

STREET
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WESTERN

STORY

MAGAZINE

10
CENTS

JANUARY 1, 1938



A COMPLETE NOVEL **TRIGGER LAW** by NEY N. GEER

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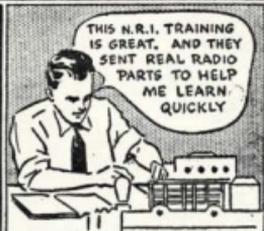
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The Roundup

FOLKS, we have with us to-night, Mrs. Walter Johnson, of Humboldt, Iowa, who writes as follows:

DEAR BOSS OF THE ROUNDUP:

Please enter the name of my neighbor, Mr. Will Locke, who is eighty-six and very active, in your Old-timer's Club.

I also have another neighbor, aged seventy-five, Mr. Archie Hackley, who is eligible to be included. Both men, especially the latter, are steady readers of Western Story Magazine, and I know it would please them very much to find their names on your list of old-timers. Mr. Locke's hobby is gardening and Mr. Hackley's is certainly reading.

My husband and I both read your magazine but we shall have to wait at least a quarter of a century to be eligible to your club.

We're very pleased that you wrote us, Mrs. Johnson, and thanks a lot. We can't help but feel that gardening and reading are two of the finest hobbies in the world, and we hope Mr. Locke and Mr. Hackley will enjoy them for many years to come. And we hope, too, that you and your husband will continue to find increasing enjoyment in Western Story Magazine.

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TRIGGER LAW

By NEY N. GEER

Author of "Potluck Picks A Trail," etc.

CHAPTER I.

SHOTS IN THE DARK.

POTLUCK" JONES opened his eyes, to lay silent and motionless, wondering just what had awakened him. Tommy O'Neil lay close beside him, and by Tommy's slow, regular breathing, Potluck knew

that his friend was sleeping soundly. The glow of starlight entered the room through a narrow window beside the head of the bed. The window was open. The night air had grown crisp and cool. Beyond the flimsy partition on his right came the sound of a man snoring loudly in the room adjoining. Potluck





This time Potluck needed all the luck he could find

judged the time to be well past midnight.

Outside, in the hallway, a loose board creaked. Potluck listened more intently, and distinguished the sound of their doorknob being cautiously turned. A dry hinge creaked. The door to the room swung a little inward, but the chair back under the knob checked further movement. The intruder, whoever it was, seemed baffled. For a time there came no further sound. Potluck's hand moved under his pillow and gripped his gun.

Then, vaguely outlined in the dim

light, a hand wedged itself into the crack of the partly opened door, gripped the chair back and quietly worked it to one side. The door swung open and a shadowy figure entered stealthily, closed the door, and replaced the chair under the knob. Potluck saw that the midnight visitor was a man of short, plump build—a man very close to death, for Potluck's gun sights were upon him.

The man sank down upon the chair as if waiting to make sure the occupants of the room were sleeping soundly. He was breathing heavily,

as if from excitement or from very recent physical exertion. From time to time he checked his breath and seemed to listen long and intently.

Potluck gently thumbed his hammer back. The mechanism of the Colt gave off a sharp, metallic click.

"Don't shoot!" pleaded the man in a hoarse, startled whisper. "Don't speak! Don't move! Listen!"

There was a vaguely familiar quality in the man's hushed, excited voice. Potluck tried vainly to place it in his memory. Then, traveling slowly along the hallway outside, the furtive tread of boots drew near, passed by the door, and faded out beyond. The back stairs creaked complainingly at the passing of those boots as their wearer descended into the dark alley at the hotel's rear.

The plump man stood up and tiptoed forward to stand beside the bed. The starlight entering the window revealed the man's features more clearly. Potluck eased his hammer down.

"Judge! Judge Stoner!" Potluck muttered in an astonished whisper. "Why all this catfootin' around?"

Judge Stoner leaned over the bed and peered down searchingly. Satisfied, he straightened. "Potluck, I need your help! Wake Tommy up!"

With his elbow, Potluck nudged his friend gently between the shoulders. Tommy came awake and raised his head.

"Quit proddin' me," Tommy grumbled sleepily. "Can't you let a man get some rest?"

"Keep quiet," Potluck whispered. "It's Judge Stoner! There seems to be mischief afoot."

"Death rides my trail!" Judge Stoner whispered tensely. "To-night a man tried to murder me!"

"You sure it wasn't just a bad dream?" Tommy O'Neil asked

softly. "I just had one myself. It was a lucky thing you came."

"This thing is serious!" Judge Stoner's voice sounded strained.

"How'd you know we were in Coyote Springs?" Potluck asked. "How'd you find us here?"

"I recognized your horses at the livery. I found your names on the register of this hotel," their visitor informed them quickly. "I don't want any one to know I came here. I must—"

He stopped abruptly. "Listen!"

STEPS were sounding again in the hallway. Just outside the door the sound stopped, and only the loud snoring of a man in the adjoining room broke the night silence of the hotel's second-story rooms. From outside, softened somewhat by distance, the tinny clamor of a dance-hall piano beat its way in through the open window. The steps sounded again, passed on, faded.

"This thing is dead serious!" Judge Stoner repeated hoarsely. "My brother John always writes me a letter on my birthday. Now it's two months passed—and no letter. To-night a man tried to murder me! There's trouble in the Whetstone Mountains. Death rides the wind!"

"Shucks!" muttered Potluck Jones. "Judge, pull off yore boots and spend the night with us. You're all spooked up! Come daylight, you'll see things different. Move over, Too-bad."

"No! A thousand times no! This thing is serious, gentlemen!" The harried man tiptoed to the window and peered out into the starlit night as if straining his ears to listen. Then he tiptoed back and stood over Potluck Jones, a large knife glittering in his stubby hand.

"Look!" he commanded excitedly.

"This knife belongs to my brother John. Not over an hour ago its blade narrowly missed my jugular vein, thrown by a master hand through my window as I lay asleep in bed. John has no cause to murder me! John does not throw a knife! John may be dead! This thing is serious!"

"Watch out, Potluck!" Tommy muttered a quick warning. "The judge is off his nut! Watch him!"

"Ah!" breathed Judge Stoner heavily. "You judge me insane? Such is not the case. Potluck, you take this knife. Guard well these legal documents—they are no longer safe with me. Ride up into the Whetstones! Nose around Kettle Falls! You boys are smart; you'll uncover what is going on. You know danger when you see it. Your courage has been tested. A girl's life and future happiness is at stake. Ride! She may even now be dead!"

"Striped wild cats!" Tommy O'Neil groaned. "Judge, I reckon you must be drunk."

"Not drunk, Tommy, but I wish I was. Listen closely, and remember all I tell you," Judge Stoner pleaded, as if pressed for time. "Over a year ago our sister died back in South Bend, Indiana—bad lungs. She was a widow, and she left a girl, a rather pretty girl—Alice Danvers. But the child was spindle-legged as a newborn colt and helpless as a kitten before its eyes are open. We sent for the girl, of course, but when she arrived I saw at once that Alice wouldn't fit in Coyote Springs, so I shipped her up into the Whetstone Mountains for brother John to look after."

"Seems like you tipped her out o' the fryin' pan into the fire," Potluck remarked caustically.

Judge Stoner heaved a deep and troubled sigh. "I greatly fear that

such has turned out to be the case, my boy," he sadly agreed. "But I couldn't keep the girl with me—not here in Coyote Springs. You see, the frequent gun play in this town frightened her half to death. The poor child witnessed a lively six-gun argument the first day she arrived. But never mind about all that.

"My brother John is well-fixed," the judge went on hurriedly. "John owns quite a spread. He's a bachelor, and very soon after John saw the girl he made a will naming Alice as his sole heir. I did the same. You see, John and I are partners. But John didn't write me a letter on my birthday, and neither did the girl. To-night, with John's own knife, some one tried to murder me. This thing is serious!"

"Judge, pull off yore boots," Potluck suggested for the second time. "Come mornin', we'll talk this whole thing over; then you'll find it don't look so bad."

"No, no! I'll not draw fire upon your heads!" the judge refused vehemently. "You boys must have an open trail to ride. It's a big job I'm asking you to do. Don't fail me! Ride quickly, and remember all I've said."

Judge Stoner tiptoed to the door, moved the chair aside, and spoke in a low voice which had taken on an almost judicial calmness:

"Farewell! 'I came like water, and like wind I go.'"

BEFORE either Potluck Jones or Tommy O'Neil had time to speak, Judge Stoner stepped quickly into the hall and closed the door. Listening intently, Potluck heard the back stairs creak. That was all.

"If the judge wasn't loco, then I'm a horny toad!" Tommy muttered, smuggling deeper into the

blankets. "Prop the chair under the door, Potluck, and be danged sure you do a good job this time."

The heavy knife, together with a long Manila envelope, lay upon the blanket covering Potluck's chest. He hefted the knife and sensed that it was finely balanced for throwing. He thoughtfully fingered the heavy envelope which had been designated by Judge Stoner as "legal documents."

Potluck had met the judge in Skeleton Wells at a murder trial, and, later, at Major Barrock's home, had become better acquainted with him. But of John Stoner, the judge's brother, Potluck knew nothing. He had heard of Kettle Falls and the Whetstone Mountains, but had never been there.

"This stumps me, Too-bad," Potluck confided. "The fact is, I'm gettin' all spooked up myself."

"I never could sleep in a strange town," grumbled Tommy. "What's the matter with me, anyway?"

Potluck made no reply. He was both surprised and bewildered by this sudden turn events had taken. Together with Tommy, he had just finished a two-night ride down from Skeleton Wells and had safely delivered to Wells Fargo & Co. a small fortune in raw gold which had recently been looted from one of that company's eastbound stages. The presence of himself and Tommy in Coyote Springs was not generally known. True, they had signed the hotel register, but Potluck did not consider their names of sufficient importance to cause any comment. The fact that Judge Stoner had searched them out in the dead of night and entered their room with such stealth and secrecy was, to say the least, totally unexpected and most unusual.

Kettle Falls lay somewhere to the

north and west, a distance of three hundred miles, he judged. Potluck had not the slightest yearning to make that ride for the sole purpose of hunting trouble in the Whetstone Mountains—there was plenty of that where he and Tommy came from. He decided that in the morning he would look for the judge, talk him into a quieter mood, return the knife and papers, and so be rid of the whole affair. Yes, that was the thing to do.

Mindful of the unbarred door, Potluck swung his long legs from under the blankets and sat up. As he straightened to his feet, three quick gunshots struck his ears. The sound of those shots came rolling upward from the dark alley at the hotel's rear. Potluck moved instantly to the open window and thrust his head outside.

Clear to his attentive ears came the thumping of running boots. That sound faded, but the drumming of the dance-hall piano ran on and on. The snoring in the adjoining room stopped, the bed springs creaked, then the snore began again, this time in a slightly different key. It would seem that gun play in Coyote Springs was not unusual. Potluck drew his head inside and began tugging on his boots.

"Now what's the trouble?" Tommy asked drowsily.

"I don't know, but git yore boots on," Potluck commanded urgently. "I'm goin' down in back where those shots came from. You go down in front and keep yore eyes peeled."

"Name of a mule!" sputtered Tommy. "Towns wasn't made to sleep in!"

"Snap out of it, Too-bad," urged Potluck, swiftly buckling on his gun belt. "Judge Stoner went down the back stairs, and I'm thinkin' some one drilled him. Use yore head!

Meet me at the livery—it may be up to us to ride.”

With the knife and Manila envelope carefully secreted upon his person, Potluck left the room and moved cautiously along the dark hallway, silently descending the back stairs and keeping well to one side so as to avoid loose treads. At the open door below he stood poised and listening, his eyes probing into the shadows of the narrow alley. They came to rest upon the dark outline of a short, plump man sprawled face downward, arms flung upon the ground. The fallen man made no movement.

CHAPTER II.

THE SHERIFF TAKES A HAND.

SOME inner voice prompted Potluck to remain motionless. He stood there, crouched and listening, his presence masked by the dark stairway at his back, his alert mind keenly conscious of the growing peril stalking the starlit night. Two men ran into the alley from a side street on his left. They stopped short and bent over the limp body lying there not thirty feet from where he stood.

“I was passin’ an’ heard shots,” one man explained to the other. “It’s lucky I found you in the Ace Saloon, sheriff.”

“Yeah,” agreed the other calmly. “You did the smart thing, callin’ me first off.”

One of the men struck a match. By its light, Potluck caught the glint of an officer’s badge on the vest of the man who held it.

“Great grief!” exploded the officer, shocked out of his previous calmness. “It’s Judge Stoner! Feller, you stay right here and watch the body. I gotta find the skunk who killed him.”

“Me stay here? With a dead man?” the other whined. “Sheriff, hadn’t I better go find the coroner?”

“Do as you’re told!” the officer snapped sharply. “The devil with the coroner! It’s the killer I crave to find!” The officer whirled and ran quickly back the way he had come.

The man who remained stood motionless, as if listening to the sound of the sheriff’s speeding boots. When that sound faded, the man chuckled softly and bent down over the body. The starlight was barely sufficient to reveal that the man was carefully searching the judge’s pockets.

Potluck at once stepped from the dark doorway and moved toward him with all the stealth at his command, reasoning that any slight noise he made would be covered by the roistering piano, which had taken on a wilder tune. When quite close, Potluck spoke: “Find anything?” he asked softly.

At the sound of Potluck’s voice the man started guiltily, whirled and straightened, whipping out his holstered gun in the same movement.

Just as suddenly, Potluck’s long arm shot out and his powerful hand closed down upon the weapon, blocking the hammer’s fall. He was not surprised to find that the barrel of the man’s Colt was warm. Too warm! Three shots heat a gun’s barrel considerably. With his own heavy gun, Potluck struck the other a stunning blow upon the side of the head.

The man went limp and fell, his cocked gun remaining in Potluck’s hand. Potluck lowered the hammer with care and laid the gun beside the man. He struck a match and viewed the man’s face intently. Potluck’s attention was caught by a leather wallet clutched in the man’s hand. It was clear that wallet had

been taken from Judge Stoner's body. In the dim light, Potluck was unable to determine exactly what its contents were, but he recognized the presence of a small photograph by his sense of touch. Also, his fingers told him that the wallet contained no currency.

For an instant, Potluck hesitated with the wallet open in his hands. Then he bent quickly over Judge Stoner's body and examined it for a money belt. He found one, thick with currency, he judged. He decided the money belt could be left safely for the sheriff and coroner to care for. But there was a chance the wallet might contain information or papers the killer was in search of. Therefore Potluck placed the wallet in his own pocket.

SATISFIED, then, that to linger would do more harm than good, he moved silently away, leaving the alley by way of a vacant lot, and circling toward the livery. He reasoned that the sheriff, given time to think, would return and find the killer unconscious in the alley. Surely all the evidence the sheriff would need to hang the murderer would lay before his eyes. The man's gun was reeking with fresh-spent powder, and, in all probability, still contained three empty shells. The fact that the man had admitted he was close at the time of the shooting would be sufficient to cause the sheriff's suspicions to fasten upon him. A quick investigation would remove all doubt and speedily hang the killer. For his own part, the words of warning spoken by Judge Stoner in the hotel room were impressing themselves more deeply on Potluck's active mind. He and Tommy must get out of town at once.

Drawing near to the corrals, Pot-

luck heard Tommy's familiar voice in casual conversation with the night man in charge.

"I dunno what the shootin' was about," Tommy spoke lightly. "Some drunken sheep-herder, I reckon, with his teeth full o' wool, tryin' to hit the moon."

"There ain't no moon—yet," replied the night man in a sleepy, petulant voice. "I'd rather think it was some drunken puncher who felt wolfish and decided it was his night to howl."

"You may be right," Tommy readily agreed. "I was in the last stages of a poker game. I'm clean as a hound's tooth! You say we owe you two bucks. Ain't our credit good?"

"Stranger, I don't know you from Adam's off ox," the liveryman replied.

"Now ain't that just too bad," Tommy mourned sadly.

Potluck came striding into the uncertain light of a lantern hung just inside the wide doorway. At sight of him, Tommy's freckled, snub-nosed face brightened.

"Howdy, partner! If the timhorns didn't leave you at least two bucks, we can't get our ponies out o' hock. How about it? My laigs was built too danged short for walkin'! We gotta ride!"

"Wa-al, I ain't exactly broke," Potluck replied ruefully. "But I will declare the gamblers in this man's town have a clever way o' separatin' the wheat from the chaff."

Their bill paid, the man led the way with his lantern into the stable and watched as they saddled their mounts and donned their chaps and spurs. "You boys ride plumb top hosses," he offered suggestively.

"These nags are common stock down where we work," Tommy replied easily.

"Where did you say you worked?" the man asked.

"Down on the Cannon Ball spread," Tommy answered, stepping into his saddle.

The livery man looked puzzled. "I never heard tell o' that outfit," he confessed.

Potluck rode into the street. He had never heard of the Cannon Ball himself. His amused smile vanished, however, as he heard men's running feet drawing near. He swung his rangy black in the opposite direction and spoke a low warning to Tommy. Side by side they trotted away. They had covered only a short distance when a shrill voice cried out behind them:

"Hey, you gents! Come back here!"

"That's the sheriff, Tommy," said Potluck, turning in his saddle to look back.

A number of men were bunched around the liveryman and his lantern. They were talking excitedly. Coyote Springs seemed to be waking up to the fact that one of its prominent citizens was dead and that a murder had been committed. The town was beginning to boil.

"The sheriff ain't talkin' to us," Tommy commented.

THE next instant a bullet whistled past their heads. A split second later the air was full of lead and other guns were barking. Potluck turned sharply from the street and put spurs to his mount, bringing an adobe building in between. With Tommy at his side, they left the outskirts of Coyote Springs and raced off across the open range.

"What happened?" Tommy questioned when they slowed up to breathe their horses.

Potluck quickly informed his

friend of all that had transpired back in the alley. "I was plumb certain that sheriff would take a tumble to himself and come runnin' back to check up on that gent he left behind," Potluck finished.

"Why didn't you shoot the dirty skunk?" Tommy demanded accusingly. "I'd 'a' let a streak o' starlight through him in short order. Let's go back and find him. I ain't backward about usin' my shootin' irons!"

"Listen!" commanded Potluck sharply. "Hear that? The sheriff has jumped the true scent and is after us hot-foot. We gotta ride! I'm packin' enough evidence to hang us both, if he catches up with us."

"Yeah?" said Tommy. "Now ain't that just too bad! Me, I carried off the hotel register. I thought it best not to have our names mixed up in this after what the judge said."

"That was a smart idea," Potluck declared with a feeling of relief. "It's plenty bad enough the way things stand. Shucks! Who'd 'a' thought that chucklehaired sheriff would take our trail?"

"That sheriff!" snorted Tommy in disgust. "He came rushin' into the hotel lobby just as I was stuffin' the register under my shirt. I thought he had me red-handed. He shoved his iron in my middle and took both my guns pronto. But all he did was sniff my gun barrels, then he went rushin' out and down the street."

From behind them, running horses could be distinctly heard swiftly leaving Coyote Springs. The sound increased in volume. Those horses carried riders vaguely discernible in the starlight. The posse, a dark, moving shadow, was drawing rapidly nearer. The riders raised a mighty shout as they sighted their quarry in the distance, and a few of the more

impatient ones began using their guns.

"That dumb-haided sheriff seems to like our tracks," Potluck muttered in disgust. "Too-bad, let's make him some!"

"And make 'em fast!" ejaculated Tommy. "Folks say travelin' is educational, Potluck. Let's travel!"

Tommy was riding a big, powerful roan, a splendid animal, sure-footed and intelligent to a high degree. Potluck's mount was a rangy black, fleet of foot and enduring. But the two men had very recently finished a grueling ride of more than two hundred miles, and their horses had not yet been given sufficient time in which to thoroughly freshen up. The posse was coming fast, baying like a pack of hungry wolves.

All about them lay the gently undulating desert. Not much chance of losing the posse here, Potluck decided as he swung into the northeast and headed in the direction of Skeleton Wells, with the bullets from those behind kicking up dust around them. The shots were wild, but there was always a chance that one of them would find its mark. A crippled mount would finish them in short order.

Those posse men were in an ugly temper. Mounted on fresh horses, and riding without thought of sparing their mounts, they were grimly determined to run their quarry down in one wild burst of speed.

"Danged if this don't rile me," spoke Tommy O'Neil above the pounding of their horses' hoofs. "Here we pack fifty thousand dollars' worth o' raw gold into that man's town at dusk, and before the moon is up them yahoos run us into the brush like we was a couple o' mangle coyotes. I aim to show them bellerin' bulls my teeth!"

There was a reckless grin on Tom-

my's snub-nosed face. Fifty pounds lighter in the saddle than Potluck, and mounted on a larger, stronger horse, Tommy could have pushed ahead. But now he dropped into the rear and pulled his rifle from its boot under his stirrup leather.

"Come on!" yelled Potluck. "If you hit one o' them posse men, our fat's in the fire."

"Shake yore reins, cowboy!" retorted his companion. "Pick a fast trail an' fog yore bronc along." Tommy raised high in his stirrups, turned in his saddle and fired.

THE bullet whistled low over the heads of the posse. Some of them involuntarily ducked. But all of them spurred their horses with increased violence. Tommy emptied his rifle, but the result of his shooting, purposely high, only seemed to fan the tempers of his pursuers and increase their impetuosity. Tommy drifted up beside Potluck, punching fresh shells into his magazine. A bullet zipped past their heads with an angry snarl.

"Them gents mean business, Potluck!" Tommy grinned. "Don't you reckon I better shoot low and put some o' them afoot. They seem to think I can't hit nothin'!"

"Come on!" pleaded Potluck sharply. "There's higher ground up ahead! Stick close behind me, Too-bad!"

Potluck's rangy black had caught its second wind. Its stiffened muscles had limbered up, and the thrill of the race was in its heated blood. It topped a rolling swell and raced down the long slope beyond, threading its way across a greasewood flat in a free-running, shifting stride. A deep arroyo suddenly appeared before it. The black bunched its feet and took the air in a mighty bound to sail across and land running upon

the other side. One jump behind, Tommy lifted his big roan with the reins and cleared the wide barrier which suddenly flashed before his eyes.

The posse likewise came upon the hidden arroyo unexpectedly. Several of the horses misjudged the jump or refused to take it readily. The crumbling, perpendicular banks gave way, spilling three horses and riders down into the bottom of the deep wash, and so out of the wild pursuit which flowed madly on and up the rising ground beyond.

Like their willing mounts, Potluck and Tommy were beginning to thrill to the clamor of the chase which followed persistently in their wake. Potluck looked back and grinned.

"It looks like some o' them gents piled up, Too-bad. I hope they didn't break their fool necks."

"If one o' 'em is that sheriff, I wouldn't give a hoot," Tommy grinned back at him. "He may be dumb, but he's sure a devil when he forks a hoss. Ain't yore black got no more speed?"

"Stick close, Too-bad," Potluck cautioned. "A pack o' hounds will overrun a hot trail quicker than a cold one."

They gained the crest of a long ridge outlined by humps and hollows until it lost itself in the vague distance. Straggling clumps of mesquite fringed the ridge on either side, with the hard-packed, wind-swept crest running its erratic course above and in between. As they neared the top of a hump, Potluck looked back and saw the lead rider break over the top of the hump behind. Turning suddenly to the right, Potluck headed on a slanting course down toward the mesquite brush. He heard a shrill, excited shout of com-

mand as the lead man behind was lost to view.

The lunging hoofs of the black and roan left a trail of dust in the still night air along the fringe of mesquite. Then Potluck suddenly checked their pace to a walk and, turning sharply to the left, crossed over the ridge behind the hump, and so down into the mesquite brush on the other side. Riding at a walk and picking their way through the brush with care, they worked back and in behind the posse, which had lost sight of them and was now widely scattered and riding frantically in all directions, crashing through the mesquite and shouting excitedly to one another.

CHAPTER III.

FREE TO ACT.

A GRIN of intense satisfaction was on the lean, sun-tanned face of Potluck Jones as he sat his motionless horse and listened. "I reckon that sheriff means well, Too-bad, but he shore missed a good chance to make a name for himself this night."

"Yeah!" agreed Tommy O'Neil softly. "If he'd started sniffin' gun barrels sooner he'd 'a' nabbed his man in short order."

"And me," Potluck lamented, "I had the judge's murderer laid out cold. I reckon the skunk is ridin' with that posse bold as brass."

"Wa-al, let's back track that posse and get out o' here," suggested Tommy. "Folks in Skeleton Wells will know we never killed Judge Stoner. We'll be safe there, and this sheriff can fry in his own grease."

"Skeleton Wells?" said Potluck blankly. "Why, we're haided for Kettle Falls!"

"Name of a mule!" sputtered Tommy. "Potluck, ain't you got no

sense? Do you aim to galivant from here to the Whetstone Mountains all on account a spindle-laiged kid forgot to write the judge a letter on his birthday?"

"This thing is serious, Too-bad. You know that! But if you want to fork our trails, why, I reckon you know the way to Skeleton Wells."

"Be you tryin' to get shed o' me?" Tommy demanded hotly.

"There's a gal up there, Too-bad!"

"You got one gal, Potluck. Me, I ain't lookin' for no kid that ain't got her eyes opened."

"One o' her uncles has just been murdered, Too-bad."

"That's a fact, Potluck. But I don't aim to——"

Tommy did not finish. One of the posse rode up in sight above them and looked down. "See hide or hair o' them blasted outlaws?" the man shouted loudly.

"Who? Me?" Potluck shouted back. "My hoss put its foot in a badger hole! I'm headin' back for town."

The rider muttered an unintelligible reply and vanished from the sky line close above them.

"Come on!" said Potluck tensely. "It's our move!"

Riding slowly, they worked their way on a gradual slant back to the ridge-crest trail. Men of the posse were beating the brush behind them, but their ardor was fast cooling, and there was small chance of their straightening out the trail before daylight. In all probability, the posse would soon return to town. With this thought in mind, Potluck Jones laid the tracks of their horses over those of the posse, reasoning that, by so doing, the trail of himself and Tommy would be masked completely.

One other rider seemed to have the same thought in mind, for, as

Potluck trotted his sweating black down the long slope toward the arroyo in the greasewood flat, he vaguely distinguished a rider far ahead, traveling in the same direction as themselves. As he watched, that lone rider changed his course and struck off into the northwest across the rolling desert and was quickly lost to view.

"Now that's danged queer," muttered Potluck.

"Ain't it?" said Tommy, who had likewise been watching. "I'll bet my bottom dollar there goes the gent who did that little shootin' job back in town."

"Kettle Falls is a long jump from here, Too-bad, but that hombre is headin' in that direction," Potluck mused aloud.

"If he is," suggested Tommy quickly, "we'll talk to that gent on the trail. The way he acts makes me plumb curious."

"I thought you was hittin' for Skeleton Wells, Too-bad," replied Potluck with a grin.

"How come you got that fool idea in yore head, Potluck?" Tommy demanded cheerfully. "Why, I never thought o' such a thing."

BY the time the morning sun looked down upon this thinly peopled region of meandering trails and far horizons, Potluck could sight no trailing plume of dust kicked up by any bunch of riders following in their rear. He judged that Coyote Springs lay a good fifty miles behind. Somewhere ahead, Kettle Falls was waiting. In between was a wide stretch of wild, deceptive landscape; a sun-baked land of hidden springs and dry water holes, for this was midsummer; an unfamiliar region which neither he nor Tommy had ever traveled. It was a grim, silent land where ero-

sion wove its weird patterns among painted buttes and deep arroyos, where hot, dry winds worked freakish pranks with desert sand.

Now they rode in the crimson glow of sunrise, which tinted the whole range with a cheerful, rosy hue. The-morning air still carried the coolness of mountain heights. Having finished their night's hunting, coyotes were skulking homeward to their cool dens hidden among the hillside brush, knowing that soon the heat would come and that dust devils would begin their dervish dancing, effacing the record of this night's travels and leaving a clean page for the night to come.

Even as Potluck and Too-bad had eluded the posse, so had that lone rider eluded them, for he had hidden his trail well, and nowhere ahead could be seen the faintest sign of another horseman.

"We better be findin' water," said Tommy. "The way we stampeded out o' that man's town would shame a tenderfoot."

"Yeah," agreed Potluck ruefully. "We better find water, then get shade and sleep out the day. It was a shame the way we left our pack boss!"

"Yeah! I hate to speculate on what would 'a' happened if we'd 'a' stopped to throw his saddle on," Tommy added. "By the time we get back to Coyote Springs the livery will own that hoss on the feed bill."

"Who cares," replied Potluck. "We don't need that hoss, now that we've returned Butch Carver's loot to the Wells Fargo Co. where it rightfully belongs. Look! There's an old Mexican ahead of us. He's afoot and can't be far from water."

The old Mexican seemed to be hunting jack rabbits, for they soon saw that he carried one in his hand.

Yet he possessed no weapons other than a knife at his waist and a curved club in his free hand. He faced them with a look of suspicion on his dark face. But when Tommy handed down his tobacco sack with a friendly grin, the Mexican's wrinkled features softened, and he smiled, passing the time of day in Spanish. Soon he was leading them to his camp. On the way they saw how skillfully he used that boomeranglike hunting club when he knocked down a fleet-footed rabbit which sprang up out of the low brush.

His camp proved to be as primitive as that of a savage following a war trail. A ribby cayuse browsed on mesquite beans near a tiny spring. There was a single blanket, old and worn, a blackened kettle, together with a few obscure trinkets stowed in a leather sack fashioned after the manner of saddle pockets.

That day they rested their hard-run horses and shared their tobacco and coffee with the old Mexican, who gladly shared his rabbits, broiled and stewed, with them. It was after breakfast that Tommy examined the register which he had removed from the hotel.

"The page we signed our names is missing," Tommy sputtered. "Do you reckon Judge Stoner tore it out?"

"Either the judge or the gent that was trailin' him," Potluck reasoned. "But at that, it may fall into the sheriff's hands. It seems like we'd better change our names, Too-bad."

The register was a ruled copy book, frayed and worn. With a forlorn sigh, Tommy tossed it on the embers of the mesquite fire. "It's just too bad!" he declared solemnly. "What's in that envelope the judge gave you?"

POTLUCK was examining the knife left behind by the judge. It's blade was of Norwegian steel. This was secured to a haft of solid ivory, which was yellowed by age and cleverly carved. From the handle's extreme end the eyes of a round-headed Eskimo watched a polar bear in pursuit of a seal across arctic ice. At the Eskimo's back was a totem pole. A knife easily identified, Potluck mused, as he handed it to Tommy for inspection.

The envelope contained Judge Stoner's will, the will of John Stoner, and a partnership agreement between them. These were written in dry, uninteresting language such as lawyers use, making them difficult for any but a lawyer to thoroughly understand. It would seem that Alice Danvers inherited Judge Stoner's half interest in the Stoner ranch at his demise. At the death of John Stoner, Alice would inherit the remaining half. A girl with a promising future, Potluck decided, yet even now human wolves were upon her trail. The pack was closing in!

There were old letters written to the judge, whose given name proved to be Henry. Several were from John Stoner, some from the sister, who had now passed away, and two from Alice Danvers. These last were written in a small, neat feminine hand. Every "t" was crossed, and every "i" dotted. The letters of each word ran precisely across the page like soldiers marching in perfect line. Each capital suggested a proud and watchful officer on dress parade.

The judge's wallet contained no currency. It seemed to have been a catchall for clippings from newspapers and magazines, lodge receipts and I O U's. Potluck considered the photograph to be the only item of interest. It was the faded picture of a slender, unattractive girl with a

thick rope of braided hair hanging down over each shoulder in front and reaching to her waist. Her cheeks were sunken, and a half-frightened, half-expectant look was discernible in her eyes—eyes with long, shadowy lashes which added a touch of beauty to a face otherwise rather plain.

Potluck looked off across the far distance to the northward, where high, broken country thrust its rough and rugged contour across the pale-blue sky. If Coyote Springs had frightened Alice Danvers, what must this wild and untamed land be doing to her—a land where even the snakes and insects were armed with deadly fangs, where brush and shrubbery fought for life behind a barricade of poisoned needles and sharp thorns. He lowered his gaze to the leathery visage of the old Mexican, who squatted silent and motionless beside his tiny fire, watching the register slowly change to gray ashes. It was as easy to read the future as it was to determine the thoughts behind that old man's sun-blackened, wrinkled face.

"I reckon this is Alice Danvers," said Potluck.

Tommy took the picture in his hands. For a time he studied it intently. Then he returned it to his friend in silence.

Potluck viewed Tommy keenly. "Waal, ain't you got anything to say?"

"Yeah. Let's get some sleep, partner. We can make better time if we ride by starlight, when the heat is off the desert," Tommy suggested.

While they slept, their horses browsed over mesquite, crunching the pulpy, beanlike pods with apparent satisfaction. The old Mexican sat motionless beside the dead embers of his fire, his dark eyes roving hawklike across the desert. As the

day wore on, the Mexican began to look with growing frequency at the rifles of his two companions. It was late in the afternoon when he moved cautiously toward Potluck Jones, who slept on his saddle with his rifle in its scabbard under his stirrup leather.

TOMMY awoke with a start as a sharp report sounded. In the wink of an eye he was on his feet, leveling the two silver-mounted guns he wore. His lifelong friend had vanished. "Potluck!" Tommy called sharply. "Potluck, be you daid?"

From the edge of the brush, Potluck laughed softly. "I reckon not, Too-bad. I just shot an antelope our friend decoyed within easy range by waving my neck scarf on a stick."

Tommy grinned ruefully as he holstered his guns. "Waal, it's some satisfaction to find we've got fresh meat in camp. I shore get plumb disgusted with Jack rabbits after one feed."

The old Mexican's eyes were very bright as he peered around the brush at Tommy and pointed at a band of more than twenty antelope streaking fleet as the wind across the desert.

That night, as the sun was slipping down behind the far horizon, they spread their blankets and cinched their saddles. Guided by landmarks along a trail the wandering Mexican had mapped out for them, they rode until dawn and found water and good feed for their mounts in a brush-lined draw on the slope of a high plateau which raised above them. Here they staked out their horses, broiled antelope meat on sticks, and slept fitfully during the heat of the day.

Thus they followed the trail to Kettle Falls. Not the main trail,

used by jerk-line freighters with their long mule teams and heavy wagons coupled one behind the other, but a trail that dipped down through rocky defiles, crossed deeply eroded canyons, then vanished on the opposite rim, only to appear again at some narrow pass between high peaks.

They rode it with keen-sighted eyes always watchful, and horses that became more thin and tender-footed along the way. It was a trail that seemed always on a hunt for higher sky lines. They were climbing, and each plateau made way for a higher one beyond. Water became more frequent. Sand and cactus gave way for grass and cedars. The rough slopes became dark and mysterious with their belts of sturdy pines. Clouds gathered thick and dark over mountain peaks, and the distant crackle of lightning was in the higher levels of a thinner, cooler air. One long ride had followed another, and now the Whetstone Mountains were in sight.

CHAPTER IV.

ROMANO NADARO.

TOMMY O'NEIL reined his tired roan up short and sniffed the air suspiciously. "Potluck, I smell sheep!" There was an unmistakable quality in Tommy's voice which suggested that a most dire calamity had befallen him.

Reflectively stroking the dark stubble of beard on his lean chin, Potluck Jones cast a smiling, sideways glance at his friend. "Waal, that's not news to me. But what am I supposed to do about it, Too-bad?"

"Potluck, is John Stoner a sheep-man?" Tommy demanded belligerently.

"The judge didn't say he was."

"The judge didn't say he wasn't, either," Tommy retorted.

"Mutton would taste mighty good right now," suggested Potluck. "I wouldn't care much how it was cooked. I'm plumb sorry now we didn't cook that big diamond-back we killed yesterday, but I thought you was jokin'."

Tommy wrinkled up his snub nose in a wide grin. "Yesterday I was jokin', Potluck. But just show me the rattler I won't eat to-day. Think o' the meals we've missed on this trip! I'll bet a T-bone steak I've lost fifty pounds."

"Shucks, Too-bad, you didn't weigh fifty pounds when we started! I'll bet I'm more hungry than you be, and I can prove it."

"How? By eatin' two rattlers?"

"Nope! There's more o' me to get hungry, Too-bad. I feel it over a wider range."

They were crossing a rolling mesa which seemed to have no end. All through the night they had ridden steadily, and now were looking for water and a suitable spot to rest and graze their weary horses. Kettle Falls could not be far away, yet there was no sign of any settlement, ranch, or even the wheel tracks of a road. The sun was well up, and the early-morning hours had passed. For a time they continued on in silence, then Tommy again checked his mount suddenly.

"Look yonder!" Tommy spoke softly.

"Sheep?" Potluck questioned.

"A hoss! Dead, I reckon. There's a magpie peckin' at it."

"Then it hasn't been dead long," said Potluck, reining his mount after Tommy.

The dead animal lay to their left in a shallow draw, its body partly screened by high sage. At closer view its back showed the imprint of

saddle and blanket; its flanks were flecked with blood from cruel spurring; its mouth was raw from a savage bit.

Potluck slid stiffly from his saddle and placed his hand on the dead animal's body. It was not yet cold, and when he lifted one of its front legs he found that its muscles had not yet stiffened. He straightened and looked around.

"This bronc has been rode till it dropped, and it didn't drop more'n an hour ago, Too-bad."

"Yeah! The mangy coyote packed his saddle away on his back. Only a fool would ride a hoss like that, Potluck."

"We'll follow his tracks!" muttered Potluck grimly. "If that hombre don't give a danged good reason for ridin' this bronc to death, I'm minded to shoot off his spurs and make him eat 'em."

"Don't talk about eatin', partner," moaned Tommy.

The boot tracks of the man on foot soon came to an abrupt end. The trail of a second horse led away to the north.

"Skin me for a pink-toed salamander!" Tommy ejaculated softly, leaning down from his saddle and studying the trail sign intently. "That's one way to swap horses! Here goes a trail o' blood!"

"We'd best not trail this wounded gent too fast," Potluck cautioned. "If he's still alive when we find him, he may come up shooting, thinking we're enemies. Not havin' shaved for a week, we're sure a pair o' tough-lookin' hombres."

THE wounded man was crawling, and his trail led them in a straight line for a half mile or farther. When they sighted him he was still moving slowly. He turned and faced about as they rode

up, his dark eyes dull with pain and suffering. There was a bullet hole in his chest. It was plugged with a strip of cloth, which the man had ripped from his shirt. But he had been unable to reach the spot on his back where the bullet had entered, leaving a small hole from which blood continued to trickle.

He was a Mexican, young, and of lean, muscular build. His clean-cut features showed a high degree of intelligence, yet there was that about his dark hair and eyes which suggested a strain of Indian blood. The fact that he wore no gun seemed unusual. At the same time, it showed clearly that the man who had shot him was a cold-blooded murderer.

"Poor devil!" muttered Tommy softly, dismounting and bending over the man. "Who shot you like a dog and robbed you of yore hoss?"

"Eet does not matter, señor," the man spoke weakly. "Yesterday we sing and laugh. To-day we cry! To-morrow, who knows, señor—perhaps we die. Is that not the way of life? No?"

"Shucks!" ejaculated Tommy. "You ain't headed for the last round-up! Not when you can spout that kind o' lingo."

"To my *hogar*, eet is not far, señores," the man smiled bravely. "Eet will be a pleasure to have you rest under my roof." The man tried gamely to draw himself erect and stand. In this he failed. He smiled ruefully up at them. "Eet is only the legs that are weak, señores. No?"

"Yes," said Potluck softly. "It shore ain't yore courage, amigo."

Picking the wounded man up in his powerful arms, Potluck Jones placed him in Tommy's saddle on the big roan and steadied him there until Tommy sprang up behind, where he could support the sagging body as they rode. Walking their

horses, they continued on in the direction pointed out by the wounded man.

"What's yore name?" asked Tommy.

"Romano Nadaro, señor."

"What do you do?" Tommy questioned.

"Eet was that I herd the sheep for Señor Stoner. Bu~~n~~ow I have sheep which belong to me. But only a few. Not like the big herds which for Señor Stoner I once work weeth."

"Who was it shot you, Romano?" Potluck asked.

THE Mexican shook his head, as if fearful or reluctant to reveal the man's identity. Just why, Potluck could not determine. His mind was keenly alive to the possibility that the very man who killed Judge Stoner in Skeleton Wells was now ahead of them on the trail to Kettle Falls. Could it be that, having ridden his horse until it dropped dead in its tracks, this man had committed an attempted murder upon Romano Nadaro, who chanced to cross his path? All for the sake of a horse? If such was the case, the man they were following would stop at nothing to gain his ends; he would be a cold, ruthless antagonist with which to match wits and guns. The face of the man he had knocked unconscious over the body of Judge Stoner back in Skeleton Wells was a face which fit such a man—a mask behind which infamy of character could well lay hidden.

"Romano, we're on the trail of a gent that murdered John Stoner's brother in Coyote Springs," Potluck stated candidly. "He was a gent with long, pointed lobes to his ears, and them lobes was tacked down tight to his head. A well-built gent, tall and rangy, with ridin'

boots stitched real fancy and Levis tucked inside. That gent would have a scalp wound over his left ear. You may not have noticed it, gettin' shot in the back the way he done you. He may even have kept his black, low-crowned hat pulled a little down on the left side to cover up that scalp wound. He is a gun fanner—the hammer of his .45 is filed smooth and polished. How come he only plugged you once? He put three slugs into Judge Stoner."

Romano stiffened. His dark eyes searched Potluck's face. As they rode, Tommy had removed a roll of gauze from a saddle pocket. Now he deftly pressed a wad of it into the bullet hole in Romano's back.

"Then it ees that you are not friends weeth Señor George Crum, who for Señor Stoner ees foreman of hees sheep?"

"Not by a mile, we ain't!" declared Tommy strongly.

"So his name is George Crum," muttered Potluck softly.

"And he's foreman of the Stoner ranch," added Tommy.

"Yeah! And headed home! We didn't get here any too soon," declared Potluck. "I'm wonderin' if we got here soon enough."

"This seems to be a danged uncivilized strip o' country," said Tommy. "Looks to me like anything could happen around here and not attract much attention. And it probably will, if it ain't happened already."

"Is Alice Danvers alive?" Potluck questioned Romano.

"Si, señor. It ees that she ees to marry weeth Señor Crum, who shot me. Ees that not bad?"

"It's worse'n that!" said Tommy hotly. "It's a pain in the neck! What can John Stoner be thinkin' about to let Alice Danvers marry a murderin' skunk like George Crum?"

"Eet is that things are not the same since Señor Stoner fall weeth hees horse into the canyon," Romano stated sadly. "Weeth my seester, Carmena, Alice Danvers, ees the very good friends. She come to visit weeth Carmena very often, and of that Señor Crum is angry. He thinks I make love to her. But that is not true, señor. I weel tell you more when I am not sick weeth the bullet, señores, which now makes the head go round and round weeth spots before the eyes."

"You've told us a heap, amigo," said Potluck. "Now you just take it easy until we get you home."

"Eet is not far now, señores. We come up over the leetle hill and—see—the rancho of Romano Nadaro is before you weeth my sister, Carmena, waiting to welcome you."

CHAPTER V.

BRANDED AS MURDERERS.

POTLUCK'S far-sighted eyes discerned a trailing smudge of smoke which marked out a dirt-roofed hut in a shallow draw. A dark-skinned youth came into sight over a rise, mounted on a wiry pony and dragging a bunch of cedar wood at the end of a saddle rope. In the distance, a small band of sheep were grazing. The youth raised a shrill call, which sounded like a warning to the girl poised uncertainly in the doorway. The girl watched them intently as they drew near. Her comely features were clearly revealed in the bright morning sunlight which fell upon her troubled face, for she seemed to understand, even from a distance, that her brother was wounded.

Romano spoke swiftly in Spanish, and Carmena answered him in kind. The boy dragged his wood up close and slid from his weathered saddle to

stare at them keenly in silence, watching as they carried Romano inside. The girl motioned to a pallet of sheep pelts spread upon the dirt floor.

To Potluck's surprise, Romano sat up, though rather uncertainly, and the girl at once began caring for his wound. In a few swift movements, she removed a handful of dry leaves from a cloth sack, crushed them, dampened them with water, opened up the bullet holes and bound this poultice tightly over each of the holes. Then she placed a bundle of sheep pelts at her brother's back. Romano sat thus calmly watching what went on.

Potluck and Tommy exchanged glances. It was time to go. They had no reason for stopping longer. They had brought this wounded Mexican to his *hogar* and his sister seemed capable of caring for his wound. As yet the girl had not spoken to them, her attention being held by her brother. As they were moving outside to their horses, the girl finished cleaning her hands and touched Potluck on the arm, motioning to a kettle simmering on the fire in the center of this single room. Her face was upturned and her dark eyes on his own.

"You weel stay and eat weeth us, señor?" she asked softly. "We are poor, and our home is—what you call it—primitive? But you are welcome. For us it will be an honor, señores."

There was a quiet dignity in the girl's face and eyes which caused Potluck to remove his hat. "The fact is, we're powerful hungry, ma'am. To eat would be a pleasure we both have been lookin' forward to for a right smart spell."

"Eat?" grinned Tommy. "I've plumb forgotten the meanin' o' that word."

It was cool inside this *hogar*. Its inner walls had been constructed of small cedar logs. The wall sloped inward as it raised and came to a high dome overhead, where a large opening had been left to allow smoke to escape and light to enter. The door was the only other opening in the wall of the large, circular room, from which a smaller portion had been screened off by blankets.

Presently they were seated cross-legged upon the dirt floor, where Potluck sampled the dish of steaming stew he held in his lap. He eyed Tommy keenly and smiled.

"Mutton don't go half bad. Eh, partner?" Potluck said.

"You are mistaken," Tommy grinned. "It's venison! Who ever heard tell of a cowboy eatin' mutton?"

Carmena looked up from where she was skillfully baking corn-meal batter on a hot, flat rock beside the fire.

"You must not quarrel, señores," she told them, smiling. "If you do not like thees mutton, we weel call it by some other name. What you say? Slow antelope, yes?"

STANDING to one side was a simple hand loom holding a partly finished blanket of unusual and intricate design. Truly, the blanket was a work of art, thick, soft of texture, and colorful in a most pleasing, restful way. Potluck could trace the whole process of carding, dyeing, and weaving from the crude wool to the loom. A slow, laborious process requiring the utmost skill and infinite patience. The girl's dark eyes were on his face, Potluck discovered, and he motioned questioningly.

"Is it not pretty, señor?" Carmena asked with pride.

"It shore is," said Potluck. "The

prettiest I have ever laid eyes on."

"Then you shall have eet when I finish, señor," Carmena told him.

Tommy chuckled softly and watched the color deepen in Potluck's face. "That blanket would shore look mighty swell under yore saddle, partner. It'd sort of set off those silver-inlaid spurs you wear," he suggested.

Potluck was at a loss for words. He understood that these people were poor, eking out a living where nature was not lavish with her gifts to man. And they were generous, friendly folks, feeling deeply indebted for the aid and kindness Tommy and himself had given, which Potluck considered as very little.

"O. K., I'll buy it, and when it's finished I'll have you send it to me," Potluck said.

"Oh! But for you eet is a gift, señor," the girl stated eagerly. "Did you not save my brother's life?"

"Shucks! That was nothing!" Potluck ejaculated, becoming more ill at ease.

"Eet ces that you consider the life of Romano Nadaro of so little value?" the girl's brother asked with a wan smile.

"You know different than that, amigo," Potluck told him seriously. "I've taken a strong liking to you, Romano. You don't let trouble get you down. Then, too, it strikes me you're the sort of gent a man could trust."

"Eet ces with pleasure I hear your words, señor," Romano replied with deep feeling. "I weel remember them each day I live, as I weel remember you both, señores."

"How many miles to Kettle Falls?" Potluck asked, eager to change the subject.

"Only a few miles, señor," in-

formed Carmena. "Eet ces so little a place—only the trading post of the Señor Horn."

"And the Stoner ranch?"

"Only across the river, señor. You weel come back? Yes? For you I weel cook the new potatoes!" There was eagerness in Carmena's voice, and her eyes were very bright.

"I dunno," stated Potluck. "That all depends."

He finished eating quickly, being restless to arrive at the Stoner ranch without delay. George Crum was there by this time, Potluck reasoned, and there was no telling what kind of danger threatened John Stoner and Alice Danvers. But danger did threaten them. The fact that George Crum had murdered Judge Stoner in Coyote Springs proved that fact conclusively. But exactly what course of action he should take upon arriving at the ranch was, at this moment, beyond Potluck's comprehension.

WHEN they had thanked Carmena for her hospitality they strode outside. To Potluck's annoyance, he discovered that their horses had been unsaddled and led away. The girl explained that her younger brother had taken their animals to water and good grazing in a near-by draw, and would return with fresh mounts for them to ride. She noted the expression of annoyance on Potluck's face.

"But, señor! Ees eet not that the poor creatures have to be rested? They must have water! Yes? And good feed! No?" Carmena reasoned. "Eet ces so little we can do for you, señor, in payment for so much you do for us."

A slow smile appeared on Potluck's lean, unshaven face. He began to understand more clearly that sterling qualities and deep feeling were to be found among the people

of this dark-skinned race. A people so very often slighted, abused, and misjudged. Before he could make reply, an exclamation from Tommy O'Neil caused him to turn and gaze westward.

A wind-blown streamer of dust was traveling swiftly across the mesa. Potluck's far-sighted eyes determined that the rider was a girl, sitting free and easy in her saddle, mounted on a wiry, pinto mustang headed toward the *hogar* at a long lope.

"It's a white girl," Potluck stated with conviction.

"Yeah! And a top-hand rider," declared Tommy with approval.

"Eet ees Señorita Alice Danvers," said Carmena. "She comes often to visit weeth me and watch while I weave the blanket."

As she drew nearer and saw that Carmena was not alone, the white girl checked her pace. Her oval face was deeply sun-tanned; her hair and eyes dark; her small figure delicately rounded, presenting a picture of feminine strength, vitality, and sun-kissed beauty entirely in keeping with the high mesas of the painted desert. Hand-made riding boots with high heels fitted the girl's small feet perfectly. Her riding skirt and snug-fitting shirt were of smoke-tanned, Indian-made fringed doeskin. Her cowboy hat was of a color to match her doeskin garments, and high of crown to add a touch of height to her stature.

Tommy O'Neil caught his breath and nudged Potluck gently. "That gal just can't be Alice Danvers," Tommy said.

The girl reined close and spoke to Carmena before dismounting: "I wasn't expecting you'd have company."

"These good señores brought Ro-

mano home. He has been wounded," Carmena informed her.

The girl in doeskin appraised Potluck and Tommy uncertainly. Then she dismounted, dropped her reins, and entered the *hogar* hurriedly. Carmena followed her inside. The dirt wall of the *hogar* was thick, and their voices came soft and muted through the doorway.

"Name of a mule," muttered Tommy, moving farther away and tugging Potluck with him. "Gimme another look at that picture! That gal can't be Alice Danvers! I don't know what to make o' things."

"That's what comes from eatin' mutton, Too-bad. You're gettin' loco as a sheep-herder!"

"You think it's Alice Danvers? It's you that's loco!"

"Romano and Carmena should know," declared Potluck, smiling at Tommy's disbelief. "I'll take their word for it. It's true, that in this picture the gal looks thin and frail. But gals can change a heap, Too-Bad, and right danged sudden."

"Be you tryin' to educate me about gals, cowboy?" Tommy snorted in derision. "The gal in this here picture was a lunger—homely as a—a crow! Didn't the judge tell us positive that a little more'n a year ago Alice Danvers was a spindle-legged kid in pigtails, frightened at her own shadow? This gal is chirp as a spring robin! She was raised on a cow ranch—I got eyes! She's the pure quill, partner, but it looks like she's up to some kind o' skullduggery, passin' herself off for Alice Danvers this a way!"

"She's all wool and a yard wide, all right," Potluck agreed, with a smile at Tommy's suggested thought.

"Say! Are you tryin' to hoo-rah me?" Tommy demanded hotly.

"Not at all, pardner! This is seri-

ous business, Too-bad. There may be something in what you say. But Alice Danvers does have pretty, dark-brown eyes in this picture, and this gal has the same kind of eyes. With her face filled out——”

“I know danged well I’m right,” sputtered Tommy, “and I aim to prove it.”

TURNING quickly and with determination, Tommy O’Neil moved to the door of the *hogar* and strode inside, hat in hand. Following close behind, Potluck paused in the doorway. The girl in doeskin was bending over Romano with utmost solicitude.

“Who shot you?” the girl was asking.

Romano shrugged his shoulders slightly and shook his head. “Ees et not that the bullet ees in the back? Do you theenk Romano have eyes in hees back? No?”

“What’s yore name, ma’am?” demanded Tommy stiffly.

The girl straightened and turned. Her long, curved lashes raised, widening her eyes in a look of growing apprehension. Potluck saw that her dark eyes were not brown, but blue. Deep blue!

“Why, I’m Alice Danvers,” said the girl.

“Alice Danvers?” Tommy repeated belligerently, his red hair rumped and standing very much on end.

“Is that so strange?” she said sharply.

“Who taught you to ride?” Tommy countered quickly.

“One of Uncle John’s sheep-herders!” Her eyes were beginning to sparkle with anger.

In spite of the fact that the situation was becoming strained and out of hand, Potluck could not restrain a chuckle. The girl flashed him a

quick glance, and he saw that, underneath her anger, she was becoming very badly frightened.

“What’s your name?” Her eyes took in Tommy’s silver-mounted guns, and narrowed.

“I’m—er-r-r——” Tommy O’Neil checked himself. He seemed to remember that page missing from the hotel register. “Why, I’m Wild Bill,” he finished lightly.

“Wild Bill who?” She had finished with Tommy’s guns. Now she seemed to be weighing the sterling silver ornaments on Tommy’s bathing chaps.

“Er-r-r—just Wild Bill,” Tommy declared cheerfully.

Her glance raised slowly to Tommy’s fiery hair. “Well! You certainly look and act the part, Wild Bill. But I’ve a strong suspicion that you’re lying.”

“The same goes double!” retorted Tommy hotly. “It just happens that we’re on the hunt for Alice Danvers. But you’re not the gal! I’m thinkin’ Alice Danvers has been murdered.”

“Murdered? Are you daffy?”

“Yeah, like a fox—you can’t pull wool over my eyes, gal.”

“You two wild cats stop scrap-pin’,” Potluck interjected. “Let’s get things straightened out.”

“So I’m a wild cat, am I?” The girl in doeskin began circling slowly around Tommy and edging for the door, where Potluck stood.

Potluck stroked the stubble of beard on his chin and smiled ruefully. “Wild cats are mighty pretty to look at,” he suggested, thinking to pacify her.

“Yeah,” said Tommy. “Soft an’ silly-lookin’, but chock-full o’ cayenne pepper.”

“Step aside, please. I’m leaving!” She paused close in front of Potluck, who stood in the doorway.

Potluck did not move. "It's best we come to an understanding, gal," he told her, his lean face expressing utter seriousness. "John Stoner's brother was recently murdered in Coyote Springs."

Her face paled under its tan. Her eyes did not flinch. "I know all about that. George Crum told me. You're the one who killed and robbed him, Potluck Jones!" There was withering scorn and loathing in her voice.

Troubled uncertainty worked its way up into Potluck's eyes. "So George Crum knows my name?"

"It could be Tommy O'Neil! But that doesn't matter—you're both miserable outlaws. George Crum will kill you on sight!"

"I rather think he would," softly replied Potluck Jones. "It will be safer for that hombre if he does. That's what I aim—"

SOMETHING pointed and sharp pricked Potluck an inch above his gun belt. He looked down and saw that the girl held a slender knife. She was frightened. Badly frightened! Doubly dangerous! He smiled, but the smile was limp around the edges, for the knife blade seemed to chill his spine.

"Gal, if you really think I killed Judge Stoner, go ahead and use it," he suggested calmly.

Her flashing eyes were searching him—fixing his identity indelibly upon her memory. She laughed shakily—a laugh carrying a hint of hysterical fear. The knife point pressed more firmly. Potluck involuntarily took a step backward. Then another! The desert wind slipped under the front edge of his unbuttoned vest and lifted the left flap. With the quickness of a wild thing in deadly peril, the girl's free hand shot out and plucked from un-

der Potluck's belt the ivory-handled knife Judge Stoner had given him.

"Here is proof!" She thrust the carved-ivory haft before Potluck's eyes. With a shaky laugh she pressed him from her path, darted to her waiting mount, snatched up the reins and sprang into the saddle. The pinto mustang spun about and raced away. The ivory-handled knife went with her.

"Too bad, too bad," mourned Tommy O'Neil sadly. "Why in blazes didn't you stop her, Potluck?"

"Who? Me? I didn't know you wanted her, Too-bad," Potluck grinned sheepishly.

"You let her bluff you! She got away with the evidence! You're a good one!" Tommy stated accusingly.

"That gal wasn't bluffin', Too-bad. Besides, what use have I got for that toad stabber?"

"Part o' the evidence, ain't it?" said Tommy angrily.

"Yeah, but it begins to look like the sooner we get shed o' the evidence, the better off we'll be. That gal isn't Alice Danvers! There's a smooth gang o' crooks in this Kettle Falls town, and they're gettin' set to lay the blame for Judge Stoner's murder on us. Still, that gal seems honest—she thinks we put a slug in Romano, but can't figure out how come we took the trouble to bring him home," Potluck reasoned.

"Yeah, but that gal is Alice Danvers!" Tommy declared with strong conviction.

"Shucks! First you say she isn't, now you say she is. When I change my mind, you change yours. We're just as far apart as ever. What ails you, Too-bad?"

"Not a danged thing! We'll ask Carmena more about her," Tommy suggested.

THE Mexicans had wisely remained in the background, taking no part in the whole affair. Yet they had been listening intently. Now Carmena spoke from the *hogar* door as she watched the white girl disappearing in the distance.

"Eet ees as you say, señores. When first I see the señorita at the trading post, she was like the lily—thin and pale. Now she blooms like the flowering cactus. Yes?"

Potluck smiled. "Cactus is right! That gal is hotter'n chili peppers stuffed with hoss-radish. She could run a brand with her little finger. I'm glad we're shed o' her."

"Yeah?" said Tommy. "I don't see much wrong with her. I wouldn't give a hoot for a gal without some spunk."

"Waal, she shore has got plenty, Too-bad. We better be headin' for Kettle Falls and try to get a line on what's going on. Judge Stoner certainly got us into a heap o' trouble when he came to our room that night. But he's dead, and he put his trust in a mighty shaky basket, seemslike. A sheriff's posse run us out o' Coyote Springs, and now this George Crum will brand us as outlaws in these parts." Potluck sighed heavily.

Entering the *hogar*, Potluck questioned Romano.

"Why didn't you tell Alice Danvers that it was George Crum who shot you?"

"Señor, when you are older you weel learn that the word of a Mexican ees worth nothing against the word of an Americano. Señor Crum weel say Romano ees the thief of horses. That ees bad. No?"

"Then you plan to do nothing?"

"Señor, we weel leave this *hogar*. See, eet ees little we have to move. Eet ees not good that Señor Crum

should look at Carmena weeth desire in hees eyes. No?"

"So that's the way it is?" said Potluck.

Romano Nadaro nodded.

"Don't make any move for a day or two, amigo. You're not in shape to travel. Who knows what may happen? Perhaps George Crum will never trouble you again, my friend. With me, I carry valuable papers. Will you keep them safely until we return?"

"Eet ees so little you ask, señor. I weel guard them weeth my life!"

"If we don't return," Potluck cautioned, "will you see that these papers are delivered into the hands of Major Barrock, a United States marshal, who lives in Skeleton Wells?"

"That I weel promise to do, señor."

"And, if it comes to that, sort of make mention to the major that Potluck Jones isn't comin' back. You understand, Romano? You see, there's a gal who might keep on waitin'," Potluck finished huskily.

CHAPTER VI.

A CALL AT STONER'S.

THEY followed the trail the girl had taken. It led off across the high mesa toward Kettle Falls. Beyond, the Whetstone Mountains reared their pine-darkened, mysterious heads. After a few miles, the mesa broke away before them. A wide, level valley lay below, with the lower slopes of the mountains rising steeply to the westward.

As they descended the trail, which angled down the mesa's steep flank, Potluck studied the cluster of adobe buildings on the near bank of a deeply cut river channel that meandered down the valley. A few Mexicans, and Indians from the reserva-

tion, lounged before the largest structure, which he judged to be the trading post.

Across the river, a pretentious spread of ranch buildings and low corrals basked in the bright sunlight with the foothills close behind. The corrals, for the most part, were well removed from the main ranch house, and their lack of height, together with their long wings on either side of entrance gates, proclaimed the nature of their use.

"Sheep!" muttered Tommy. "That accounts for it!"

"Accounts for what, Too-bad?" Potluck grinned.

"It accounts for Alice Danvers bein' loco," Tommy sputtered. "Her fixin' to marry a sheep-herder!"

"Serves him right," said Potluck sociably. "Let him marry the gal—and suffer. I couldn't think of any tougher luck to wish upon him."

"Yeah?" snorted Tommy hotly. "I don't see no need o' you holdin' a grudge agin' her, even if she did bluff you to a standstill."

"Fair enough," declared Potluck. "Have it your own way, Wild Bill! But when we get down to this tradin' post you let me do the talkin', savvy?"

As they rode up, the lounging Indians eyed them closely, scrutinizing their mustangs, guns and rifles. Then, one by one, they began moving silently away. From inside the main building came the rasping wail of a fiddle. The door was open.

"Keep yore eye on our hosses," cautioned Potluck as they dismounted. Then he walked inside.

Seated on a counter, his back against a stack of Indian blankets, a crochety-looking man was scraping a frayed bow across a battered violin. Standing on its hind legs in the middle of the floor, a large brown bear awkwardly rocked its lumber-

ing body and moved its feet in time with the music. At sight of Potluck, the beast wriggled its nose and gave voice to a deep-chested *woof!*

"Now behave yoreself, Alexander!" the man commanded in a shrill, high-pitched voice. "Come in, stranger; he won't harm you. Plumb gentle, Alexander be, unless you rile him. It's been all o' a week since he took a slap at any one. Regular pet! Sleeps right beside my bed at night! Best watch dog in the world!" The man drew his bow across two strings, and the bear dropped down and sat upon its haunches.

"I reckon that's John Stoner's place across the river," said Potluck, eying the bear warily.

"Yep! It be that, stranger. Trail down across the reservation?" the little old man questioned shrewdly.

"Sort of," Potluck agreed. "I was wonderin' about John Stoner."

"Yuh reckon to work there?" the man asked, tossing a peanut to Alexander, who caught it expertly.

"Sort of," said Potluck, taking in the trader and his stock of goods with a roving eye.

"Waal, yuh don't say! Matthew Horn is the handle, stranger—Mat for short. 'Pears to me yuh might be a gun fighter—Stoner seems to find a use for 'em lately. But I'm not a man to talk about my neighbors. Not Mat Horn! There ain't a closer-mouthed man a-livin' 'n I be. Tend strictly to my own affairs. Now I reckon yore name might be Smith? Jones? It might even be John Doe, seems like."

Mat Horn waited expectantly for an answer, his head cocked sideways, his beady, near-sighted eyes as watchful as those of an inquisitive pine squirrel.

"Yeah, Jones. You guessed it." Potluck smiled thinly.

"I knowed it!" the trader cackled shrilly. "Waal, it makes no difference to Mat Horn. Saint or sinner—it's all the same! I do business with them as pays cash for what they tote away. Every man to his own likes and dislikes. I run a tradin' post, not a sheriff's office!" Mat Horn tossed another peanut to his bear.

"I ain't lookin' for no sheriff," Potluck grinned. "I'll mosey across the river. If I come back, I'll be pickin' up a sack o' trail grub—and payin' cash."

MAT HORN waved his prospective customer a casual good-by with his bow, then brought it down across his fiddle-strings. His sharp eyes did not miss Tommy O'Neil, who stood lounging carelessly just outside the door. There was little the trader's keen eyes ever did miss.

Riding briskly, the partners struck off across the valley. Potluck knew danger threatened John Stoner and the girl. In some way he must explain the situation to them clearly, and place them on their guard. What manner of welcome they would offer, Potluck did not know. He was surprised that men were not already hunting for himself and Tommy. Alice Danvers had been firm in her conviction that they were outlaws and had killed her uncle in Coyote Springs.

Tommy was whistling cheerfully. The tune was "The Dying Cowboy," and it irritated Potluck Jones.

As they neared the adobe ranch house, Potluck carefully watched the windows, sheds and outbuildings. There was no one in sight. The place seemed deserted. But when they were quite close, a man stepped from a front door and stood waiting for them to ride up and state their busi-

ness. When they drew rein he gave them a curt "Howdy!" He was of medium height, and the neatness of his attire and manner of dress suggested a man of considerable means.

"I was wantin' to talk with John Stoner," said Potluck mildly.

"I'm John Stoner. What's on your mind?" replied the other quite readily.

Tommy O'Neil cuffed his hat back on his head, and, knowing Tommy, Potluck gave him a quick side glance.

"Pleased to meet yuh, Mr. Stoner," said Tommy O'Neil. "I'd like to know—"

"You see, it's like this, Mr. Stoner," Potluck cut in quickly, yet speaking slowly. "Me and my partner was friends o' yore brother, Judge Stoner, who was recently murdered. The judge placed certain documents in my hands before it happened." With careful exactness he related much of what had taken place in Coyote Springs. As he talked, he carefully studied the man before them, yet found time to observe small details about the house.

It was the other's face that held Potluck's interest. It was a strong face, deeply marked by freshly healed scars. A face bearing mute evidence that the fall into the canyon, which Romano had spoken of, must have proved almost fatal. The eyes in that face were steel-gray, sharp and self-assured, rather hostile at first. But, as Potluck's story progressed, they became not entirely unfriendly, peering with concentrated attention from under the wide hat brim which shaded them.

At first it seemed strange that John Stoner wore no gun in sight, and Potluck could detect no bulge under either of the man's drooping shoulders. Then he saw a rifle muzzle pointing from an upper window,

and thought he understood. As if knowing that a leveled rifle was at his back, Stoner seemed neither to believe nor disbelieve what he heard. Like one withholding judgment, the man listened with a show of courtesy until the end. A man whose brain was quick and keen and far-reaching, like his eyes, Potluck decided.

"Take my word for it, Mr. Stoner," Potluck finished. "You're in a heap o' danger here! If I was in yore boots, I'd buckle on a gun or two. You're takin' a big chance lettin' yore niece ride without a trusted escort. As the judge said: 'Death rides the wind!' I reckon the judge wasn't mistaken."

THE sheepman thoughtfully smoothed a thick, stubby mustache. "This astounds me! My brother Henry has bitter enemies. Ah, yes! He has been strong for law and order—a little harsh, perhaps. Now he is dead! Dead! And I am left to carry on alone. No more pleasant times together. This thing cuts my heart wide open, Mr.—"

"Potluck Jones is the name. This is Tommy O'Neil. Us pilgrims is ridin' light and trailin' fancy free. You savvy? A couple o' tumbleweeds rollin' with the wind o' chance!"

"Ah, I begin to understand. I am not a rich man, but I shall reward you fittingly. You say my brother placed in your hands legal documents? That is good. I wish to have them, and for your long, tiresome ride you shall be well paid. Of course, the murderer shall be tracked down and punished. The low, degraded cur shall not escape my wrath. I'll hang him!"

"I shore hope you find the skunk, Mr. Stoner," declared Potluck carelessly. "No tellin' where you'll find him."

"Those documents?" The sheepman's hand was extended eagerly. "I'm eager to ascertain that they're all accounted for."

Potluck smiled and shook his head. "You see, the judge said they was important, deeds and such. I cached those documents back along our trail. You understand? Just in case we was killed, or something, so they wouldn't fall into the wrong hands.

"Ah!" muttered the sheepman in disappointment. Then he smiled. "Exactly right, my boy! I begin to see why my brother Henry placed his trust in you. Are those documents very far away?"

"Not as the crow flies," replied Potluck easily. "But the way our trail winds through the bad lands, it's a right smart ride. Now that we've found everything is O. K., we'll ride back and fetch 'em in to you. And be danged glad to get shed of 'em, Mr. Stoner."

"Exactly right! I'll be here, boys. Of course, you know I hate to see you rush off like this. I'd be proud to have you step down and rest your hosses, but they look tolerable fresh. They look to be wearin' Romano Nadaro's brand. Hurry back, boys."

"Come on, Too-bad," said Potluck, reining away. "We got a long night ride to make. So long, Mr. Stoner!"

Tommy followed with visible reluctance, but with range courtesy refrained from looking back over his shoulder as they loped away. He did not speak until they were at the river, where the high banks cut them from view of the Stoner ranch house.

"Partner, you got a danged poor memory!" Tommy sputtered. "You didn't tell him about that knife. You never said a word about his foreman shootin' Romano. You

didn't say we met the girl and what a wild cat she was. I was fixin' to tell him about that and give him a piece of my mind."

"That's what I was afraid of, Too-bad."

"Yeah? Waal, I spotted that gal a-peekin' out a window at me," Tommy spoke accusingly. "You pushed off in such a rush that I had no chance to tell that little snip a thing or two."

"Was you fixin' to roost on yore saddle horn and crow like a rooster?" Potluck asked moodily. "You'd have shore put us both in the stew. That gal has turned you loco, Too-bad!"

YEAH? Here I ride myself to a frazzle and starve just on her account. What thanks do I get? She calls me a miserable outlaw, dang her ornery hide."

"Keep yore shirt on, Wild Bill."

"Don't start callin' me names, partner!"

"Cool off, Too-bad! Couldn't you see I was usin' my head, while I was talkin'? So was John Stoner! There was a rifle lined on us from an upstairs window, screened by a curtain, sort of. But I made out the face of the man behind that gun. It was the same man who killed Judge Stoner back in Coyote Springs."

"Striped wild cats!" groaned Tommy. "I was so interested in Alice Danvers that I never saw that gent a-tall."

"One wrong move would have been our last, Too-bad," Potluck reasoned. "If they'd have been sure we carried those documents, that gang o' Crum's would have shot us off at the pockets. I saw another curtain move. Crum wasn't alone!"

"Blue blazes! Do you aim to ride off and leave John Stoner and that girl prisoners? Let's go straight

back now. I want to line my sights on that Crummy critter. I'll show that gal! I'll make her call me Wild Bill and like it before you could shake a rabbit from yore hat, Potluck."

"Take it easy, Too-bad! I don't carry rabbits in my hat. This thing is serious! I'm not so sure but what John Stoner and that gal are in on this deal. We gotta mix brains with gun smoke! I've fixed things so they'll stand hitched, waitin' for those documents until we've had time to think things over. There's something danged queer going on at that ranch. We rode smack dab into a trap, and the gal was watchin'. It may be that John Stoner is on a tight spot, but they won't harm him until we turn over those documents to him. Those documents have them up a tree. They ain't right sure just where they stand. I tried to make it clear that we was only lookin' for a little easy money, and would high-tail on about our business soon as we got it."

They put their borrowed mustangs across the packed gravel ford with the swift water of Kettle River gurgling about the animal's knees. Water splashed up on saddle girths, boots and stirrups. When they climbed the high, dry bank on the other side, red dust raised and stuck to dampened leather and the legs and bellies of their mounts. Looking back, the Stoner sheep ranch seemed quiet and peaceful as before, dozing calmly in the sun.

"I can't figure out why John Stoner failed to send the judge a letter on the judge's birthday," Potluck mused. "Too-bad, it's a cinch George Crum plans to marry the gal, then put John Stoner out o' the way."

"Huh? With me around, Crum won't!" Tommy declared strongly.

CHAPTER VII.

FURTHER PLANS.

MAT HORN had placed his fiddle on a shelf. Now he fiddled with a big horn-handled six-gun, oil, and a cleaning rag. Alexander, the big bear, was securely fastened to a chain in a rear room, where the trader's bunk stood in one corner, visible through the open door. Alexander lay watching what went on in the store with a surly look in his shoe-button eyes.

"Howdy, Mr. Jones! Howdy!" Mat Horn cackled shrilly as Potluck stepped into the doorway. "Just shinin' up my old hoglaig!" he declared jovially. "There's no tellin' how soon I might need to use it. Alexander missed a peanut, Mr. Jones. See?" The trader pointed.

Inclining his head, Potluck glanced down beside his boots. "Yeah, I see," said he.

The big gun bellowed in the trader's hand. The peanut vanished before Potluck's eyes. He faced Mat Horn and smiled.

"I see—you never miss," said Potluck calmly.

The trader eased his gun down lightly in its worn holster. "Gotta keep my hand in, Mr. Jones! I ain't shot a gent for nigh a month, but there's no tellin'. You're a sharp lad—quick to catch on. Smart, you be! What'll you have, salt-side or smoked? I got anything you're lookin' for. Just name it, Mr. Jones!"

Matthew Horn wriggled his eyebrows, and his gold spectacles drooped into place upon his narrow, pointed nose.

They dickered and bartered and called each other friendly names. When Potluck paid the bill he grinned.

"Mat, I ain't been robbed so slick

in years. It'd be more painless if you used a gun."

"Freight comes most powerful high, Mr. Jones." The trader chuckled slyly. "Then, too, them outlaws skulk around. Every man to his own trade, Mr. Jones. Live and let live, says old Mat Horn!"

Feeling positive that their movements were being watched from the Stoner ranch, Potluck led the way up the valley, avoiding the trail they had used coming here from the *hogar*. If any one followed them from the ranch, he wanted to know it, as he planned to spend the night with Romano.

"Seems like every one takes us for a couple of outlaws," said Potluck when the trading post was well behind. "Mat Horn is positive of the fact."

"What was the shootin' about?" Tommy asked.

"Mat Horn wanted me to understand he was ready in case we planned to rob him." Potluck grinned.

"Outlaws!" muttered Tommy. "Us raised together like we was brothers—and we've come to this."

THE valley swung to the right. A high shoulder of the mesa cut the Stoner ranch from view. Looking back into the distance, Potluck saw an indistinguishable rider leave the sheep ranch and head toward the trading post. Screened from view themselves, they watched for a time and made sure, then continued on a couple of miles. Here the Kettle River swung closer. When they came to a sheep trail cutting down the steep bank they slid their mustangs down into the shallow stream. Riding in the water, Potluck struck downstream, and the channel led them in its erratic swing to the opposite side of the val-

ley. In the lee of a high bank, Potluck rode out upon a gravel bar, dismounted and dropped his reins.

"While we're waitin' for that rider to pass," he said, "we've got time to have a bath, shave up, and change into some clean clothes. I bought everything we'll need."

"Not a bad idea," agreed Tommy. "Even a Mexican gal will jolt a man with the notion to slick up."

Some time later, looking less like desperadoes, they left the river and crossed their back trail, now heading for the mesa. They smiled as they observed that a new trail lay upon their own, but of the rider who followed them they caught no glimpse. A narrow draw gave promise of means of gaining the mesa's top, so they turned into it and began climbing slowly, lost to view from the valley behind.

When some elevation had been gained, Potluck took to the right slope on a long slant, following sheep trails, passing thick clumps of junipers, and riding through scattered cedars. As they drew nearer to the mesa's rim, a wide coulee became visible farther up the draw, and, looking down, they saw that the coulee was green with growing corn, beans, and thrifty squash vines—a fertile tract watered by a tiny stream that spilled down over a sheer wall surrounding the coulee on three sides like a rock corral. The open end below was closed by a thick brush fence reinforced with poles and cedar posts.

"There's the makin's of Carmena's flapjacks for another winter," said Tommy with deep interest.

"Yeah," Potluck replied. "Romano has put our hosses on good feed in a meadow just above that falls. Them broncs shore are makin' hay!"

With instinct for direction almost equal to an Indian's, Potluck had, for all their erratic winding course, topped the mesa rim where he could sight the *hogar* of the Mexicans. By now the sun had slipped down behind the far horizon to the westward, yet it seemed to linger still, as if reluctant to leave, swiftly changing with sweeping brush strokes an always perfect but never finished work of art—the painted desert. A land of vast silence and far distances.

Carmena waited in the *hogar* door as they rode up.

"Folks in these parts take us for a pair of outlaws," Potluck stated.

Carmena smiled. "To be the outlaw—that does not show in your eyes, señor. You return? Yes? That is good!"

"We thought perhaps Crum would send some o' his gang to back-track us. They noticed we was ridin' yore hosses, and they might take it into their heads we left those documents here. If they come to-night, I thought it best we should be here," Potluck told her.

"If they come, the sheep weel be near and the dogs watchful, señor," said Carmena. "Now I weel prepare the food."

The younger brother of Carmena came eagerly to take charge of their horses, a shy smile on his boyish face. They entered the *hogar* and greeted Romano, who now looked weak and seemed to suffer considerably with his wound.

"That slow antelope certainly smells good!" Tommy declared in anticipation, his freshly scrubbed freckles shining.

"Eet ees that you like the barbe-cue? Yes? Weeth the potato een the ashes baked, and the *tortilla* vairee thin and cook just right? No?" Romano questioned.

THAT evening Potluck opened the sacks he had brought from the trading post. They contained food, mostly, yet there were gifts for all of them, including a large sack of Mat Horn's roasted peanuts, which they ate, tossing the shucks to blaze and crackle in the fire, while they discussed the trader, Alice Danvers and her uncle, and the situation on the Stoner ranch.

Night came with its purple shadows. After the fire had died and smoke no longer trailed upward and out the hole in the roof, sleep did not come at once to Potluck Jones. He stirred restlessly, his mind filled with troubled thoughts. His was a generous nature, and he could not understand why some men were possessed with relentless greed and constantly sought to enrich themselves at the cost of pain and suffering to their fellow man. His thoughtful eyes were fixed upon the hole in the roof. He viewed the low-hung stars as through a telescope. After a time a face appeared and Wanna Barrock, the girl Potluck loved, was asking him in his dreams: "Why do trails lead on and on, with never an end?" and the cowboy answered softly as he slept: "I'll come back, Wanna!"

Then steel-gray dawn was in his eyes. Half-grown lambs were baaing as they awoke their ewes to suckle. Carmena was moving quietly about, preparing breakfast, and her younger brother passed outside to view his flock in the growing light. Romano called them presently, asking if they had slept comfortably. Of his own restless, pain-racked night, Romano said nothing. A dark-skinned race living close to nature, Potluck mused. Yet he understood that their spirits were kindred with his own.

Once again they took the trail to the trading post. Now it was

touched with the soft, golden beauty of the rising sun. Their mustangs loped freely. The creaking whisper of saddle leather was in Potluck's ears. His clean-cut features were serious and thoughtful. Whistling cheerfully, Tommy O'Neil cast frequent glances at his friend.

"Waal, partner, did you figure out our play?" Tommy asked lightly. "You didn't bring those documents along."

"First off I'm going to have a heart-to-heart talk with old Mat Horn. It strikes me that the trader is honest, after a fashion. I'll lay my cards on the table and perhaps he'll be able to give me a line on what has been going on at the Stoner ranch the last few months. A United States marshal would come in handy. Too-bad, I wish Major Barrock was along."

"You're forgettin' I'm a deputy sheriff." Tommy grinned.

"Yore a long way off yore range," Potluck replied moodily.

"Don't let that trouble you, partner," rejoined Tommy airily. "Wells County has a rubber boundary—I'll stretch the line aplenty. Me? I ain't fussy!"

"This game they're playin' puzzles me, Too-bad. We gotta take it free and easy. Wait for the joker to show, then—waal, heat yore irons," Potluck stated grimly.

"Too bad if I don't, partner," Tommy declared cheerfully. "Otherwise this trip wouldn't be worth the hunger pangs I've suffered."

The trail tipped over the mesa rim and down. As they neared the trading post, Potluck saw that something was amiss. Not an Indian was in sight, but the Mexicans had gathered from the adobe dwellings and were peering cautiously in at the heavily barred windows. The front door was closed, and before it stood

a Mexican woman giving voice to Spanish lamentations and wringing her apron in her hands.

"Looks like the old man with the scythe was up and early in the saddle this mornin'," stated Tommy as they stopped.

CHAPTER VIII.

TRAGEDY AT THE TRADER'S.

POTLUCK paused a moment in his saddle, then dismounted and handed Tommy his reins. Striding to the door, he placed his hand upon the wooden latch.

"No! No, señor!" the woman screamed shrilly. "The bear ees loco! She weel keel you!"

"Ho, Mat! Mat Horn!" Potluck called loudly.

His only answer was the metallic rattle of a dragging chain, and a threatening rumble of warning from Alexander, who seemed to be on a wild rampage. Potluck pressed the latch. To his surprise, he found the heavy door was not barred.

"Señor, she weel keel you!" the woman wailed. "You can do nothing, señor!"

"Vamose!" commanded Potluck sharply. "I aim to let the bear out!"

At his words the woman screamed and all the Mexicans fled.

"Name of a mule!" Tommy sputtered. "Partner, ain't we got trouble enough on our hands without you fixin' to play tag with that grizzly?"

"Get the hosses out o' sight," warned Potluck firmly.

Muttering resignedly, Tommy reined away with Potluck's mount in tow. When the horses were out of sight and at what he judged to be a safe distance, Potluck quickly thrust open the door and stepped nimbly to one side.

From inside came the whip and jingle of Alexander's chain, and he

came charging through the open door like a brown thunderbolt, not stopping, but keeping straight on at a lumbering lope, covering ground as fast as a horse could run. The bear looked back once over its shaggy shoulder, then suddenly changed its course as if answering to the call of the wild, and, with its dragging chain whipping up a comet's tail of dust, headed straight across the valley in the direction of the Whetstone Mountains.

Inside the door, Potluck froze in shocked surprise. "Tommy! Come have a look!" His voice was tense.

From their pale-blue doorways, Mexicans were jabbering back and forth. Tommy called to a ragged boy and flipped him a coin. "Hold the brones, *muchacho!*"

"Si, señor!" The boy ran to snatch the coin, then hesitated. "The bear ees gone, señor?"

"Yeah! So will these brones, if you don't hold 'em tight—that bear spooked 'em."

Tommy found Potluck gazing at the body of a man lying in a heap against the counter near the door. The neck was twisted, and the face stared at them from under an up-thrown arm—a face covered with freshly healed scars and, now, some not healed. The man was dead—had been for some time.

"It's John Stoner," muttered Tommy. "Striped wild cats!"

"He's wearing a gun," said Potluck huskily. "How did he manage to escape that gang at the ranch?"

"Where's the trader anyway?" said Tommy.

"We'll look in back," said Potluck.

THEY moved slowly, as men will at such a time. Clad only in his trousers, Mat Horn lay face down beside his bunk. Protruding from his back was a knife

—a knife with an ivory totem pole carved on its handle—its keen-edged blade planted deep in the old man's heart.

A hurt, unbelieving look appeared in Tommy's honest eyes. "Partner, for a plugged nickel I'd sell out my share in this mess right now."

Potluck viewed his boyhood friend intently, then understood. "It wasn't the girl, Too-bad—it's buried to the hilt. John Stoner threw it! The girl couldn't have been here."

"She's a little devil!" muttered Tommy. "I've got my fingers crossed."

"It's yore eyes that's crossed, Too-bad. This crotchety old codger wasn't dressed! Do you think he'd have opened his door if there'd been a gal along? Not Mat Horn! Mat thought Stoner was his friend, so he unbarred his door before steppin' into his britches or bucklin' on a gun."

"How do you know the knife was thrown?" Tommy demanded.

"Because of the bear," Potluck reasoned. "Stoner knew the Mexicans would hear a shot and might cause trouble. The bear was fastened to that big ring in the floor beside Mat's bunk, but the chain stretched nearly to the door. Stoner had to throw from beyond reach of Alexander's chain. It's clear Alexander made a go for him. That bear ain't my idea of a pet. You can see what happened. Stoner didn't make it out the door—there was a weak link in the chain."

"There's a weak link in yore chain, partner. Stoner couldn't throw a knife! The judge told us that. That gal seemed mighty handy with one."

"Yo're loco!" said Potluck sharply.

"Yeah? This George Crum murdered the judge, all right. We know he shot the Mex. This gal aims to

marry Crum, don't she? Falls heir to everything, don't she? Now her uncles are both dead, ain't they? Uncross yore own eyes!" Tommy finished strongly.

Potluck was confused. There was logic in Tommy's reasoning, yet he felt positive the girl had no hand in this trading-post affair.

"If John Stoner couldn't throw a knife, then that scar-faced man can't be John Stoner," he said, puzzled. The evidence seemed to contradict itself.

"Then who is he? Mat Horn was mighty suspicious o' strangers, so why did he let this gent in if he wasn't John Stoner?"

"That's right," agreed Potluck, more at a loss than ever.

"If this gent ain't John Stoner, it proves the gal we met can't be Alice Danvers," said Tommy stubbornly. "The right gal wouldn't throw in with the wrong man, would she? Then where is John Stoner? Where's Alice Danvers—the one with pig-tails and spindle legs?"

Potluck eyed the Mexicans now peering in. "I wish I knew?" The words came like a groan from his lips.

"Shucks! It don't make sense any way you figure it," Tommy lamented. "Judge Stoner declared we was smart—that only goes to show how dumb *he* was!"

"You're right on that point, Too-bad. Let's get to movin'."

"Wait!" exclaimed Tommy. "Do you reckon Mat Horn just happened to fall that way? His fingers are stickin' in the hip pocket of his britches."

"We'll have a look," Potluck suggested, and bent down over the dead man. "It's a letter in his pocket. No stamp! No stamp! No post-mark! Why, it's addressed to Wild Bill!"

"It's for me," said Tommy quickly. "Open it!"

There was a familiarity about the writing that struck Potluck at once. The neatly formed letters marched in a neat row across the unlined sheet within. The letter was not signed. It needed no signature. So he read again what Alice Danvers had written:

Do not return to the ranch. My uncle is plotting to kill you both.

"She is the right girl, Too-bad! This proves it."

"Yeah, and it proves she was here, partner!" mused Tommy. "But not to murder Mat Horn. She gave him this note of warnin' to give to us. Stoner came to shut Mat's mouth."

"This shows she knows what is going on," stated Potluck bitterly. "Why didn't she say something at the *hogar*? Let's ride to the ranch and see what they aim to do. I'm gettin' riled!"

CHAPTER IX.

DANGER TRAIL.

OUTSIDE, they placed one of the Mexicans in charge and gave orders that the bodies be buried, and the store closed. Then they quickly mounted and rode toward the Stoner ranch. One thought was in their minds—the man who had shot Judge Stoner was still at large. Potluck would be able to identify that man, and before the day was spent they hoped to find him.

"Tommy, we can't both be right!" declared Potluck as they crossed the river.

"No," said Tommy quickly, "but we could both be wrong."

Potluck heaved a troubled sigh. "Do you reckon there'll ever come a time when there'll be law and order

in these parts, Too-bad?" he asked somberly.

"Yeah. But by then I reckon we'll both be daid, partner," Tommy said cheerfully.

The Stoner ranch showed no change. It carried the same air of quiet, peaceful meditation that it had on their visit of the day before. They rode up freely, yet under their easy manner was a tension like that of a cocked and loaded gun. No one stepped from the house to meet them. They hailed the place, but no one answered. A flat, dead silence reigned. No curtain moved. No face showed at any window. Not even a dog barked out a challenge, or wagged its tail in welcome.

A careful search of the house and sheds brought no one to light. They saw signs in the kitchen which led them to believe the cook, apparently a Mexican woman, and probably the companion of the girl, had departed in some haste that night. No breakfast had been cooked. At the corals, they found the fresh trail of horses leaving. They mounted, and when the trail led off toward the Whetstone Mountains, they saw they were following five horses. None of the animals were being led. That fact struck Potluck heavily. Apparently, the girl was riding of her own free will. Where else could she be?

"There's no tellin' about these women," declared Tommy skeptically as he carefully studied the spread-out trail. "She may be another Cattle Kate or a Sheep o' Sheba."

"Don't look so glum, Too-bad," encouraged Potluck. "You know, I think you sort o' like that gal. Yore mother used to teach us that love and faith was kinsfolk, and that a little hope and charity didn't come amiss. That gal must have found

things mighty wild up here, comin' from the East. If she's afraid o' shootin' irons, I don't blame her for packin' a knife and flashin' it when she gets caught in a jam."

"That's right," said Tommy. "Mat Horn took us for outlaws, but those Mexicans sized us up right. Carmena swears by Alice Danvers. Potluck, do you reckon mom would like that gal?"

"Carmena ain't bad-lookin', Too-bad."

Tommy O'Neil glared at him.

The trail led up into rough country, and they worked their sure-footed mustangs swiftly, taking steep climbs steadily, trotting up those long angling slopes which terminated in bald-headed ridges, from which the mountains derived their name. They dipped into long, narrow valleys fringed on either side with brush-lined slopes, belts of piñons, or more open growths of cedars, always following the trail eagerly and with relentless determination, yet above all with wary caution.

TALK became useless and thoughts seemed vain. Why, Potluck asked himself, was he following another outlaw trail? It would profit him nothing in the end. Was it chivalry that led them on? It was not greed! Were some men destined always to lay out crooked trails of violence and crime? Were other men born only to follow, to track down, to punish outlaws with a degree of violence far greater still?

His troubled mind looked back and turned the dog-eared pages of histories he had studied as a boy, reviewing the records of strife and war, of men who had led armies, conquered vast domains, only to be conquered in their turn. He shook his

head—the answer was beyond him. Life and love and happiness were the things he longed for—Wanna Barrock and a home! Yet here he was, a man hunter on a human trail. Was there such a thing as Fate? A spell of dark, melancholy brooding settled upon him. In spite of that, his eyes were bright and sharp and eager, for the trail was growing fresher, and Tommy O'Neil was bristling with cheerful eagerness, like a terrier fully confident that its quarry is close at hand.

Like a ghost at dawn, the trail suddenly vanished on a wind-swept rocky ridge. Their attention sharpened as they slowly ranged about, searching further sign. Then, from somewhere in the distance, came a shriek of pain. Or was it a cry of death? They could not be sure, for the sound was faint and muffled. They reined their mounts up short to listen. The clear mountain air brought no further sound to register upon their straining ears.

"Come on!" said Potluck tensely, and spurred his mustang down across a brushy slope into a long, winding mountain meadow. For he judged that from this direction the human scream had come.

They rode swiftly, in reckless haste. That distress cry had sounded urgent. They raced past a fringe of thick, bushy pines, swept around an abrupt turn unexpectedly, and were into it with startling suddenness.

In the trail a Mexican lay dead or dying. Just beyond, under a thick-limbed piñon, four men were busily engaged in the grim business of hanging a man. He was an old man whose unkempt beard and tattered clothing gave him the appearance of a human scarecrow. Already the

rope was around his neck, and one of the four men who held him captive was tossing the rope's end over the piñon's lowest limb. Another held the bridle reins of the restless horse upon which the old man sat hopelessly. Those four captors seemed startled by this sudden interruption caused by the appearance of Potluck and Tommy.

"Reach!" commanded Potluck sharply. "Reach high, gents!"

His Colt covered them as he searched their faces. George Crum, the murderer of Judge Stoner, was not among them. Those four men hesitated, their hard eyes weighing the situation keenly.

"Take things easy, strangers," said one. "We're only fixin' to hang an ornery, no-account hoss thief."

"Talk to 'em through smoke!" hissed Tommy O'Neil, his guns leveled upon the four.

BEFORE Potluck could give reply, a cold, brittle voice spoke behind them, and the hammer of a rifle clicked. "Drop those shootin' irons!" the voice commanded.

Potluck stiffened. He flashed Tommy a quick side glance. Tommy's fearless blue eyes spoke plainly: "Shoot it out!" Potluck's brown eyes flashed back a warning: "Wait the chance!"

"Waal, if it's only a hoss thief yore a-hangin'," drawled Potluck mildly, "I reckon us two pilgrims don't mind watchin' the show." He lowered his gun and slowly turned to view the man behind—a man whose voice he recognized.

It was Judge Stoner's murderer—George Crum!

"Drop those guns!" snapped Crum, harshly menacing. "We've got 'em, boys. Now we'll have a triple hangin'!"

"Yeah? Says who?" challenged Tommy O'Neil, his steady eyes and leveled guns never wavering from those men in front.

"I'm John Stoner!" the human scarecrow shouted through the rope around his neck. For Heaven's sake, don't let 'em hang me!"

It was a deadlock. Potluck knew the fearless stubbornness of his lifelong friend. Tommy would die fighting rather than drop his guns. Potluck's gun hand tensed as he prepared to throw a shot under his left arm at the man who held them covered with a rifle. He saw George Crum's finger tighten on the trigger. He knew that he was looking death full in the face. But if he could stop George Crum for a single instant, Potluck knew that Tommy would have a chance. Crum's rifle bullet would strike first, Potluck knew, but he must fire his return shot quick and true, in spite of the impact of that bullet. So this was it—"trail's end!" The thought flashed through his mind swift as light even as it telegraphed his right hand to flick the muzzle of his heavy six-gun into line with George Crum's narrowed eyes.

From the brush and timber at George Crum's back there came the sudden rush of a heavy body—a crackling of twigs and limbs, a metallic rattle. For one split second George Crum hesitated from stunned surprise. He glanced involuntarily across his shoulder as his finger tightened on the trigger.

The report of Potluck's .45 was lost as the rifle's blast blotted it out completely. Crum's bullet cut a furrow across the rump of Potluck's lunging mustang, already exploding into sudden movement at the sight of Alexander, Mat Horn's half-tame bear, charging into the open from the trees.

To Potluck Jones it seemed that the whole tense scene was shattered as if touched off by a fuse. Lunging, pitching mustangs! The hammering throb of guns! Thudding lead! Death riding the wind!

Potluck quit his saddle in mid-air, his one thought being to finish the outlaws. But in two jumps of his unmanageable mount the whole thing seemed to be finished. He landed on his feet, gun in hand. He saw that George Crum was down. The other four outlaws were down. Smoke trickled from the muzzles of Tommy's silver-mounted guns. But to Potluck's horror, he saw that the frightened horse had jumped away and left the old man dangling and kicking in the air.

SPRINGING toward the hanging man, Potluck holstered his gun and quickly brought his penknife into play, slashing the rope and catching the swaying body as it fell. The man who had declared his name to be John Stoner caught his breath with a gasping sigh and began to breathe spasmodically. Potluck worked with him.

"Danged if that wasn't sudden!" declared Tommy, a satisfied grin on his freckled face. "Danged if that critter, Alexander, didn't come nigh scarin' the daylight out o' me."

"Where'd that bear go to?" asked Potluck.

"Shucks! How do I know? I didn't have time to get a look at the ornery critter. But I heard him hit the brush on the other side o' the valley, or else it was a hoss."

"Danged if Alexander wasn't like the pea in a three-shell game," said Potluck. "That bear turned up where not expected, but at exactly the right time."

The old man tried shakily to sit up. Potluck aided him to do so.

"That Mexican was my friend—one of my herders," the old man said with an effort. "They killed him! They hung him first! He found me, and was helping me to escape. I've been held captive! Starved, abused, and tortured! They tried to force me to sign papers. They planned to kill me from the first."

"Just you take things easy," cautioned Potluck with deep sympathy.

"Are you shore enough John Stoner?" Tommy demanded.

The old man nodded vehemently, his clawlike hands working at his scrawny, emaciated neck. The rope had burned him badly. There seemed to be no strength in him. He was unwashed, a picture of the most abject misery Potluck had ever seen. A man who had founded his little empire, only to fall among thieves.

"Is George Crum dead?" Potluck asked his friend.

Tommy strode to where Crum lay and turned him over.

"You shore hit him dead center above the eyes," Tommy declared cheerfully. "Shucks! I was plannin' to hold a little conversation with that gent. But you spoiled that, partner."

CHAPTER X.

NEW TRAILS BECKON.

AS he viewed his boyhood friend, something deep and strong pulled at Potluck's heart-strings. Tommy's grin widened. A moment before, Tommy had been willing to risk a bullet in his own or Potluck's back rather than drop his guns at an outlaw's sharp command. Foolishly brave, generous to a fault, always quick and sure on the trigger—that was Tommy O'Neil, Potluck mused—and Tommy was fast becoming one of the deadliest gun fighters in a wild land where six-

guns seemed to be the only lawmen answered to. "Too-bad" Tommy O'Neil, writing the end to bits of outlaw history with lead periods from his ready guns. How soon would a bullet cut Tommy down, Potluck asked himself. His own part in the recent gun fight had seemed small indeed.

"I'm glad George Crum is dead," said John Stoner, a shudder racking his thin, stooped shoulders. "I trusted Crum! Crum did know sheep. He was a good foreman, until he turned bad. It was in a deep, dark cave Crum placed me, with no way of getting out. He came often to taunt me. He told me that he planned to kill my brother, Henry. Did you boys ever hear tell of Judge Stoner in Coyote Springs?" the old man asked.

"It was the judge who sent us up here," confided Potluck gently.

The man's eyes brightened. "Then Henry is still alive?"

Potluck slowly shook his head. "Crum did kill yore brother the same night he came to us. We tried to beat Crum up here, but he rode his hoss to death. Then Crum shot Romano Nadaro, took Romano's horse and made it to the ranch ahead of us."

"What of my niece, Alice Danvers? Have you seen her?" There was only a faint glimmer of hope in the man's beaten eyes. "Crum said he hadn't harmed the girl—that he planned to marry her just to make things look right and cover up his crimes."

"We saw the gal yesterday," said Tommy brightly. "But I'll be danged if I can figure out where she is to-day. Don't you worry no more about that gal, Mr. Stoner. She's chirper'n a spring robin—plenty able to take care of herself, I'd say."

"If you think you're strong enough to ride, we'll put you on a bronc and head down to the ranch," suggested Potluck. "The ranch was deserted when we were there this mornin', but the gal may be back by now. If she ain't, it'll give you a chance to clean up a bit and change into some decent clothes. I reckon you'd hate to have her see you lookin' like you do now."

"That's right," said John Stoner, a trifle sadly. "I know how I look! But I can ride, and once I get home and have a chance to clean up I'll feel better."

John Stoner tottered to his feet. "Don't hold it against me for the way I look. I haven't had a chance to wash, or shave, or a change of clothes since Crum lowered me down into that cave more'n a year ago. Even the sunlight seems to scorch my eyes. I think I'm almost blind!"

"Crum held you prisoner that long?" Potluck asked.

"Name of a mule!" sputtered Tommy O'Neil. "Shootin' was too danged good for that Crummy critter!"

He turned away and set about catching a mount so that he could round up the scattered horses, which had bolted at the scent and sight of Mat Horn's bear.

WITH long, slanting strokes, the evening sun was busily painting the desert with changing tints and rosy hues. John Stoner could ride no faster than a walk. Tommy sighted a small bunch of riders crossing a ridge below, following the trail he and Potluck had made that morning. Tommy put his mount into a lope and rode ahead to meet those riders.

As he crossed a sheep-grazed meadow, Mexicans suddenly flanked him on either side, closing in around

him. From the edge of the trees just ahead a girl's voice called: "It's Wild Bill!"

Riding closer, Tommy grinned. "Where do you think you're headed?" he demanded.

"I'm glad we found you," said Alice Danvers. "Last night I followed you up the valley, but lost your trail. I hunted for you all last night. When I returned to the trading post this morning I found that Mat Horn had been murdered and Uncle John had been killed by the bear. The Mexicans were just burying them. They told me you were trailing up into the Whetstone Mountains from the ranch. Of course, I knew that you were after George Crum, and I knew that he planned to kill you. So I persuaded the Mexicans to join me, and we took your trail. I'm glad we arrived in time to save you, Wild Bill."

"Save me?" Tommy spoke acidly. "Now ain't that just too bad! I'd like to know how come Mat Horn was killed with that ivory-handled knife you snatched off Potluck Jones. How come you know so much about what George Crum planned to do? I don't trust you overmuch, gal. That's straight!"

"So that's the way you feel about me! You think I helped murder old

Mat Horn!" Alice Danvers rode closer. Tommy's words had angered her. "When I returned to the ranch with that knife there was no one there but Mrs. Sanchez, the cook. She's my friend, so I told her what had happened. Then I laid the knife on the mantel above the fireplace and went up to the my room. I was there when Uncle John and George Crum returned to the ranch and found the knife where I had left it. They both flew into a terrible temper. They cursed and swore something awful. I was frightened. You'd have thought a ghost had left that knife there."

"So that's what spooked 'em up," said Tommy, with interest. "They must have decided that Mat Horn had something to do with it. They decided Mat Horn must know too much. We came along about then, and they didn't know which way to jump. They wanted those documents, that's clear."

Alice Danvers nodded. "They didn't know I was listening. I heard enough to become convinced that George Crum killed Uncle Henry in Coyote Springs. I'm sorry I called you an outlaw, Wild Bill."

Tommy smiled. "That ain't my name, ma'am! I'm Tommy O'Neil! Tommy to my friends, but poison to

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gents like Crum. So you was plannin' to marry that ornery critter? Waal, it's just too bad!"

"That wasn't my idea! Uncle John planned that—I never cared much for George Crum from the very first. And I don't feel sorry that Uncle John is dead. He's never treated me the same since he met with that terrible accident in the canyon."

"So that's when they made the switch," Tommy mused aloud. "Gal, you must have been pretty blind."

"What do you mean?" asked the girl uncertainly.

"That was when they switched that bogus uncle off on you—the time of that accident. A right clever way o' pullin' wool over every one's eyes, even to old Mat Horn, who knew yore uncle John Stoner well, but was awful near-sighted. John Stoner ain't dead," Tommy informed her. "We found him up in the mountains, and we're bringin' him back home. George Crum is dead. Potluck killed him. You see, there was a little shootin', gal. Us two pilgrims paid them gents off in their own coin. They was a low-down, worthless bunch!"

ALICE DANVERS seemed bewildered. "You mean to say that Uncle John has been a— a prisoner? That the man I have been thinking was my uncle is not my uncle? In that case, I must've lived, with my real uncle for only two days! You've done a great deal for us, Mr. O'Neil."

"Just plain Tommy, gal. No fuss and feathers; drop the mister," Tommy grinned. "So you begin to savvy? I'm right glad to see yo're gettin' yore eyes open."

For a moment Alice Danvers sat motionless in her saddle. The tone

of her voice changed to one of eagerness.

"Where—where is he? My Uncle John?" she asked.

Tommy motioned over his shoulder. "He's ridin' home with Potluck Jones. Yore uncle would much rather you didn't see him until he's had a chance to shave and slick up a bit. Then, too, those dead outlaws are tied across their saddles. There'll be another job o' buryin' for these Mexicans at the tradin' post."

"You mean I can't see Uncle John now?" she said.

"That's what I aim to say." Tommy grinned. "Just you rein yore bronc along side o' mine, gal. We'll ride on ahead. Do you reckon we can find the cook? Yore uncle will be needin' a heap o' soap and hot water, not to speak o' mild nourishment to begin with. He is danged near starved to death."

"We'll find Mrs. Sanchez at the trading post," she told him.

They rode in silence for some time. Tommy's blue eyes were untroubled by any somber thought of the outlaws he had just killed in the gun fight. His was of an impulsive nature, never given to looking backward with regret, but always ahead with anticipation toward the future. His gaze ranged off to the south and eastward below, where the Kettle River Valley and the high mesa beyond were taking on the deepening tints and rainbow hues of sunset.

"Right pretty, ain't it?" Tommy asked softly.

"I've grown to love it," Alice Danvers replied gently.

"In spite of all that's happened here?"

"In spite of everything, Tommy."

Tommy turned slowly in his saddle and viewed her keenly. "Gal, I'm right curious to know what's happened to yore uncle's sheep.

There wasn't a sign o' them up in the mountains. Just old tracks, all more'n a couple o' months old."

"What does that mean?" the girl asked. "This spring George Crum and that scar-faced man fired all the old herders and hired new ones. That seemed strange, don't you think?"

"Shucks!" muttered Tommy. "It begins to look like the next job for us to do is trail them sheep. Most likely we'll find them sheep in Utah or Colorado. Potluck won't be strong for the idea o' trailin' 'em. That cowboy don't like woollies! But me? I'm broad-minded!" Tommy grinned, a twinkle in his blue eyes. "I'll talk him into the idea, gal. It was Potluck talked me into trailin' to Kettle Falls. Now it's up to Potluck to help me find those missin' woollies."

"You mean to go to all that trouble just on account of Uncle John?" the girl asked softly.

"Oh, that won't be much trouble," said Tommy lightly. "You see, Judge Stoner was a friend of ours. John Stoner is the judge's brother, ain't he? You'll like Potluck Jones! Why, that partner o' mine is the dangest gent for helpin' out his friends you ever saw. Nothin' stops him! But don't you go and get yore cap set for Potluck. He's plumb

head over heels in love with Wanna Barrock."

"I'm not thinking about Potluck Jones," she said.

ALICE DANVERS was not thinking about Potluck Jones when, two days later, she stood watching them ride northward from the Stoner ranch at sunrise. She had her eyes fixed on Tommy O'Neil, now riding his own big roan. She was wondering if, and how soon, Tommy would come riding back. Five bands of sheep had vanished from John Stoner's range. Would Tommy and his friend find those sheep and bring them back? Without his sheep, John Stoner was a broken man without the courage to start anew, for he was old. The cruelty of George Crum had aged her uncle beyond his years. For herself, there was no security for the future. A vague, restless lonesomeness settled upon the girl as she watched those two riders become mere specks, then vanish in the distance. She must wait, remembering Tommy's promise to return. She could cherish in her heart a memory of Tommy's fearless Irish eyes and the honesty stamped upon his freckled face. She could wonder how much Tommy cared for her, and hope.

*A Complete Novel, "SIX-GUN LEGACY," by GLENN H. WICHMAN,
in Next Week's Issue.*

A FUR COAT FOR MILADY

MANY a heart hungering for a real sealskin coat may have that desire fulfilled. At least, there will be no shortage of fur, although the cash for it may be a little slow in forthcoming. In a single ship arriving in Seattle from Alaska, there were on board fifty-five thousand one hundred and eighty sealskins valued at one million six hundred and fifty thousand dollars. These were secured at Probilof Islands.



SHELL GAME

By KENNETH GILBERT

Author of "The Chance of a Yellow Dog," etc.

Everything turned to gold for Red Farrand—but it was gold he couldn't grasp

RED" FARRAND rose from where he had crouched behind a clump of brush, and worked the lever of his repeater, to reload the gun. An empty brass shell was flung out, but no fresh cartridge slid into the barrel. He saw then that the magazine was empty, and he grunted.

The discovery, however, was not of immediate importance. He had just killed his partner. Old Tom Niles was out there in the fresh

snow, the first of the early Alaskan winter. Farrand was a poor shot, and he had been lucky that he had not needed a second bullet. Poor old Niles never knew what had hit him. He lay there on his back, arms and legs outflung grotesquely, his fringe of grizzled whiskers upthrust pointedly at the leaden sky. The bucket of water he had been carrying from the near-by spring had spilled where he had dropped it.

Farrand was quite sure that Niles

was dead, yet he went forward cautiously, aware that his gun was empty. It was more good luck, he thought, that Niles's gun—a .44-40—was the same caliber as his own. Niles would have ammunition at the cabin, all that Farrand would need on the hundred-mile get-away to Three Below and the Outside.

Farrand's mukluks crunched in the snow as he came closer and bent over his victim. He was still a little afraid of Niles; he had always feared him, for that matter. That was why he had chosen to ambush the man, rather than shoot it out openly.

The gold that Farrand wanted was probably at the cabin, yet Niles might be carrying something useful, so the killer explored the inner pockets of the man's mackinaw. A few trinkets of no worth he tossed aside, but presently his fingers touched a folded square of paper. Curiously he opened it, spread it out, and saw that there was writing on it. His greedy thought was that it might contain a clew as to where Niles had hidden the gold.

His eyes scanned the scrawled pencil lines in eagerness, then astonishment, then sudden, guilty rage. For, this was no clew to the gold. It was a message from beyond the grave, directed to Red Farrand himself! Too late, now, Farrand realized that Niles had been reading his mind uncannily all the time—had known what the killer intended. The message read:

RED: If you ever find this, then you'll have done it. I've known it was coming, but I couldn't stop it. It worried me some at first, but my mind is settled at last. It had to come some time. I'm an old man, and tired. If you've done this, Red, I forgive you, because you'll have killed yourself as well. I've figured it out, Red. The curse of Midas. So long!

Startled and uneasy, Red Farrand straightened and looked around, as

though he expected to discover some witness of his deed. But the snowy forest was silent and dead—as dead as this old man against whom he had plotted.

But, old Tom Niles's written words had stirred the man's curiosity. What had Niles meant when he said that he, Red Farrand, had doomed himself as well? It sounded like nonsense. There was no reason why Farrand should die, or ever be brought to justice for his crime. All he had to do was to get the gold and hit for the Outside. The world would never know the truth. No other prospectors or trappers would likely be along to find evidence of the murder until spring—and then there would be no evidence. The wolves would see to that. What was this "curse of Midas?"

FARRAND racked his memory. It seemed that back in his school days he had read the story of the greedy king who wished that everything he might touch would turn to gold. That was all right in its way—except that he had starved to death because even the food he touched turned to gold. Nobody could eat gold. It was a silly story, thought Red Farrand. No sense to it. How could a fool yarn like that apply to him? Why should he have to eat gold? He shrugged and dismissed the thought.

More important was his desire to get away from here. He went on up to the cabin and began his search for the gold which, he knew, old Tom Niles had hidden about the place.

The two men had not been partners in a true sense. Old Tom Niles had been lonely, and when he had met Red Farrand at Three Below earlier that year, he had been impressed by the man's seeming affability. Farrand accepted the old sour-

dough's offer to spend the winter in the wilds.

There was a reason for it more pressing than the honest desire to dig gold out of the ground. Farrand was convinced that prospecting was a slow way to get rich. But he needed a hide-out, after that killing at Circle, where he had waylaid a drunken prospector in from the creeks. He had slugged his victim to death, but had nearly been caught before he could complete the job of robbing him. Farrand was glad to bury himself in the wilds with old Tom Niles, realizing that the latter was a respected old-timer and that the marshal's posse would never dream that he was harboring a killer. When Farrand discovered that Niles had about five thousand dollars in coarse gold, he decided to kill again.

But he was afraid to face Niles openly, and the latter, by some innate sixth sense, seemed to have become suspicious of the new partner. Days went by while Red Farrand plotted and planned, finally nerving himself for the deed. On the plea that he was going over to the headwaters of the Porcupine to look for a trap line site, he had left the camp early that morning, saying he would be gone two days. But, no sooner had he got out of Niles's sight than he returned by another route, and lay in wait for the old man. He had let Niles get to the spring and almost return, before finally working up his courage to do the job.

Then he had discovered that he was out of ammunition. A real sourdough would have made that find a long time ago, but Farrand had been pondering the crime he was about to commit.

Well, it was done now. All he had to do was to find the gold. What if old Tom Niles had read murder-

ous greed in his eyes? That hadn't saved Niles.

At the end of half an hour, however, Farrand was annoyed, for he had found no sign of Niles's little hoard of golden dust. Farrand had all but torn the cabin apart, but there was no trace of the cache. In sudden resentment, he told himself that he had been tricked. And yet he knew that old Tom Niles had once possessed the gold, for Farrand had seen it.

Painstakingly he went over every inch of the place, but there was no secret panel in the log wall, no false log which could be slid out. It was probable, he thought, that Niles had cached the stuff outside. Yet that seemed unreasonable, because it would be too risky; a man might forget the exact stump or rock under which the treasure was buried. It would be hard to dig out of frozen ground beneath the snow, in case Niles had wanted the gold before spring. No, the stuff was most likely in the cabin. But—where?

All night Red Farrand searched, without success. By daybreak he knew that he had lost, that he would have to be on his way. The weather signs portended a change, and he had no intention of being compelled to spend days here alone in the partially wrecked cabin, realizing that old Tom Niles was lying stark out there on the trail from the spring. Haggard and red-eyed from loss of sleep and from worry, he got together what grub he could carry, and made ready to set out, just as the weak rays of the wintry sun grayed the eastern hills.

WITH grub and trail outfit ready, he bethought himself of the need for ammunition. He was almost grateful for a moment to old Tom Niles when he

found that the prospector had plenty of cartridges that would fit both guns. Niles had the frugal habit of loading his own ammunition. Farrand saw that the old man had evidently been busy, for there was a cracker box half filled with freshly loaded shells.

Farrand's first thought was that he would need only twenty-five or thirty cartridges, on the mush into Three Below. But the greed in his nature made it difficult for him to leave all that precious ammunition behind. What if he ran into a spell of bad weather that lasted for days or even weeks? Every cartridge might come in handy. He gathered up all the ammunition and put it into his pack, after filling the magazine of his rifle. So many shells added greatly to the load he would have to pack, but the extra labor would be worth while if he was delayed greatly in reaching Three Below, and had to hunt meat in order to live.

Yet Red Farrand was not without criminal cunning. The disappointment in not finding the gold had sharpened his wits. In sudden suspicion he wondered if he had not guessed how old Tom Niles had tricked him. This ammunition—it seemed to him to be unusually heavy. On sudden impulse he selected one of the cartridges, picking one at random. Like all the others it was greased with bear tallow that had been dried out until it was almost black. Had Niles loaded these cartridges with gold dust instead of powder? It would be a clever trick.

Farrand twisted a bullet loose and emptied the contents of the cartridge case into his palm. No, it was powder, all right; good, black powder. But to make even doubly certain, he stepped to the door; pumped a shell into the barrel of his rifle, and pulled

the trigger. Loud and true rang the report on the still morning air. He grunted disappointment. Old Tom Niles had not tricked him that way at all.

Nothing to do but get out and admit that he'd been outwitted. He had no regret that his crime had netted him nothing; rather his resentment against Tom Niles was bitter because it seemed that the old man had not played fair, after all. Smart, hey? Well, the old fool had got what was coming to him, anyway!

Red Farrand shouldered his pack, after strapping on a pair of snowshoes, and struck out for civilization. No one would ever hook him up with the killing. There was no possible retribution. Tom Niles was dead and gone, and Red Farrand was free. The first storm would cover his tracks. Snow was already beginning to fly.

He camped that night, warm and comfortable, in a spruce thicket ten miles from the cabin, while a shrieking blizzard, the wind like the voice of outraged justice hurling malediction at him, blanketed the land with a new depth of snow. But Red Farrand slept the sleep of an honest, tired man on whose conscience nothing rested. He'd never been troubled with such a fool thing as "nerves."

"Daylight, however, brought no lessening of the storm. If anything, it was more savage and bitter. Seventy-two hours later it blew itself out, but the strong cold gripped the land with icy fingers. Farrand's grub was lower than he liked, and he knew that he'd have to push on swiftly if he reached Three Below without feeling the pinch of hunger.

The temperature continued to drop. Never had he seen colder

weather. He frosted his nose, ears and fingers and was compelled time after time to stop and build a fire to thaw out. Likewise it was so cold at night that he found difficulty in sleeping. Hardship began to tell on him. Worry displaced his ordinary confidence in himself. He could not tell how far he had come, but Three Below was still a long way off. The cold was so intense that the drifts froze and the icy particles cut the webbing of his snowshoes. At the end of the second day he threw the snowshoes away, finding that he could make better time by walking on the frozen crust. It was five days after he had left the cabin that he ran out of grub.

But, he told himself, this was nothing to worry about. There must be game about, although he did not recall having seen any moose or caribou. The antled clan had "yarded" in deep swamps as a means of protection against wolves. He began hunting the swamps, looking for meat. But all he saw was a few camp robbers, gray little birds that regarded him curiously with eyes that were bright with hunger. They were mute evidence that famine was abroad in the land. Even the snowshoe rabbits remained hidden during the spell of bitter cold. That night Red Farrand slept fitfully, with hunger pains gnawing at him like some ravenous beast of prey.

BEFORE daylight he was up, warming his starving body by a fire. The air was still, brittle, chill as blued steel. The cold weather might endure for days, and while it lasted the wild folk would remain sluggish and unmoving. So far as he could tell, game seemed to have moved out of the country. He decided to go on toward Three Below, trusting to luck to get a shot

at some creature which hunger had driven forth.

But the cold and the lack of food made his progress slow. He was beginning to grow weak. The only sustenance he had was a few handfuls of tea, and while this gave him temporary warmth there was little or no nourishment in it.

The little gray camp robbers, the Canada jays, continued to haunt him. It struck him at last that in their beady glances he saw hope that he would die. This stirred anger and fear. For the first time he became really worried, and even knew a pang of regret at what he had done. After all, the killing of Tom Niles had gained him nothing. If he had not committed that crime, he would be at this minute in a warm and cozy cabin with his partner, and he wouldn't be hungry. Yet if he had only found the gold, he told himself, he wouldn't have minded going hungry. But Tom Niles had cheated him, tricked him. Tears of maudlin self-pity came to his eyes and froze on his cheeks.

Suddenly it came to him that the solution of his problem had been before him all the time and he had not noticed it. These little gray birds—they would provide a mouthful or so of food, anyway. He picked out one of the tiny, fluffy creatures nearest him, raised the gun and steadied his aim as best he could. But the weakness that had crept through his body made aiming uncertain, and he was a poor shot at best. The gray jay, sitting on the limb of a spruce twenty feet above the man's head, merely hopped farther along its perch as the .44-40 crashed out in the icy silence, and the heavy bullet whizzed past.

The missed shot sent Farrand into sudden fury. Again and again he blasted at the bird, but the latter seemed to have a charmed life. Pres-

ently the click of the hammer told the man that the gun was empty.

He reloaded, ready to resume firing, but by this time the jays had taken alarm, and had withdrawn to the deeper forest. Farrand wasted half an hour hunting for them, but they had evidently decided to desert him. He went on, gloomy with disappointment, having wasted eight or ten cartridges. Still, he didn't begrudge those shells so much. He still had plenty of ammunition, and the shooting had helped lighten his load.

Coming over a rise that afternoon, he saw a ghostly white shape that seemed to float through the underbrush ahead. His first thought was that it was a snowshoe rabbit, and the excitement at the promise of meat made his hands tremble so much that the bullet went wild. In a frenzy he emptied his gun at the fleeing creature, without effect. Just before it vanished in the brush he saw the flick of a bushy tail. He had been shooting at an arctic fox, white in its winter fur.

It would have been rank fare even if he had killed it, but he was so hungry by now that it would have seemed like the choicest meat. Nevertheless, it had escaped, and all that he had gained was a lightening of his load of ammunition. Still, he told himself, he had plenty of cartridges left.

The queer thing was that twice now he had failed to kill meat when the opportunity offered. He did not believe that he could be as bad a marksman as that, and yet it had happened. Was there something wrong with his gun? He did not believe it; the gun had always been reliable in the past. Discouraged, and with apprehension growing, he went on. It was near dark when he toiled over a rise, and saw a band of cari-

bou, which had been huddled in the lee of a big rock, break and run before him.

As quickly as he could he unlimbered the gun and kept shooting until it was empty. But not one of the grayish, shaggy-footed beasts so much as stumbled. Again he had missed completely.

THE heart almost went out of the killer then, and he dropped in the snow and gave way to futile tears. He had not been a man who believed in such a thing as retribution, yet he sensed now that he was paying part of the penalty for his cold-blooded crime. Almost it seemed to him that old Tom Niles, an invisible spirit now, was at his elbow, chuckling in revenge. The thought was so startling that Red Farrand, terrified anew, looked around quickly, as though expecting to see the ghost of his victim.

Somehow he knew that madness was creeping on him, and he fought against it. He tried to account in a reasonable way for what had happened, arguing that it was merely bad luck—like being unable to find Niles's gold. But he could not shake off the feeling that he was at grips with some baleful, supernatural force which was going to get him in the end—even as old Tom Niles had said.

Red Farrand shivered and decided to make camp. He had enough tea for one more brew; after that he'd have to depend on snow water. Just as he was building his fire the malign fate which pursued him, appeared to taunt him again.

A wraithlike owl floated on silent pions to a near-by tree and sat there regarding him with round, moonlike eyes. In sudden hope—for the bird was food, after a fashion—Red Farrand caught up his gun and

fired until there were no more shells in the magazine. At the first shot the owl took flight, but the now crazed man continued to send bullets after the bird as it winged swiftly away. Not so much as a feather dropped. The killer knew then that the sentence of death had been pronounced on him, a lingering death by starvation more terrible than the quick, merciful end that had come to his victim.

But a ratlike courage came to his aid then. He would not give up; he would fight back. He would try again to kill food, to prove that all that had happened was mere chance. Into his pack he went after more shells, and then he made a startling discovery. His ammunition was gone!

Aghast at the find, his recollection flicked back over the prodigal manner in which he had wasted shells the last few days. He knew he had emptied his gun several times, yet he had brought many cartridges with him and he did not see how he could have fired them all. Surely there were forty or fifty of them left. He dug deeper in the bag—and found the explanation.

The seam at one corner of the bag had been forced open by the heavy weight of ammunition and, one by one, the precious shells had worked out and dropped in the snow behind him as he trudged on. He remembered now that the bag had seemed unaccountably lighter. In sudden frenzy he began tearing the outfit apart, throwing articles out on the snow, hoping that some of the cartridges were lodged in the bottom still. Suddenly he gave a cry and straightened up, holding something in the fingers of his right hand.

It was a single cartridge which, somehow, had not worked through the broken seam. And this last shell,

he knew, was going to be the means of saving his life. This one would not fail as the others had done. He shouted crazily that this was the one lucky shell of all. In his addled brain he saw this remaining cartridge as the equivalent of food that would last him many days, until he could reach Three Below. He fondled it lovingly, muttering over it as though it were some priceless jewel. With the sleeve of his parka he wiped it free of the blackened bear tallow, so that it would fit snugly in the barrel and nothing would impede the direction of the bullet.

But as he was in the act of rubbing it clean of grease he stopped abruptly and stared at the smallish object with widened, unbelieving eyes. For, strangely enough, the bullet which had been covered by the dark grease, *was the same color as the brass shell!*

FOR the tick of three seconds, perhaps, the significance of this did not dawn on him. Then he gave a scream of understanding and leaped to his feet, mouthing in maniacal rage.

At last the means by which old Tom Niles had tricked him was revealed. At last he had discovered the ingenious way by which the prospector, fearing death, had outwitted his potential murderer. Instead of lead, old Tom Niles had molded the bullets with molten gold, then rubbed black grease on them to hide their true color!

Niles had never intended to fire those cartridges himself. But he had surmised that the killer would either leave the ammunition behind, in which case nobody probably would ever discover the secret or, taking it along, would shoot the gold away, unaware that he was firing a nugget

worth, perhaps, thirty dollars, each time he pulled the trigger.

Now Farrand knew why his aim had been so poor. The golden bullets had a different consistency than lead, for which the gun was bored. They shot high, low or wide. There was no accuracy in them. In his greedy soul, too, there was agony that he had so recklessly squandered wealth on the little gray jays, the fox, the owl, worthless as food ordinarily. The gold he had flung at them would have bought him tons of the finest grub obtainable.

Still, he couldn't eat gold. The stuff had been worthless here. There flashed into his recollection what old Tom Niles had written about the "curse of Midas." Golden bullets that couldn't be eaten, which were useless they couldn't be shot straight—and yet they represented wealth for which he had taken the life of a man. The grim humor of it struck his crazed imagination and made him laugh.

Still, he gloated, he would beat the ghost of old Tom Niles, after all. This last bullet *would* kill game. He would break the curse. All he needed now was opportunity. And—like the answer to a prayer—he heard the crunch of snow in the near-by brush, and turned to see a

young bull moose which had forsaken its swamp, standing there eyeing him in mild wonder.

Breathless, yet trying to keep cool and steady, he slid the last cartridge into the barrel of the rifle and raised the weapon, letting the sights line themselves on the breast of the shaggy beast. His left eye closed as he took careful aim.

But a curious thing happened. Of a sudden the moose seemed shrouded in mist, which instantly cleared. Yet as the fog cleared away, it seemed to Red Farrand that instead of a moose, he saw the face of old Tom Niles. Not angry or reproachful, but smiling, confident—sure that he would fail, that he had doomed himself to death even as old Tom Niles had prophesied. In fury Red Farrand pulled the trigger, felt his shoulder jerk to the recoil. Blue smoke wreathed the muzzle for an instant, and when it was gone the face of old Tom Niles was no longer there. Nor could he see the moose.

Red Farrand laughed and flung the useless gun from him. The rays of the setting sun broke through gathering clouds that portended another blizzard, and lit the gloomy forest like a golden spectacle. The sparkling snow particles seemed yellow, golden. It *was* gold! He



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screamed that everything had turned to gold, the woods, the drifts, the whole world. He dropped on knees and seized handfuls of what seemed to him to be golden snow. Laughing, crying, he let the brittle, frosted stuff trickle between his fingers. He even tried to eat it, but knew that he couldn't eat gold. The curse of Midas—

He was lying there, face down, still grasping at the snow, when the blizzard came at last in the darkness,

with a rush of wind that moaned uneasily through the trees. Everything was gold—but he couldn't eat gold. In the deepening gloom his eyes could not make out that the food which would have spelled life to him—the still warm body of the young moose which had died instantly under the impact of that last bullet—lay where it had fallen behind a clump of brush, only a few paces from where Red Farrand groveled in expiation of his crime.

In Next Week's Issue, "BLIZZARD BUCKAROO,"

by ARTHUR HAWTHORNE CARHART.

WHAT WAS SITTING BULL?

WAS Sitting Bull, the Sioux warrior, medicine man or chief? This question bothers many people who like their history authentic. Superintendent Lawrence K. Fox of the South Dakota State Historical Department, claims that the tribal leader was a medicine man who was called chief for want of a better title.

An author is quoted as saying, "There are several men still living who saw Sitting Bull inaugurated as head of the nonagency Sioux." Another historian called him an Unkpapa chief, and the band which Sitting Bull led was known as the Hunkpapas.

The markers of Sitting Bull's grave at Fort Yates, North Dakota, have been destroyed so many times by souvenir seekers that a movement has been started to put up a new and permanent marker that cannot be chipped or torn off by unthinking sightseers.

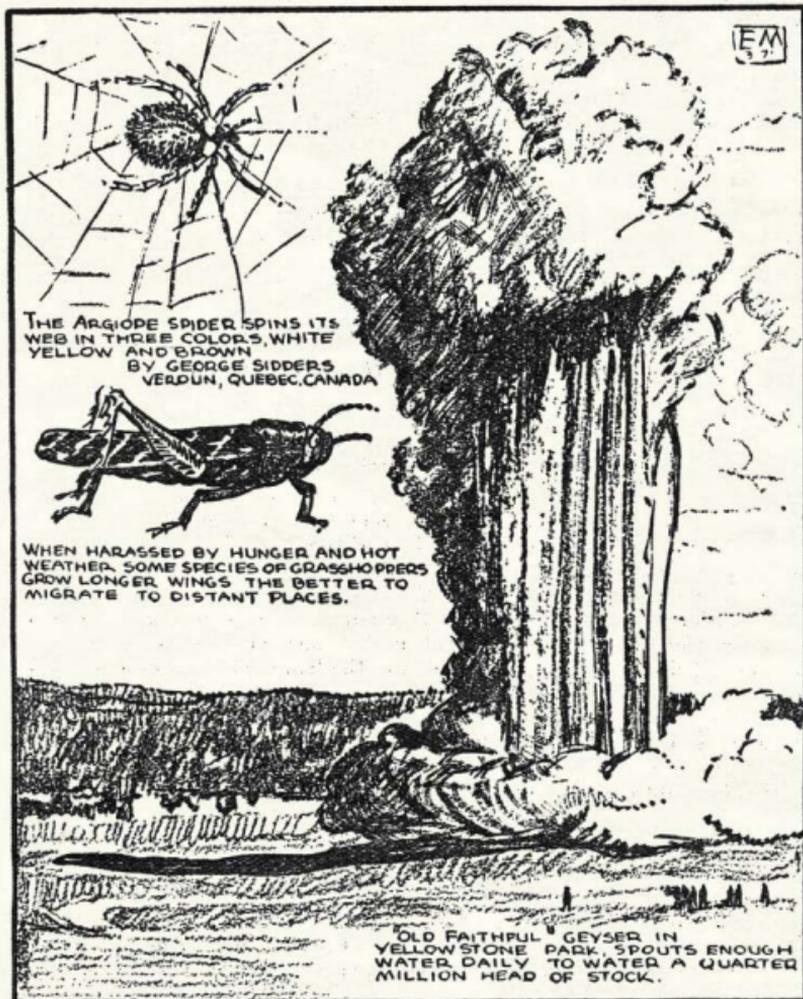
BIRDS TO THE RESCUE

A RECENT survey in Colorado, where the grasshoppers have done great damage, indicates that birds and insects will do much toward destroying grasshopper eggs and thus will diminish the plague in 1938.

Snowbirds and meloid larva are invading the pods of recently laid eggs in all sections of the plague district in Huerfano County. The better known name for meloid larva is blister beetle which obtains most of its food from grasshopper eggs. Once the pods are attacked by the blister beetle there is small hope of the hatching being successful. The cheery little snowbirds are doing their bit to help out Huerfano County ranchers.

Interesting And True

By H. FREDRIC YOUNG



THE ARGIOPE SPIDER SPINS ITS WEB IN THREE COLORS, WHITE YELLOW AND BROWN
BY GEORGE SIDDER, VERDUN, QUEBEC, CANADA

WHEN HARASSED BY HUNGER AND HOT WEATHER, SOME SPECIES OF GRASSHOPPERS GROW LONGER WINGS THE BETTER TO MIGRATE TO DISTANT PLACES.

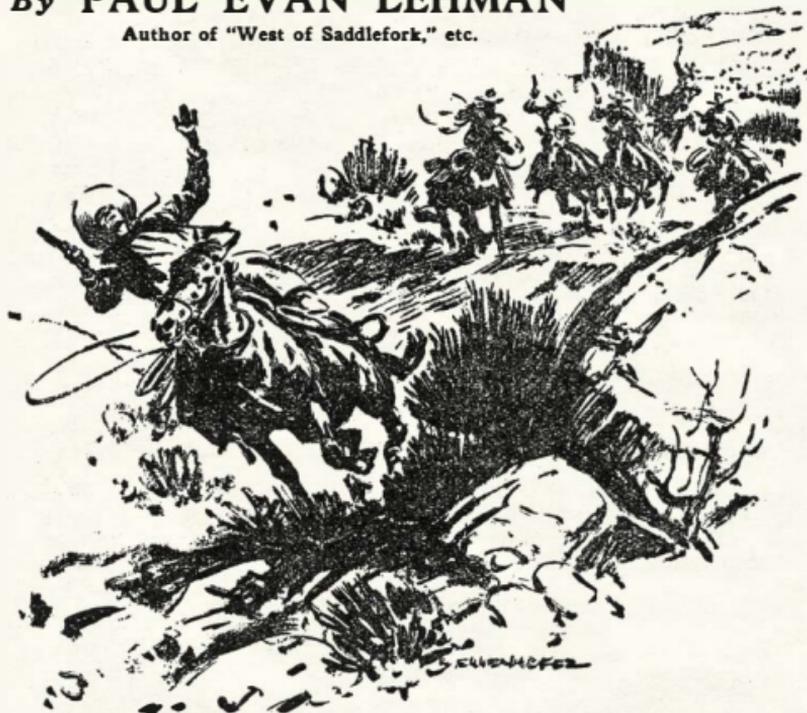
OLD FAITHFUL GEYSER IN YELLOWSTONE PARK, SPOUTS ENOUGH WATER DAILY TO WATER A QUARTER MILLION HEAD OF STOCK.

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.

Wolves of the Chaparral

By PAUL EVAN LEHMAN

Author of "West of Saddlefork," etc.



CHAPTER I.

LEAD MEDICINE.

BARRY WESTON dipped the brush in a basin of water and determinedly renewed his efforts to plaster down a shock of brown hair which a perverse nature had definitely decided should be curly. His best efforts were useless; by the time he had subdued, by dint of much brushing and a liberal application of water, the last of the unruly locks, the first were dry and twisting in rebellion.

Barry detested these curls with all the masculinity of his nineteen years. Curls rimed with girls, and, while quite becoming to one like, say, Barbara Dawn, they were entirely out of place on the head of a man. Barry wondered a bit peevishly why he couldn't draw his hair over his forehead and brush it neatly in place like Joe, the bartender at the Silver Palace, did. Nature, he firmly believed, had given him a raw deal when it came to hirsute adornment.

As he frowned into the cracked mirror above the washstand, he was

PART I.



Beginning A Gripping New Novel of Range Land Strategy

entirely unconscious of that fact that this same nature had been extremely generous with respect to the rest of him. His shoulders were broad, his waist slim, and he had to stoop slightly to look into the mirror. The face which frowned back at him, while tanned, was good to look upon. Just now it fairly shone from the scrubbing it had received.

Despairing of achieving a coiffure as faultless as that of Joe, Barry turned his attention to his scarf. It was a flaming yellow in color, and went very handsomely with the bright-blue silk shirt his mother had given him on Christmas. He knotted it carefully, then, before donning his coat, buckled about him a new and elaborately hand-tooled

cartridge belt and holster. From the latter protruded the slick walnut handle of a Colt six-gun, Barry's most highly prized heritage from his father.

Pressing a carefully dusted gray Stetson over his wet locks, Barry cast a final critical look at his reflection and made his way to the living room. His mother was seated in her favorite rocking-chair, darning. She looked up at his entrance and smiled approvingly. His stepfather lowered the newspaper he was reading and glared at him over its top.

"Where you goin' all dressed up like a Christmas tree?" he asked sourly.

"Thought I'd ride over to the

Cinch Buckle and see if Clement's goin' to town."

"You didn't dress up like that for Clement. You're goin' a-courtin' his sister. Better keep clear of the Cinch Buckle or you'll have Steve Moley in your hair."

"That polecat better stay away from her!" blazed Barry. "He's rotten to the core. Look at that waitress over at the café; she was crazy about him. His old man had a sweet time hushin' that up! And there's others. Steve Moley's got no right to be within fifty feet of a decent girl like Barbara Dawn."

"He gits lots closer than that, if what a feller hears is the truth," said the stepfather. "Don't you go stirrin' up trouble with Steve. We don't want Judge Moley down on us."

For his mother's sake Barry withheld the scornful words which trembled on his lips. This stepfather of his was craven; a weak-spined creature. Barry often believed that his mother had married him in order to have a man about the house to do the chores. Ignoring his foster parent, Barry crossed to where his mother sat and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"I'll be home early, ma; don't wait up."

She smiled at him. "I've got quite a bit of mendin' to do; I wouldn't be surprised if I was still up when you get back. If I'm not, I'll leave the back door unbarred. Be a good boy, now."

IT was the admonition which followed him every time he went out. Barry patted her shoulder affectionately and stepped out on the gallery. It was dusk, and the evening wind swept the odor of sage across the range land. He caught up the showy pinto gelding and cinched his silver-mounted saddle in

place. Barry was proud of that saddle; it had cost him a great deal of hard labor and self-denial. His stepfather paid him a wage so small that he was ashamed to tell his mother.

By the time he reached the Cinch Buckle it was quite dark. There was a light in the living room of the big house, and he could hear the hands talking and laughing in the bunk house. The gallery was a recess of deep shadows. He swung from his horse at the hitch rack and ascended the steps.

"Is that you, Barry?"

He turned swiftly. Barbara was back there in the gloom, probably in the hammock.

"You bet it's me," he said, and started to grope his way to her side.

His foot struck a riding boot extended in the darkness. Had he been moving more rapidly he would have tripped over it. As he was recovering his balance, a voice spoke drawlingly.

"Good evenin', Mister Weston."

Barry stiffened, peering at the rocking-chair from which the boot extended. That was Steve Moley's voice; Steve was there in the shadows with Barbara.

"You, huh?" Barry grated.

"Who'd you think it was—Clement?"

A stifled laugh from Barbara forced the climax. To a girl of sixteen the awkward stumbling, followed by the dry question, was a bit of harmless byplay; to Barry, diffident and self-conscious, the action was a deliberate attempt to humiliate him, the drawling remark an intentional effort to complete his confusion. A wave of hot anger, searing as the breath of a furnace, swept over him. All his accumulated hatred for this sneering young libertine surged to the surface. Like a whiplash Barry's fist shot out,

thudded solidly against flesh, knocked the languid Steve Moley completely out of the chair.

With a pantherlike leap Barry was on him, hands searching swiftly for the gun he knew Steve would attempt to draw. Barbara's sharp command went unheeded. He caught Moley's wrist as the weapon was wrenched from its holster, twisted it sharply, heard the gun strike the veranda floor. Groping fingers found it, tossed it swiftly into the shadows of the porch; then, panting, Barry got to his feet and stood waiting.

Moley got up slowly, and even in the darkness Barry could sense the burning intensity of his gaze. He felt Barbara grasp him by the arm and in the white heat of his anger brushed her roughly aside. With a cry of indignation she thrust herself between them.

"Barry Weston, you ought to be ashamed of yourself! Striking a man who was sitting in a chair and then trying to push me aside! I think you've gone absolutely crazy. Go home and don't come back—ever. I don't want to see you again." Instantly she turned to Moley, her voice softening. "Did he hurt you, Steve?"

Barry stood there for a moment, his cup of bitterness full. Of course, he was to blame; that hot temper of his was constantly getting him into trouble. If Barbara only knew Steve Moley as he knew him; but she didn't. Girls didn't hear the gossip of saloon and store; folk diligently kept from them the more sordid and shabby facts of life.

Indistinctly he could see her brushing Steve's cheek with her handkerchief, and he experienced a little savage thrill of satisfaction. It would take more than a bit of silk to wipe away the brand he had

placed there. Abruptly he turned and strode from the gallery. Flinging himself into the saddle he headed the horse toward town.

AT the sound of hoofs, Barbara came to the edge of the gallery and stood looking after him. Her face still burned with resentment, but ever than a little voice was whispering that perhaps she had judged too harshly. She tried to stifle the thought.

Steve moved over beside her, fingers still caressing his sore cheek.

"The yellow pup!" he said. "Knows better than to stand up to me. Had to hit me when I was sittin' down."

"Steve, you shouldn't have tripped him."

"That wasn't what riled him. He's jealous. Right now he's carryin' with him a picture of you and me makin' love in the dark."

She turned on him indignantly. "We weren't making love, Steve Moley, and you knew it! Don't you even dare suggest that we were!"

"Sure not. I was just foolin'. Come on; let's sit down again." An arm slipped tentatively about her slim waist, but she twisted away.

"I don't feel like it, Steve. I'm going in. Good night."

She left him abruptly. Steve stood for a few seconds looking at the door which had been shut in his face. He was frowning, and his lips were curled in the sneer which had become characteristic of him. He was older than Barry by two years, and to him Barbara Dawn was a kid; an adorable kid, to be sure, but a kid just the same. Her treatment of him rankled.

"Needs takin' down a peg or two," he mumbled finally, and fashioned a cigarette. When it was going nicely, he strolled from the gallery and with

the aid of lighted matches found his gun. Getting on his horse, he, too, headed for town.

By the time Barry reached Mescal, the hot flame of his anger had simmered to a smoldering blaze which was ready to flare at the slightest suggestion of a draft. He dropped from his horse at the Silver Palace hitch rack, jerked a slip knot in the rein, and entered the saloon. Clement Dawn, Barbara's elder brother, stood leaning against bar. Barry ranged himself alongside his friend and ordered whisky. Clement eyed him wonderingly, but accepted the drink Barry bought for him.

Barry tossed off his liquor, repressing a shudder as he did so. He did not like the taste of the stuff, but men drank it, and Barry liked to think of himself as a man. Clement spoke a bit anxiously.

"What's the matter, Barry? You're white as a sheet. Sick?"

"Clem, I'm so mad I'm like to bust. I stopped at the house on my way to town. The gallery was dark. When I climbed the steps, Barbara called to me, and I thought she was alone in the hammock. She wasn't. Steve Moley was with her."

Clement's face hardened. "Was, huh?"

"Yes. Clem, we know what he is; Barbara doesn't. It burned me up to find him there. You ought to warn her against him. In a nice way, I mean."

"I'll talk to her."

"Don't be rough. She just doesn't understand that it will hurt her to be associated with that scum. You're her brother; you can tell her easy-like."

"Sure, I'll tell her. What that Steve Moley needs is a good dose of lead medicine, and he's sure goin' to get it before long. See you later, Barry."

He nodded and walked purposefully away. Barry watched until he had gone, then, feeling a bit reckless, ordered another drink. It left him dizzy, and he went outside to get some air. The sidewalk was deserted. He heard the beat of hoofs and thought at first it was Clement on his way home; but the sounds approached rather than receded, and presently a horseman swung up to the rack and dismounted. As he stepped within range of the Palace lights, Barry recognized him. It was Steve Moley.

Steve carelessly draped a rein across the rail and, ducking beneath it, stepped to the walk. Barry was standing by the swinging doors, and at sight of him Steve stopped abruptly.

"I want to talk to you," said Barry.

Moley stared at him, his black eyes glinting. "I don't want no talk out of you. I'm not sittin' down now."

"You're goin' to listen to me, Steve. It won't take long; I can put it in very few words. It's this: keep away from Barbara Dawn."

The sneer on Moley's lips became more pronounced. "You danged meddler—tellin' me what to do! Chew on that and see how you like it!"

HE lunged forward, striking viciously. Barry ducked, and the hard fist glanced off the side of his head. His own fist swept upward in an arc and landed squarely on Moley's chin. It was not a knock-out punch, but the force of it sent Moley sprawling backward, dazed and dizzy. He brought up against the hitch rail, fell, and rolled into the street. His horse reared, tearing loose the reins, and wheeled away from the rack.

Barry's mount was prancing nerv-

ously, and in that instant Weston hoped he'd trample Steve into the dust; but Moley rolled clear, got to his knees, and clung to the rack waiting for his brain to clear. In the light which streamed from the saloon Barry could see his face plainly. His eyes were glinting and the thin lips were drawn away from his teeth, giving him the appearance of a snarling wolf.

Quite suddenly he pulled himself to his feet, his hand flashing for the gun at his hip. Barry saw the glint of light on the steel barrel, and his hand streaked for his own weapon. The action was instinctive; never before had he drawn his gun on a man.

The hot rage within him was extinguished as suddenly as though he had been plunged into an icy pool. His head cleared, his muscles steadied. He caught the flash of Moley's gun, felt the hot breath of the slug on his cheek, even heard the sound of lead plunking into the building behind him. Although he had never practiced drawing, the old gun came out of its holster as though it had been greased. He held his elbow close to his side and shot from the hip.

Moley staggered under the impact of the slug, teetered on his heels for a moment, then plunged face down in the dust. And in that one short second Barry became horribly aware of the enormity of the thing he had done.

Alarmed, he ran to Moley's side and lifted the man in his arms. Moley was limp, and his head lolled as Barry raised him. "Steve!" he cried. "Wake up, man!" But Moley did not respond.

Barry glanced about him. Voices came to him from the inside of the Palace, and he could hear the thud of boots on the wooden floor. In another moment they would come

rushing from the place, guns in their hands. He would be caught, and without any defense. He had shot Steve Moley, son of the influential Judge Moley, who held the sheriff in the palm of his hand and administered the high justice, the middle, and the low! And he couldn't explain the reason for the quarrel. He'd die before he'd drag Barbara's name into this. They could hang him first.

He dropped the inert body into the dust and sprang for his horse. The animal, nervous, backed to the full length of the rein. Barry jerked it loose, swung to pinto, grasped the horn. Men were streaming from the saloon. Barry yelled at the horse, and as the animal lunged into full stride, ran with him for a few yards, then vaulted into the saddle. Bending low, he headed the pinto for home.

The sweep of the wind on his cheeks helped restore his faculties. He brushed his hand across his forehead and removed it covered with cold sweat. He fought against the emotion which engulfed him, striving to think clearly. There would be no safety for him at the ranch; he must flee the State entirely. But first he would tell his mother. She was a little woman, but she was stanch. She would understand, and she would help.

He flung himself off the gelding outside the house. The living-room light still burned. As he passed through the doorway he could see her still busy with her mending. She looked up, smiling as usual; then her face sobered at sight of the desperate light in his eyes.

"Barry! What's wrong, son?"

He crossed to her side, dropped on his knees by her chair. "Ma, I've done somethin' awful! Steve Moley—I've shot him!"

"Shot him!" He met her startled gaze with a look of much utter misery that she impulsively drew him to her. "Tell me about it," she said softly.

He did; and somehow as he unburdened himself he began to feel better. When he had finished, he withdrew from her embrace and eyed her anxiously.

"Son, we've been taught that to kill a man is a horrible thing," she said slowly. "But out here where men must kill sometimes in order to live, it doesn't seem so awful. Steve drew on you and fired before you pulled your gun. You shot in self-defense, and if you could prove it any jury would exonerate you. But you can't prove it, and Horace Moley will hound you to the gallows if you stay to fight the charge. So you'll have to run, Barry."

She got to her feet in that swift, birdlike way of hers, and started for the kitchen. "You make up a blanket roll. Take extra clothing and plenty of cartridges. I'll fix a package of food and fill a canteen with coffee. If you carry your own supplies you can keep clear of towns."

He followed her impulsively, grasped her by the shoulders and swung her about. "Ma, you're a brick!" he said, and kissed her.

The matter of outfitting did not take long. Fortunately his stepfather was in bed. Within fifteen minutes he had strapped a goodly sized package behind the cantle and had tied a filled rifle boot on the saddle.

His mother stood on the gallery watching as he mounted the pinto. He rode over to her and, leaning from the saddle, held her to him.

"Good-by, ma," he said brokenly.

"Good-by, son. Ride north. Don't falter and don't waste time blaming yourself. You did the only thing possible, and no matter what others

think, God knows the truth. Get word to me where you are. Here—take this money. Be brave and true, and—and be—a good—boy."

She broke down then. Barry kissed her and straightened in the saddle. He could hear the sobbing as he rode away. He sat very stiff and erect, and a lump the size of a melon seemed to have caught in his throat. He bit his lip and dashed an angry hand across his eyes.

Men, he knew, were not supposed to weep.

CHAPTER II.

EXILE.

BARRY rode north, avoiding the towns, sleeping in out-of-the-way places, leaving the trail at the remotest sign of another traveler. In time he crossed into New Mexico, pushed onward into Colorado, and there, safe from pursuit, he worked for a cattle outfit during the fall round-up.

Here it was that he risked sending a letter to his mother, telling her of his escape, and asking that she address him under an assume name at the town of Pike. When he was sure that sufficient time had elapsed, he went into the combination store and post office with the intention of inquiring for mail.

A man was seated on the counter dangling his feet. Barry caught his keen look as he stepped up to the window, and at the same moment saw the gleam of a metal star half hidden beneath his coat. Barry had instructed his mother to write him under the name of Butler; now, fearing that the officer was waiting to seize the claimant of such a letter, he asked for mail under an entirely different name.

Of course there was none, and Barry turned away. The hearbreak-

ing part about it was that while the postmaster was looking through the general delivery letters, Barry caught sight of one addressed to John Butler in his mother's handwriting.

He returned to Pike on several occasions after that, but always the sheriff was in the store; and he finally gave up his efforts to secure the letter. Had he but known it, the officer had never heard of either Barry Weston or John Butler. He was a brother of the storekeeper and boarded with him.

At the end of the round-up, Barry headed north again, holding to the trail until he reached Sheridan, Wyoming. Having saved his money, he stayed a while at this town, hearing finally of an outfit across the line in Montana that needed men. He applied for a job, and got it.

He did not write again. Walt Bascomb, postmaster at Mescal, owed his job to the influence of Horace Moley. One letter from Barry had already passed through his hands; the next one might be intercepted. In an effort to forget his Texas home and the ones he loved, Barry plunged into the work of the range with a dogged determination that won him swift advancement.

Spring came, and with it calving time. Barry had toughened and hardened under the rigors of a severe winter. The determination to win a place for himself in the north country had left its stamp upon him. He had become more serious of mien; his blue eyes were somber; he rarely smiled.

There was no regret for the shooting of Steve Moley. He knew that if he had given Steve the chance to fire another shot, he would have been killed. But he realized now that his hot temper might easily lead him into a quarrel that was not entirely justi-

fied, and he rigorously fought that hot emotion which arose within him and prompted him to act before he had thought.

As a result he became somewhat slow of speech, forcing himself to turn things over in his mind before delivering an opinion. When angered, he formed the habit of staring fixedly at the object of his ire for a short space of time. Thus he was able to control himself; but once he decided that retaliation was justified, he went into action with the speed and fury of a cougar.

By degrees he shed his exaggerated ideas of what constituted a man. He no longer swaggered, and he drank infrequently and sparingly. His curly hair was still a source of despair; but now that there was no Barbara Dawn in his life, he didn't take the pains to control it, but conceded to nature a victory that she would have won in any event.

Always his mind was busy with thoughts of his mother and Barbara and Clement. They seemed with him constantly, in spirit, and at times he longed so desperately for a sight of them that he would mount his horse and ride swiftly across the rolling range land in an effort to lose the urge in the sweep of the wind. Barbara had sent him home. She said she never wanted to see him again. He realized with a feeling of despair that perhaps she never would.

He had long since sold the pinto. The animal was too conspicuous, and he had learned that a horse of solid color was more dependable and seemed to possess more stamina.

FALL came, and then winter with its constant worries about drift fence and starving cattle. Spring and calf round-up, summer range, fall again—one sea-

son followed another swiftly. Always he worked. In his third year he was made foreman of Hank Steven's big spread. His responsibilities doubled, and he had less time to think of Texas. He learned to handle men, to judge them, to reward and punish. Once they were bothered by rustlers, and Barry led a party of cattlemen against them. The rustlers were trapped and exterminated. Barry was forced to kill two of them, and in one case his habit of thinking before acting nearly cost him his life. When he was recovering from the wound he had received it occurred to him that, as in the case of Steve Moley, the emergency had found him calm, almost cold.

Spring of the fifth year of exile found him a man of twenty-four, tall, broad of shoulder, somber of countenance, but entirely master of himself. The twentieth of May was his birthlay. It dawned cold and dismal with the threat of rain in the air. He felt suddenly depressed, and in an effort to escape the drabness he rode to Sheridan. At a saloon he had a drink which seemed to strangle him. Still, he ordered another and for once in his life he felt like getting soddenly drunk. On the verge of tossing the drink off he stopped. A man had stepped to a place at the bar beside him. His clothes were ragged, his face unshaven, his gray hair straggled about his shoulders; but there was something in his make-up that Barry seemed to find familiar. He looked into the back bar mirror and studied the man's face until he was sure of the identification.

"Howdy, George," he said quietly.

The man turned an apathetic face toward him, then the old eyes brightened and the seamed face crinkled in a smile.

"Barry Weston, by the eternal!" "George Brent, of Mescal, Texas!" They shook hands delightedly. "George, what under the sun brings you up here?"

"I'm ridin' the grub line, Barry," George said sadly. "Funny, ain't it? When you left I was runnin' my own spread, the old Slash B. Now it's gone, and I'm plumb busted and just about down and out."

He turned and downed the liquor which he had ordered. Barry left his own drink untouched.

"This is my birthday, and we're goin' to celebrate," Barry told him. "We'll hunt up a restaurant and have the best meal they can turn out. Come along."

"I—I ain't got much dinero, Barry," apologized Brent. "And I ain't a bit hungry. You eat and I'll watch."

"You'll eat with me, old-timer, and you'll talk. Gosh, George, I'm full of questions. First off, how's mother?"

"Now don't you start askin' questions now. Wait till we git to the rest'rnt and I'll give you the whole story while we're eatin'. Lots of things have happened in Mescal Basin since you left."

NO more was said until they were seated in a café with a generous meal spread before them. Brent plunged into his story without any urging on Barry's part.

"You asked me how I got up here, and I reckon I'd better tell you that first. It ain't a long story. Mescal Basin is on the down grade—been goin' down steadily for a couple years. Two seasons of drought and cattle disease danged near wrecked us, Matt Billings especially. Yeah, your ma's Flyin' W and the Cinch Buckle was hit, too, but not as hard as Matt's MB. The sickness started

on his range, but luckily for the rest of us it was fenced—only spread in the Basin, that is—and the rest of us managed to save somethin'.

"About a year ago I'd reached the end of the string. As a last resort I went to Judge Moley to see could I get me a loan of some money. You know folks always figgered he was rich. I didn't have much hope—jest took a reckless plunge, you might say. Well, Horace agreed to lend me ten thousand dollars to restock, takin' a mortgage on the Slash B as collateral for the loan. I give him the mortgage right willin', for I had everything to gain and nothin' but a few scrawny cows and a dry range to lose. I bought me some prime breedin' stock and started out to build up the old Slash B. Well, sir, I'd hardly turned my new herd into pasture before the whole danged outfit was rustled."

"Rustled!"

"Yes, sir. Never had no rustlin' of any account in Mescal Basin before, but they sure stripped me clean. Me and the boys started out after 'em, but they split the herd into small bunches and hazed 'em through the south hills and across the border. Leastwise, that's what we think they did; never could find out for sure. Since then some of the others have lost stock—the Cinch Buckle and the Flyin' W. Seems like an outlaw named Tug Groody has a gang operatin' in the south hills, and it ain't far from there to the border."

"What's the matter with the sheriff?"

"The same thing that's ailed him all along—laziness and inefficiency. Yeah, Sam Hodge still got the job. Horace Moley gits him reelected every term some way or other. Well, Sam chased around in the hills lookin' for Tug, but somehow he never

caught up with him. As I said, they cleaned me complete. When the time came to make a payment on my note, I went to Horace and asked for an extension. A bank had opened up in Mescal run by a feller named Alonzo J. Frothingham, and Horace told me he had discounted my note and turned the mortgage over to the bank. I went to Frothingham, but he refused to give me any additional time and sold me out. The Slash B was bought by Steve Moley."

Barry stiffened in his chair. "Steve Moley?"

"Yeah. What's the matter?"

Barry had gone white. "Steve Moley! I—I thought——"

"You'd killed him? Shucks, no. I wish you had. Didn't nobody write you? He got well and is more ornery than ever. If ever a jasper needed some killin' it's Steve; but your bullet didn't do the trick—worse luck."

Barry drew a deep breath. "Then I can go back?"

"Sure you can. But there's mighty little left to go back to, except your mother."

"Tell me about her, George. She's well?"

Brent lowered his head and for a moment was busy trying to corral some peas on his knife. Barry leaned over the table and gripped him by an arm.

"George, why don't you answer? She's well, isn't she?"

BRENT looked up soberly. "Well—no, Barry, she ain't. She had a shock a year or so ago. When I left she was in bed, but she was gittin' better. Only—well, then things come back, you know; and now that it's safe, I reckon you'd better be gittin' back there to look after her."

"How long has it been since you saw her?"

"Barry, I reckon it's close to a year. But don't take it so hard, son. I'm sure she's all right. Maybe I gave you the wrong hunch when I said you ought to go back. I just meant that the Flyin' W needs you now that your stepfather has gone haywire."

Barry frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Chet Lewis is a bum," Brent said deliberately. "I know you never liked him, but I'd be bound to say the same thing if you did. Right after you left he took to drinkin' and loafin'. The ranch run down some-thing terrible. Lately he's been pesterin' your ma to sell out to the Moleys. Horace and Steve must be gittin' land crazy. I heard they were after Barbara Dawn to sell the Cinch Buckle, too."

"Let me get this straight, George. You say they're after Barbara to sell the Cinch Buckle. What's the matter with her father and Clement? They used to run that spread."

"Charley Dawn died a couple years ago. He left the ranch to Barbara and Clement and Clay. And now that Clement's gone—but maybe you didn't hear about that either?"

"George, you're the first man to bring me news from Mescal in the past five years."

"Well, Clement and Steve had a run-in. Steve kept hangin' around the Cinch Buckle, mostly when Clement was away. Heard tell that Clem had ordered him off the spread. One day Clement walked in when Steve was badgerin' Barbara to sell. They had words, and Clement popped him."

"George, he didn't!"

"I'll tell a man he did. Knocked Steve plumb loose from his boot

heels. The very next night Clem tangled with Cal Garth, one of Steve's pet gunmen. It was back of the Palace and nobody saw it. There were two shots, and when the crowd run out, Cal was layin' on the ground deader'n a mackerel. Ace Polmateer, who owns the Palace, and his two bouncers, were first on the spot. They kept the crowd away until Sheriff Hodge got there. At the inquest Hodge swore that Cal's gun was fully loaded and in his holster. That made it murder, and if Clem ever comes back to Mescal he'll sure swing for it."

"Clement never shot a man without giving him a chance," Barry said flatly.

Brent shrugged. "There are lots of folks that believe the same, me included; but when the other jigger is found with his gun unfired and in his holster, especially a gunman like Garth, there ain't but one verdict a jury can bring in."

"So Clement had to run for it," Barry said slowly.

"Yeah. That left the Cinch Buckle in the hands of Barbara and Clay, her younger brother. The girl runs it, and, Barry, she is one little lady to tie to! Knows her cows. And han'some? Son, she's as purty as a new yaller buggy with red wheels."

George finished his meal with a sigh of satisfaction. Barry had pushed back his plate when he heard the news of his mother's illness. Now he got to his feet. "George, I'm headin' back to Mescal. What are you aimin' to do?"

"Look for a job like I been doin', I reckon. It sure is tough. I look like a bum and feel like one. And I'm gittin' old."

"We'll fix that in a hurry," said Barry tersely. "I've got a boss that

ranks ace-high, and I'm takin' you to see him. Come along."

THEY went to a store where, despite Brent's protests, Barry bought him some new clothes. When a barber had clipped his hair and shaved him, George Brent was a new man in appearance.

"I'm thankin' you, Barry," he said quietly. "If you aim to give me a job I'll pay you back out of my first month's wages."

Soberly they rode from Sheridan, Barry's joy at the reunion dampened by the news which Brent had been forced to impart. Presently he began to ask questions, and Brent answered brightly in an effort to cheer him. Yes, his mother often spoke of him. True blue, Mrs. Lewis. Chet couldn't talk her into selling the Flying W; she felt that it belonged to Barry even if the title was in her name. "Ace" Polmateer had added a dance floor to the Palace and had engaged a string of girls. Steve Moley was crazy about one of them. No, he didn't mess around Barbara much; she was keeping company off and on with Alonzo J. Frothingham, president of the new bank. And so on, until Barry's range captured their attention.

They dismounted at headquarters, and Barry led his friend directly to Hank Steven. The introduction was short and to the point.

"Boss, meet up with a friend from Texas. Name's George Brent, and he sure savvies cows. He's your new foreman."

"You're not leavin', Barry?"

"Yes. Brent tells me that my mother is—very sick. Maybe she is already gone. I got to go back to her, Hank."

Steven had Barry's full confidence. "How about that shootin' scrape?"

"The man didn't die, after all. If

he's had a hand in mother's illness—if he worried her until she broke down, I may have to finish the job. Anyhow, I got to go back. Boss, we have some good men on the spread, but they're all cowboys. Brent is a rancher; he owned his own spread in Texas. He'll make you a good foreman."

Hank was a man of quick decisions. "Your recommend is good enough for me, Barry. Brent, you're on the pay roll as foreman startin' to-day."

Barry spoke tersely. "You can draw up a check for the money you've been holdin' for me. I'll cash it at Sheridan on my way south. While you're doin' it I'll be gettin' my outfit together." He nodded shortly and left the room.

The two men looked after him speculatively.

"There goes a square, upstandin' man if there ever was one," said Hank. "I sure hate to lose him."

George Brent nodded his agreement. "He's changed a heap. Back in Mescal Basin folks remember him as a wild young kid. I got a hunch that somebody's goin' to be surprised; mighty dawg-gonned surprised."

CHAPTER III.

MURDER ON THE TRAIL.

BARRY WESTON reined in his horse and sat the saddle listening. The sound of three distinct shots had been borne to him on the afternoon breeze, the first two in quick succession, the other after a short interval. Had the shots been equally spaced he would have taken them for the help signal in general use; but as it was they might mean anything from harmless target shooting to a battle for life. After a moment he urged his horse onward at a slow lope.

He sniffed the air eagerly, gazed about him at every familiar landmark. Night should find him at the side of his mother. His pleasant anticipation was tinged with a shade of apprehension. Suppose he were too late! The thought caused him to spur his mount, only to rein in almost instantly. The horse had served him faithfully; for a full month he had carried Barry steadily toward home, always willing, never faltering. Now, within hours of his destination, there was no necessity to hurry him.

The country was rolling and rocky, with occasional patches of scrub timber and thorny chaparral. Presently the horse topped a rise, and Barry drew rein quickly and backed the animal to an outcropping of rock over which he could peer.

Before him the stage road dipped gently into a stone-studded hollow, to rise again on the far side to the crest of still another ridge. Down this latter slope a horseman was rushing, bent low over the neck of his mount. Almost at once a compact group of pursuers topped the rise, quirts rising and falling, sun glinting on their weapons. Even as Barry watched, the horseman in the lead turned in his saddle and fired rapidly with a six-gun.

Barry remained behind his rock shelter. Thus far there was no call for interference. The pursued might be a criminal; the pursuer, a posse.

The horseman in the lead crossed the flat bottom of the depression and put his horse to the slope which led to Barry's hiding place. Weston could see the fellow's eyes now. They were staring wildly, desperately. He was leaning as far over as his saddle horn would permit.

The climb slowed his horse's speed, and the pursuers perceptibly closed the gap between them and their

quarry. Now, as they reached the foot of the slope, their leader pulled his mount to a stop, raised his six-gun, and, taking deliberate aim, fired. The fleeing man jerked erect in his saddle, swayed, tossed about for a few jumps like a sack of straw in a bouncing wagon, then slipped from the saddle, rolled, and lay still.

Barry drew his carbine from its sheath under his leg and rode out to the top of the rise. At this range he was out of reach of their six-guns, while his rifle easily commanded them. He fired a warning shot, then rode slowly down the trail toward the prostrate man.

The pursuers drew up sharply, their horses restive. For a moment they conversed, then suddenly spurred their mounts in a charge straight up the slope. Barry fired again, and one of the horses plunged forward to the earth, throwing its rider heavily. Another shot and a horseman pulled up, his left arm dangling. Swerving their mounts from the trail, the horsemen circled, heading for the foot of the declivity.

THE man who had been unseated got to his feet and started running in a zigzag course down the grade. When he reached his waiting companions, one of them extended a hand and drew him to the horse's back; then the whole six rode swiftly up the opposite slope and disappeared over the ridge.

Barry dismounted by the prostrate man and rolled him over on his back. The fellow was short and stocky, with that appearance of untidiness which clings to some persons despite their efforts to escape it. He was badly wounded, and could not possibly live very long. Barry got his canteen and forced some water into the man's mouth. There was

little else he could do. He was on the open road, several hours' ride from Mescal, and moving the man was out of the question. He squatted on his heels and smoked thoughtfully, shielding the fellow from the rays of the sun with his body.

He heard a coughing gasp and looked down at the wounded man. The man's eyes were open and he was trying to speak. Barry quickly raised his head, wiped the froth from his lips, and gave him a drink of water.

"Thanks," gasped the man feebly, and lay back, panting. His lips moved again, and Barry had to put his head close to them in order to hear.

"I'm—done for—ain't I?"

"You're pretty hard hit, pardner."

There was a short interval of silence, broken by a coughing spell which brought on hemorrhage.

"Better not try to talk," advised Barry.

The man clamped his white lips together and gazed wildly up at Barry. He gasped the words with a distinct effort. "Cursed—double-crosser! Oughta knowed—he'd do it." He uttered a bitter laugh which brought on a coughing spell. Barry raised his head until the paroxysm had passed. As he was lowering him, the man spoke again, faintly, haltingly. "Buy—steal—kill!" He closed his eyes, his strength entirely gone.

Barry leaned over him and spoke sharply. "Listen, pardner; who are you talkin' about? Who shot you, and why?"

The eyelids fluttered open, the lips moved weakly. No audible sound escaped them, although Barry placed his ear close and strained to hear. In his impatience he shook the man gently in an effort to rouse him. "His name?" he kept repeating.

"Tell me his name." But the man had gone lax in his arms and Barry realized suddenly that he was dead.

Carefully he examined the contents of the man's pockets in an effort to identify him. There were a few trinkets, some change, and a wallet the contents of which caused Barry to exclaim in amazement. He thumbed through the thick wad of bank notes. Five thousand dollars! No wonder the fellow had been waylaid.

Barry put the wallet into an inside pocket for safe keeping, then caught up the man's horse and roped the limp body over the saddle. Using the rein as a lead rope, he continued on his way.

"Buy—steal—kill." What had the fellow meant by that? Steal and kill were easily understandable; but why the buy? George Brent's story of how the Moleys were attempting to buy the Cinch Buckle and the Flying W had, of course, impressed him; but surely there could be no connection here. There was the possibility, though, that the man's pursuers might be the rustler gang George had mentioned. Although the distance had been too great for positive identification, Barry had seen that the leader—the one who had shot this man—was big and broad and bewhiskered. Barry believed he would know him if he were to meet him again. And certainly one of the others would carry his arm in a sling for some time to come.

THE sun was low when he rode into Mescal. Barry found himself gazing about him much like a colt returning to the home pasture. He saw the same false-fronted buildings, a bit more warped and faded from the five years' sun and rain; the Silver Palace of Ace Polmateer, easily the largest estab-

ishment in town and shining with a coat of fresh paint; Bascomb's store, also renovated; a new brick building bearing the legend "Cattlemen's Bank;" the squat, drab office of Horace Moley, attorney at law and justice of the peace. Livery barn and corral, feed store and harness shop. All unchanged. Even the street wore the same old ruts which crossed and criscrossed like the wrinkles in the face of a very tired old man. But it all spelled home.

The people on the main street stared curiously, a few of them following along the sidewalks. Some of them Barry knew, but none recognized him in the dusk. He rode straight to a building labeled "Sheriff's Office," and drew rein before it. Sam Hodge stood in the doorway, picking his teeth. He caught sight of Barry and the laden horse, and walked to the hitch rack.

"What you got there?" he asked, and looked up at Barry.

"Know me, Sam?"

The sheriff squinted hard, then jerked erect and backed away a step.

"Barry Weston! Who in the devil you shot now?"

Barry stared at him, habit suppressing the hot words which rose to his lips. Presently he spoke, explaining. Hodge walked into the street and callously raised the dangling head of the dead man.

"Huh!" he grunted, allowing it to fall again. "It's that Slater jigger that's been hangin' around the Cinch Buckle. Find anything on him?"

"This," said Barry, and handed him the wallet.

The sheriff counted the contents, his eyes widening in surprise. "All that dinero! And everybody thought he was a bum. Huh! I'll put this in my safe until we can locate his folks."

A question came from somebody

in the crowd. "And what are you going to do about the killer? It's evident, isn't it, that Tug Groody did this."

Barry turned quickly to look at the speaker. He saw a tall, rather gaunt man, with a long, wolfish face and a mane of iron-gray hair. He was wearing a shabby black frock coat, baggy black trousers, and a moth-eaten beaver hat. Horace Moley, big man of Mescal, had also changed but little.

"Why, I'll git a posse together first thing in the mornin'. Ain't no use ridin' now; we can't trail in the dark." Hodge turned back to the office with the wallet.

"I think it would be wise to copy the numbers on those bank notes," said Moley. "This man may have stolen them for all we know." He entered the office on the heels of the sheriff and closed the door behind him. Presently they emerged, talking.

"I'll check up on these numbers," said Moley. "In the meanwhile, try to get in touch with the man's relatives." He nodded shortly to Hodge and walked across the sidewalk to where Barry sat his horse. For a moment Moley stood looking up into Barry's face, his own features inscrutable.

"So you've come back, eh?"

"Yes."

"Aiming to stay?"

"Why, I reckon so."

"Well, I can't say that you're welcome; our memory of you isn't a pleasing one."

"I have a few unpleasant recollections myself."

For a brief moment the two men exchanged level, appraising glances; then Moley turned abruptly away and started across the street toward his office.

Sam Hodge came to the edge of

the sidewalk and spoke gruffly. "All right, Weston, you can go. I'll take charge of Slater's horse."

BARRY wheeled away from the rack. No longer could he curb his impatience to reach the Flying W. He wanted to ask Hodge about his mother, but the sheriff's attitude had killed all desire to question him. He tried to ease his mind by concentrating on the murder of Slater. Sam Hodge had said the man had been hanging around the Cinch Buckle. The Moleys were trying to buy that spread, and Slater had died with the word "buy" on his lips. George had also said that the Cinch Buckle had been losing stock, and had blamed the loss on a gang of rustlers led by "Tug" Groody. And it was undoubtedly Tug Groody's men who had murdered Slater. There *was* a connection there, but so vague a one that Barry was unable to trace it to any reasonable conclusion.

He could never explain why he slowed to a walk when he neared the ranch house. Perhaps it was the natural dread of finding his worst fears realized that caused him to check his horse. Even when he rounded the east wing and saw the

light in his mother's bedroom he held to this slow pace. On the soft turf the sound of hoofs was almost inaudible. Then he saw a horse at the hitch rack, and on an impulse rode to a corner of the gallery and tied there.

Noiselessly he stepped to the gallery. There was a light in the living room, and peering through a window he could see two men leaning over the desk in one corner. He recognized one of them as his stepfather, Chet Lewis; the other, although his back was turned, he knew to be Steve Moley.

Gently he raised the latch and pulled. The door was barred. Barry considered for a moment, then moved silently from the gallery and circled the house. The rear door was unfastened. He stooped and unbuckled his spurs, placing them in a pocket of his chaps; then entered and closed the door behind him.

He was in the kitchen. Before him was the dining room, and beyond that the lighted living room. There was sufficient illumination to permit him to avoid the furniture as he made his way softly to the living-room entrance. There he stopped, watching and listening.

His stepfather was seated at the



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desk, a pen gripped in his hand, laboriously writing. Before him were spread a number of papers. Steve Moley looked over his shoulder. As Barry watched, the elder man jerked back in his chair and spoke testily.

"I can't do it, Steve. My hand shakes so's I can't even stay on the line."

"Go on and write," grated Moley. "What difference does it make if the signature is shaky? She's sick and weak; it'll look all the more natural."

Barry felt the hot blood mounting to his head, and only the force of stern habit restrained him from springing at the conspirators. They were forging his mother's name to some document. But she still lived; Moley's words assured him of that. Perhaps it was this knowledge which helped him keep a grip on himself and remain, muscles tense and blood pounding, to see the thing through.

Moley went on: "Go ahead; practice some more. And for gosh sakes, relax. You're grippin' that pen like a drownin' man hangin' onto an oar. Loosen up."

"Steve, if Barry ever finds this out he'll kill me!"

"You poor weaklin', quit your cryin'. Barry ain't findin' nothin' out. He won't be back until it's too late to do a thing about it. Now get busy and sign that deed. You can witness it in your own handwritin', and I'll be the other witness. Go ahead; sign it."

Again Chet Lewis bent to his task; Barry heard the scratch of the pen as he wrote, swiftly, desperately. Flinging the pen on the desk he leaned back in his chair and swore. "There it is. It's the best I can do."

Moley seized the deed and held it up exultantly. "It's perfect! Chet, all you needed was somebody to prod you. The old lady'd have to acknowledge that signature herself!"

"Think so?" came a cold voice from the doorway.

Both men wheeled, Moley's hand moving instinctively toward his gun. The paper to which he clung hampered him, and before he could draw the weapon, Barry was speaking.

"Don't do it, Steve. I aim to make sure the next time I shoot."

HIS stepfather had twisted about in his chair and was staring with wild, red-rimmed eyes and slack jaw. His face was a pasty white. Moley was trembling with rage and frustration; only the certain knowledge that this man would kill him prevented his forcing the issue.

Barry stepped into the room, his stride springy, like that of a stalking cougar. Even to Moley's rage-heated brain seeped the knowledge that this man was infinitely more dangerous than the boy who had out-shot him five years before. Weston had filled out, hardened; his face had lost its youthful curves; the jaw muscles were rigid and inflexible. There was a certain definite something which stamped him as capable, dominant, entirely sure of himself.

"I'll take the deed, Steve." Barry paid not the slightest attention to the cowed Lewis.

Under the spell of that compelling gaze, Moley involuntarily held forth the hand which clutched the paper. Barry briefly glanced at the document, then tore it to shreds.

"We won't bother with the law; it's too slow, and I can scotch my own snakes. Get out, Steve; and don't ever set foot on the Flyin' W again. Start movin'."

Red rage suddenly blinded Steve Moley. Who was this upstart to order him about? What right had he to come back and interfere with the

plans of himself and his father? With a wild oath he snatched at his gun, and this time there was no paper to hamper him.

Barry had been praying that he would make such a move. Sternly he had held himself in; now all the accumulated fury within him surged to the surface. As though hurled from a catapult he sprang at Moley. His tense fingers gripped the wrist of Steve's gun hand, wrenched it so violently that Moley screamed with pain. The gun flew from the hand to clatter on the floor a dozen feet away.

Moley lashed out with his free fist only to have his arm seized in an iron grip and forced down in front of him. With his left hand, Barry pinioned both the fellow's wrists, and with the palm of his right slapped him again and again on the cheek. They were vicious, stinging blows; but the ignominy of them cut far deeper than the ringing slaps.

Whirling the livid Moley, Barry propelled him to the doorway, drew the bolt, and pushed him through the entrance to the gallery.

"Get on your horse and ride," he said thickly, and stood there to make sure that his order was obeyed.

Steve, shaking with rage and humiliation, leaped on his horse, wheeled the animal from the rack, then turned and spat out every vile epithet that crowded to his tongue. Not until Barry made a motion toward his gun did the fellow jerk his horse about and spur him unmercifully from the yard.

Barry went inside to find his stepfather cringing in a chair, his eyes wide with apprehension.

"It was a joke, Barry," he wailed.

"We was just funnin'—me and Steve. We wasn't goin' to use——"

"Shut up. Chet Lewis, you're a liar by the clock. Quit shakin'; I'm not goin' to hurt you. You deserve killin', but for some reason ma saw fit to marry you, and you're still her husband. Now listen to me. Tomorrow you turn out with the crew—if there are any left—and get to work. You'll eat in the bunk house and sleep there, too. And if you take one drink of liquor and I find it out, I'll use a quirt on you. How's mother?"

"Porely, Barry; porely. She had a shock about a year ago, and she ain't never got over it right. I'm awful worried about her."

Barry flung him a withering look and turned on his heel. In the corridor which led to the east wing, he halted to compose himself, then walked quietly to his mother's door, rapped lightly, and opened it.

She was seated in a rocking-chair with a quilt about her shoulders. Her head rested on the back of the chair, and her eyes were closed. How pale and wan she was; how thin! And her hair had turned completely white. So still was she that for a moment Barry thought that life had fled.

"Ma!" he cried, all the pity and yearning of those five long years surging over him.

Her eyes fluttered open, and such a wonderful change came over her face that he was startled.

"Why—Barry! I was dreaming of you!"

In an instant he was kneeling by her side, holding her frail body close, kissing the soft white hair.

"Ma—dear old ma! It's so good to be back!"

MINES AND MINING

By

J. A.

THOMPSON



MORE than a million and a half ounces of fine gold have come from the yellow-metal camps of Washington. Lode and placer mines alike have produced their share of this new wealth. While placer gold is more easily recovered, the trend in Washington has been that toward the hard-rock deposits as much more lasting propositions with better assurance of ultimate rewards.

Bill K., of Sioux City, Iowa, is particularly interested in Washington's gold-prospecting areas. He writes:

"Can you give me the low-down on the best gold-producing and gold-prospecting areas in the State of Washington? I am planning a thorough prospecting trip out there next spring. Are the best returns being made from placer or hard-rock operations? What general sections would you suggest?"

Bill, if you want to be where the boys have been making the biggest gold production, stick pretty close to the northern sector of the State up around Ferry and Okanogan Counties. Mines in these counties have

been accounting for close to ninety per cent of Washington's annual gold output recently. Whatcom County comes next.

As far as hard-rock gold mining is concerned, the Republic district, in Ferry County, has been active. Old mines are in production, and new prospecting is going on. And some of the small-scale placer boys have been making beans and buns or better by taking gold from bars along the Columbia River.

In Okanogan County gold placers have been worked lately along the Similkameen and Twisp Rivers as well as the Columbia. There also has been placer work on Mary Ann and Myers Creeks. But again in output value the hard-rock mines have far outclassed the placers. For instance, the Bodie Mine, just north of Wauconda. A company was formed to operate this property only a couple of years ago. In 1935 they handled nine thousand tons of gold ore. In 1936 they doubled the output and did in the neighborhood of a hundred thousand dollars' worth of gold-production business.

Other recent Okanogan County gold producers have been the Golconda Mine, also near Wauconda; the Red Shirt, near Twisp; the Chlo-

ride Queen, near Nighthawk; and some properties in the Oroville vicinity.

Slate Creek neighborhood, and the Mount Baker district, are apparently the most likely areas in Whatcom County. The Sultan River in Snohomish County has produced smaller amounts of placer gold as a result of small-scale and individual placer prospecting along that stream.

Gold ores are somewhat spotty in the Swauk area in Kittitas County, down in the central part of the State, but rich pockets have been and may be uncovered and several small lots of high grade were shipped out last year. Some placering goes on down that way, too.

That, of course, doesn't exhaust all of Washington's gold possibilities. It merely gives an indication of where recent *production*, as carried in the records, has been best. There has been plenty of individual placering and placer prospecting in other widely scattered districts from the Columbia River country up in Stevens County down to the Snake River bars in Asotin and Whitman counties along the southeastern part of the State. Morris Creek in Yakima County yielded some placer gold last year as did Peshastin Creek in Chelan County.

And, as usual, gold in varying amounts, generally small for the individual prospector, is still being gleaned annually from the Pacific coast gold-bearing beach sands along the Washington shore in Clallam and

Grays Harbor Counties — from Ozette Beach, in the former, and Pacific Beach and the Moclips area in the latter county. Moclips and Pacific Beach can be reached by automobile over a graded road out from Hoquiam and Aberdeen.

"Some time ago you spoke of the old Pinos Altos placer-gold district in New Mexico," says Walter B. M., writing us from Dallas, Texas. "Is that section still active?"

And how, Walt. It looks now as if mining men with some good capital behind them have moved in to start things humming, at least as far as the Bear Creek placers are concerned. Considerable blocks of property have been obtained, and an outfit representing influential California capitalists has been reported making detailed value tests preliminary to working the gravels by a steam-shovel operation. That will handle yardage the boys with homemade rockers could never attain. Other individual holdings in the same vicinity are being worked.

And L. P. T., of Mobile, Alabama, writes us to ask about gold placering in Utah. Not so hot, compared to placer opportunities in other Western States in our opinion, L. P. T., but the best areas for prospecting with likelihood of gold returns are along the Colorado and Green Rivers in upper San Juan and Grand Counties, and perhaps the Green River country up in Uintah County.

We desire to be of real help to our 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 published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.



Shorty's Long Shot

By RAY
HUMPHREYS

Author of "One Good Lie
Deserves Another," etc.

*Introducing the mysterious
Mr. Snikwah*

WHEN young Deputy Sheriff "Shorty" McKay breezed into his office in Monte Vista usually early that Saturday morning, he was more than amazed to find his superior, Sheriff Joe Cook, pacing nervously back and forth, like one of the caged lions Shorty had seen in circus cages.

There was a savage glitter in the sheriff's eyes.

"Howdy, boss!" greeted Shorty cheerily. "You're up kind of early, ain't you? You seem sort of worried. Anything particular wrong?"

Sheriff Cook's handlebar mustache bristled.

"Anything particular wrong?" He tried to mimic Shorty's careless, carefree tone, while his leathery face went almost purple. "No, there's nothing particular wrong! Don't fret for a single moment, my dear lad. Everything is hunky-dory. *Except—*"

The sheriff blasted out that word "except" so loudly that Shorty jumped.

"Except," went on Sheriff Cook, in a growl that would have been the envy of any circus lion, "this is Saturday morning again!"

Shorty nodded solemnly. He hitched his thumbs in the armpits of his frayed leather vest.

"Yeah," he agreed, "that's why I got down a bit early, boss."

"It's a blamed good thing you did," retorted Sheriff Cook, belligerently. "It's the least thing you would do, you dusty-brained sap! I got a bone to gnaw with you, simpleton! Set down in that chair!"

Shorty sat down. He knew better than to start any argument with Sheriff Cook when the latter was behaving as he was. He knew, too, what was in the wind. This was Saturday morning, and there was a good chance that the "Seventh Day Wonder," as Shorty had nicknamed

him, would strike again. He had struck on the five preceding Saturday mornings, popping out from behind a building or a signboard, masked, and shoving a long blue-barreled revolver into the stomach of his intended victim.

He never said anything. He didn't have to say anything. The citizen got "the drift" and stood, paralyzed, with hands high in the air, as the gunman hastily relieved him of his wallet or the loose money in his pockets. The robber ignored jewelry.

Sheriff Cook cleared his voice, ominously. He glared at Shorty.

While I've been working overtime, sweating and sleuthing, trying to knock off this Saturday robber," he began gloomily, "I figured that you was doing the same, as I ordered you to do some weeks back."

The sheriff threw away his cigar in disgust. "But no! What do I learn last night? Instead of going around looking for clews or trying to pick up a word of gossip or something that might lead to the apprehension of this dog-gone Saturday bandit, you spend your time loafing around the lobby of the Chief Ouray Hotel here, gabbing, and playing up to that flashy-dressed salesman from Philadelphia! Now, all I got to say is——"

But Shorty, looking quite distressed, interrupted right there.

"Listen, sheriff!" Shorty spoke quickly, his words tumbling over one another as he sought to make the best advantage of his opportunity. "I've been down around the Chief Ouray only the last two days, since Mr. Snikwah, of Philadelphia, has been in town. He's a swell fellow, boss, but he's mighty careless the way he handles his money. He's carrying a pretty fat roll on him, and

I've been trying to convince him that——"

Sheriff Cook laughed—a very unpleasant, mirthless laugh.

"It is a toss-up with me," he said, "whether you or that salesman with that crazy name of Snikwah is the biggest boob! If he's carrying a lot of money, as you say, he's balmy! But you—say, you're the one who is advertising it all over the town-ship, from what I hear! I reckon everybody in Monte Vista knows that Mr. Snikwah is going around toting a bale of currency. Now, seeing we don't know who this robber fellow is, I figure it's quite likely that he's heard about Snikwah by this time and probably has him on his list."

"He'd better not monkey with Mr. Snikwah," said Shorty, his blue eyes narrowing. "Mr. Snikwah may sell tooth powder and perfumes and such, but he's no softie. He might take the bandit's gun from him——"

Again Sheriff Cook chuckled—but it was a joyless cackle.

YOU figure Mr. Snikwah is any tougher than Charley Morris, who was stuck up two weeks ago?" thundered the sheriff. "Wasn't Morris marshal at Capona for eight years? But what did Morris do when he looked up the barrel of that long gun? He just lifted his hands and let the robber do his worst. Charley was smart at that. You can't fight a buzz saw; you can't beat a guy with the drop on you!"

"But Mr. Snikwah——" began Shorty.

"What about Anthony Zarlengo, who got held up three weeks ago today?" roared the sheriff, pounding his desk with a clenched fist. "Wasn't Tony the champion middleweight boxer of all southwestern Colorado just a few years back?"

What did he do when he saw that gun muzzle caressing his left cheek? He didn't do no shadow boxing, you bet! He just stalled until the robber finished his little task! Don't you go telling me, Shorty, about any one being too tough to be stuck up!"

Shorty gulped. There was no use, he realized, in trying to tell the excited Cook anything, just then. The sheriff had worked himself into a lather, like a nervous horse, and nothing any one could say would cool him off. Shorty shuddered a little. What if there was another Saturday morning holdup any minute now? And, undoubtedly, there would be if the bandit ran true to form. In fact, the outlaw might operate for an eternity of Saturdays unless something unforeseen occurred to check his wild career.

Five weeks of strenuous effort on the part of the sheriff and Shorty had turned up little more than nothing. All any one knew was that the robber was medium-sized, dressed in a rather shabby dark suit, and a black slouch hat. He wore a mask and dark gloves. None of his five Saturday morning victims had heard him say a single word.

"What makes me so hopping mad!" broke out the sheriff, who had evidently been thinking the same thoughts as Shorty, "is that we're so blasted helpless! All I can do is work in circles until I'm dizzy! I meet myself coming back! The usual routine is out. There's no tell-tale jewelry or clothing to spot, nothing to locate in pawnshops! There ain't a doubt in my mind, though, but what the thief readily and quickly spends the money he gets. But what can we do? Charley Morris, as I recall, had nineteen dollars and eighty-seven cents on him, and Tony Zarlengo had fifteen dollars, all in five-dollar bills, and Donald Bow-

man—let's see now—he had upward of sixty-five dollars on him, didn't he? An Bill Black had forty-one bucks when he was taken, and Truman Stockton was carrying—"

The telephone buzzed abruptly, interrupting the sheriff's dismal reminiscences. He picked up the receiver a bit gingerly.

"Yeah, Sheriff Joe Cook talking!" he said gruffly. "What's that? Who did you say? Oh, Paul Stein, down at the Chief Ouray Hotel, eh? Yeah, Paul! What? What's that you say? Robbed? Stuck up? Mr. Snikwah just held up around the corner from your hotel? Well, I'll—I'll be right down, Paul. Fast as I can leg it!"

The sheriff banged down the receiver with an ejaculation that was not exactly pious. He scowled at the wide-eyed Shorty.

"There you are, nitwit! Your fine friend, Mr. Snikwah, has just been held up, Stein says! He probably lost that bale of hay he's been carrying! And he can thank you—and himself, by gosh! I figured it out right, didn't I? He was the logical victim this Saturday. Well, come on, for the love of Pete, let's get going!"

THE sheriff ran to the door and sped out to the sidewalk, his right hand pressed against his holster. Shorty was one leap behind him. Shorty detoured around the sheriff after a few yards of fast sprinting and beat him to the corner, where both skidded to the right and tore down the block as fast as their cowboy boots permitted.

Shorty reached the Chief Ouray Hotel first and bolted into the lobby like a range horse. A minute later in charged Sheriff Cook, puffing,

with as much decorum as a rodeo Brahma steer.

Mr. Snikwah, of Philadelphia, was in the center of the lobby, surrounded by speechless guests. But Mr. Snikwah was not speechless. It seemed he was delivering an oration of some sort because he was talking quite loud and making fierce gestures.

"Civilization, in some sections of the West, is decadent!" Mr. Snikwah was saying as Sheriff Cook panted up. "Gradually, it appears, lawlessness is creeping back, enveloping the country in that somber shroud that once shielded the depredations of the road agents in the days when the Sioux Indians—yes, and the Utes and the Comanches and the Arapahoes—stood by in transfixed horror, bewildered at the ruthlessness of the bad white man, who was worse than any early renegade Indian. Yes, my dear friends, Romans and countrymen—"

"Say!" bellowed Sheriff Cook, grabbing the eloquent Mr. Snikwah by the nearest arm. "Did that robber tap you on the noddle with a brickbat or the butt of a gun? What's the idea of the speech? Get down to earth, brother, and let's have the details of this robbery!"

Mr. Snikwah looked at the sheriff coldly. Then he seemed to see Shorty, at the sheriff's left, and he smiled cordially at the deputy.

"I was stuck up, Shorty!" exclaimed Mr. Snikwah spiritedly. "I went out, meaning to start on my rounds of the stores in my capacity as salesman for Garden of Allah Products, Incorporated, when a very uncouth and rude individual suddenly confronted me, at the entrance to an alley, and relieved me of considerable excess baggage with nifty dispatch."

"How much dough did he get, Snikwah!" cut in the exasperated sheriff.

"He got exactly one hundred dollars in currency!"

"Big bills, little bills?" persisted the sheriff.

"All one-dollar bills," said Mr. Snikwah, nodding his head sadly. "It just happened that I had all my small change in one-dollar bills!"

"Heck!" exploded Sheriff Cook angrily. "Too bad you couldn't have lost a fifty-dollar bill or a hundred-dollar bill or two—then we might have a fighting chance to trace the dough. But this way—aw, shucks! Which way did the robber run, Snikwah?"

"Down the alley, of course," said Snikwah, blinking.

"We cannot allow such things to happen to our guests here at the new Chief Ouray Hotel, Sheriff Cook!" spoke up Paul Stein sternly. "It sets a very bad precedent, sir! It does not enhance the reputation of the hotel. On the contrary, I greatly fear—"

"You keep on gassing, Stein, and I fear I may punch you on the jaw," Cook cried hotly. "This is no time for language! Shorty, you scatter down around the railroad tracks and I'll mobilize in the other end of town. We may get a glimpse of this outlaw at that! Dark suit, black slouch hat, black mask and dark gloves, I suppose, Snikwah?"

The Philadelphian nodded energetically. He smiled wanly at Cook.

"Precisely—a vivid description! A remarkable description, in fact!"

But Sheriff Cook, muttering vaguely under his breath, missed the complimentary remark. He was tearing through the lobby, and a second later was whirling through the revolving doors.

Mr. Stein shrugged. The other guests looked awed. But Mr. Snikwah looked at Shorty and Shorty beckoned. Together Mr. Snikwah and Shorty retired to a far corner of the lobby, where they held a whispered consultation.

At length Shorty sauntered out, casually, and Mr. Snikwah went back over to the desk, complaining, aloud, of the law enforcement in Monte Vista. He found the horrified and sympathetic Mr. Stein ready to offer what consolation he could.

"It is an outrage that you, a guest at the Chief Ouray, should be so humiliated while in our thriving city, Mr. Snikwah!" offered the unhappy clerk. "This is the sixth Saturday morning, in a row, that some one has been held up, as you were. I apologize for our lax officials."

"Them birds are liable to be run down and injured by their own shadows some of these sunny days if they don't move faster," gloomily commented Mr. Snikwah. "I will make it a point not to be here next Saturday morning, however, and if I ever return I shall be careful to avoid coming on a Saturday."

IT was several hours later when Sheriff Joe Cook returned to the Chief Ouray Hotel, empty-handed. It was the same old story. There wasn't a trace, as far as the sheriff could find, of the elusive Saturday morning bandit. The sheriff had made a rather thorough patrol of the north and east sections of town, looking everywhere, asking every one if they had seen a party answering the now familiar description. Nobody had a clew. The sheriff had returned to the hotel in desperation.

"Shorty been back, Paul?" he asked the clerk wearily. The latter shook his head. "Is that bird Snikwah still around?"

"Seated yonder," said Mr. Stein. He made a motion toward a divan on the far side of the lobby. "Surely, Mr. Cook, you have not given up the search so soon?"

"No," said Sheriff Cook gruffly. "I'm still on the trail. When you hear me start barking, real ferocious, you'll know I have the bandit treed up the steeple of the Community Church!"

The sheriff walked over toward Mr. Snikwah, who was busily conversing with several other guests. As the sheriff approached he caught some of Mr. Snikwah's remarks.

"I was completely off guard or I would have seized the villain and taken him to small pieces right there!" Mr. Snikwah was declaring. "I experienced no fear, but I was surprised. I thought I was in Colorado, not in a bandit-infested wilderness of Manchuria, and I was not prepared. What I should have done was to grab the gun——"

"Pardon me," said Sheriff Cook grimly. "A word with you, Snikwah!"

Mr. Snikwah glanced up and seemed to be a little startled at seeing the sheriff standing there. He immediately excused himself, however, and got up from the divan and came over to Cook.

"Yes, sheriff?" Mr. Snikwah rubbed his hands together nervously.

"Let's go over here where we can have some privacy," suggested the sheriff darkly. "I want to tell you something, Snikwah."

They retired to two big chairs on the opposite side of the lobby. Once they were seated the sheriff lost no

time. He jabbed Mr. Snikwah with a long finger.

"Son," he began, "it doesn't pay in Monte Vista or Denver or even New York, to go around flashing a lot of money! You brought your own misery on, carrying and showing so much dough, and further, it ain't exactly right to criticize the officers so loudly before they get even a fair chance to apprehend the criminal. Remember, arresting a smart crook is not as easy as just falling off a divan."

Mr. Snikwah nodded. He reached in a coat pocket and, with a flourish, pulled out a handkerchief.

Sheriff Cook immediately recoiled as he saw what came with the handkerchief and dropped to the lobby floor, apparently unnoticed by Mr. Snikwah, who was mopping his perspiring brow. Quick as lightning, after that first shock, the sheriff drew his gun.

"Don't move an eyelash, Snikwah—unless you want to die!"

Mr. Snikwah paused in his brow-mopping operation.

"Why—what—what's wrong?" he asked, in a strained voice.

"You are—ding blast it!" exclaimed Cook. He kept his service revolver trained on the staring Snikwah while he stooped and picked up a piece of black cloth. It had eyeholes cut in it.

"Well, Mr. Bandit, alias Mr. Snikwah," the sheriff purred grimly, "I wonder if you would be kind enough to explain what you are doing with this little piece of apparel in your pocket? Speak right up in meeting!"

"Why—what is it?" asked the Philadelphian nervously.

"It's a mask," said the sheriff, his gun still leveled. "It is such a mask as our friend, the Saturday

bandit, has been sporting around here! Funny you'd be carrying such a thing, ain't it?"

Mr. Snikwah appeared greatly astonished.

THE dirty crook must have stuffed it in my coat pocket while he was robbing me!" explained Snikwah, trembling. "I can't account for it otherwise, sheriff. It certainly resembles the mask he was wearing!"

Sheriff Cook smiled. It was a contented smile.

"I guess," he said, "that I've come to the end of the long, long trail that goes a-winding, as the poet fellow said. I reckon you weren't held up this morning, Snikwah, or, if you were, you stuck up yourself! And I further deduce that you are the fine-feathered bird who has been pulling these Saturday morning jobs in our town for the past five weeks! Now, not a word, Snikwah! You're talking to Sheriff Joe Cook, in person, and not to his idiotic deputy, Shorty. Understand?"

Mr. Snikwah appeared stunned. He shook his head slowly.

"The robber must have palmed that off on me, sir," he began, weakly.

"You mean to tell me, a grown man, that maybe he snatched off his mask while he was robbing you, and put it in your pocket, Snikwah?" Sheriff Cook chuckled at the idea. "You must think I'm batty! Now, Brother Snikwah, sit perfectly quiet while I frisk you for more evidence. It would be just awfully funny, wouldn't it, if you should be toting a rod, too? Maybe the bandit concealed that on you while he was robbing you!"

The stranger blanched. But he allowed Cook to search him. The sheriff snorted in sudden satisfac-

tion as he found what he was hoping to find.

"Heeled, eh?" exclaimed Cook, as he pulled the revolver from under Snikwah's belt. "And a nice blue-barreled affair, too! Well, as I live and breathe! Brother Saturday himself, I reckon! Wait until I get Charley Morris to look at you, son—and Anthony F. Zarlengo, and Donald Bowman, and Bill Black, and Trueman Stockton. And wait until I show you up, as Exhibit A, to that slow-witted, half-baked, dusty-noddled deputy of mine, Shorty. Ha, won't I laugh!"

"This—ah—there's a mistake here!" protested Mr. Snikwah weakly.

"Come here, Stein!" called the sheriff, beckoning grandly to the hotel clerk. Stein came hurriedly. "Your favorite guest here, Brother Snikwah, has these on him, I find!" The sheriff displayed the mask and the revolver. "I am amazed, Mr. Stein, that you harbor such guests as this gent! I am afraid you are setting a very bad precedent, sir."

"Oh, my goodness!" said the appalled clerk.

"We better be sauntering down to the jail," said Cook, with a stinging sarcasm that caused Stein to flinch. "Just forward any mail for Mr. Snikwah down to the local hoosegow, if you please. Visiting days at the brig are Tuesday and Thursday, remember. When you come to call, Mr. Stein, I'll have a trusty page Mr. Snikwah for you!"

The hotel clerk was livid. But he could find no words, just then, with which to express himself. He stood by, mute, as the sheriff ushered his perspiring prisoner across the lobby and out the door.

On the sidewalk the law officer ran smack into Eugene Cervi, editor of

the Monte Vista *Clarion*. He buttholed Cervi.

"You gone to press yet with this week's paper, son?"

"No, sheriff—why?" asked Cervi, staring.

"Because I have a very nice headline for you, Gene," said Sheriff Cook, in high spirits. "I have just nailed, cold, so to speak, in the ritzy lobby of the Chief Ouray Hotel here, a gentleman who claims to be one Snikwah from Philadelphia, but who, in reality, appears to be none other than the Saturday morning bandit. Why he held himself up today I cannot say, unless it was to divert suspicion from himself. See me at the jail for further details!"

"Gee!" cried Cervi. "This is a scoop, sheriff. I'll beat the Alamosa and Salida papers on this story!"

AT the jail Sheriff Cook slapped Snikwah into a cell without ceremony, other than to search him thoroughly. The man had nothing else on him, however, and the sheriff made a mental note to go down to the Chief Ouray and search his room as soon as Shorty came in.

"Shorty!" called Sheriff Cook, as he locked the cell. "Shorty!"

Proceeding to his front office the sheriff eased himself into a chair.

He was tired. He had walked around town for quite a time before he had sought out Snikwah at the Chief Ouray. He wondered now, as he relaxed, why fate had delivered Snikwah into his hands so easily in the hotel lobby. He admitted, to himself, that he had not suspected Snikwah in the least. He had gone back to see the man, really, to try to get some additional facts from him regarding the latest alleged robbery. If the mask hadn't dropped

from the fellow's pocket, by accident it—

"But that's luck for you!" the sheriff informed himself gravely. "It was just in the cards that Snikwah was going to uncover himself as he did. He was sure a surprised onion, but he acted guilty as Hades!"

Sheriff Cook slapped his leg in anticipation.

"I just want to see Shorty's face when I tell him I got Mr. Snikwah of Philadelphia in the cooler!" The sheriff leaned back in his chair and laughed until the tears ran down his leathery cheeks. "Boy, won't he be some flabbergasted guy! His dear old pal and fellow lobby-lounger, Snikwah, locked up as the Saturday morning robber! He'll just about die, I reckon. He'll be as speechless as that hotelman, Stein. I guess old Sheriff Cook isn't so dumb in the pinches. Wait until the *Clarion* comes out with the news!"

It was not a long wait. Maybe the weary sheriff, smugly satisfied with his successful afternoon, dozed a little in the big chair. At any rate he opened his eyes when he heard the paper thud against the door. He went out, picked it up, and opened it, his heart pounding.

Yes, there were the screaming black headlines, across the top of page one:

COOK NABS SATURDAY THUG

With a contented sigh the sheriff sat down again to read the article. He glowed, proudly, as he read the stirring account wherein he was depicted as the super-sleuth, endowed with almost uncanny powers for ferreting out crime's deepest secrets. The sheriff flushed a little guiltily as he read Cervi's inspired details of the capture. Lacking both time and facts, the editor has described the stirring scene sensationally, if not accurately.

The sheriff read that he had pounced upon Mr. Snikwah in the lobby of the Chief Ouray and floored him with one terrific right to the chin. He had disarmed him, taking two pistols and a bowie knife, and then, kneeling on the prisoner's chest, had forced a complete confession in which the prisoner admitted all of the Monte Vista robberies and hinted, vaguely, that he was badly wanted for more heinous offenses elsewhere.

"Good heavens!" breathed Sheriff Cook. "Cervi laid it on thick!"

Suddenly the sheriff bethought himself of the time. He glanced up at the big clock on the wall and his mouth dropped open in amazement.

"Great Gosh! Where can that locoed Shorty be?"



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IT was supper time. It was long past the hour when Shorty should have returned to the office. The sheriff frowned as he bit the end of a fresh cigar and settled back to wait a while longer. He meant to stay until Shorty came in, however late, because he had carefully thought out all he was going to say to the deputy at the first opportunity. He smiled hopefully.

"I'll knock him cold, dang him!"

It was another hour, however, before the door opened and in came Shorty, accompanied by Charley Morris and a strange man and a strange woman. The sheriff, at sight of Morris, one of the victims of the Saturday bandit, forgot all he had rehearsed to say to Shorty.

"Hey, Charley!" cried Cook excitedly. "You're just in time—just the man I wanted to see. I want you to take a look at a prisoner I got."

"Just a minute, boss," interposed Shorty. "Maybe first I should—"

"No minute about it!" snapped the sheriff, beckoning to Morris. "I want you to take a squint at a party first thing, Charley! No arguments now from anybody! I'm going to trot out a bird here, from jail—"

"But listen, boss!" protested Shorty, waving his hands.

"No buts!" The sheriff turned and went through the door that connected the jail with the office. He was back, in a jiffy, bringing Mr. Snikwah. He smiled triumphantly.

"Charley Morris, is this the bozo held you up two weeks ago to-day?"

"No!" yelled Charley Morris disgustedly.

"What?" asked the startled sheriff, blinking.

"No!" Charley Morris shook his head vigorously.

"Listen to me, boss!" yelled

Shorty, above Morris's outburst. "We got the Saturday crook, sure enough—but it isn't Mr. Snikwah there! Here's the party, to my right here—the young lady! Now, don't look so surprised about it, boss. We got the clothes she's been wearing on these jobs and a confession, likewise. You see, when Mr. Snikwah was robbed to-day he was robbed of marked money—peek-a-boo money, I call it. Each one of those one-dollar bills bore a picture of George Washington, of course, but holes had been punched through George's eyes with a pin. Marked like that, the average crook wouldn't notice it. All I had to do was to wise up the merchants to watch all one-dollar bills and to-night Joe Daly got some of the bills from this young lady here."

Shorty paused.

"I'm sorry for her, though, and I think she ought to have a break, boss," went on Shorty. "She had to do it, she says, on account of the fact that her husband ordered her to, and they had nothing to eat. He didn't dare stir out of the house. When we went to see him I found out he was a fugitive from Rio Grande County, wanted there for a shooting. There's a reward on his head, he admits. This is him here, with my handcuffs on him. The reward will more than pay back the losses of the folks robbed here in the past few weeks. Get the picture, boss?"

"No," faltered Sheriff Cook weakly. "How come that money was marked?"

"I figured whoever was taking the dough was spending it, probably in Saturday shopping," said Shorty. "So it was essential to get a line on the money. Charley Morris here, who was plenty sore about the whole affair, put up most of it, and I put in my last month's salary. We

got the one hundred dollars together and marked it. I also thought it was funny the Saturday bandit never said a word, so I arranged——”

“Then I put an innocent man in jail?” broke in the sheriff worriedly.

“Well, Snikwah is no thug.” Shorty grinned. “All he did was to help Morris and myself nab the robber. He went out with the marked dough, hoping to be stuck up. He carried a mask and a gun in his pocket and, when the bandit found them, Snikwah whispered that he was an outlaw, too, and that he ought to be immune. It was then the Saturday robber spoke for the first time, advising him to try some other field. Mr. Snikwah, of course, recognized a woman's voice—and that helped me in warning the mer-

chants who to watch for with the peek-a-boo bills. The story in to-night's *Clarion* helped, too, because it threw the girl, here, off guard. She figured her victim was jailed for her deed!”

There was perspiration on Sheriff Cook's face.

“Mr. Snikwah,” he stammered, extending a hand to the late prisoner, “I'm sure more than remorseful about that error. I offer——”

“By the way,” interrupted Shorty. “Mr. Snikwah's real name sounds a little better when it's spelled right. Snikwah is just backward, boss. His right name is Hawkins, and he's a private detective from Denver!”

“Oh!” said Sheriff Cook, and he sat down in his chair a bit heavily.



WAS IT COCK ROBIN?

WHO did it?” was on the tongue of every fireman who rushed to put out the blaze in an eighty-foot palm tree in San José, California. There were no electric wires near the tree which might have caused a spark and surely no cigarette smoker perched himself eighty feet above the ground in order to be nonchalant. There seemed to be only one plausible explanation of the mystery, and that was that some sparrow had picked up a lighted “fag” and carried it to the treetop. The bird may have been attracted by the red glow of the tip, and failed to discover that it was hot until well up in the air, when the rush of air perhaps fanned the cigarette into a blaze.



WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

By JOHN NORTH

If you don't want your snowshoes to crack up on you, you must take good care of them. John North will be glad to send you some hints on the subject if you'll just ask him. Address your letters in care of Western Story Magazine.

WE want to publish part of a letter from T. F. and his friend, who are planning to leave for Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, the first of March. Their route sounds most interesting, and we think there may be some of you who would find it useful in whole or part for that next trip you plan.

Says T. F.: "We will drive a car and go directly to San Antonio, Texas, and thence to Laredo. We intend to spend some time in the Big Bend country of Texas, then proceed up through southern New Mexico and over to southern Arizona, through the Coronado National Forest south of Tucson. We will then double back east and north to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and from

there we shall push on north into western Colorado as far as Grand Junction, where we plan to hit Route 50 and press into Utah. There we turn south via Moab and go on down through the La Sal National Forest and the Arches National Monument, turning thence into Arizona through the Navajo Indian country to Lee's Crossing, where we plan to go back north to the Zion and Bryce Canyon National Parks. From there we travel down to Boulder Dam and cross back into Arizona and then move eastward to Grand Canyon, and south to Phoenix. From Phoenix we go westward via the Gila River to Yuma, and into California via San Diego and thence to Los Angeles.

"In California we plan to spend

a great deal of time in the High Sierras visiting the national parks and forests there. From San Francisco we will go up through the redwood empire to Crater Lake, and then on up to Canada.

"This trip we expect to take at least eighteen months. We shall probably spend the winter of 1938-1939 in southern California and press on north the following spring when the weather becomes mild."

We feel that this trip will be of extraordinary value and interest, and we wish T. F. and his friend all the luck in the world. One of the diversions T. F. will indulge in is to take pictures of all the native wild flowers. We hope he will write to this department again and give the readers the benefit of some of his experiences during the trip.

All set to trek down to the Lone Star State, Walter P., of Wilmington, Delaware, is looking for a likely place in which to settle.

"By way of introduction, Mr. North, I'll just say I'm another one of those home-seekers who appear so often in your department. I'm looking for a warm climate where a lot of things will grow and where I can not only work outdoors, but play outdoors as well. I'd like to put in my spare time fishing, bathing, and duck shooting, and have picked the Gulf coast section of Texas as about filling the bill for my sport program. But of course I must work as well,

so what can you tell me about the agricultural possibilities down there?"

Well, Walter, that's a subject upon which I can hand out an earful of facts. In my opinion, you've picked a mighty swell location, for the Gulf coast section of Texas takes high rank in agriculture. This is the heart of King Cotton's empire, for down there the staple grows within gunshot distance of warehouses, compresses, and mills, where it is stored and processed. Here, also, you'll find wide fields of agricultural staples, endless gardens of green vegetables, orchards of figs and pecans, ranges for cattle, and meadows for cows, turkeys, chickens, and geese.

So you see, farm activities in this region may be as continuous and diversified as the farmer desires. If you wish to specialize, for instance, in feed crops, you'll find that the Gulf coast grows a wider variety than any region of comparable size in the United States. The rice yield in this part of Texas is also high, and soy beans, peanuts, and potatoes are all grown successfully.

With a fertile soil, a mild, moderate climate, and a season long enough to permit two crops on the same ground, the Gulf coast country is ideal for the truck farmer. Practically all vegetables grow here. If, however, you'd rather raise grapes than potatoes, your preference may be gratified, for vineyards in the coastal region are making good progress. The magnolia fig, a well-known table delicacy, flourishes here.

We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North supplies accurate information about the West, its ranches, mines, homestead lands, mountains, and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to enclose a stamped envelope for a reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

PART V.



*Jinglebob finds the rime
he wants—and the girl*

Jinglebob Jenkins, Trouble Trailer

By WILLIAM COLT MacDONALD

A FEUD exists between the Ladder A Ranch, owned by Breck Alastair, and the neighboring Bridle Bit outfit of Dave Scarab, who, unsuccessful in his efforts to buy the Ladder A, allegedly

has been rustling its cattle. In the course of the feud, Breck is wounded, and management of the ranch devolves upon his daughter, Lorry.

Tarp Jones, veteran Ladder A foreman, tells Lorry of a camper on

Ladder A land—a pleasant chap who writes verses, Lorry, fearing the newcomer may be a Bridle Bit spy, decides to order him away. The verse writer, Jinglebob Jenkins, goes to the town of Padre Wells for supplies, and has a run-in with Gus Raymer, Bridle Bit foreman. Jenkins is arrested by Marshal Steve Franklin, a Scarab's tool, but is quickly released on orders from Sheriff Clem Wagner and Deputy Bucky Malotte. Scarab, suspecting Jenkins to be an officer, orders him watched.

Returning to his camp, Jenkins is shot at from ambush. He finds clues which reveal Steve Franklin as the ambusher. Meanwhile, Lorry has met Jinglebob, and taken such a liking to him that she invites him to stay at the Ladder A bunk house. He accepts.

A short time later, in the Acme Saloon, Jenkins confronts Franklin, accusing him of attempted dry-gulching. Franklin draws, but Jinglebob's gun leaps first, and he kills the marshal.

Scarab instructs one of his men, Utah Hannan, to get Jinglebob. Hannan makes the attempt, but is himself captured by Jinglebob and taken to the sheriff. The sheriff and Jinglebob, taking no chances on Scarab bailing out Hannan, dispatch him secretly to a jail in the neighboring town of Grayville, in care of Bucky Malotte.

After a social hour at the Ladder A with Breck Alastair and Lorry—Jinglebob has discovered Lorry loves him—he determines daringly to pay a visit to the Bridle Bit himself, and see if he can discover the meaning behind a mysterious visitor to that ranch—one D. C. Jerrold.

Jinglebob steals into the ranch house, and draws down on Scarab, Raymer, and Jerrold, who are hold-

ing a conference. He forces from Jerrold the information that the T. N. & A. S. Railroad—of which Jerrold is a director—wishes to carry the freight of the Napache Petroleum Corporation, and is extending its rails as far as Padre Wells.

Before Jinglebob can exact further information from his victim, he hears a soft step behind him and wheels around. But Utah Hannan has the drop on him. Before Jinglebob can act, Utah lifts the heavy butt of his six-gun and crashes it down on the head of the verse-writing gun toter.

CHAPTER XIX.

CROOKED PLANS.

JINGLEBOB regained consciousness slowly. He hadn't been "out" long from the force of Hannan's blow: his heavy felt sombrero had softened considerably the violent impact of Hannan's gun barrel. There was a blur of voices in the room. Jinglebob didn't open his eyes at once. His head throbbed. He moved his wrists, then his ankles a trifle. Things came clearer after a moment, and he realized he was prone on the floor, bound hand and foot. Scarab once more had control of the situation.

The room was full of men. Jinglebob opened his eyes a thin crack and saw Scarab seated on a chair a few feet away, bathing his head with cold water. Jerrold and Raymer were near by, Jerrold looking nervous and pale. Utah Hannan and the puncher, known as Hank Wooley, were talking to Scarab. Jinglebob recognized the men who had been playing cards in the bunk house. Scarab and Raymer had their guns once more. Jinglebob wondered what had become of his

own guns. He remembered dropping them to the floor, and that was all.

Another thought struck Jinglebob: where was Bucky Malotte? Hannan's presence meant that he had escaped from Bucky. But how? And what had become of Bucky? Perhaps, though, Bucky had delivered Hannan to the deputy in Grayville and Hannan had escaped afterward. A few moments later, Jinglebob's thoughts were answered.

Scarab was talking to Hannan and Hank Wooley. "But I don't see what kept you hombres away so long," Scarab frowned. He reached to a pail of water at his side and soaked up a rag which he lifted to the spot on his head where Jinglebob's gun barrel had landed.

"I been telling you," Hank Wooley answered. "I'd gone all the way to Grayville—"

"I don't see what you did that for?" Scarab cut in.

Wooley laughed shortly. "I reckon that wallop on the conk must have spoiled your memory, boss. Don't you remember, when Utah didn't show up, last night, you told me I'd better head toward Grayville and see if I couldn't see some sign of him. 'Member? You'd figured that Jenkins must have gone to Grayville and that Utah was on his trail, and—"

"Don't be a fool, Hank," Scarab interrupted. "I remember all that clearly. After the way Jenkins out-guessed Utah and took him prisoner, I reckon it's a good thing I did get anxious about him. But that's all clear. There's nothing wrong with my memory. You went to Grayville. On your way back, you spotted Bucky Malotte with Hannan, heading toward you."

"And, like I told you," Wooley put in, "I plugged Malotte and un-

tied Utah. Malotte was carrying Utah's gun and—"

"Yes," Scarab said impatiently. "You said all that. But where've you two been all day? You should have been here long ago. Here it's getting along toward midnight."

"I explained where we'd been," Utah took up the story. "I'd been arrested. I was an escaped prisoner. It didn't seem good sense to come back in daylight. I didn't know but what Jenkins or Sheriff Wagner might be riding around and spot me. So me and Hank hid out in a dry wash all day. When it commenced to get dark we started for here. Now is it clear?"

Scarab nodded. He smiled thinly. "That's what I wanted to know. There was so much noise here I didn't get it the first time, I reckon. What did you do with Malotte's body?"

"We dragged it offn the road and left it in some brush. I tied his horse in the brush, too, so it wouldn't come wanderin' home," Utah said.

"Good work," Scarab nodded. After a minute he said, "You're sure no one noticed you, Hank?"

"There wasn't a soul within miles."

"No doubt about Malotte's being dead, is there?"

WOOLEY laughed scornfully. "Cripes! I knocked him off his horse with a slug in the back. Then, just for good luck, when we were leaving him, I threw another slug at his head. That bullheaded deputy is dead as a doornail."

Jinglebob's heart sank. So that was the end of Bucky Malotte. Plucky Bucky was dead and, in one way, Jinglebob was responsible for his death. Right then, Jinglebob made a mental vow if ever he escaped from this situation alive, he'd avenge Bucky's murder.

Scarab was again doing things to his head with water and a rag. He swore. "My head aches like the very devil!"

"Just take it easy, boss," Raymer suggested.

"How in the devil can I take it easy with a gang all around me and everybody talking at once?" Scarab said irritably. "Come on, clear out of here, you hombres. The excitement's over. I want a mite of peace and quiet. I'll let you know if I need you. Go on, clear out!"

The five punchers who had been playing cards in the bunk house were quick to follow their boss's order.

Jerrold sank down on a chair with a long sigh.

Raymer, noticing Hannan and Wooley remaining behind, said, "Go on, get out. Didn't you hear what Dave said?"

Wooley scuffed out of the room and closed the door behind him. Utah Hannan made no move to leave.

Scarab raised his head. "Cripes, don't close that door. Let some fresh air in. My head's splitting."

Hannan swung the door open again. Then he came back into the room.

Scarab looked coldly at him. "Didn't you hear what I said about getting out, Utah?"

Hannan nodded. "I heard you," he said coolly. "I want to talk to you a minute."

"What's on your mind?" Scarab asked.

"I'm asking for a square deal," Hannan replied.

"What do you mean?"

Hannan said, a trifle uneasily, "I'll put it up to you, fair and square, Dave, and leave it to your own judgment. There's something big under way—big money."

"What if there is?" Scarab said coldly.

"I'm asking for an in."

Scarab swore softly and studied Hannan. "Do I understand you're demanding a share in what Gus and D. C. and myself are planning?"

Hannan shook his head. "Not demanding. Asking. Leaving it to your judgment."

"Just how do you figure," Scarab said, "that you're entitled to any more than the rest of those waddies in the bunk house?"

"I've done more than them. I risked my life against Jenkins."

"He outguessed you, though. You didn't outsmart him."

"The fact remains," Hannan said hastily, "that I took risks they didn't. I figure I'm a notch ahead of them. It was all right before. You paid good wages for hamstringing Ladder A cows and running them off and so on. There wasn't any danger in that. Whether I succeeded with Jenkins or not, you've got to admit that I tried. I took chances them others didn't take."

Scarab laughed sarcastically, "Yes, and if Hank hadn't rescued you from Malotte, where would you be? Maybe Hank is entitled to something else, too."

"He didn't act like he'd thought of it," Hannan pointed out. "That proves he ain't got the brain I got. You need brains, Dave. This business ain't all cleared up yet. You'll maybe have something else for me that requires brains and nerve, too. I'll be more valuable if I know what it's all about—and get a cut on the profits. You realize that as well as I do."

Scarab eyed Hannan a moment.

Hannan met the gaze boldly, then added, "Remember, I'm not demanding a thing. I'm leaving it to your own sense of what's fair and

right. Besides, you've got to admit, Dave, that I squared accounts with Jenkins for that wallop on the conk he give you. Am I in, or ain't I?"

SCARAB smiled a trifle. "You got nerve, I'll say that for you." He turned to Raymer and Jerrold. "How about it, do we let him in for a small share?"

"Whatever you say, Dave," Raymer replied.

Jerrold shook his head. "I'm against it. Why divide the profits? This man is well paid and——"

"Yes, you would be against it," Scarab sneered. "All you had was an idea. We're doing the work. The devil with you, Jerrold. You're shaky right now. I figure Hannan deserves more than his wages. We may need him bad before we get through."

Jerrold's shoulders gave a shrug of resignation. "I withdraw my objections—though I still don't like it."

"You're in, Utah," Scarab said shortly. "But don't expect more than a small cut."

"Thanks." Hannan glanced triumphantly at Jerrold, then back to Scarab. "What do I do?"

"Nothing right now. Maybe I'll have something for you when Jenkins regains consciousness. You must have walloped him plenty hard, Utah. He hasn't stirred."

"They stay hit when I hit 'em." Hannan smirked. "Say, Dave," and there was a new familiarity in the man's voice, "can you tell me what this game is you're playing? I knew something big was under way—something bigger than just getting control of the Ladder A—and I've been plumb curious."

Scarab hesitated a moment. "I reckon there's no harm in telling you," he said, shrugging his shoul-

ders. "Keep it quiet from the crew in the bunk house. There's not much to tell. The Napache Petroleum Corporation, over in Wyattown, have been shipping their crude oil, as it comes from the wells, on the Desert Central Railroad——"

"The Desert Central is just a jerk-water line," Hannan said contemptuously. "I used to know a brakeman on that string of rusty rails."

"What you say is true," Scarab nodded, "but it's the only connection between Wyattown and the larger lines up north. Consequently, the Desert Central is charging exorbitant rates. The Napache people are getting plumb sick of being robbed. Now, the T. N. & A. S. road, of which our little pal, D. C. Jerrold, is a director, wants the job of carrying Napache oil——"

"But the T. N. & A. S. rails only come as far as Grayville," Hannan interrupted. "Wyattown is clear the other side of the Truculento Mountains."

"I know all that," Scarab said. "Keep still while I do the talking. Now, it is planned to bring the T. N. & A. S. road as far as Padre Wells. So far, our worthy friend, Jerrold, has succeeded in keeping those plans secret from the country hereabouts. Mr. Jerrold has explained very patiently, to his business associates, that until the rails actually commence to be laid, nothing should be said. You see, Utah, the T. N. & A. S. will have to buy certain property in Padre Wells and the Napache people will construct tanks there. If the plans were known, the holders of such property would immediately increase the purchase price of their holdings. At least, this is the excuse D. C. has employed for keeping the plans secret. Now, both the road and the

oil people are getting impatient to start operations."

Hannan shook his head blankly. "It's too deep for me, Dave. Even with rails to Padre Wells, Wyatttown is still some twenty miles distant, through the Truculentos. Danged if I see——"

"I'll make it clearer," Scarab nodded. "The contract between the T. N. & A. S. and the oil people, calls for the railroad to lay a pipe line to carry the oil from Wyatttown to Padre Wells, where it can be put into tank cars——"

"Pipe line?" Hannan frowned.

"To pump the oil through," Scarab explained impatiently.

"I never heard of such a thing," Hannan said, shaking his head.

"You will in the future," Scarab said. "They've been using pipe lines in the Eastern States for quite some years now. Until the T. N. & A. S. puts its rails straight across country, it's the sensible way of handling the proposition."

Hannan considered a moment. "I suppose this pipe line will go through Sabre Canyon, in the Truculentos?"

"Exactly," Scarab replied. "It's the only pass through for miles around. It would be the devil of a job to carry a line across the mountains at any other point—too expensive to be thought of, in fact."

Light suddenly dawned on Hannan's face. "Sabre Canyon is part of the Ladder A holdings," he exclaimed.

THAT," Scarab said dryly, "is what has been bothering us for some time. To carry out its part of the contract, the railroad has got to get a right of way through Sabre Canyon and across the Ladder A property. The company would pay Alastair a nice chunk of money

for that right. However, D. C. and I feel that Alastair wouldn't have sense enough to get as much cash as he could. So the idea is for me to get hold of the Ladder A and then boost the price Alastair would probably accept."

"You mean hold 'em up—stick the railroad with a big price?"

Scarab smiled thinly. "You put it rather crudely, Utah, but you get the general idea. Then, Jerrold and I, and my men, split the profits."

"Holy smoke!" Hannan looked respectfully at Scarab. "What an idea. It's plumb elegant. You're smart, Dave. So that's why you're trying to scare the Ladder A into selling to you."

"That's it—but don't credit me with being smart. D. C. gets the credit. He had the idea long before he negotiated the contract with his road and the oil people."

"But—but," Hannan floundered, "where do you come in? Why didn't he buy the Ladder A himself?"

Jerrold smiles sourly at the question. Raymer grinned and said, "You ain't smart in big business workin's, Utah."

Scarab chuckled, "Can't you see, Utah, it wouldn't look well for D. C. to be holding up his own company and——"

"So!" Hannan exclaimed, suddenly indignant. "That's what he is doing! He's robbin' his own pals, ain't he? I call that downright crooked!"

Scarab turned to Jerrold with a soft laugh. "You see, D. C.? There is a difference in the various moral planes. Now, Utah would never think of cheating a pal."

"It's lousy dirty," Hannan insisted earnestly. "Holding up his own company." He shot a look of indignation at Jerrold.

Jerrold returned the gaze with a

poisonous sneer. "You'll be glad enough to share in the profits, Hannan, when this deal goes through. Let's hear no more of such talk. Dave, I think you've said too much as it is. I saw Jenkins move, just now. I think he's regaining consciousness. It wouldn't do for him to hear what you've said."

"That," Scarab replied coolly, "wouldn't make the slightest difference. Jenkins isn't going any place where he could tell our plans. His course is run."

CHAPTER XX.

SCARAB'S PROPOSITION.

JINGLEBOB lay motionless on the floor, his aching head teeming with thought. Now he knew the reason for Scarab's wanting the Ladder A outfit. Inwardly he cursed his luck. With the knowledge he now possessed, Jinglebob could at once relieve Breck Alastair's mind of all its worries—providing he were free. But Jinglebob couldn't see how he was going to be free. His guns were gone; he was bound hand and foot. Victory was in Scarab's grasp and nothing, it seemed, could be done to prevent it. Jinglebob, now, had no illusions as to his ultimate fate were it left to Scarab to settle.

Hannan was still thinking over the plans that had been outlined to him. Now and then he shook his head and cast angry glances in Jerrold's direction. Raymer smoked a cigarette and said nothing, leaving the next move to Scarab. Scarab had gone on bathing his head with the wet rag. The five cowboys in the bunk house—six, including Hank Wooley—weren't making as much noise as before. Plainly the card game hadn't been resumed. Jinglebob counted the odds against himself. Ten against one. Even if his hand and

feet were free and his guns within reach, the odds were too big. It looked like the end. Jinglebob knew he could expect no mercy from Scarab.

Scarab rose suddenly and moved across the floor to Jinglebob's side. He nudged Jinglebob's ribs with one booted foot. "Come on, Jenkins, come awake. You've stalled long enough."

Jinglebob groaned and moved a trifle. He opened his eyes slowly and gazed around with a vacant expression in them.

"Cut it," Scarab said impatiently. "We've had enough of bluffing for one evening, Jenkins. I've been watching you. You've been conscious for some time. There are certain tremors of a man's eyelids that give him away, when he tries to fake unconsciousness."

Jinglebob opened his eyes and forced a smile. "You win, Scarab," he said, "for the present."

Scarab sneered, "I win for all time."

"Look here, Dave," Jerrold interrupted excitedly, "do you mean to say Jenkins heard everything you told Hannan?"

"Sure he did," Scarab admitted, "as well as anything you hombres might have mentioned. I figured Jenkins might be interested in my reason for wanting the Ladder A. I knew he was listening."

"But, Dave," Jerrold looked horrified, "that was a rash thing, a very rash thing to do. Jenkins may—"

"Jenkins," Scarab smiled thinly, "isn't going to have any opportunity to spill what he's learned. He's finished, right now. He realizes that as well as I do. Want to get up, Jenkins?"

"Suits me," Jinglebob replied from his prone position on the floor. "These boards aren't any too soft."

Scarab said, "Bring a chair over here, Hannan."

Hannan brought a straight-backed chair.

Scarab reached down, grasped the front of Jinglebob's shirt, and easily lifted him to the chair. A wave of dizziness swept through Jinglebob's head. When his mind cleared he found himself seated on the chair, his bound hands before him, on his lap, his bound feet resting on the floor.

"Take it easy a minute," Scarab's voice came through a rapidly clearing fog. "I've got a proposition to make, when you feel able to talk. There's a bottle here. Do you want a drink, or a cigarette?"

"A drink of water and a cigarette," Jinglebob replied.

"Hannan?" Scarab gave a brief order.

UTAH HANNAN brought a tin dipper of water and held it to Jinglebob's lips. He couldn't help taunting the captive. "Talk to me about a gun barrel over the conk, will you?" he jeered. "Guess I showed what I could do in that direction. How'd you like——"

"Shut up, Hannan," Scarab said.

Jinglebob finished drinking, then asked for another dipperful. Hannan brought it and Jinglebob drank half of that.

Scarab took the dipper from Hannan's hand and dashed the remaining water in Jinglebob's face. "That'll help clear your mind," Scarab said. Jinglebob didn't reply.

Scarab deftly rolled a cigarette and thrust it between Jinglebob's lips. He rolled one for himself, and lighted both with the same match.

Hannan took the dipper away and seated himself near Jerrold and Raymer, four or five yards away.

Jinglebob inhaled deeply on the

cigarette and glanced around the room. He saw his guns on the table, where some one had placed them. So near and yet so far. He blew out the smoke and looked at Scarab.

Scarab said, "How do you feel?"

"You should know," Jinglebob forced a grin. "We both had a dose of the same medicine."

"I reckon," Scarab nodded, "though I think you were hit harder than I was. Your barrel just struck me a glancing blow."

"Maybe," Jinglebob proposed lightly, "we should be in the same hospital so we could compare operations."

"I see," Scarab nodded again, "you want to get down to business and hear what my proposition is. I was just making it clear, Jenkins, there's no hard feelings. We've played a game and you've lost. I've nothing against you personal."

"Of course not," Jinglebob said sarcastically. "It's all a pure business proposition, with you, just like getting the Ladder A and selling it to Jerrold's company. He robs his own company and you do your best to practically steal a ranch. You can't get away with it, Scarab."

Scarab laughed confidently. "That's only your own opinion, Mr. Deputy United States Marshal."

Jinglebob had been looking at Jerrold. Now his eyes came back to meet Scarab's mocking gaze. "You know, then," Jinglebob said quietly.

Scarab nodded.

"I suppose you went through my pockets and found my badge."

Again, Scarab nodded. "I knew before that, though. I didn't need that gold badge to tell me."

Jinglebob said as quietly as before. "I'm curious to know where I slipped up."

"You didn't, exactly," Scarab replied. "Ichy Wellman got careless."

"Ichy Wellman?"

"That clerk in the general store where they handle the mail. Ichy talked about you mailing out poems. It sounded sort of phony to me. I maneuvered Ichy into leaving the store to go to the storehouse, while I picked up one of your letters. I suppose you've been mailing reports to the United States marshal. Anyway, that's what the letter I saw consisted of. It was smart using a double envelope that way, so your reports could be forwarded on to the marshal, but it wasn't quite smart enough."

"I reckon," Jinglebob said ruefully, "we can't blame Ichy any more than myself. So you've added robbing the United States mails to your other crimes, Scarab."

Scarab smiled. "Guilty," he said. "But that information isn't going to do you any good, either. Do you know, for a time, I had you spotted as an Artexico Cattle Association detective."

JINGLEBOB puffed on his cigarette, thoughtfully. Well, it would do no harm to talk now. The longer he kept talking, the longer he'd keep alive. Something might happen—but Jinglebob didn't know what that something could be. He said, "Yes, I know a lot of folks suspected me of being an A. C. A. man. I was with the association a few years back. That man they sent down in answer to Alastair's letter was a good friend of mine."

"You mean Mitchell?" Scarab asked.

Jinglebob nodded. "Mitchell, the man Franklin dry-gulched. After I heard he'd been murdered, I asked my office to put me on the case. The United States marshal got in touch with the A. C. A. and explained the situation. The association knew my

work and consented to let me come down here instead of sending one of their own men. As a matter of fact, I guess they were glad to have the case in the hands of a government man. Mitchell had come down here openly; everybody knew he was a cattle dick."

"Your way had us fooled for a spell," Scarab put in, "but after I'd read some of your poetry, I knew you were no poet."

Jinglebob grinned. "I call that plumb unkind. You've broken my heart."

"That's too bad." Scarab chuckled. "Of course, all I had to go on were those verses you wrote for Pat Hogan, but——"

"They were representative," Jinglebob smiled. "You're right on that point, anyway, Scarab."

"You might have fooled me if you'd come to me carrying that chunk of baling wire we found in your pocket. I might even have put you on my pay roll to do some branding."

"I considered that and passed it up," Jinglebob replied. "Yes, I know, a lot of folks have suspected me of being a cow thief, when they saw that wire. Carrying that is an old habit I picked up when I was working for the Artexico people. We had branding to do now and then."

Jinglebob was keeping the conversation going as long as possible. Every moment meant added life.

Scarab said suddenly, "Jenkins, you don't need to keep glancing at your guns on that table. You can't get to 'em."

"I suppose not," Jinglebob said easily. "There's no law against trying, I suppose?"

"Only the law that might makes right," Scarab replied. "However, it's not going to be necessary for you to try. We're going to put 'em back

in your holsters—just as we returned your badge and other stuff to your pockets. Then everything will be found on your body and folks will wonder who did this last killing.”

Jinglebob stiffened just a trifle. “Like that, eh?” he said steadily.

“Just like that, Jenkins.”

“There isn’t any other way?”

“Danged if I can see one, Jenkins. You know too much. I can’t let you go now, though I hate to have you rubbed out.”

“I’ll bet you do,” Jinglebob said scornfully.

“It’s a fact. Confound it, I could almost like you, Jenkins. You’ve got brains. You’ve had me guessing two or three times. You’ve made this game I’m playing plumb interesting. But I can’t see any other way. I’m in this too deep now, to pull out, even if I wanted to, which I don’t. No, it’s your finish, Jenkins.”

“You figuring to do the job yourself?”

Scarab frowned. “I don’t reckon. Utah Hannan has a score to square with you. You probably heard him asking for an in. I figure I’ll give him the job.”

“I’ll take it and glad of the chance,” Hannan cut in.

Scarab cast a cold glance toward Hannan. “Nobody invited you to talk, Hannan.”

Hannan shrank back from the chill glance in Scarab’s eyes and kept silent.

Jinglebob said quietly, “You’ll mebbe let yourself in for trouble, Scarab. There’s people who know I was coming here.”

SCARAB nodded. “I reckoned as much. But your body will be found a long way from here. Nobody’s going to be able to prove anything against us, and there’s too

many Colt .45s, in the country to tie the slug they dig out of your body, to any particular individual. You see, Jenkins, it’s all worked out. We’re playing for big stakes and we can’t afford to let one man’s life—or even half a dozen—stand in our way.”

“Dave,” Jerrold cut in, uneasily, “you had a proposition to make to Jenkins. Seems to me you’re wasting time, with all this talk.”

“Don’t get impatient, D. C. You’re in my bailiwick, now, not in your mahogany-decorated director’s office. I’m running things here.”

“But, Dave, it’s getting late.”

“What if it is? Would you begrudge Jenkins a few more minutes of life? You’re about as cold-blooded a fish as I—”

Jinglebob cut in, “Maybe your friend, Jerrold, is right, Scarab. I’m waiting to hear what your proposition is. Why not get to talking?”

Scarab shrugged his shoulders. “Just as you say, cowhand. Well, it’s this way. The last time I visited the Ladder A, I made Alastair an offer for his ranch.”

“A pretty lousy offer, if you ask me,” Jinglebob said. “About a half what the outfit is worth.”

“I’m not asking you,” Scarab said coolly. “Under the circumstances, I believe you’ll presently admit the price is fair.”

“What are the circumstances?”

“Alastair is going to lose his ranch, anyway.”

“How do you figure that?”

“You’re going to write a note to Alastair, advising him to take my offer. I’ve a right strong hunch that Alastair will do what you advise. Right?”

Jinglebob laughed scornfully. “Maybe. But suppose I refuse to write such a note.”

“You won’t, if I’ve got you figured

out correctly," Scarab said confidently.

"I suppose if I write the note, you'll give me my life."

"I didn't say that."

"And if I refuse to write it, you'll kill me."

"Look here, Jenkins, you've got the wrong idea. Face the facts. Whether you write that note or not, you're due to be put out of the way. You know too much to be good for my health."

"That settles it," Jinglebob said grimly. "I'm writing no such note. You can't force Alastair to sell, whether I'm alive or dead."

"No, I can't," Scarab conceded readily, "and I don't intend to try any more along the lines I've been employing. It's time for action. If you refuse to write what I ask, then we'll be leaving to raid the Ladder A within an hour. There's four men there, and a girl. It won't be hard to put them out of the way. We'll burn the buildings—at least the bodies—"

"Curse you, Scarab!" Jinglebob strained against his bonds.

"I thought that would get you," Scarab said cruelly.

"That won't give you the Ladder A!"

"That's where you're wrong Jenkins. D. C. will write out a bill of sale and sign it with Breck Alastair's name."

"You won't be able to make a forgery like that stand up—"

SCARAB'S cold laugh cut in on the words. "You don't realize what an artist D. C. is with a pen. I managed to get hold of a sample of Alastair's writing. D. C. can imitate it so Alastair's own folks wouldn't know the difference. Back

about twenty years, D. C. was considered one of the cleverest forgery artists that ever served a term in the Colorado Penitentiary, and he's improved since then."

"Look here, Dave," Jerrold cut in quickly, "there's no use raking up my past history. That's all gone and forgotten."

"Cut the piousness, D. C.," Scarab snapped. "We've got to make this fool see light. If he won't write that note, well, we'll be money ahead. All it will cost us is a short ride, a few cartridges, and a lighted match here and there."

He turned back to Jinglebob. "How about it, Jenkins, will you write that note and give the Alastairs half what their ranch is worth, or will you refuse and give them—death?"

"Curse you for a cold-blooded devil, Scarab!"

"Don't waste your breath with histrionics, Jenkins. They're not effective. Think, think fast. Will you write that note?"

Jinglebob was thinking fast. By writing the note, he would at least save the lives of Lorry, Breck and the others. He slumped down in his chair. "All right," he said grimly, "you win. Bring on your paper and pencil and untie my hands."

"Good!" Scarab exclaimed. "I thought you'd listen to reason. And don't think when your hands are untied, you'll be able to start anything. You'll have plenty of guns pointed your way. Gus, get a paper and pencil."

Raymer rose to his feet. "I guess there ain't any up here. I'll lope down to the bunk house and tear a sheet out of the tally book."

"Hurry it up."

Raymer rose to his feet and started

toward the door. Then he stopped short as a new voice interrupted the proceedings:

"Don't be in any hurry about that pencil and paper. You ain't going to need it. Just reach high and reach pronto!"

All eyes flashed to the doorway. A bloody apparition stood there, swaying a trifle, clutching the door jamb with one hand, a leveled .45 gripped in the other, covering the men in the room. Slowly, four pairs of hands rose in the air.

"Bucky!" Jinglebob said unbelievably. "Bucky Malotte."

CHAPTER XXI.

POWDER SMOKE!

IT was a terrible looking Bucky who stood so uncertainly in that doorway. Only his bulldog courage had kept him going on the trail of his escaped prisoner. He was disheveled. His hat was gone and his bloodstained hair hung down over his glassy blue eyes. His shirt was stained darkly; the lower half of his face was a bloody mask.

He half stumbled into the room, closing the door at his rear. Through a supreme effort of will he managed to hold his gun steady on the men in the room.

"Get back, back, all of you," he said thickly. "Face the wall. Keep your hands in the air. Hannan, prisoners don't escape from Bucky Malotte."

His blocky body swayed uncertainly and the sturdy bulldog legs seemed no longer sturdy as he advanced farther into the room. Scarab and his companions were facing the far wall now, their arms elevated.

"Get me untied, Bucky," Jingle-

bob pleaded. "Quick. Don't make any noise. There's men in the bunk house. But shoot if you have to. They're planning to raid the Ladder A."

He could see Bucky was nearly out on his feet. Bucky's eyes were growing vacant. The man was weak, nearly done. Jinglebob's words finally penetrated his mind.

"You, there, with the city clothes," Bucky mumbled thickly. "Get those ropes off——"

"That's you, Jerrold," Jinglebob cut in. "Hurry up. Get these ropes off, if you don't want to be plugged."

"Take your time, D. C.," Scarab advised, glancing over his shoulder. "Malotte's nearly finished now. He can't last. Take your time."

"Oh, yeah?" Bucky growled, with a momentary return of his old spirit. "I'll show you if I can last or not! Get busy on those ropes, mister."

Jerrold came to Jinglebob and commenced fumbling at the ropes about Jinglebob's wrists.

"Don't you take Scarab's word for it, Jerrold," Jinglebob snapped. "I know Malotte. He'll last. He'll plug you sure as the devil. Keep going."

"Stall it, D. C., stall it," Scarab said. "Don't let 'em bluff you."

"You, Scarab," Bucky managed to say, "I'll get you, anyway, if you don't shut up."

"Don't let him worry you, D. C.," Scarab spoke swiftly. "Stall along. He don't dare shoot——"

Bucky swung one gun toward Scarab. Scarab flattened himself against the wall. He didn't say anything more.

Jerrold was working steadily at the knots now. Bucky swayed and nearly fell. With an effort he jerked himself upright. "Hurry, hurry," he

mumbled thickly. "Jinglebob—you'll have to—" Again he swayed.

"He's going!" Scarab yelled. "Stall, D. C."

But Jinglebob's arms were loose now. He jerked them free just as Bucky slumped to the floor. Scarab gave a cry of triumph, and swung away from the wall, jerking his gun.

Jinglebob gave Jerrold a shove to one side, just as Scarab fired. The bullet entered Jerrold's body. Jerrold groaned and crumpled.

Scarab fired again, as Jinglebob, his feet still bound, made one leap toward the table for his guns. His hands closed about the butts, as Scarab's second shot flew wide.

HANNAN and Raymer had whirled around now, their guns flashing in the light. Two reports sounded almost together. Jinglebob felt something like burning hot iron pierce his side. With his feet tied together and his guns in his hands he couldn't save himself from falling. Even as he fired he crashed into the table, overturning it.

He heard Raymer give a yell of pain and heard a body strike the floor. Scarab swore suddenly and Jinglebob knew he'd scored hits with both guns. He heard slugs thud into the overturned table behind which he'd fallen.

Behind him, Bucky was sprawling on the floor, swearing at his inability to rise. He braced himself on one hand, released one quick shot at Utah Hannan. Hannan smashed back against the wall and crashed down. Bucky laughed and lifted his gun toward the lamp. There came a loud roar and a shattering of glass as the room was plunged in darkness.

There were wild yells from the bunk house now.

Jinglebob snapped, "Good work, Bucky," and crawled through the darkness toward the door. He reached it, felt for the knob and hauled himself upright. With his other hand he shot the bolt in place, locking it, just an instant before the men from the bunk house arrived. There came a loud pounding on the door.

A crimson flash split the gloom and in the momentary light, Jinglebob saw Raymer's form. He fired again, and in a second moment of illumination saw streaks of fire spurting from Dave Scarab's vicinity. A choked, bubbling curse was torn from Raymer's lips as he crashed down. At the same instant, a second slug entered Jinglebob's body, knocking him to the floor again.

Scarab yelled, "Break down that door, boys!"

Jinglebob twisted around, sent two swift shots ripping through the door and heard startled, panicky yells and the sounds of treating feet. A red-hot knife sliced across his left thigh. Again he whirled back toward Scarab. It was too dark to see the man's position, but Jinglebob thumbed his right gun twice.

Only dull clicks sounded. That gun was empty. Scarab fired again. Jinglebob felt the breeze of the bullet as it cut the handkerchief at his throat. He lifted his left gun. Three spurts of fire spouted from the muzzle. In the light of the final shot, he glimpsed Scarab as the man was plunging down and heard his body strike the floor.

Silence descended as the echoes of the roaring guns died away. The room was swimming with powder smoke that stung eyes and throat and nostrils. Jinglebob waited tensely. Outside he could hear men's

voices, but he knew that, for a few moments at least, the other Bridle Bit punchers would keep their distance. He waited a moment longer, then reloaded his guns. He said quietly, alert for the first movement, "Got enough, Scarab?"

There was no reply. Jinglebob made a soft scraping noise on the floor. That didn't produce any shots either.

"Sounds like they're finished, Bucky," Jinglebob said, low-voiced.

"Finish', finish'," Bucky said thickly. He sounded drunk.

Jinglebob put down his guns and untied the knots about his ankles. There was a dull ache at two spots in his body. His shirt felt warm and wet and sticky. His left thigh burned, but he judged that wound wasn't as serious as the others. He holstered one gun, then with the other in his hand, he made a painful course about the room, feeling for bodies in the darkness. He could only judge who they were from their positions when he had seen them last.

THE survey didn't take long. Scarab was dead, as was Utah Hannan. Raymer was still alive, but unable to speak or move. Jerrold was unconscious and, from the sound of his labored breathing, had taken a slug through his lungs.

Jinglebob stumbled about the room until he had found the bucket of water. He made his way back to Bucky, on the floor, and dashed some water in his face. They both drank from the dipper.

From outside came a yell in Hank Wooley's voice, "Hey, Dave! Are you all right?" Footsteps were approaching the house again, more cautiously this time.

"Scarab's finished, you coyotes,"

Jinglebob yelled—or tried to yell. His voice was little better now than a hoarse croak. "And so's the rest of your pals."

A sudden torrent of cursing sounded outside the house, then a rattle of gunfire. Bullets crashed through the door and open window to thud into the walls.

Bucky was struggling to rise, now. Jinglebob held him close to the floor. "Stay down, Bucky, stay down. We've cleaned up in here, but there's six hombres outside that want our scalps." He held more water to Bucky's lips.

Bucky's words came clearer after a moment. "I reckon I was sort of out," he said haltingly. "Hannan got away from me. He must have had a pal——"

"It was Hank Wooley. He followed you. They left you for dead, Bucky."

"Lucky they left—my horse—near. I followed their trail—when I come to——"

"Do you know how bad you're hit, Bucky?"

Another hurricane of flying lead swept through the door and open window. Jinglebob staggered to his feet, raised one gun. A stream of orange fire lanced through the window. A man yelled with pain and started off at a stumbling run that ended when he pitched to the earth.

There were wild yells of rage and more gunfire. Bullets thudded into the walls. Jinglebob had immediately dropped to the floor again and returned to Bucky.

"We've got to make a fight of it, Bucky, old son," he said steadily. "I'll load your gun for you. Are you too hard hit to fire?"

"Don't think—I'm hit—bad," Bucky mumbled. "I got a slug play-

Continued on page 124

The HOLLOW TREE

Conducted by HELEN RIVERS



NOT all the gold is panned in the West. A letter from Vermont assures us that many mines were abandoned in the East when the gold rush of the Far West took place, and there is plenty of evidence that there is still some left for those who are interested enough to look for it.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

For the past five years I have lived on gold I panned and sluiced here in the East, and I only work at it in the summer.

Many do not know that North and South Carolina have a gold history. Before the great gold rush of 1850, all the gold that was minted in the United States mint came

from those two States. The two largest gold nuggets in the world came from around Charlotte. One weighed twenty-four pounds, and the other seventeen or eighteen pounds. Only two years ago a man from Philadelphia, got out twenty thousand dollars' worth in three months from Golden Valley, outside of Forest City.

It is my opinion that these abandoned dumps will still yield enough gold to make the work pay. Water rights and leases can be had for a small charge. Most of the gold area is up in the hills where the mountain people live. If you go there, remember that they were there first. Trust them, and let them trust you, for they are human and live their own way. I lived with them for five dollars a week, which included meals, room, washing, mending, and the use of a horse. Never ask them personal questions or try to mix with their women.

As to Vermont, I have a bottle of gold nuggets varying from a pinhead in size to the largeness of a pea, which I panned out of a brook in central Vermont. Working out of Ludlow, I went up a stream in back of Echo Lake and was surprised to see where great washings for gold had taken place about one hundred years ago. I panned at this spot all day and took out about a dollar's worth of gold.

Now, I am ready to go West and want a partner to prospect for placer gold out there. Let me know, hombres, your experience and any other information, such as the low-down on taking out a Western claim.

A. G. BARNARD.

Wilmington, Vermont.

Two eighteen-year-old buddies from our good neighbor, Canada, want Pen Pals. All kinds will do, for these boys have big hearts and the more friends they can corral, the happier they are. So let's see how happy some of you can make them.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am writing hoping that you will put this in The Hollow Tree. I would like friends from all over the world to write to us. We are two boys from Windsor and would like to correspond with some other

readers who live in different parts of the world.

Vincent is five feet seven inches tall, has black, curly hair, blue eyes, is eighteen years of age, and interested in all sports. I am Carl, five feet, eight inches tall, with curly blond hair and gray eyes. I am also eighteen years old. So come on, every one, write to us soon. Thank you.

VINCENT SKINNER.

521 Erie Street West,
Windsor, Ontario, Canada.

CARL BURNS.

3242 Linwood Place, Sandwich,
Windsor, Ontario, Canada.

Stamp lovers, here is a chance to add to your collection first hand. Somehow there is a great deal more satisfaction in getting a stamp off a letter that has your own name on it.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

In reading Western Story I read your Hollow Tree letters. If any one will write me I'll send them stamps from wherever I may be. Can also tell them where the best hunting and fishing is in California. I've traveled all over the world, and am mailing this letter in Vladivostok, Russia. Will answer all letters. "BONNIE" BAGNALL.

Standard Oil Co. of California,
SS. W. S. Miller, San Pedro, California.

Do you know what an O. S. O. is? Those of you who understand these mysterious symbols will want to correspond with this hombre who,

though only nineteen, has been places.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am nineteen and have seen most of the United States. I belong to the Uncasville-ham Radio Club and if it would be interesting to anybody we are going to work ten and twenty meters this year. I would like to have an O. S. O. with anybody anywhere.

FRANCIS N. WILLEY.

124 McKinley Avenue,
Norwich, Connecticut.

Calling all cooks! Calling all cooks! Why, here is one right here, looking for a good ranch kitchen in which to do his stuff.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am looking for some one in the West who would like to annex a young man as a cook on a ranch. It is a hobby with me, and cooking seems to come natural since I can make excellent bread, pies, cakes, roasts, fries, and anything else required of a cook.

I have always wanted to go West but so far I have only received impressions of it from your magazine, Western Story. I would like to actually see some of the places described in the stories.

Any one who reads this magazine and writes to me because they have seen my application, will, I am sure, be of a caliber worthy to work for, and I just crave to cook for people who have healthy appetites and like to eat.

BOB JOSLYN.

433 Main Street, Reedsburg, Wisconsin.

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 Rivers, 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.

Jim White— Cowboy Explorer

By CHARLES L.
McNICHOLS

*A cowboy explorer makes
a marvelous discovery*

TO-DAY they have the Carlsbad Cavern improved with up-to-date electric lights and good, safe trails, over which the tourist can wander for miles. But when Jim White discovered it, all he saw was a big, black, apparently bottomless pit from which an endless cloud of millions of bats poured out and ascended in a smokelike spiral into the evening sky.

Jim had never been to school a day in his life. He had been punching cows ever since he was ten years old. He was nineteen when he first saw that big hole back in 1901. But lack of schooling didn't prevent him from figuring out that there must be a cave of tremendous proportions underground. The hole itself was a big one, more than a hundred feet across. Jim sat down on his heels, Texas fashion, and began to figure how he could get down into the cavern without breaking his neck.



From where he was sitting it seemed as if the hole had no bottom at all. All he could see was a great black, gaping nothingness out of which the bats boiled up like black steam out of a devil's kettle.

So Jim built himself a fire on the brink, and when it got going good he took a stick and shoved the blazing embers off into the hole. When they finally hit bottom he saw that the entrance to his newly discovered cave was at least a hundred and fifty feet deep!

Well, Jim had been out alone for a month combing the hills for strays, and he was out of grub. He was on the way back to the headquarters of the Lucas brothers' H Slash outfit when he'd been attracted by that cloud of bats which at first he had thought was the smoke of a big fire. He wanted to remain there and investigate that big hole, but he was due back, so he regretfully picked his way down over the rocks to the place where he had left his horse.

When he arrived at the ranch he didn't say a word about his discovery. He figured nobody would believe him. But as soon as he could get away he assembled a one-hundred-and-fifty-foot whale line and hit for the hills. When he got to the hole, the morning light was shining down into it, and he saw that the hundred-and-fifty-foot line didn't reach the bottom. But it did reach a ledge where there was a scant foothold, and down Jim went, hand over hand. He had his lariat wrapped around his waist, and he was hoping he could get the rest of the way on that.

Just hoping, mind you. Jim didn't know how much farther he had to go. He was sliding down into that devil's den, all alone, miles from help—and nobody knew where he was. If he slipped and crippled himself, he'd just have to lie there till he died. He couldn't have been any more on his own if he'd been at the north pole! Down he went, and with the help of his lariat he got to the bottom, where the hole turned and went slanting back into the heart of the mountain.

HE lit a coal-oil lantern and started down the sloping entrance into a wonderland that no white man had ever seen. One Indian had been down there.

Probably only one. Jim found his bones after a time; they were the only indication that any other human had ever entered the cave.

That old lantern would only punch a tiny hole of pale-yellow light in the great, solid blackness of the huge room in which the young cowpoke found himself. The light gleamed fitfully on pillars and huge hanging icicle formations, some of them breathtakingly beautiful and some of them so ghostly and weird that Jim had to shake his head to see if his eyes were playing him tricks. The ground underfoot was dangerous and rough, and full of mysterious potholes that were so deep that a rock rolled into one of them seemed to clatter down forever into infinity.

By this time Jim had started talking to himself—like a cowhand talking to a spooky horse. "Easy, boy. Easy, there. Take it slow, now. Don't get scared." He kept himself busy piling up little monuments of rock to mark his trail through the maze of stalactites and stalagmites. A city man might have gone batty through wonder and fear and wandered to his death, but Jim White, cowboy, made sure of his back trail.

The worst of it were the echoes and the weird noises that seemed to fill the cavern. Echoes, and a shortage of coal oil finally drove Jim back to the mouth of the cave, awed and dripping with sweat in spite of the chill atmosphere. The temperature of the cave was just fifty-six degrees, as always, in spite of the hot June sun outside.

Well, Jim had to talk now. He went back to the H Slash to tell some of the boys of the wonders he had seen. They all laughed at him. He wanted to do some more exploring, but he wanted some one with him, be-

cause he was afraid the size and loneliness of the weird place would drive him loco if he tried it again by himself. But nobody but a fifteen-year-old Mexican kid would take enough stock in Jim White's big "bat hole" even to ride over and look at it.

The lantern had proved entirely too dim for the cavern, so Jim and the Mexican made a couple of torches by stuffing rag wicks into the spouts of a couple of big coffeepots. These crude flares made a lot more light, and with them the two passed the last of Jim's marked trail and discovered the famous "Big room"—that wonderland within a wonderland that is the principal show place of the Carlsbad Cavern to-day. "Pot-head," the Mexican, thought it was surely the home range of the old devil himself, but the kid willingly pressed on, eager to see just what the old boy might look like!

There's no use trying to describe what they saw. You might not believe it any more than the H Slash boys believed Jim and Pot-head when they got home three days later after exploring about twenty-five miles of underground chambers. You can see pictures of some of it in the September, 1925, issue of the *National Geographic*, but even they won't help you much. You have to go to Carlsbad and see it, and even then you'll shake your head plenty before you'll believe your eyes.

A YEAR later Jim White succeeded in getting a bunch of business men from the town of Eddy, now Carlsbad, New Mexico, to go down into the cave with him. They only covered about eight miles of the apparently unending cavern, but they came out thoroughly convinced of what has now

proven to be the truth—Jim White, the cowboy that no one believed, had discovered the largest cave in the whole wide world—so big that even the Mammoth Cave in Kentucky is a pothole by comparison.

That same year a fertilizer company got interested in mining the huge pile of bat *guano* that had accumulated under the bat roost in the section of the cave near the big hole by which Jim had first gained entrance. From then until 1917 this outfit took four million dollars' worth of fertilizer out of the cave and then went broke when the supply became exhausted. During these years Jim drew a salary from the company and did not become interested in the cavern's show possibilities. The dark retreats in the big room and beyond where there are no bats or any other form of life were seldom visited. But when the *guano* played out, Jim began to build trails and guide tourists through this underground wonderland for a fee of two dollars a head.

He again became very active in the unending job of exploring and developing new sections of the cave. Unending, because the cavern seems to go on and on forever under the Guadalupe Mountains. It's a devil's maze of pits and passages that lead to chambers on several different levels. Jim put all the money he made out of the tourist traffic into the development of his underground domain, and even garnered himself some extra *dinero* trapping coyotes during the slack season in the winter to aid in his work.

It would take more than the space we have here to tell about the number of hairbreadth escapes he had during his numerous explorations. Once his clothes became saturated with oil from a leaking lantern and

caught fire. A couple of times his light failed him and he found himself trapped in the solid, impenetrable darkness. A number of times he missed death by inches from pot-holes that appeared suddenly right under his feet. But these hazards decreased as he gained experience.

Owing to the even, cool temperature in the cave, Jim got so he liked to stay down there to avoid winter cold and summer heat. Once he stayed underground for fourteen months. His face, that had had the usual cowboy's saddle-colored tan, got as white as a ghost's, and his eyes became so used to the semi-darkness that he found the sunlight almost unbearably painful when he came out into the light. Jim was well on his way to become one of those blind, dead-white animals that inhabit the big caves everywhere! Since then he has seen to it that he gets out in the sunlight enough to keep color and eyesight normal.

IN 1923 the United States government took official notice that Jim White had discovered quite a hole in the ground and the Reclamation Service sent a man out to look it over. As a result the cavern and some of the surrounding country were set aside as what is known as a "national monument," but the tourist-guiding business was retained as a personal concession by Jim himself. A good, hard road was built right up to the cave, and an easy trail was constructed down into it,

doing away with the barrel and hoisting winch that had been the means of ascending and descending since the days of the *guano* company. Later, in 1930, the Carlsbad Cavern was given full status as a national park, just like Yellowstone and Yosemite, and fittingly enough, Jim White was made chief ranger.

Since the government took it over, seven miles of perfectly safe and well-graded trails through the accessible parts of this scenic wonderland have been built, and a special double-unit lighting system that gives off twice as much illumination as the full moon has been installed. And more than a thousand people a day now make the six-hour trip during the summer season.

As for Jim, chief ranger, his exploring days are by no means over. He not only supervises the further explorations of the big cavern itself, but has discovered other caves in the neighborhood.

One of the most important is "Mummy Cave," where the ancient "Basket-maker Indians," the old boys who used the *atlatl*—spear—instead of the bow and arrow, lived and buried their dead.

This last discovery has made Jim White, the cowboy who never went to school, a big shot in the scientific world, because the leading anthropologists think that in the bones found in Mummy Cave they have one of the keys that may unlock the secret of the antiquity of man in America.

Coming Next Week, "SEESAW GOES TO TOWN,"

by DABNEY OTIS COLLINS.



*Good Old Chief
Solves A Knotty
Problem*

Chief Plays Vigilante

By GEORGE CORY FRANKLIN

Author of "Vein to the West," etc.

IF I hadn't learned so much about ropes, and how to untie knots with my teeth, I wouldn't have brought Al Peak into this mess. Al thought it was funny to have me untie my halter rope, and he used to play tricks on me, like putting the loose end through the loop, or by half hitching it after he had tied an ordinary halter knot. Then he'd

stand back in the passage behind my stall and chuckle as he saw me working at the knot.

Some of the mules took the idea from me, and Smoky, the third mule from the lead, got so that he would untie the pack ropes and let the load fall off the mule in front of him. He got licked for it, too, because, while Al is full of fun and likes to have us all do smart tricks, he won't

let anything happen to delay us in our work of packing ore from the St. Jacobs Mine.

I got so I could not only untie almost any knot, but could pull out the wooden peg that held the corral gate shut, or lift the latch on the chuck-house door and go in and help myself to salt or crackers. "Dough-belly," the cook, would make believe he was terribly angry about it, but when no one was around he'd call me to the door and, when I opened it, would pet me or give me something that I especially liked.

We had a nice time that summer. The grass was good; the work not hard, and the men laughed and whistled about their tasks. We would leave Peak's main camp on the lake fork about sunup each morning. Four strings of fifteen mules each, sometimes we would stop at the Iron-bed Camp for a load of mine timbers, then go on to the mine, where the men would load three sacks of ore on each mule. Then we'd go down the mountain, getting back to camp early in the afternoon. The rest of the day we grazed on the hills that were back of camp.

I pulled the lead string on the Number One outfit, Al riding me. Toby came next, "Humpty" riding him. "Jumbo" Peak came next, riding Gray Eagle, pulling the third string. The tail string was handled sometimes by one man, sometimes another. The Peak brothers had trouble getting a packer for that string. During the spring and summer they hired several different men for the job, and the man who finally stuck was one they called "Burly." He was a big man with bushy red hair and whiskers. He had little black eyes that were always shifting. He never laughed or joked like

the other men, and when he was in the corral the mules and horses were nervous and jumpy.

I got a whiff of the hate smell from him, and after that I kept away, but Chub, the little bay he rode, didn't like him at all, and didn't hesitate to show it, either.

Once every month, two men would come up from Lake City in a buckboard, always just before dark. One of them drove the team, and the other rode with a shotgun between his knees and a leather bag by his feet. It was this bag that Al tied to my saddle one morning, and then went back along the string loosening the breechings, as he always does before we start up the mountain. I smelled of the bag and of the leather strings that held it. They were tied pretty tight, but I could get hold of one of the loose ends with my teeth. I thought what a good joke it would be to untie that string.

I had to jerk pretty hard, but finally I felt the knot give and was just about to pull it loose when I heard Al coming back along the other side of the mules. I thought I'd better not let him catch me at it, so I straightened up and stood holding my head high and my ears forward, as though I saw something across the river.

Al laid his hand on the sack when he got on, but just at that moment Jumbo Peak came up and said that he and Humpty were going to load coal and would come later. Al said, "All right, Burly and I will go on," and we started.

Going around the first curve, Dynamite set back and broke the pig-tail on Topsy's saddle and Al had to go back and tie a new one. Al cussed Dynamite a bit, but he didn't smell mad when he came back, and we went on to the mine.

THE foreman came out to meet us, and all of a sudden the fear smell was so strong that it scared me. I looked around to see what the matter was; Al had his hands on the string, looking at it, and his face made me feel sorry inside.

"Great guns, Jim," he told the foreman, "I've lost the pay sack."

"Lost it," Jim said. "How could you do that?"

"I had it on the front of my saddle. Chief must have untied it. See, here's the marks of his teeth."

"Gee, Al, that's too bad. The men are expecting their money to-night, and they'll be sore if it ain't here."

"By thunder, they'll have it," Al told him. "I'll go back down the trail, and if I don't find it, I'll go on to town and draw it out of my own account. Make out a list of what you need, while I tell Burly what to do."

He went away, and when he came back he was sore. He tied Topsy, the lead mule, to a post, got into the saddle without touching a stirrup, and jabbed me with his spurs.

I was so surprised to have Al act that way that I didn't mind the hurt. I knew he wanted to go some place right now, and I hit the trail at a good gait. Al did slow me down while we were on the grassy slope, but as soon as we came to where the hillside was covered with buckbush he rode on one side and looked close. I'd forgotten all about the bag, and hadn't felt it fall off, but I had a pretty good idea, now, what Al was looking for, and I tried to help him by sniffing at the bushes we passed.

Just below the Iron-bed cabins we met Jumbo and Humpy, and when they told Al they hadn't seen the leather bag, he rode faster until we

got to the camp. He left me there and took the team and light wagon they use when they're in a hurry, and pulled out.

Early in the afternoon Burly came with his string of mules, but before he started to unpack them he went into the grain room, and a little later two men rode up the trail from town. They stopped by the corral and I knew them to be two of the packers that had worked for Al early in the summer. They seemed to know Burly and they talked to him a while; then all three of them went into the chuck house. I didn't like being left in the corral alone, so I pulled the wooden peg that held the gate and went out to graze on the hillside.

I saw Al come, and right after that Burly and the two other men rode away at a fast lope, heading up the trail that leads over toward Silver-ton. I had filled up on grass and thought I'd like some of Dough-belly's biscuits, so I went back to the chuck house. It was awful still there, and I couldn't figure it out because I knew Al must be around some place, and Dough-belly never went far away. I put my nose on the latch and pushed, as I had done lots of times before, and when the door opened I was so surprised that I gave a loud snort.

Al lay on the floor, like he'd been taking a nap. He began to talk to me right away. "Hello, Chief," he said. "Good boy."

I quieted down when I heard Al's voice, and sniffed at him. "Good boy, chief," Al said again, then he turned over on his face, and I saw that his hands were tied behind him. His feet were tied together, too. I thought this must be some sort of a funny game that Al was playing, and turned away. "Whoa, Chief,"

he said. "Good boy, I'll bet you can't untie that rope."

I handled my ears and listened to him. Al said, "I'll give you some oats—oats, Chief, savvy?—if you'll untie it for me."

Finally I got it into my head that Al was trying a new trick on me. He thought I couldn't untie that knot. I smelled of his hands and fooled with the rope a little with my lips, not really trying to untie the knot, but getting the feel of it. I heard something outside and started to go see what it was, but Al said, "Good horse, Chief, untie the rope." I knew those words—they were the ones Al used when he and the men watched me untie a rope they had fixed for me.

I went back and worked at the knot with my teeth. It wasn't very hard to loosen, and I soon had it untied and held it up waving it around like I always do. Al sat up now, and reached up. He could touch my nose. "Good old Chief," he said. "You've paid for all the mischief you've caused."

He took hold of my legs and pulled himself up until he stood straight. Then he put his arm around my neck and pulled and shoved me around, until we got close to the cook table. Then he grabbed up a knife and cut the ropes that held his legs together.

As soon as he was free he opened the door into the little room where Dough-belly sleeps and said, "You here?"

I heard Dough-belly grunt, but he couldn't talk, because there was a rag tied over his mouth. He was all tied up, too, the same as Al had been. Al cut him loose and they talked a little. Then Al led me out to the stable, put my saddle on me, and away we went up the valley.

Never in my life had I been given such a ride as I got that day. Al didn't even wait for me to get warmed up but spurred me into a run and made me hold it.

THERE is a long piece of level country above the camp, and we didn't lose much time covering it, but when we came to where the trail starts up over Cottonwood Hill, I was breathing hard, so Al let me slow down a little until I got my wind. I knew, though, by the feel of his legs against me, that he was nervous and in a terrible hurry. I could smell Chub's tracks in the trail, and supposed that Al wanted to catch him, but wondered why he should turn me off into a dim trail that led down through the woods. After a little I figured it out; that this was a short cut, and he hoped to head Chub off before he reached the level valley beyond.

When he came to the main trail again, Al got down and looked for tracks. Then he led me back into the trees and tied me out of sight. It wasn't long until I heard horses coming, and, sure enough, it was Burly and the two other men. Al stood behind a tree and, when they were nearly to him, he said: "Stick 'em up! I've got you covered."

The man in front saw that Al had the drop on him, and I guess he saw it was no use to try to get away, but Burly and the other man were far enough away so that they took a chance, and whirled back into the timber. Before Al could get to the first man, they were gone.

I knew the man he'd stuck up pretty well. His name was Cady, and he'd pulled a string for Al for some time. Al said, "You birds came pretty near gettin' away with it, didn't you? Where's the money you took off of me?"

Cady motioned toward the sack on his saddle. Al opened it and took some bundles of green paper out. "This is only half of it, where's the rest?"

"That's all I know about," Cady told him. "It's the money you got when we stuck you up at the camp."

"Didn't Burly tell you that he found the first pay sack beside the trail?" Al asked.

Cady shook his head, and Al seemed to think he was telling the truth; anyway, he took Cady's guns away from him and made him ride ahead of us into camp. Jumbo and Humpy were there, and they told Al they had seen Burly and the other man ride past, but hadn't tried to stop them. They hadn't talked with Dough-belly yet, so didn't know what had happened. Al told them to take Cady with them and follow Burly and his partner to Lake City. Then he turned me toward the mine.

We got there just before the gong rang for supper, and Al gave the pay sack to the foreman. "Don't tell anybody about what's happened, Jim. I'm only half done with this job," he said, and then we went back to camp.

Along in the night Humpy brought Toby and Gray Eagle into the stable. He and Al got a lantern and hunted all around the hay room and in the mangers, but they didn't find the sack. Next day we made our usual trip. Things soon settled down like they were before, only Al was always ready to pet me and say, "You're a good horse, Chief." And whenever I went to the chuck house Dough-belly always had a doughnut or a biscuit for me, and he'd come and rub my ears and say nice things to me.

One day I was all alone in the stable, so I pulled the pin that held

the half door to my stall, and went over to the grain room. I knew it wouldn't do me any good to go in there, because Al had put a padlock on the grain box so I couldn't open it, but sometimes there was a little oats left in a sack, so I muzzled the latch on the door until I got it open and went in. There weren't any grain sacks lying around, and as soon as I found out that the padlock was on the box I started to go out. My head was near the log wall, and as I turned I got a strong scent of Burly. For a time I felt sick all over. I'd come to hate Burly, and the smell made me want to fight. I knew he couldn't be there in the grain room, but there was that smell, stronger than ever. It seemed to come from a crack behind one of the upright braces beside the windows.

I stuck my nose in there, and found a hole big enough to get my head in. There was something soft and smooth in the hole, something that felt like the skirt to my saddle. I took hold of it with my teeth and dragged it out. Just then I heard Al coming along the passageway and I whirled back. Once, when he'd caught me in the grain room, he'd paddled me with a little board. It didn't hurt any, but I didn't want Al to catch me there anyway. I'd just got about halfway through the door when he saw me.

"Chief, you old rascal," he began, then stopped. He wasn't scolding me any more. He came to me and took the leather thing out of my mouth and yelled: "Hey, Jumbo, come here! Chief has found the pay sack that Burly hid in the grain room!"

The other men came running. Al opened the leather bag and took out a lot of green papers like those he had found in the sack Cady had.

"How in the world did that old lock picker find it?" Jumbo asked.

"You can search me," Al said, "but let's not let anybody know about our having found it, and when Burly gets out of jail on that assault charge, he'll come here sure. He was trying to double-cross his partners by telling them that he didn't find the pay sack."

Every time Jumbo would come near Al, when there was nobody else around, they'd talk about my having found the pay sack. "I tell you, Jumbo," Al said one day, "this horse is part human. He thinks things out like a man does."

Jumbo laughed and said, "Well, if we don't find out, somehow, what happened, you'll think he can read and write pretty soon."

"Nothing he'd do would surprise me," Al said. "You think I'm nuts about it, but if he can't reason, how did he happen to come to the chuck house that day and untie me?"

"He'd do that all right," Jumbo said, "if he smelled grub or thought he could pull some mischief or other."

SOON after that, fall came. The aspen leaves became very pretty, and ice began to form on the beaver ponds at night. One morning there was snow on the ground and after that the mules were kept in the stable at night. I liked this best of any time of year. The frost in the air made us all feel good, and it was nice to think, during the day, as we bucked through the drifts on the trail, of the warm stable with clean straw to sleep on, and the well-filled managers.

Each string of mules had their own long manger and the horse that led them had a box stall at the end, so that the mules could look up and see him, if anything scared them.

There was a window in one end of my stall, and not long after the snow came there was a full moon. I liked to get my mouth full of sweet timothy and stand and look out of the window while I ate it. I could see across through the trees to where the road from Lake City wound around them, and back the other way to the house where Al and Jumbo stayed.

There was a light in the window, so I knew they were there, and I wondered who that could be standing beside a tree out near the road. He was a big man, but not fat enough to be Jumbo. I put my head down in the manger for another bite of hay, and when I looked out of the window again, the man was gone. A minute later I saw him near the hay stacks behind the barn.

Just then the door to Al's house opened and a strong light showed across the open. Al came out on the step and called back to Jumbo, "I guess I'll have a look 'round the stables."

Right away the man I'd seen by the haystack ran back into the timber and pretty soon I saw him on a horse riding away toward town.

Al came with a lantern, looked over the mules, then came to my stall. I was awfully glad to see him and put my head against his shirt, like I do when I'm in trouble. He stroked my neck and rubbed my ear. "What's the matter, Chief?" he asked. "Did a pack rat scare you, or did you have a bad dream?"

I nickered with my nose against him, trying my best to tell him that something was wrong, but he didn't understand. He did go through the grain room, though, and look around. Then he came back and said, "You're all right, don't be so jumpy."

I didn't go to sleep for a long time,

but stood watching, to see if the man came back. Once, toward morning, when a mule hit his hoof against a board, I jumped to look out of the window, but there was no one in sight.

There wasn't anything more to frighten me for some time, then one night when I'd almost forgotten about the man I'd seen, I heard the door to the stable creak. I looked to see if there was any light in Al's window, but there wasn't. I wondered who could be coming into the barn at that time of night, and went to my door and pushed it open.

Some one was feeling his way along the passage, some one who knew the way well enough so that he didn't need a light, and the mules didn't snort or make a fuss, like they do when a strange man comes into the stable. I took another step out into the passageway, and then I knew. The smell of Burly came strong, and it was the fear smell.

He was slipping along, not making any noise, but headed for the grain room. I snorted and he cursed me and told me to "shut up." That made me mad and I whistled, and then squealed. Burly reached for a pitch fork and came at me, prodding me in the shoulder. I heard the door of Al's house slam, and I knew he had heard me. That gave me the nerve to charge against the pain of the jabbing pitchfork. I struck with

both front feet and felt one hoof hit a bone.

The men were coming now. I could hear the frosty snow creak under their boots as they ran. I struck again, just as the stable door opened and a light shone in the passage. Burly was down behind the mules, but I couldn't get to him because the pitchfork was stuck in my shoulder and held me back. When the light showed on his face he started to get up. He was right behind Topsy, and one of his hands touched her leg. She kicked once, and that was enough.

The men dragged Burly out, but Al came to me and pulled the pitchfork out and wiped the blood off my neck and shoulder. The mad smell was terribly strong on Al, but when he'd got a bottle out of the saddle room and rubbed some stuff on me I felt better.

Next morning I saw the men loading something wrapped in canvas into the high box and drive off with it toward Lake City. Al said to Jumbo, "I'll let my string rest today; I'm going to stay with Chief."

"Sure," Jumbo said. "And Al, I'll take back all I said about him not thinking things through. He not only got the money back, but he punished the thief."

Al just grinned and combed a snarl out of my mane with his fingers.





Deputy for a Day

By CLIFF WALTERS

Author of "The Borrowed Herd," etc.

Trough was hunting sage hens, but it was a different kind of a bird that Barney was after

AS the freight wagon pulled by four weary horses gained the top of a low ridge, and brought into view the cluster of log buildings that was Bootville, Barney Tindall, the small, nonpaying passenger on that dust-enveloped wagon, focused a warm, anticipatory smile upon one false-fronted building in particular. He pointed toward it now and said:

"That's my friend, Jim Blair's, store. I'll sure be glad to see him again, and plant my boots under his dinner table."

"Uh-huh," said the mile-weary

freighter who was hauling his first load through this Badger Basin country.

"And I'm sure much obliged to you for givin' me this long lift," Barney went on, his words merging with the clank of chain tugs. "I'm about as flat as I'll ever get. No horse, saddle, or change. And my boots is wore so thin that I flinch when I step on a live cigarette butt."

"Glad I could oblige yuh."

The late summer sun, poised high in its noonday zenith, poured down its heat. Brake shoes howled against steel tires as the wagon rumbled down the slope and into the heat-

stupified little town. Without waiting for the vehicle to stop, Barney Tindall hopped to the ground, waved to the accommodating driver, and ascended the porch of the Blair store.

With a smile on his lips, and his hand on the latch of the front door, he suddenly stopped. The place was locked. Surprised, he rattled the door.

"Hey, Jim!" he called. "I'm back again—and broke as usual!"

There was no response. He turned away and started around to the back door. But from the saloon across the street a loud voice bawled:

"You can't get in there no more, Tindall! Blair's dead!"

Barney tensed as if a thunderbolt had jarred from the cloudless heavens. His smile changed to a stony stare. He walked across the street to where Sheriff van Alston was squatting in the shade of the saloon.

"You say Jim's—dead?"

"Yeah," the officer replied. "Two days ago he was killed. Buried him yesterday evenin'."

"Killed? Now who would——"

"Bendy Linck would—and did. The bent-nosed skunk was layin' for Jim when he opened his store the other mornin'. By the time the shootin' was over, and some of us got there, the money till was empty and a stockin'-footed sorrel horse was streakin' it up over the ridge there."

"And you let Bendy Linck get away?"

"I didn't let him!" Van Alston snapped. "I kept on his trail till dark that night. Even a sheriff can't trail in the dark, which is somethin' that folks can't seem to get through their thick heads!"

"So you give up that trail?"

"I lost it!" Van Alston's red face grew a bit redder. "What's gripin' you, Tindall? Upset 'cause you've lost your meal ticket—Jim Blair?"

"He was something besides that, Van Alston," answered Barney, gray eyes sober. "We rode a lot of round-ups together, Jim and me, 'fore he inherited this store from his dad."

"You're all through cashin' in on that frienship now, Tindall," came the reply. "If you've come back here flat broke again, expectin' Jim to stake you—like he allus has—to a horse and ridin' outfit, you're outta luck."

"Whenever Jim staked me, I always paid him back," stoutly maintained the puncher with the shabby clothes—and a failing for business ventures that never turned out right. "Now I'm askin' you a favor, Van. Stake me to a horse and saddle till I go out and round up Bendy Linck. I've never seen him, but I guess I'd know him by that crooked beak that got him his nickname."

"Sorry." Van Alston was blunt. "I've never had as much confidence in a jobless loafer as Jim Blair always seemed to have. Of course, you never drug me out of a river and saved my life like Jim claimed you saved his. Nope. When I lend my horses out, I want to know that they're comin' back to me."

Barney swallowed. "Would it be askin' too much if I want to be deputized? I'll find Bendy Linck!"

"Oh, sure. Everybody can do better'n the sheriff—to hear them tell it." The officer scowled. "Sure. I'll hand you a warrant for Linck's arrest, if you'll leave town with it—and not come back."

"You say Linck was ridin' a stockin'-footed sorrel horse?"

"Yeah. Why? Uh—if you've got a hunch where Linck might be——"

"Maybe I've got a hunch where there's a stockin'-footed sorrel. But there's lots of 'em around the range."

"Remember this, Tindall. I ain't givin' you the right to sneak up on Linck and shoot him in the back. He's entitled to a trial, same as any other criminal. Besides, there's two hundred dollars reward on him alive, only a hundred if he's dead."

"If I find him, I won't kill him unless he tries pullin' his gun. Give me that warrant. And I wish you'd loan me a horse."

"No horse!" The officer was emphatic.

A FEW minutes later, foodless, gunless, and horseless, Barney Tindall made his solitary way down Bootville's only street. But it wasn't the lack of grub, the emptiness of his stomach, that bothered him when he glanced at the deserted store across the street. It was a poignant emptiness of the heart, the sharp realization that Jim Blair was lost to him forever.

From the corner of his eye, Barney saw people watching him. He knew what they were saying among themselves. They were saying that he had "cashed in" on his friendship with Jim for the last time; that now this mooching was at an end. Perhaps this fact pleased them. They had always resented the presence of this little puncher who had, for so long, been the recipient of their jovial storekeeper's generosity and esteem.

At the end of the street Barney turned and walked toward the two-roomed cabin where "Trough" Porter lived alone. Trough, an ample person who tipped the scales at well over two hundred pounds, was tipped back in a creaking chair, dozing, when his caller appeared.

"Howdy, Trough," Barney Tindall greeted.

Porter opened dull blue eyes and eased his chair down. He grunted, "Huh! So you're back again!"

"Yep."

"But Santy Claus is dead. Well, there's some cold biscuits over there in the cupboard. And some beans. Help yourself, Barney."

The suggestion of a smile flickered across Barney's face. "You mean you actually had some grub left over from a meal, Trough? What's the matter? Off your feed?"

"Gettin' sick of beans," the fat man answered.

Porter, whose youth had been spent on the unfertile acres of a place called Poverty Flats, had eventually stumbled upon a small placer mine over in the Hat Crown Mountains, and fate, with one generous quirk, had reimbursed him for those many years of privation. He had retired to Bootville, with one definite aim in life—to eat his fill.

He neither smoked, drank, nor gambled. His only vice was gorging, indulging his appetite to the point of gluttony. Now, after two years, excess pounds had insulated his body and won him the nickname of "Trough."

"I'd think you go out and collect yourself a mess of young sage hens," Barney suggested. "They're just gettin' nice and ripe now. Had a feed of 'em the other evenin'. So tender and juicy they make your mouth water."

The thumbs of those plump hands overlapped on Trough's expansive paunch twitched. "Sage hens!" he snorted. "They ain't none this year. I've drove all around these hills in my buckboard huntin' 'em. You don't have to tell me how good they taste, how they make your mouth

water. Just tell me where I can find some."

"Let's hitch up to your buckboard," Barney replied. "I'll show you some. Oh, they're about ten miles from here. But there's lots of 'em up there—by Coyote Springs."

"Coyote Springs? You're sure?" Trough was lifting his heavy body from the chair. "Say, why are you so anxious to see I get some sage hens?"

"I could use some grub, too, Trough. I—I haven't got a gun. If you'd rather not come along, loan me your team and a gun."

"I'll go along," Trough decided. "But there'd better be some game up there at them springs. I want at least a dozen birds myself."

"S'pose you take the .22 rifle," Barney said. "I'll borrow your old .45 six-gun."

"You must think you're a good shot, killin' sage hens with a six-shooter."

"I've done it before."

"All right. Let's go." Trough picked up his hat. "Or do you want some grub first?"

"Nope. I—I'm not very hungry right now." Barney was inspecting the .45 which had hung on the log wall.

THREE hours later Barney and Trough Porter, lurching along over sagebrush in a buckboard which tilted emphatically toward Trough's side, were making their way toward the strip of green which marked the course of Coyote Springs.

"Guess we'll have to walk from here," Trough said. "Too rough for drivin'. I'll tie the team up."

Barney's gray eyes focused on a homesteader's cabin, a new building, which loomed above the willows fringing the course of the spring. His

gaze shifted, roving along those willows. Yesterday, walking past here, he had seen a stockin'-footed sorrel horse picketed near the spring. Maybe—

"Come on," Trough said. "Let's find them sagers if they're around here. And they'd better be!" He led the way.

"Who owns that homestead cabin, Trough?"

"Feller name of Sam Goble. Knew him when he was a kid over on Poverty Flats. He got slung in jail for stealin' colts once, but I guess he's reformed now."

They descended into the wide draw, walked about two hundred yards, and saw a small bunch of sage hens feeding on the broad-bladed grass along the water. Trough brought up his small rifle. It cracked sharply, and a gray bird flopped over against a rock. Again the .22 snapped, and another bird crumpled. But Trough was in too much haste now. He crowded the other birds scurrying up the trail. They whirred up into flight and flew up the draw, landing not far below the homesteader's cabin.

The two men trailed them, Barney taking one side of the spring and Porter the other. Barney walked faster than his portly companion, who puffed noisily. From the corner of his eye, the puncher could see the tall figure of a man framed in the open doorway of the cabin. Barney walked still faster.

"Don't rush so fast!" called Trough. "Wait'll I get there with this rifle."

But Barney paid no attention. Several yards ahead of Porter now, he could see the sage hens trailing through the brush a short distance below the cabin. He was within shooting distance of them now. Awkwardly he dragged the six-

shooter from its holster and blazed away at the closest bird. Spurting dirt showed that he had missed by at least ten feet.

He shot a second time and missed by still a wider margin. The tall man standing in the doorway of the cabin laughed raucously at Barney's marksmanship. Barney turned and stared at him.

"Better trade that six-shooter off fer a shotgun, feller!" taunted the tall man.

Barney abandoned his hunting, then, and walked slowly toward the cabin. As he drew near he noted a stockin'-footed sorrel horse tied in a clump of willows. His gaze shifted back to the man in the doorway—a gaunt-faced man with a narrow, crooked nose and alert eyes.

As Barney approached, Sam Goble, the homesteader, came around the corner of the cabin. Barney had never seen either of these men before, but now he identified "Bendy" Linck by the latter's crooked nose.

"Howdy, gents," he said.

"Howdy, dead shot!" jeered Linck. "What you comin' over here for? Better trail them sagers. You might accidentally shoot one of 'em."

"Me?" Barney said softly. "I'm too busy. Sheriff van Alston give me a warrant for your arrest, Linck. Here it is."

"Keep it!" snapped the crooked-nosed man. "I'm leavin' here to-night. And tell the sheriff he sure sent a swell deputy out to collect a gunman! I've seen some terrible shootin' in my day, stranger, but yours is about the worst ever."

THE look in Barney's gray eyes, the sound of his voice, suddenly changed as he drawled, "I've got a warrant for your arrest, Linck. I'm takin' you

back to town—if you're too yellow to battle it out!"

"You tryin' to commit suicide?" Linck drawled.

"Maybe. But Jim Blair happened to be my best friend, Linck. I hate to see the snake that murdered him standin' there vertical when he should be layin' horizontal—like the rest of the snakes!"

There was a breathless pause during which big Trough Porter hove into sight.

"Two of you after me, eh?" growled Bendy Linck.

Porter heard those words. He also heard Linck add: "I'll drill you both! Pretendin' to be huntin' sagers, eh?"

His bony hand shot down toward his gun, the agile gesture of a man who deals in lead.

Big Trough Porter emitted a wild yell and tried to put as much distance as possible between himself and the gun of the killer.

But the instant Linck's hand moved, the instant his intentions were apparent, Barney Tindall had moved, too. His quick hand whipped a .45 from its holster, and the weapon hurled its deafening detonations across the hills.

Benry Linck sagged against the wall. And Barney Tindall, whose right arm had moved with the speed of a lightning flash, was holding his gun on homesteader Sam Goble.

The color drained from Goble's face as he watched Linck slump and lie still. He stared at Barney.

"You—you sure surprised Bendy, stranger," he offered. "I never seen nobody awkwarder with a gun than when you was shootin' at them sage hens."

"There's reasons for everything," Barney drawled. "If that snake layin' there thought he had a cinch,

that's the way I wanted it. And I wanted him to do just what he did—make a grab for his gun. He maybe worth more alive, but he's better off dead. And that's the way Jim Blair would've wanted it. But where do you stand on this deal, Goble? You're harborin' a murderer!"

"He come here and wouldn't leave," the homesteader protested. "I begged him to go. I don't want to get in bad with the law again. I've had enough of that."

"Then you're not takin' up Bendy Linck's battles?"

"No, sir!"

Big Trough Porter, puffing and mopping his brow, returned slowly to the cabin.

"Gosh sakes, Barney!" he blurted. "You killed Bendy Linck! And I thought sure as the devil he'd kill both of us!"

"You stay here, Trough," Barney said. "I'll go get your buckboard and then we'll haul that gent to town."

AT dusk that evening Sheriff van Alston was handing Barney Tindall a hundred dollars, and Barney, as promptly, was handing it back.

"I don't know what's goin' to happen to Jim's store," he said, "so

you'd better keep that hundred and buy a headstone for Jim."

"That's the way you're goin' to spend this money that you need so bad?" The officer stared incredulously.

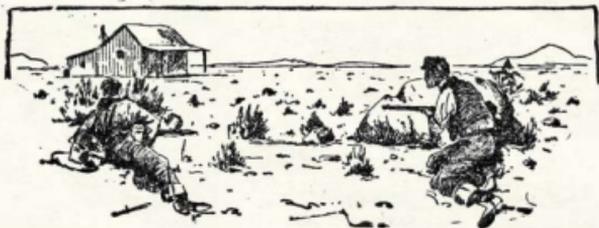
"That's it." The little puncher turned slowly away and started to leave the sheriff's office.

"Wait, Barney!" called Trough Porter. "You say you don't know what's goin' to become of Jim's store. Well, Jim owed me some money, and I kinda figured I'd fall heir to that store. But after what happened to-day up there at Coyote Springs, after you savin' me from Linck's bullets, I happen to remember that Jim left a piece of paper with me about a year ago. A piece of paper that says he wanted you to have what he left—just in case he went kinda suddenlike."

Barney hesitated. A mist filmed his gray eyes. "You sure about that, Trough?"

"Yes, sir. And I allus thought Jim was overestimatin' a range bum, Barney. But I don't know. After you doin' what you did to-day, and after handin' that hundred dollars back to Van there, I guess maybe Jim was right in givin' you your last stake."

"I think maybe he was," said Van Alston quietly.



MISSING DEPARTMENT

GALLAGHER, JOHN.—My brother, who was born in Ireland. Mother's name was Bridget McCabe. Last heard from about ten years ago in New Haven, Connecticut, where he worked in the railroad yards. He is between sixty and seventy years old. He left Ireland when young and came to this country. About forty years ago he was in Valley City, North Dakota. Any information concerning him will be greatly appreciated by his sister Annie, care of Western Story Magazine.

LAKEY, MRS. SARAH INEZ.—My sister, who was last heard of in Sterling, Colorado, in 1920. She has light hair and blue eyes. He has two children Dorothy and Herman. Any information concerning her will be greatly appreciated by Mrs. Anna B. Cheek, Long Lane, Missouri.

PETERSON, J. I. and CECIL.—Last seen about seven years ago at Carthage, Missouri. Cecil was about ten years old, and J. I. about four. They were taken from the Lapin Orphan Home and have not heard from them since. Any one knowing their whereabouts please write to Mrs. Etta Peterson, care of Mac Cartha, Route 2, Box 580, Bakersfield, California.

MOORE, RODNEY.—My oldest brother, who was thirty-five years old in January, 1937. He has gray eyes, weighs about one hundred and seventy pounds. He is five feet six inches tall. Six years ago he lived in Imperial Valley. He was graduated from the El Centro High School and was last seen by his brother-in-law in July, 1930. At that time he was going to work on a sheep ranch in Bend, Oregon. Any information would be greatly appreciated by Mrs. S. E. Mayberry, 617 Cherry Street, Abilene, Texas.

BARBER, JIM.—Last heard of in Taylor County about fifteen years ago. He has red hair and a glass eye. His mother's name is Wells, and his father is a railroad man. Jim, if you see this please write, as I think of you so much. Willie Barrow, R. 1, Box 905, West Palm Beach, Florida.

BOLE, PAUL.—Formerly of Sawtelle, California. He moved to Long Beach, California. He has a sister, Hazel and two younger brothers, Herbert and Wayne. His mother's name is Mrs. May Olson, and his grandmother's, Mrs. Mary Mullins. Any one knowing the whereabouts of Paul or any of these people please write to Ruth Stokes, General Delivery, San Fernando, California.

RAYMOND.—You have been gone seven years. Did you get the letter June sent you to Davenport Street? Would you be kind enough to send us some money? June is in the second year of high school. I give her piano and violin lessons. She plays in the school orchestra. You would be proud of her. I know you will see this as you are a great reader of Western Story Magazine. Have thought of doing this for some time. If you don't send us some money, will have to make a point of getting it from you and do not want to do that. Please answer this through the magazine. Dorothy.

BAILEY, CHARLIE, JR.—Last heard from in Calvin, Oklahoma. He had blue eyes and dark hair. He is about twenty-five years old. His mother's maiden name was May Secar. Any information leading to his whereabouts will be greatly appreciated by his aunt, Mrs. Nellie Farnell, 114 West 74th Street, Shreveport, Louisiana.

HARRIS, RANDOLPH.—Last heard from in 1927 or 1928, when he was working on the Dixie highway as a truck driver for Louis De Cognate Co., of Lexington, Kentucky. He was formerly from Georgia. Any one knowing his whereabouts please tell him to write to an old friend that longs to hear from him. Stella West, care of W. Nevins, 7414 Walnut Avenue, Hammond, Indiana.

SIMMONS, L. L.—Blue eyes, brown hair, left eyetooth crowned in gold, six feet three inches tall, weighs one hundred and eighty pounds, and is forty-three years old. Last heard of in 1932, in Nebraska. He travels a great deal. Son, if you read this please write to your mother, Mrs. M. I. Simmons, Clayton, Georgia.

AGATHA.—Won't you write and tell us where you are? We miss you terribly. Please write to Clarence, care of Western Story Magazine.

MISSING RELATIVES.—Do not know my parents' names. Was placed in the Tennessee Industrial School in 1902 when I was about two or three years old. I have dark eyes and complexion, and am crippled in my left hand and arm from burns. Have been told that I am part Cherokee Indian. Am so anxious to find out about myself. Won't some one help me. James White, Plattsburg, Missouri.

H. W. H. of ALASKA.—Please send your name and address to Helen Rivers, care of The Hollow Tree, Western Story Magazine. Your letter appeared December 18, 1937.

There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

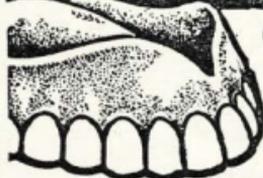
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Continued from page 103

in' around my left ribs, some place, It bled like the devil. There's a furrow cut across the back of my head. It was close. When I woke up I was layin' on my face—and—the blood was running down across my nose. It—it tickled." He laughed rather light-heartedly. "Sure, I'm—I'm all right. I been pullin' these fantin' spells—on and off—all afternoon. Gimme my gun and—"

He staggered to an erect position and stumbled toward the window. Jinglebob was up, too, swaying queerly on unsteady feet. His head was swimming in a crimson fog. He felt dizzy.

"We'll give 'em the works, Bucky." He tried to make the words come steady, but his voice sounded faint and far away. He lifted his gun and nearly fell through the window when he fired it. He steadied himself against the wall. A steady stream of hot flame was jetting from Bucky's gun in the direction of the shadowy figures outside.

Bridle Bit six-shooters commenced to bark again. Bucky and Jinglebob dropped to the floor as a hail of bullets swept above them.

"What do you say we open the door and rush 'em?" Bucky asked—and immediately fainted away.

"Bucky! Bucky!" Jinglebob said. "Did they get you, pard?"

Bucky didn't answer. Once more, grimly determined, Jinglebob staggered to his feet. His whole body seemed filled with pain. There wasn't any strength in his legs. He stumbled against the wall and crashed down again. Gamely he gritted his teeth and fought to arise, but the necessary strength wasn't there. The firing outside commenced again with renewed fury. There was a great deal of angry shouting, curses.

Then, for the second time that night, Jinglebob Jenkins lost consciousness.

CHAPTER XXII.

A RHYME FOR SASKATOON.

GRAY dawn was filtering through the windows of the Bridle Bit bunk house when Jinglebob opened his eyes. He was undressed, covered with blankets. His body felt stiff and sore. His leg throbbed unmercifully. He moved one arm. It moved freely.

"Nope, I'm not a prisoner," he muttered. "I wonder what's happened. Where's Bucky?"

A movement at his right caught his eye. He twisted around and his mouth fell open when he saw Lorry Alastair standing there. Lorry was wearing overalls; a six-shooter was slung at her right side.

"Hello, Lorry." Jinglebob grinned. "Welcome to our party. How did you get here?"

"So you're awake, are you?" Lorry shook her head exasperatedly. "Jinglebob, you'll be the death of me yet. Why do you insist on running off and getting into fights?"

"It's the nature of the beast," Jinglebob chuckled. His head was clearing fast. He didn't feel nearly so bad as he had upon first awakening.

Lorry drew a chair next to the bunk and sat down. "How do you feel?"

"A mite stiff. Otherwise, all right. Sa-a-ay, what happened? The last I remember—" He paused, then went on, "Say, Lorry, I know now why Scarab wanted the Ladder A. Oh, say, he's dead—"

"I know he's dead, and so is Gus Raymer. Utah Hanman may pull through. I guess that Jerrold man is going to live to serve a prison sentence. He told us the whole story about the railroad and the Napache oil people and all they'd planned."

"Sa-a-ay, you know as much as I do! Hey, where's Bucky Malotte? What happened to him?"

"Bucky's over in the cook shanty, propped up on chairs," Lorry replied.

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"He refused to be put to bed. Tarp's making some coffee and—"

"Coffee? Good. That's all I need. And a cigarette." Jinglebob started to rise from the bunk.

Lorry pressed him back. "You'll stay right there until the doctor comes. Matt has gone to town for him. Your wounds aren't really serious, but there's a couple of bullets to extract, and then we'll move you to the Ladder A."

"Am I hit bad?"

Lorry smiled and shook her head. "Not bad, but you're going to require some nursing, after those bullets are out. Sheriff Wagner patched you up as well as possible until the doctor gets here. It was loss of blood that knocked you out, the sheriff says. And the same applies to Bucky, though his wounds aren't quite as bad as yours."

"Look, Lorry, how did you get here?"

"On horses."

"Dang it, you know what I mean. How did you know I was coming here, when did you arrive, and—"

"Tarp Jones told me."

"Dang Tarp Jones. I told him not to say anything."

"Jinglebob Jenkins, you should know better than that. I could have told you, from my experience, that old Tarp only obeys the orders he wants to obey. And I can't say I like the way you slipped off without telling me—"

"Lorry, I had to do it. It was the only way. This business had to be settled. Breck couldn't stand much more uncertainty. But, just what happened to bring you here?"

LORRY told him: "Last night, some time after you'd left, Tarp came to me and said he thought he and Matt should go to the Bridle Bit and see if you were all right. That was the first intimation I'd had that you'd left. I didn't feel so good about that, Mr. Deputy United States Marshal."

"You know that, too, eh?"

"There isn't much now I don't know about you, cowboy. There'll be no more secrets between us from now on."

"I'm hoping there won't be any need for secrets," Jinglebob chuckled.

"I'm going to see to it there won't," Lorry said sternly, though there was a twinkle in her dark eyes. "Anyway, when Tarp said where you'd gone, my heart dropped into my shoes. Tarp bucked against me going along, but I couldn't be stopped then. We left Breck with Chris, then Tarp, Matt, and I rode to Padre Wells, where we picked up Sheriff Wagner. He agreed with me that we'd better get here as soon as possible. Before we reached here we heard firing. Those Bridle Bit cowboys were just getting ready to smash down the door. We came up on them from the rear and Wagner ordered them to throw down their arms. There was a little firing, but it didn't amount to much."

"Lorry Alastair, are you admitting you were in a gun fight?"

Lorry frowned. "I don't know, Jinglebob," she said frankly. "I don't remember firing my gun, but after we'd rounded 'em up and taken prisoners, I discovered my gun was empty. Anyway," and she smiled, "I'm maintaining I forgot to load it before leaving home. And then we broke down the door to the house and found you and Bucky; and, Jinglebob, I was plumb scared, until the sheriff said you were both alive. Then the sheriff fixed you up and Matt rode to Padre Wells to bring the doctor. Bucky came out of his faint and told us what he knew and we talked to the others, and—and—I guess that's all."

There was a step at the door of the bunk house and old Tarp Jones entered, bearing two cups of steaming coffee.

"Hello there, Jinglebob," he greeted. "Ye're awake, are ye? How about some Java?"

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"Good, but Tarp, you're an old scoundrel."

"Me," innocently, "what hev I done?"

"I told you not to tell I was coming here."

"Young feller," Tarp said seriously, "they's times when wisdom is above promises. I saw my duty and I took it, and it's a right good thing fer you young fellers—meanin' you an' Bucky Malotte—that me'n Matt and Lorry done what we done. Ye'd been wiped out."

"I reckon, Tarp," Jinglebob grinned. "All right, you're forgiven."

Tarp placed the coffee on a near-by table. "I'll go tell Bucky and the sheriff ye're awake. They wanted to know."

"Don't be in too much of a hurry. I want to talk to Lorry a few minutes. Seeing too many people at once might bring me a rise of temperature," Jinglebob said gravely.

TARP slowly winked one eye. "All right, I'll leave ye alone a spell, but I doubt yer temperature will stay down." And when Lorry gasped, the old cowman beat a hasty retreat.

"Well, Lorry," Jinglebob tried to keep his voice level, "I reckon the sale of a right of way to the T. N. & A. S. will put you and Breck on easy street."

"It'll help," Lorry nodded. "Look, Jinglebob, we want you with us. Breck wants a man to run the Ladder A. I talked it over with him last night—"

"Now, wait a minute, Lorry—" Jinglebob started a protest.

"I'll do no more waiting, man dear. You're leaving that deputy United States marshal job. You're going to stay where I can keep an eye on you."

"But, Lorry, I can't live on your ranch."

"I've got my own ideas about that.

If it wasn't for you, we wouldn't have that ranch."

"I can't do it, Lorry." Jinglebob was shaking his head and reaching for her hands at the same time.

Lorry laughed. "Maybe I can bribe you."

"What's the bribe?"

"I'll give you a rhyme for Saskatoon."

"Lorry!"

"Jinglebob, did I ever tell you my name?"

"It's Lorry," puzzledly.

"That's my nickname. No, I know I never told you. You see, my mother named me. She'd read a book, when she was younger, she'd liked a great deal. She named me after the book. The title of the book was 'Lorna Doone.' I'm Lorna Doone Alastair."

"Lorry, it fits!"

"I reckon it does, cowboy."

"Now I can end that poem."

"Just how did it go, Jinglebob?"

Jinglebob sat a little straighter in the bunk. Forgotten now was the pain of his wounds. His eyes sparkled as he recited:

"You ask which one I like the best,
From Miles to Saskatoon?
The sweetest girl in all the West,
Is the one named Lorna Doone."

Lorry's eyes were misty bright. "It's grand, Jinglebob."

Jinglebob said ruefully, "You had that rhyme all the time, and you never told me."

Lorry admitted the truth of his statement. "I—I wanted to make sure you were going to stay, first. I wasn't going to give you a rhyme to pass on to some other girl."

"Lorry, you little idiot, you sweet little idiot."

Jinglebob raised his arms as the girl leaned closer. He held her tight, murmuring, "Sweet little idiot."

After a time she stopped his voice with her lips.

THE END.



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To look at me now you wouldn't recognize me as the same man I used to be. Then I was a physical wreck, a 97-pound weakling—flat-chested, spindly legs, arms like pipe stems.

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