old, who wishes to settle in southern Arizona or New Mexico. I have been in Alaska, South America, and a good share of the States. I was born in the West, but have never been back to live since I was twelve years old. I would like to hear from homesteaders, prospectors, and fruit and truck growers in the Southwest who are making a living at it. I've had a lot of citrus experience in Florida, and have done some prospecting. If there are any farmers or fruit growers in Arizona willing to risk board and a place to spread my blankets for a good husky work hand until I can get acquainted and locate a spot for myself, I'll be glad to come.

EX-DOUGHBOY.

Care of The Tree.

We are betting that this hombre won't be lonesome very long.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Will you please help a lonesome Yank to get some mail in this North country? My home town is Waukegan, Illinois, and I've lived here since 1920, except for two trips to the World's Fair.

I am interested in the Southwestern



Utah Hombre can tell you folks who are interested in homesteading and ranching just what southwestern Utah has to offer the pioneer home seeker. Wear your friend-maker membership badges, folks, and drop a line to this hombre who is looking for a few good pard.

Twenty-five cents in coin or stamps sent to The Hollow Tree Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring you either the pin style or the button for the coat lapel. In ordering, be sure to state which you wish.

States—California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas. Every one is plumb welcome to write, and especially those from dude ranches. Any folks desiring information about the gold strikes just north of here are welcome to it if they will drop me a line.

All right, folks, fling your ink this way. My age is nineteen years. U. KISKI.

639 Prince Arthur Boulevard,

Fort William, Ontario, Canada.

There should be a number of good pals for this woman.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I was born at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains, in good old Virginia, some thirty-nine years ago. I've always had a very decided longing to roam all wild places, everywhere, but I've always been stuck pretty much in one place, being poor. However, I do get to fish. How I love it! And I want to find some nice person who loves the fields and streams as I do. But most of all I wish my correspondent to be from some place where those very old and

thorny plants called cacti grow. I am very fond of them and have a few, but I want all I can get. I will be very glad to hear from any one from any State in the Southwest.

MRS. F. BROOKFIELD.
Williamstown, New Jersey.

Speak right up, folks, if you would like to have this hombre visit you.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

This summer I am going on a canoe trip that will cover all of one thousand miles. The trip I am planning will start at Rochester and proceed up the St. Lawrence until I come to a canal or river that joins Lake Champlain with the St. Lawrence. Then down Lake Champlain to Lake George and into the Hudson, up the Mohawk to the Barge Canal, and back to Rochester. I would like to get in touch with some fellows along the route so that I may visit them.

FRANK SCHWIKERT.
50 Roseview Avenue,
Rochester, New York.

Ralph is a junior member who wants Western Pen Pals.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a boy of sixteen years, and I am very interested in the West. I intend to go West when I get a little older. I would particularly like to hear from ranchers and cowboys in Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Wyoming, Montana, South Dakota, and Colorado.

RALPH HAMBLETT.
Box 272, Derry, New Hampshire.

A Quebec girl seeks your correspondence.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a lonely girl of sixteen, living in a small town in northern Quebec. I would like Pen Pals from all over the world. I enjoy dancing and swimming. All of you who want a true-blue Pen Pal, please write to me.

MARION PALMER.
Care of M. D. Palmer,
332 Portage Avenue,
Rouyn, Quebec, Canada.

Barbara is a Minnesota miss.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I'm in my early teens, and a junior in high school. I would like to hear from girls from fifteen up, and from all over the world. I could ride horseback from morn-

ing till night, and there isn't much that I don't like to do. I love all outdoor sports. I will exchange snapshots with every one who would care to.

BARBARA SHELDON.
1871 Portland Avenue,
St. Paul, Minnesota.

This junior lad hails from New Zealand.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a boy of thirteen and I live in a small township out of Gisborne. I have lived in the country all my life and am rather lonesome. I would like to hear from any one wanting a pen friend.

JIM PEDERSEN.
Matawai, Gisborne,
North Island, New Zealand.

Just take your pick, folks, one or all.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

We are all young fellows between nineteen and twenty-three, who are serving with the Prince of Wales Volunteers, in India. We would very much like to get in touch with people from all over the world.

SIGNALER S. MATTHEW,	No. 3650691
“ W. WILSON,	“ 3651197
“ A. RATTIGAN,	“ 3651033
“ M. CARY,	“ 3651697
“ J. CARNEY,	“ 3651904
“ W. BROWN,	“ 3650324
“ T. HANKEY,	“ 3651144
“ T. JONES,	“ 3651860
“ J. PRESTON,	“ 3650666
“ G. WRIGLESWORTH	“ 4446834

Signal Section, H. Q. Wing, Second Batt.,
Prince of Wales Volunteers,
McPherson Barracks,
Allahabad, U. P., India.

Dorothy is a little girl ten years old.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a girl ten years old. I would like to hear from girls living on ranches in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and California. I like swimming and skating. I play the piano. And I am in the 6A grade at school. I would like very much to have a Pal from out West, for I love the West.

DOROTHY WILLIAMS.
145 West Frambes Avenue,
Columbus, Ohio.



WHERE TO GO And How To GET THERE

By JOHN NORTH

We aim in this department to give practical help to readers. The service offered includes accurate information about the West, its ranches, mines, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. We will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to us, for we are always glad to assist you to the best of our ability.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

IN search of a location in the Pacific Northwest, Clark T., of Baltimore, Maryland, is asking for information about a mighty interesting part of the Beaver State.

"Although I've been in the East for about ten years now, Mr. North, I have never felt at home or happy here. Born and brought up on the Pacific coast, I'm homesick for the West. I love work in the woods and fields, as well as such outdoor sports

as hunting and fishing. After doing a little preliminary investigating, I've about decided that Baker County offers an energetic hombre a fighting chance to make good. As far as I have been able to find out, this county has many industries, ranging from farming to mining. Can you give me some helpful details?"

We'll do our level best for you, Clark. It seems to us that you've chosen well, for Baker County, em-

bracing an area of three thousand square miles, has more commercial resources than any other county in the State of Oregon. Farming, live stock, lumbering, dairying, and mining all contribute to its wealth and prosperity.

The basic industry of Baker County is farming, and being a great live-stock country, hay is the principal crop grown, with alfalfa ranking first. Wild hay, timothy, and clover are also raised and are of superior quality. Wheat, oats, and barley constitute the bulk of the grain crop, most of which is consumed within the county. Considerable quantities of potatoes and other vegetables are raised in various parts of the county.

Eagle Valley and the canyon of Snake River are the principal fruit-growing sections of Baker County. The largest peach orchard in the State is located at Home, on the Snake River.

Live-stock raising is the second oldest industry in the county and one of the most important. Dairying is also a big industry and is growing yearly. Baker County has two cheese factories manufacturing a high-grade cheese which competes successfully with that made any place in the world. Lumbering is one of the main resources of the county, the principal product being white pine.

The oldest industry in Baker County is mining. Gold was first

discovered in this section back in 1861, and since that time the district has produced over one hundred and twenty million dollars in gold, silver, and copper. In fact, the Baker district produces eighty-five per cent of the mineral wealth of the State of Oregon. Besides gold, silver, and copper, the district is rich in lime, gypsum, cement materials, granite, building stone, fire clay, and other minerals. Recently there has been a small, steady gold rush in Baker County, and activity to-day in that field is much stronger than it has been in thirty years.

Baker is the county seat, and is located on the main line of the Union Pacific, in Powder River Valley. The altitude is three thousand four hundred and forty feet, and the population is

over seven thousand. Its trade territory embraces a wide area. Baker is also on the Old Oregon Trail, seventy-four miles of this historic highway running through Baker County.

SPECIAL NOTICE

WHERE TO GO IN WASHINGTON

With wonderful scenic panoramas, tumbling mountain streams, unexplored wilderness, and clean, attractive cities, Washington is the Mecca of many vacationists. If you are touring out to the Evergreen State, you'll want a descriptive booklet telling you where to go, as well as a road map, showing you how to get there. For an address from which this free literature may be obtained, write John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Baker County, embracing an area of three thousand square miles, has more commercial resources than any other county in Oregon. Farming, live stock, lumbering, dairying, and mining all contribute to its wealth and prosperity. For an address from which additional details about Baker County may be obtained, write John North.

Well, it's a trail to the alluring Ozark country that Roger P., of Buffalo, New York, wants to follow.

"For a number of years now I have had my heart set on a vacation in the fascinating Ozark country of Missouri, Mr. North. This year, come what may, I intend to carry out this plan. I'm especially fond of fishing and have been told that the lakes and streams of this region furnish excellent sport. In fact it's the idea of renting a river float and enjoying this sport as I drift down a stream that appeals to me most. Can this be done? And will you give me the names of some towns from which good fishing streams may be reached?"

You've handed out an order that it is a joy to fill, Roger. Somehow, we, too, have always had a soft spot in our heart for the Ozark region, with its swelling hills, smiling lakes, numerous springs of pure water, and picturesque little hamlets. We wager our best sombrero that this "hill country" will prove superb summer playground.

Fishing from a river float is one of the most favored ways of angling in the Ozarks, and you'll find that equipment can be rented and guides procured on almost any river. You'll surely revel in the lazy peaceful days, with new scenery at every turn and fishing holes all along the way. Lunch is usually enjoyed at some scenic spot, and camp is made at night on the river banks. So numerous are the waterways of the Ozarks that trips of almost any desired length are possible.

Good fishing waters are easily accessible from many of the hamlets in the Ozarks. Springfield is the gateway to the famed White River and Lake Taneycomo sections, while Rolla centers a section of fine river fishing, including such streams as the Gasconade, Big and Little Pines, and Meramec. Among numerous other points surrounded by neigh-

borhoods of good fishing are: Joplin, Neosho, Monett, Forsythe, Westplains, Lebanon, Van Buren, Poplar Bluff, and Waynesville. Lake of Ozarks, near Bagnell, is rapidly gaining a national reputation among anglers.

The famed Ozark country, with its swelling hills and deep canyons, its smiling lakes and bubbling springs, its deep woods and picturesque little hamlets, is an ideal summer playground. Readers interested in this famous "hill country" should ask John North where free literature and road maps may be obtained.

Fishing is surely a mighty fine sport, but it's Western rodeos about which Phil H., of Chicago, Illinois, craves some facts.

"I expect to spend a month or so out in Wyoming before the summer is over, Mr. North, and would like you to give me a schedule of the outdoor events which I might take in. I'm mighty keen to see a real Western rodeo."

You're heading for the right State to gratify this wish, Phil. During July, rodeos, boasting some of the world's best riders, are held at Cheyenne, Casper, Cody, Evanston, Gillette, Lander, Pinedale, Saratoga, and Sheridan. In August the Debois rodeo, the Lake Guernsey Water Carnival, the Jackson Hole rodeo, and the "Night Herd" at Thermopolis, all make red-letter days on the Wyoming calendar. And in September the Wyoming State Fair and Wyoming Products Exposition is held at Douglas.

Big celebrations in the West usually take the form of summer rodeos, which bring together the top cowhands and wranglers, as well as the toughest buckin' horses in all range land. If you are interested in taking in one of these events, ask John North to tell you when and where the most notable rodeos are held.

GUNS AND GUNNERS

By CHARLES E. CHAPEL

Lieutenant, U. S. Marine Corps



The foremost authorities on ballistics and the principal firearms manufacturers are cooperating to make this department a success. We shall be glad to answer any letters regarding firearms if accompanied by a stamped and addressed envelope. Address your letters to Lieutenant Charles E. Chapel, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

BANK guards are organized all over the United States. The butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker are kept in touch with bandit activities by telephone and by special-alarm circuits run out from the bank so that any bank employee can touch a button and summon armed assistance. The plan is for each member of the bank guard to grab his gun and take position where he thinks he can best intercept the fleeing car. Sometimes it is the innocent bystander who gets killed. This fact has created a demand for marksmanship training for the volunteer bank guards, but the old-fashioned firing at stationary targets at known ranges is boresome to

many men, hence the need for some new scheme of instruction.

Shooting at a target made of three-ply veneer to resemble an automobile load of bank bandits is the solution to the problem. This target is reinforced and mounted on skids. It runs along a cable towed by a car going on a parallel course in the opposite direction. Vital spots in the car, such as gas tank, radiator, tires, motor, and passenger seats are painted a bright color and count as scoring areas. Dummies resembling innocent bystanders are mounted in the rear of the bandit-car target. Hitting a bystander target counts against the shooter even more than hitting the

driver of the car counts for him. It's a great idea. The credit goes to Mr. Frank M. Hamlin, president of the Lake Villa Trust & Savings Bank, Lake County, Illinois.

Data on the 1876 Winchester.

A. C. N., Gadsden, Alabama: The 1876 Winchester, also called the "Centennial," the rifle used by Teddy Roosevelt in his ranch days, cost \$40, had a 28-inch barrel, used .45-75 cartridges, lever action, carrying 12 rounds, and weighed 9¼ pounds. This gun was made in various calibers, with round, half-octagon, or full-octagon barrel, and in both sporting and target models.

Woman on champion team.

G. R. T., Exeter, New Hampshire: One of the members of the 1933 Civilian Club Outdoor Pistol League champion team was Mrs. Ad Topperwein, considered by most experts as the world's greatest woman shooter. This team made their championship status firing slow-fire, 20 shots, and includes Don Nissen, former Texas State champion; H. M. Cline, a champion and a brother of a former State champion; N. B. Gussett, champion Public Service Shot; and Sergeant W. E. Morgan, of the Ninth Infantry. The total score was 986 out of a possible 1000. The next best team only made 966. They used .38

Special Mid-range Sharp-corner Cartridges, sometimes called "wad-cutters."

Shotguns in the '70s.

P. L. D., Bridgeport, Connecticut: Shotguns were mostly muzzle-loaders as late as 1880, with gauges from 4 to 12; 9 and 11 being the popular sizes. Barrels varied from 34 to 50 inches in length. One and one-quarter ounces of shot was the usual load, with from 4 to 8 drams of powder. There was no definite load in use by all shooters for the same bore.

Flags on the ranges of the gay '90s.

H. F. E., Eagle Rock, California: An old idea for estimating the wind velocity was to stick red flags in the ground at intervals of forty or fifty feet between the firing line and the target. Wire rings sewed inside the flags kept them unfurled to the breeze. When there appeared to be the same amount of wind all over the range, the shooter let go his round.

Jeweler uses his head.

Mr. William Spitzel, Los Angeles, California jeweler, was held up by a bandit who jumped into his automobile. Spitzel pretended to faint from fear; the bandit reached for the steering wheel; Spitzel pulled the bandit's gun and killed him.

Peters's and Colt's have resumed sending free booklets to our readers. If you have not received these interesting pamphlets, write us now, and we will put your name on the mailing list.

The government supply of Krag and Russian rifles is exhausted, but the U. S. Rifle (Enfield), Model 1917, Caliber .30, is sold to *citizens of the United States* for \$8.85, under certain restrictions which will be explained to readers who send us a stamped and addressed envelope.

MISSING

This department is offered free of charge to our readers. Its purpose is to aid them in getting in touch with persons of whom they have lost track.

While it will be better to use your name in the notice, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

Now, readers, help those whose friends or relatives are missing, as you would like to be helped if you were in a similar position.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to any one who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

JACK.—Fred and wife led to you and Bill. There is no trouble or danger of any kind for either of you. I am anxious to hear from you. Won't you write to dad at the old address at R. R. 7 I have just returned from Merrill. Love and best wishes from Spud.

ATTENTION.—Would like to hear from old buddies who served with me in the Philippine Islands from 1920 to 1927. Especially want to hear from Charles Ley and Sam Braffe. Address Ralph Bates, Ex-sgt. Q. M. C., 158 Woodworth Avenue, Yonkers, New York.

NOTICE.—Any one wishing to get in touch with Henry Transee can reach him by addressing Henry Transee, General Delivery, Zephir Hills, Florida.

NOTICE.—Somewhere I have a half sister. She would be between twenty-eight and thirty years of age and used to live in Arizona. Other than that I know nothing about her. She and I had the same father, James L. Tiddy. My grandmother, Mrs. Beessie Tiddy, Missoula, Montana, used to write to her mother. Any word of her would be greatly appreciated by Mrs. Dorothea Sampier, 2750 Wiskah Road, Aberdeen, Washington.

SNODGRASS, JARVIS.—Your mother is very ill. Please write. Any one knowing the whereabouts of this man, please communicate with Levene Snodgrass, Ancho, New Mexico.

PLETCHER, GRACE.—In 1928 she was married to a man named Potter. She is a large heavy-set woman. Has black hair and dark eyes. Would be about forty-five years of age. Mr. Potter was tall, slender, and light-complexioned. It is thought that his initials were M. C. When last heard of, they were in the vicinity of Cincinnati, Ohio. A property settlement requires communication with them. Any one knowing their whereabouts, kindly notify M. C., care of Western Story Magazine.

SLAYTON, HARRY.—Frequently called Bud. Has not been heard from for years since he suddenly stopped writing home. Had been in California around Marysville and Yuba City. He is twenty-two years old. Has gray eyes, light, sandy hair, and very fair complexion. Is five feet ten and a half inches tall, and of large build. Walks with a loose, easy stride. Right hand is badly scarred from a burn. When he was seventeen years old he enlisted in the navy and spent three years on the carrier, *Lexington*. His mother is much worried and would appreciate any help in locating him. Address Mrs. Walter Slayton, Gilmore City, Iowa.

CRAIG, ANNIE.—Who taught school in Fillmore, Utah, in the '80s. I am not looking for help, nor am I in a position to give it, but I would like to find this lost relative. Address A. R., care of Western Story Magazine.

NOTICE.—If the two ladies who talked to me on Capolis Beach on July 4, 1921 or 1922 about a lost daughter and niece whom they were trying to find will communicate with A. R., care of Western Story Magazine, they can obtain information of interest to them.

DECAR, JESSE.—Please come home. We are waiting for you. Onieda and Marian.

DONEZ, CHARLES WILLIAM.—Frequently called Bill. Has not been heard from since 1931. He was then working for the G. P. & E. Co., in Stockton, California. In his last letter he spoke of leaving for Boulder Dam, Nevada, in a few days. He is twenty-nine years of age. Has brown hair and blue eyes. He is six feet tall and weighed one hundred and seventy pounds. Any one knowing his whereabouts, please communicate with his sister, Mrs. Georgia E. Miller, R. 1, Longview, Washington.

RATLIFF, or RATCLIFF, JONES H.—He was born in 1850 in eastern Kentucky. In 1876 he went West leaving his wife and three small children in Floyd County, Kentucky. In 1884 he was heard from in Kansas. It is possible that he may have gone to Oklahoma when the homestead lands were opened up. Soon after he left home a son, Robert, was born. Robert and his sister Elizabeth are still living. Any one who can give information concerning this man will be suitably rewarded by R. L. Sloane, R. 2, Rensselaer, Indiana.

STROUD, JOHN HENRY.—Was last seen in Tacoma, Washington. Would be about sixty-two years of age. Has straight black hair and dark-brown eyes. He is five feet ten inches tall and weighed one hundred and fifty pounds. Any news of him would be welcomed by his daughter, Nancy Jane Toney, P. O. Box 574, Wapato, Washington.

CUMMINGS, FRANCIS M.—Usually called Frank. He was born in Stafford Springs, Connecticut, on August 18, 1867. His relatives have not heard from him for about twenty-five years. In 1932 he is known to have lived at a boarding house in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. He left there with the intention of going to the Peace River district either in British Columbia or Alberta. His relatives are very desirous of any information as to his present address. Kindly write to Kenneth M. White, Rockville, Connecticut, U. S. A.

TURNER, PAUL G.—He is thirty years of age. Has not been heard from for two years. Please get in touch with some of your folks. Come home if possible. We all want to see you, especially dad. Any one having even the slightest information regarding him, please communicate with Wayne B. Turner, Anthony, Kansas.

MARTIN, ANTHONY E.—Who has been missing for fifteen years. He had brown hair and blue eyes, and light complexion. On one side of face was a big dimple. In the World War he was a member of Aero Sqd. 476. His last address was Forbes Street, Arlington, New Jersey. His sister Louise died a year ago. His mother is very ill, and prays that she may see her boy before she is called. Any one knowing even the slightest news of him, please write at once to Anna, care of Western Story Magazine.

JACKSON, ADAM, and SONS, LLOYD and LEONARD.—The former is my brother-in-law. When last heard from they were in Spokane, Washington. That was in 1932. Any one knowing their whereabouts, please advise Harry Fox, 211 Thirteenth Street South, Moorhead, Minnesota.

VAN NORMAN, FRED.—Was last heard from when in Petoskey, Michigan. He is six feet two inches tall. Has brown hair and blue eyes. Is about forty-nine years of age. If he, or any of his brothers see this, please write to his daughter, Mrs. H. K. Benner, 49 Fernor Avenue, Saint Vital, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

NOTICE.—U. M. Miller, (Skippy), Bkr. 1c, U. S. Florida, from April, 1917 to July, 1919, would like to hear from all shipmates of the Florida's wartime crew, especially those of the bakeshop and galley force: H. Hampton, Glen Frasier, Johnny Fetter, W. L. Cecil, Joe Gillo, and others. Any one knowing any of these men, kindly call this notice to their attention. Address U. M. Miller, General Delivery, Winter Park, Florida.

GUNTHER, JACOB L.—Write to me at once. Have very important news for you. Any one knowing his present whereabouts, please get in touch with Ethel Gutman, 12340 Grand River Avenue, Detroit, Michigan.

THOMAS, ALBERT LEROY.—Five years ago he was in Whitney's Point, New York. Has not been heard from since. His wife's maiden name was Lillian Scarfield. They had a little boy who would now be about seven years of age. Mr. Thomas is six feet tall, and has brown eyes and hair. Any one having any information concerning him, kindly write to his mother, Mrs. Henry Thomas, Windsor, California.

WHITE, ELSIE and DEE.—They are my brother's children. I think that they lived near San Angelo, Texas, about fifteen years ago, but it is possible that I am incorrect as to name of place. Would like so much to hear from both of them. Address Lonnie White, 512 West Gilsou Avenue, Electra, Texas.

CORNELIUS, HUGH T.—Your father is sick and worries constantly about you. Please write to Laura. Any one knowing his whereabouts, please write to F. Cornelius, care of V. R. Reid, R. 3, Pineshik, Ontario.

RENNISON, ARTHUR, EARL, CECIL, and FREDERICK.—They are my brothers. When last heard from, Arthur was married and living in California. He had twin daughters. Earl was in Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, the last letter I had from him. I have had no word from Cecil or Frederick since they left home. Brothers, if you see this, please write to me. I am married now and have three boys. Any one knowing them, please bring this advertisement to their attention. Mrs. Orric Cushman, Odell, Oregon.

RENNISON, FLORENCE.—She is my mother. The last time I saw her was during the summer of 1930, in Klamath Falls, Oregon. She is about five feet tall, and has blue eyes and black hair. I have married since I last met her. Any one knowing her whereabouts, kindly notify Mrs. Orric Cushman, Odell, Oregon.

WILLIAMS, CLAUDE.—Originally a resident of Waukesha, Wisconsin. Has also spent some time in several cities in Michigan, and lived for a while in Reading, Pennsylvania. Any one knowing his present whereabouts, kindly communicate with Charles Schreiner, 656 North Twelfth Street, Reading, Pennsylvania.

WINTER, JOSEPH.—He is my father's brother. When he was a young boy he left his home in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for the West. We heard at one time that he had been killed at work in a mill in St. Louis, Missouri, but we never had any proof of his death. If any of the readers know anything concerning his death, or whether he is still living, kindly communicate with Mrs. Mary Moore, B. I. Washington, Pennsylvania.

WINTER, JOHN.—Of Pine Bluff, Arkansas. He used to be foreman over men being transported from one State to another over the Baltimore & Ohio R. R. Any one knowing his whereabouts, please advise Mrs. Mary Moore, R. 1, Washington, Pennsylvania.

NILSSON, FREDERICKA, ELVIRA, HANNA, and MARTIN.—Who left Brahe, Hoby, Blekinge, Sweden, in 1884. They went to Chicago, Illinois, and the last heard from them was a letter in 1902. If they, or any of their children, are living, please write to their brother Adolph Nilsson, Kvidinge, Sweden.

LORRIS, MELISIE.—When last heard of she was in DeLano, Tennessee. That was in 1931. She is believed to be in Chickamauga, Georgia. An old friend is anxious to locate her and would greatly appreciate any assistance from the readers. Please address William Wells, 24 Marlon Street, Knoxville, Tennessee.

NOTICE.—Have heard that some men have been trying to locate me regarding the payment of a sum of money due to me. This is to notify them of my correct address. Mrs. Mary Kane, 733 Walnut Street, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

TAYLOR, CLAUDE LEVERT.—Write to Sister Hazel at once. Any one knowing his address, please advise Mrs. J. C. Hall, R. 1, Porterville, Mississippi.

BURTON, G. W.—In 1934 he was living in Liano Grande, and Mason, Texas. Would like to get in touch with him. C. Kennedy, 5041½ Quincy Street, Chicago, Illinois.

MURRAH, or MURRAY, PENDLETON, RELATIVES OF.—He was governor of Texas in 1863. Would like to hear from any one who is related to him in any degree. Address C. Kennedy, 5041½ Quincy Street, Chicago, Illinois.

ERWIN, RUTH.—Wife of Raymond Erwin, who died of tuberculosis in 1932 or '33. He was a World War veteran. Her maiden name was Peterson. In October, 1930, she visited her parents in Aurora, Colorado. I last heard from her in 1932. She was then in Palo Alto, California. Any one knowing her present whereabouts please address Bill Plotner, 714 Ramona Street, Palo Alto, California.

WILSON.—Any one of this name who may be related to W. I. F. Wilson, please write to him or his daughter. Would like to hear especially from any of his old friends in North Carolina. Please address Miss Sarah Wilson, R. R. 2, Inola, Oklahoma.

IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE
THEY ONCE CALLED ME
SKINNY!



It's a shame to be
SKINNY

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Astonishing gains with new double tonic. Richest imported brewers' ale yeast concentrated 7 times and iron added. Gives 5 to 15 lbs. in a few weeks

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Doctors for years have prescribed yeast to build up health. But now, with this new yeast discovery in pleasant little tablets, you can get far greater tonic results than with ordinary yeast—regain health, and also put on pounds of firm flesh—enticing curves—and in a far shorter time.

Not only are thousands quickly gaining beauty-bringing pounds, but also clear, radiant skin, freedom from indigestion, nervousness and constipation, new pep.

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This amazing new product, Ironized Yeast, is made from specially cultured brewers' ale yeast imported from Europe—the richest yeast known—which by a new scientific process is now concentrated 7 times—made 7 times more powerful.

But that is not all! This super-rich yeast is ironized with 3 kinds of strengthening iron.

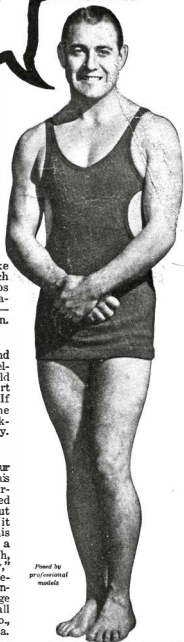
Day after day, as you take Ironized Yeast tablets, watch flat chest develop, skinny limbs round out attractively, constipation go, skin clear to beauty—you're an entirely new person.

Results guaranteed

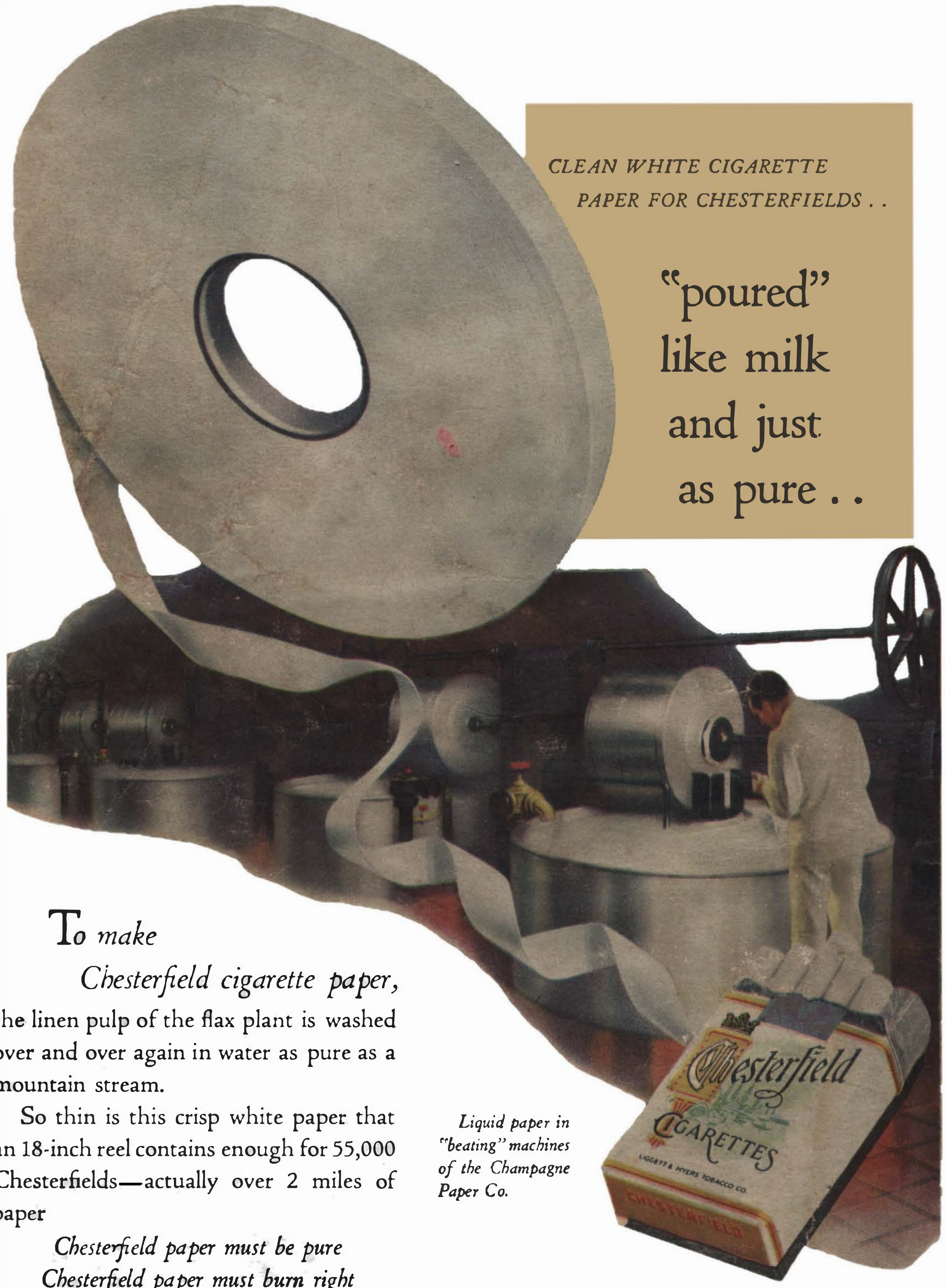
No matter how skinny and weak you may be, this marvelous new Ironized Yeast should build you up in a few short weeks as it has thousands. If you are not delighted with the results of the very first package, your money back instantly.

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