STREET AND SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY

FEB. 10, '40

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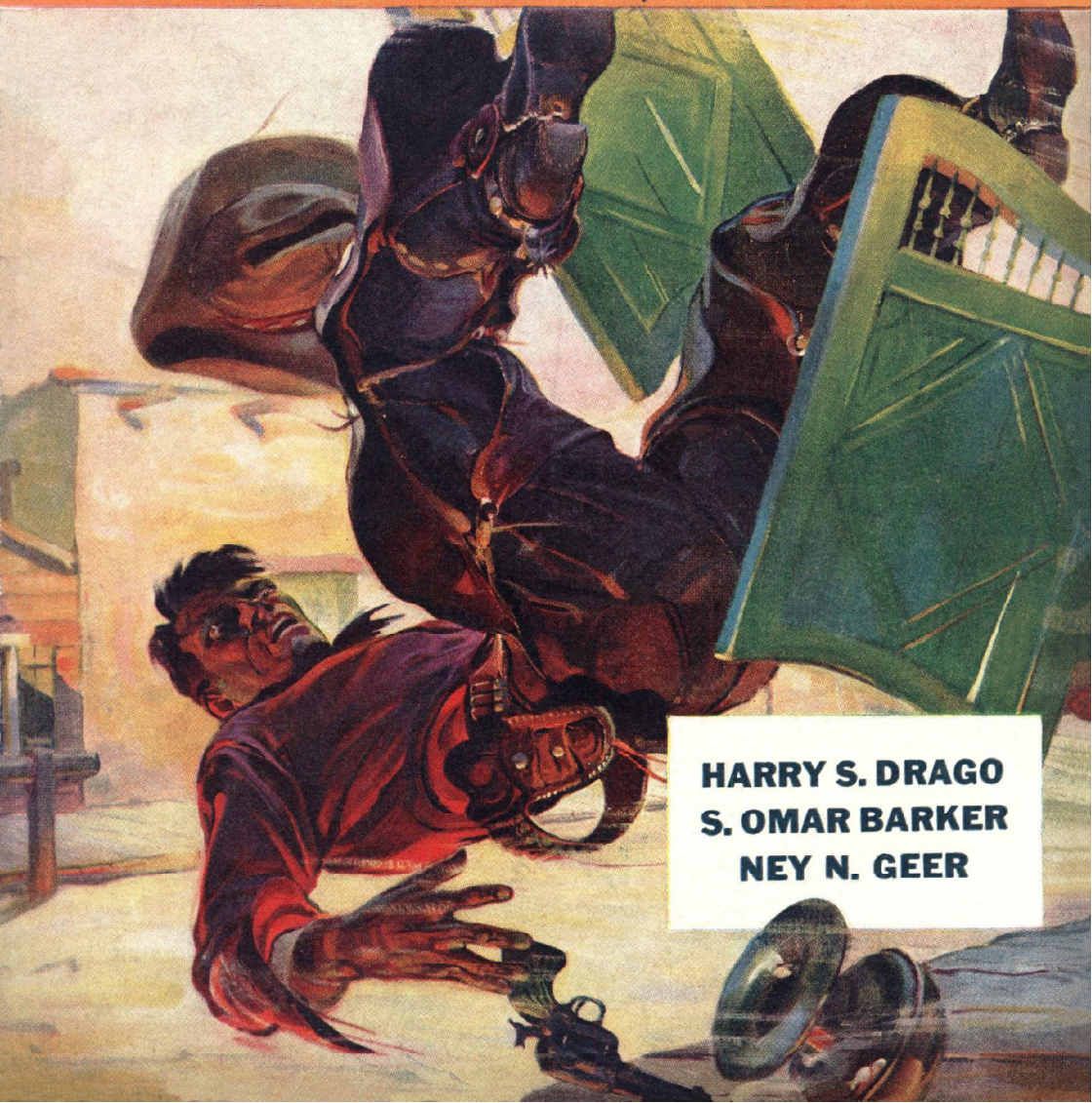

HARRY S. DRAGO
S. OMAR BARKER
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IT used to be thought that many people were just naturally skinny, puny and inclined to be nervous. But today that idea has been proved entirely untrue in great numbers of cases. Thousands of thin, tired, jittery, rundown people have gained new naturally good-looking pounds, normal health and pep, new friends and wonderful new enjoyment in life—with the aid of the Vitamin B and iron in these amazing little Ironized Yeast tablets.

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Special offer!

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Turn spare hours into money. Use spare time at home to master a profession which has made thousands of dollars yearly for ambitious men and women. Many graduates have completed this training in just a few months, but you can take your own time. It need not interfere with your other work or pleasure. All instruction has been prepared by the teachers in our well known resident school—the same material is used and a diploma is awarded upon graduation.

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STREET & SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

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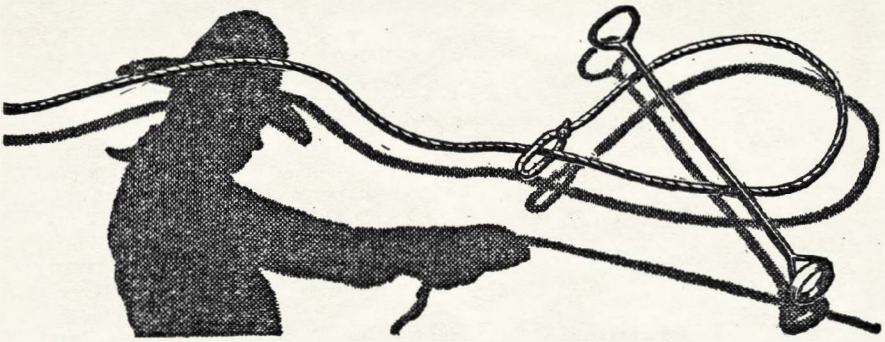


The Roundup

THE Hudson River is a long way from the Canadian, but recently New York had a one-steer stampede that created more havoc than a rampaging herd would cause on the plains of Texas. A fourteen-hundred-pound mossyhorn got loose as it was unloaded from a cattle car and went on the prod through Manhattan's canyons and arroyos. He outflanked the rush of traffic, turned the point of the drive, and soon had automobiles milling with smoking tires and smashed fenders.

Meantime, a posse had formed and taken to the trail. Cowboys from the West—well, anyhow, from the West Side—leaped to the running boards of a car and took to the chase. They hung onto their flying mount and grimly shook out loops with which they meant to bring the old outlaw to earth.

All might have gone well had the law not joined in. The steer had heard the shrill wail of winter's wind in the West, but he had never heard the shrill wail of a police-car siren on the West Side—and he didn't like it. He took off anew through the bosque of iron elevated stanchions with no regard for stop lights, piling up traffic and causing peaceful citizens to flee for their lives.

Finally the posse caught him and a rope was flung over his head. But the roper didn't throw him off his feet, he didn't even take a dally with his rope. So the steer took a dally of his own. He leaped over the hood of a police car, the rope got tangled in the machine, and someone cut the lariat just in time to keep the car from being overturned and maybe dragged off and cached. That outlaw was really ornery by then, for he'd seen the glint of six-guns—all right, service revolvers—in the hands of the law.

But civilization corners wild, free spirits, and in two hours they had the steer calmed down. And this time they took a dally—around a concrete pillar. More power to you, old mossyhorn!

"I have been a reader of Western Story for over eight years," friend Tom C. Fuller, of Lexington, Kentucky, informs us, "and I do not think it is out of the way for me to offer my first criticism of the magazine. What is the make of the revolvers carried by the American colonists in Gerard Delano's illustrations of his article, THE STORY OF THE WEST, in the December 16th and 23rd

issues? Colonel Sam Colt patented his revolver in 1836 so I am wondering what kind of revolvers these men became so proficient with in October, 1835. Anyway, here's hoping for the same high class of stories as always—"

Not out of the way at all, Mr. Fuller, and here's Delano's justification of the revolvers depicted in these particular episodes: "Your reader is quite correct in that the general period of the cap-and-ball revolver is officially credited as beginning in 1836. Your reader has the advantage of me as to the exact date of Colt's patent. (The Colt's Patent Firearms Manufacturing Co., of Hartford, Connecticut, in their 100th anniversary firearms manual, 'A Century of Achievement,' says: 'As a youth of twenty he (Samuel Colt) . . . journeyed to Europe where he secured patents in England and France and upon his return to the United States February 25th, 1836, the historic American patent was granted.') But in a recent *American Rifleman*, under the title of 'The Spencer Carbine,' an article recently appeared from which I quote an excerpt as showing that various guns were already in use at the time the manufacturer was granted the patent, patent having been *applied for* some time before. This is the excerpt: 'The period of the 1850's saw the change from muzzle to breach loader—the most famous of these was the invention of Christopher Spencer, which he first patented on March 6th, 1860.'

"Another article which also appeared in *The American Rifleman* under the title of 'The Percussion Plains Rifle,' mentions the practical percussion cap as appearing in this country in 1830. From the foregoing two points I consider myself justified in showing revolvers in use during the War of the Texas Revolution which officially began on October 2nd, 1835, and was still in progress in the spring of 1836 when Colt's patent was *granted*. Even if the action had occurred a year or so earlier I would still consider I was within the realm of probability in the revolver being in actual use at such a time, prior to the actual issue of the patent, since the patent date is not proof that the gun was not in use prior to its issuance.

"I trust that this all explains to your reader's satisfaction my use of the cap-and-ball revolvers in these pictures."

In next week's issue—

Sam Martin didn't know he was slated to walk a tight rope over a boiling caldron of trouble when he rode into the Devil Wind Drums to do a little prospecting. But gold and guns usually go together—and Sam found plenty of both waiting for him. Tom Roan's latest novel, SKULL VALLEY GOLD, is full of fast and furious thrills. Don't miss it!

No superstitious native, but a hard-headed young Alaskan, The Siwash Kid wondered if he'd ever fathom the mystery of the riderless, gold-laden sled that crossed his path, bound for some unknown destination. Where was it going and what unseen hand was cracking the whip over its team of trail-fagged dogs? Watch for PHANTOM OF THE GEE POLE, an unusual story by Kenneth Gilbert.

Harry F. Olmsted, Mojave Lloyd, Harry Sinclair Drago and many other names are also down in the tally book for next week. And, of course, you'll find all your favorite departments.

I jumped from $18 a week to $50
-- a Free Book started me toward this
GOOD PAY IN RADIO

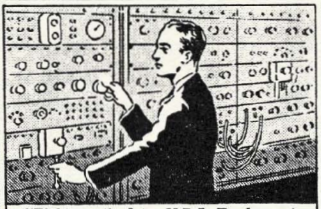
HERE'S How it Happened

by S. J. E.
(NAME AND ADDRESS SENT UPON REQUEST)

"I had an $18 a week job in a shoe factory. I'd probably be at it today if I hadn't read about the opportunities in Radio and started training at home for them."

"The training National Radio Institute gave me was so practical I was soon ready to make $5 to $10 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."

"When I finished training I accepted a job as serviceman with a Radio store. In three weeks I was made service manager at more than twice what I earned in the shoe factory."



"Eight months later N.R.I. Employment Department sent me to Station KWCR as a Radio operator. Now I am Radio Engineer at Station WSUI. I am also connected with Television Station W9XK."

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INTER OFFICE MEMORANDUM

TO: Mr. A. L. Grammer, President FROM: F. L. Stebbins, Jr. DATE: February 1, 1940

SUBJECT:

Mighty glad to tell you that "Steel to the Sunset", now appearing in the February 10th issue of WILD WEST WEEKLY stands out, in my opinion, as "tops" among all stories that I have read for publication.

This story was written especially for WILD WEST WEEKLY by Allan R. Bosworth, who is rated by countless readers as the outstanding Western writer of today. Within the past few months Bosworth has had stories in THE SATURDAY EVENING POST, COLLIER'S and THIS WEEK. In a highly dramatic piece of writing Mr. Bosworth paints the conflict of two great railroads in their race westward to reach the Colorado border and acquire valuable Federal land grants.

Real drama, man-to-man conflict, interesting characterization, plot and color - this story has everything. I'm sure that many who are not now reading WILD WEST WEEKLY would like to know about this splendid story.

F. L. Stebbins, Jr.

Editor, WILD WEST WEEKLY

A real treat for new and old readers of WILD WEST WEEKLY.

Ghosts OF THE RIMROCK

CHAPTER I

THE DRAGON'S CLAWS

"THESE scientists must be discouraged, turned back—killed, if necessary!" Quan Goon said with finality, his deeply carved, hawklike face revealing an ungoverned arrogance and ferocity. "This Flagler Expedition must never be permitted to explore the Pueblo Grande ruins! It means disaster for the Wu-tai-shan Company, desecration of the graves of our honorable dead!"

BY HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

PART ONE

He was big, powerful, the type of man that comes only from the northern provinces. His was not the only voice in this weighty conference now ending in the sumptuous private apartment over Carlotta Soong's ornate gambling establishment in Reno's Chinatown. And yet, he eyed the others fiercely, as though daring them to contradict him.

Carlotta herself, young, exquisitely beautiful, her hair as smooth and black as satin, and her dark eyes with their faint almond slant giving the only hint of the Chinese blood that was in her, regarded the three men seated across the teakwood table from her with concern.

"We shall find some way to stop them." She spoke their tongue, her voice proud, scornful. "That is why I have invited them here tonight for dinner. I shall learn their plans and be able to cope with them."

The three men nodded. There was something inscrutable about them, with their parchment-yellow faces and hooded eyes. Sui Chen, ostensible head of a modest importing firm, was stout, bland and plainly as shrewd as he was pacific. Little Doy Kee resembled a hundred thousand of his countrymen and typified them in unshakable calm and passive acceptance of the inevitable. Together with Quan Goon, all three were mature in years, though Sui Chen, at sixty, alone could claim to have reached the age of wisdom.

All held high positions in the Wu-tai-shan Company. Taking counsel together, weighing and voting and deciding, they guided its destiny. Secretly, its activities went far beyond the ownership of Carlotta's establishment and Sui Chen's importing business.

News of the Flagler Foundation's archaeological expedition from the East, planning so soon to go down to the Pueblo Grande Indian ruins in southeastern Nevada for purposes of exploration, had come as a bombshell, for in that very section of the great Amargosa Desert, the Wu-tai-shan Company had its richest stake, and one with whose safety and security nothing could be allowed to tamper.

"Since the hour of our organizing we have made desperate efforts to keep away from the white men! It was the only hope of our people," Quan Goon said solemnly. "In that desolate, unwanted wasteland, and with the gracious consent of the gods, we have succeeded beyond our dreams." He paused, then continued even more slowly. "Men die mysteriously in the desert. If these scientists persist in their folly, they will be stopped before they ever lay eyes on Pueblo Grande!"

Doy Kee gravely agreed; it was the only way, he said. Sui Chen hesitated, noting the frown which flitted across Carlotta's oval face like a shadow.

"VIOLENCE is for fools," she told them. There was something magnetic, compelling, about this girl. Not even these impassive, Buddha-like men were wholly immune to it. It explained why she handled the business of the Wu-tai-shan Company before the world, taking care of its banking and routine affairs. "Let us be wise. Wisdom is always the better weapon. Some legal trickery might serve us. I can speak to Slade Salters. He is coming tonight." Salters was her attorney.

"No!" Quan Goon thundered. "That foreign devil must not be told anything! He has already learned too much."

"Salters knows only what I choose to tell him, and that is little," Carlotta declared steadily. But even

Sui Chen found reason to agree with Quan Goon now.

"The white lawyer must know nothing of our interest in the scientists, lest he guess too much, little daughter. Think of some other way."

"That you, of all persons, should be the one to counsel soft actions!" Quan Goon burst out, gazing at her incredulously, in an access of sullen anger. "You, more than anyone, should demand vengeance of these dogs of whites—and lose no smallest chance to claim it!"

"I should hate them all," she said, thinking of the mining-camp justice that long ago had left her white mother to die on the open desert in dead of winter, "and I do hate them! It was not they who brought me up, educated me, gave me an opportunity in life—"

"A desert man has already been chosen to guide these grave despoilers," Quan Goon went on bitterly. "That man will cause us trouble!"

"Jim Morningstar," Sui Chen put in, as if remembering suddenly. "He came to my store this afternoon, looking for a cook for the expedition. I did not discourage him—"

"Morningstar?" Carlotta echoed sharply, leaning forward and fixing her gaze on Sui Chen. That name meant something to her.

Sui Chen nodded, without a break in the passivity of his face. "His son."

He added what he knew of Morningstar. It was not much; but this type of desert man, hard, young, and capable, was familiar to them all.

For a moment Carlotta gazed broodingly off into space as though she no longer heard. Her thoughts were busy. Presently she appeared to come to some decision.

"Doy Kee!"

"Yes, Rose-petal?"

"I know you are a learned man, a greater scientist than these men who will be here this evening. But you will be their cook, Doy Kee. I will arrange it. You are a stranger in Reno."

The Chinese agreed submissively. "One does not hesitate to demean himself when it serves our interests. I will keep a watch on their activities, turn back anyone attempting to enter the ruins. Is not that what we ask?"

Quan Goon leaned forward to deliver a fierce aside. "Just be sure, Doy Kee, that you succeed well, or—"

A door opened noiselessly and a house boy, bearing an armful of blossoms, padded softly into the room and began to arrange the blossoms in a vase that was true Ming. Another boy followed, bearing a tray of sweetmeats.

Quan Goon got to his feet and bowed. "It is late," he said. "We shall continue our discussions tomorrow."

Doy Kee followed him out. Plump Sui Chen remained at the table. His eyes followed Carlotta as she crossed the room, regal in her exquisitely embroidered jacket of imperial jade silk and trousers of dullest gold. The reflected glow from the porcelain lamps touched her face with a kindly finger.

"Moy Quai, you are beautiful tonight," said Sui Chen. "You were well named Rose-petal. I shudder at this Carlotta they call you."

"It was my mother's name," the girl murmured. With the careful eye of an impresario, she surveyed the details of this sumptuously appointed room rich with its embroidered hangings, its hand-carved furniture and priceless porcelains. She lit a joss paper and deposited it before the image of Kwan Yam, the

Goddess of Mercy, that occupied a niche of honor in the wall. "In some quarters—behind my back, I assure you—I understand that I am called the Empress Carlotta." Her smile was without bitterness. Sui Chen winced.

"These whites have evil tongues," he said. He, too, rose to leave. "It is the Feast of the Lanterns," he murmured. "A moment for laughter and soft words; but there can be no laughter when the gods frown on us."

CARLOTTA stood at the window for a moment after he left. Parting the heavy damask silk curtains, she peered out at the strings of bobbing paper lanterns that decorated Chinatown. The quarter had a holiday air tonight. The street was crowded with whites and Chinese. Cowboys from the Washoe Valley ranches, their spur chains jangling on the sidewalks, miners with the muck still on their boots, were streaming into her establishment. Few who played there had any acquaintance with her.

The sound of carriages below warned her that her guests were arriving. Slade Salters, dark, debonair, ushered them in. Her invitation had been extended through him. He introduced Dr. Malcolm Birdsall, head of the Flagler Expedition, and Clay Masters, up from the United States Mint at Carson City. Dr. Birdsall himself introduced the members of his own party: Jennifer Orme, the zoologist; nervous little Balto Stubbs, archaelogist and antiquarian; tall, stock, good-natured Bill Merriam, a geologist of note; and Hans Krock, the expedition's photographer. Several members of the faculty of the University of Nevada were also present.

Curiosity was largely responsible for their presence, but they were hardly prepared to be received in such an atmosphere of good taste and sophistication. Carlotta read their surprise. Only in the upturned corners of her strong mouth did she reveal her contempt for these people. She held Jennifer Orme's attention for a moment.

"You excite my interest," Carlotta told her. "You are very brave to face the hardships of such a trip. You are the only woman going with the expedition?"

"Yes, but I never think of myself that way," Jennifer answered. "If I did, I'd unconsciously be expecting favors. I try to take a man's view of it."

"Obviously, you know nothing about a man's viewpoint," thought Carlotta. "Not that you aren't pretty enough without trying to be, and despite those ugly glasses." She didn't have to be told that in Jennifer Orme's busy life there never had been any time for romance. Aloud, she said: "I'm afraid you are far too charming, Miss Orme, for any man to forget that you are a woman."

Dr. Birdsall stepped forward. "Miss Soong, may I present Jim Morningstar, who's taking us to Pueblo Grande?"

Carlotta's anticipated hatred of Morningstar received a jolt as her eyes lingered on his strong, clean-boned face, stamped with unmistakable resolution, and on his high broad shoulders. He was a man at whom any woman would look twice. She knew a brief moment of disquiet even as the thought crossed her mind. As for Morningstar, he found himself gazing almost rudely at this vital, self-possessed, strangely compelling girl whom he had often heard called "the Empress" in cow camps and on the range. Her color, her

erectness, even her unescapable mystery, everything about her had a peculiar attraction for him.

"This is all very informal," Carlotta said, in her low, pleasant voice, "but I am so glad you could come. We must have a long talk later. I'm deeply interested in your plans for taking the expedition to Pueblo Grande."

He had no way of knowing how true this was. She gave him her hand for a moment and he felt something electric pass through his fingers. "I'm afraid my work will be the least important of any," he said with his slow, engaging smile.

"You are too modest," Carlotta replied, turning to be introduced to another guest.

Hans Krock beckoned to Morningstar and tried to explain the excellence of some rare Chinese prints. "They do these things better than we, Morningstar," he declared. "They have a simplicity of line that we have never been able to match."

AFTER a few minutes Jim was glad to escape. He found Jennifer Orme at his side. He had accepted her as a practical person, unlikely to present a problem on the long trip into the desert.

"I wonder if you realize that a fortune had been spent on this room?" she queried. "I'd hesitate to name the value of that vase. And this!" Her long fingers caressed a bowl of purest rose quartz. "There are so many beautiful things here," she sighed.

Morningstar heard her without listening. Thinking of Carlotta, he found the words doubly true. He glanced in her direction, only to catch her withdrawing her eyes from him.

A few minutes later a Chinese boy removed a screen from a wide archway, and Carlotta led them in to dinner. Strange viands appeared, and they were delicious. Carlotta, seated at the head of the table, accepted the compliments gracefully, but it was Slade Salters who kept the conversation in full stride. Big and handsome, sure of himself and his engagingly frank smile, he was well fitted for that office.

"This is the pleasantest moment of our stay in Reno," Dr. Birdsall declared. "We shall remember it for weeks."

Carlotta smiled at the unconscious irony she found in his words.

In the midst of the third course, duck prepared mandarin style, Dr. Birdsall leaned forward to speak across the table. "Morningstar, if we had a cook like this we'd live high at Pueblo Grande." It was said in a bantering tone; yet Carlotta, on the alert for just such an opening, took it up at once.

"Why not this very cook?" she put in quietly, as though it were the simplest of matters. "He is my own, but I seldom make use of him except on occasions like the present. There is no obligation involved whatever, doctor," she hastened to assure, when Birdsall would have protested. To the expressionless Chinese behind her chair she said: "Wong, ask Doy Kee to step here."

Doy Kee presently made his appearance, bowing modestly. There was nothing attractive in his yellow face or blank eyes; yet Birdsall gazed on him as a veritable prize. A few swift exchanges passed between Doy Kee and Carlotta in euphonious Chinese, and then Carlotta said, lapsing into English:

"Very well. You will go into the desert with these friends of mine and cook for them, Doy Kee. They start— Is it this coming Friday, doctor?" she broke off. Birdsall has-

tened to confirm her, whereupon she completed her instructions to Doy Kee smoothly and rapidly.

"All light," Doy Kee assented in a pidgin he would have scorned to use at another time. "I go like you say, missy."

"And thank you very kindly," Dr. Birdsall told Carlotta warmly, as the cook turned away. "This certainly leaves us in your debt."

Gazing shrewdly from one to another as he followed the exchange, Slade Salters asked himself if this was the innocent service it appeared to be, and whether the scientist would have occasion later to alter his opinion of his hostess' generosity. It was a suspicion based on knowledge that would have surprised Carlotta.

Meanwhile, talk of another order was going forward at the other end of the table. Clay Masters had just mentioned the interesting fact that it was now scientifically possible to recognize raw gold and to identify its source with ease. Occasionally there was an exception. Masters cited as an example the coarse gold coming into the mint in small quantities from Chinese shopkeepers, ranch cooks and other Orientals scattered through Nevada.

"Undoubtedly this gold is all alike," he declared, "and yet its origin is completely unknown to us at the mint. I sometimes amuse myself —and this will amuse you, too, Miss Soong—with the fancy that some rich, unknown mine has been discovered deep in the desert and kept an absolute secret. Of course, the Chinese will tell nothing. Invariably they declare they panned the gold out of some small stream in the hills, or they say 'No sabby' to every question put to them!"

He laughed at his conjecture, but Carlotta chose to find a literal question in the glance he tossed her. "It would be more interesting than amusing, if true," she said lightly. "My establishment has sometimes been called a gold mine. I know nothing about any other. I'm afraid you are hunting a fantastic improbability."

WATCHING her, Jim Morningstar thought how difficult it would be to question anything which fell from those lips. He would have been considerably interested to learn of the tight, cold band which closed about her heart at the turn the talk was taking. Things were indeed growing desperate. Quan Goon's plea for violence seemed harder to resist.

Slade Salters was nearer the truth. He knew Carlotta well enough to grasp something of her secret perturbation. The idea put forth by Clay Masters had never occurred to the attorney, yet it was far from a surprise. It seemed to answer a number of questions he had long asked himself.

"Perhaps the truth has been kept even from you, Carlotta," he observed quietly.

"I think not," she closed him off curtly. It was as though she wanted to be done with the subject. Sensing her disturbance, even Morningstar read an undercurrent of tension here which he could not fathom. Carlotta was not easily discountenanced, however, and adroitly turned the conversation to the plans of the Flagler Expedition.

It was not difficult for her to elicit the information she wanted, without arousing suspicion. Only Morningstar caught the thread of tautness in her. Later, when the others ventured downstairs to try their luck at fan-tan, she successfully held him back.

"Gambling holds no fascination

for me," she said. "Come, we will sit here and smoke." She placed a cigarette in a long ivory holder and held it up for him to light.

Over his own cigarette Morningstar regarded her with growing interest. Life seemed to flow in her in a great, sweeping tide, as though the white and yellow blood in her were ever in conflict.

"Late at night, when the quarter is quiet, I often sit here and listen to the Truckee tumbling over the rocks," she murmured. "It always brings me peace."

"I've listened to that river a few nights myself," Morningstar told her. "You know, when you've lived in the desert as long as I have, you don't pass a river by without looking at it twice. It means something to you, reminds you of the days when you would have given your right arm for a few drops of water." His tone was soft, mellow. A mood was on him to which he had long been a stranger. The nearness of this girl, the intoxicating perfume she wore, the very air of this incense-laden room seemed to put a spell on him. He threw it off and opened one of the long windows.

He did not realize that Carlotta was watching him closely.

"What will you do about water on this trip?" she asked.

"We'll fill the tanks in Piute. There's no water beyond there. Two days' riding will bring us to Pueblo Grande. When our supply runs low, we'll have to send a wagon into Piute for more."

"You could be four days without water, if anything happened to the tanks?" Carlotta queried. "Two days going and two days coming, that is. It might be a desperate situation for you."

"I'll see that nothing happens to the tanks," he assured her.

"I trust you will be careful," she murmured as she tapped the ashes from her cigarette. Quan Goon had said that strange things happened on the desert. After a pause, she said: "I suppose you know Pueblo Grande?"

"I've seen it," he acknowledged, wondering at her interest and somehow finding a warning lying deep behind her words.

"Isn't it dangerous to wander through old ruins?" she inquired. "Don't they sometimes come tumbling down?"

Morningstar smiled. "You're not suggesting that that is what is going to happen at Pueblo Grande, are you?"

"No, the gods forbid! I was only thinking of your responsibility. The lives of these men and Miss Orme will be in your keeping. I shouldn't like to see any accident happen."

"You are needlessly alarmed, Miss . . . er . . . Soong. I promise you I shall return them safely to Reno a few weeks hence. I know those ruins are crumbling. So does Dr. Birdsall. He has agreed that if work becomes dangerous, the expedition will be called back."

"Prudence is always wise," she told him, dissembling whatever satisfaction his words gave her. "And if you find the Miss Soong difficult on your tongue—you may call me Carlotta."

She leaned toward him impulsively as she heard the others on the stairs. "Take this," she murmured earnestly. "Always keep it with you. It will bring you luck."

She placed in his hand a little jade figurine carved in the shape of a remarkably lifelike dragon.

Morningstar gazed at it for a moment, then at her, and finally his eyes came back to the little figurine. Its carving was flawless, its value considerable. And it was a gift from her. But somehow he read a significance into the giving of it that outweighed those considerations.

"It has claws—and they are sharp," he remarked.

"That is true." She spoke softly, almost with regret, it seemed. "But remember, they can protect as well as destroy!"

CHAPTER II

"GO BACK!"

SLADE SALTERS was tall and broad-shouldered, a handsome figure of a man, and yet somehow he appeared small in contrast with the trio who shared his office this morning. A glance told that these men were more at home on the range than in town. But they had made themselves comfortable here, looking to the attorney as to a trusted intimate. And no wonder: for, men of unsavory repute as they were by whatever standard of judgment, not a one of them but owed his liberty at the present moment to Salters. Nor did the obligation end there. Cattle rustlers and small-time hold-up men, they had constant need of the services of a not too scrupulous lawyer.

"Give us an idear of what this proposition of yores is, Slade." Tip Slaughter cocked an ice-blue eye at the lawyer, the reddish stubble on his rocky jaw glowing like wires in the sunlight from the window.

"It's a long shot," the attorney warned, "but it's good, or I wouldn't have bothered to send for you. This Masters wasn't telling all he knew, but he did say there's a lot of gold that's exactly alike turning up at the mint in small lots, and they don't know where it's coming from because the mine isn't recorded. Trust a bunch of chinks to keep a thing like that secret! There's a mine, all right; and if the pigtails have got it, I aim to get it! It'll make us all rich."

"But do yuh know where it is?" Snap Clanton demanded.

"Only that the Empress and the rest of the Wu-tai-shan Company are mighty worked up over this expedition that's going out to hunt Indian relics," was the answer. "But that's enough for me. Why, the chink've even figured it out to have one of them taken along as cook." He related how Carlotta had managed that bit of business, and pointed out its significance. "Where there's that much smoke, there's bound to be fire!" he declared.

"An' so yuh want us to go down there in the desert an' grub around?" Bart Cagle rasped dubiously. "Why, there's five hundred square miles o' nothin' but sand, Salters!"

"Hold on," Slaughter put in coolly at this point. "We ain't even decided there *is* a mine yet! It all sounds mighty phony to me." Clanton nodded agreement, and they waited for Slade's answer.

He responded with the story of all that had occurred at the Feast of the Lanterns dinner; how the heads of the Wu-tai-shan Company had acted as though they had something to cover up; how Carlotta had deliberately taken Jim Morningstar's measure; and how she had de-

clared outright that there was no mine, and yet had all but snapped at him, Salters, when he ventured to question her on the matter.

"I tell you I know what I'm talking about." He reiterated his conviction firmly. "This thing is big! More than that, the mine is somewhere near the Pueblo Grande Indian ruins."

"But we've not only got the chinks to deal with, but Morningstar, too," Clanton grumbled. He knew all about Morningstar, as did the others.

"Too much for you boys to handle, is it?" Salters came back with crisp satire.

"That's all right, too," the renegade retorted doggedly. "No harm in lookin' matters over from every angle. It's my guess there's dead men in this; an' it may be us!"

Slade scoffed him to silence and turned his attention to Tip Slaughter. The latter was less impressed by the obstacles, but plainly still inclined to ridicule the possibility that the mine existed at all. Salters succeeded in convincing him at length only by promising that if he followed instructions, he would soon enough be forced to realize the truth.

"I'm not in this for the fun of it," the lawyer reminded them, "any more than you boys are. Now, what I want you to do is this. That scientific expedition is heading south for Sodaville on Friday, and from there they'll strike into the desert for these ruins—"

Snap Clanton knew that country. "Pueblo Grande? It's somewhere over around Piute," he interrupted.

"Then you could pick up the expedition there," Salters nodded. "Follow it, and watch every move that's made. But keep out of sight yourselves, and never mind just now about the mine. Just learn all you can and I've a hunch it'll drop into our hands, when the time comes. What money you need I'll supply."

The men agreed to that plan. For some time the talk was of ways and means. At last the trio made ready to leave; and Salters lowered his voice for a final word.

"Don't misunderstand me," he told them levelly. "Do as you're told and things will go smoothly. I say that because there's plenty of chance in this business for something to go haywire. You know these chinks; and I don't have to warn you about Morningstar. Just keep out of sight and keep your eyes open, that's all. I'll meet you in Piute in two weeks."

UNDER Jim Morningstar's direction the Flagler Expedition struck south into the desert on schedule. Toward sunset of a sweltering day, they pitched camp at the base of a high butte not more than a day's travel from Pueblo Grande.

Late in the afternoon, a brisk wind had sprung up; sand blew across the open flats and rustled in the drought-twisted sagebrush. Dusk brought with it a bleakness that did little to promote good spirits. An hour later the desert chill settled down. Even Dr. Birdsall was depressed, making a wry face at the sand in his food at supper. The rest were silent or low-spoken, except for the three cowboys, Sulphur Riley, Johnnie Landers and Happy Failes, Jim's assistants, who made light of anything.

There were eleven in the party, including Morningstar. Perhaps the one member they were all most conscious of was Jennifer Orme. Even Jim kept watching her where she sat near the fire, gazing into the flames. He asked himself whether she would be able to stand up to the rigors of this trip.

Curiously enough, she showed less sign of weariness and depression than her companions. She was pretty, too, in a quiet way, Jim was forced to admit; tendrils of honey-colored hair blew about her face in a delightful way. There was serenity in those hazel eyes, but this girl was vital, however little she chose to make of the fact.

"You'll hear the coyotes howling, when the wind drops." Bill Merriam endeavored to engage her in talk. Big and lazy, with a deep voice and salty common sense, he was a likable chap.

"I've heard them before," she told him. They conversed desultorily; Balto Stubbs, Dave Sprague, and Hans Krock, the photographer, listening.

Morningstar was still busy with his final preparations for the night. "Better gather plenty of dry sage, and keep a blaze going," he told Sulphur and the others. "It'll get colder toward morning."

Sulphur, lanky and lantern-jawed, his eyes deep-set, shrewd, got to his feet. "Ain't enough brush in this country to keep a blaze goin' all night," he grunted. He was an incurable grumbler, but the others knew it was just his way.

Jim smiled and left it at that. As he turned back to the fire, something flashed down from above and buried itself in the embers. Balto Stubbs, short and stout and excitable, vented a cry of surprise. The others were no less startled.

Taking a single swift stride, Morningstar leaned down and plucked a long, wicked-looking knife out of the flames. He was just in time, for there was a paper skewered on the thin blade, its edges already beginning to curl and brown. He removed it and flattened it out. His face went thin and cold as he read the two printed words. He stared at them so long that curiosity began to get the better of the others.

"What is the meaning of this business, anyway?" Dr. Birdsall exclaimed sharply. "What does that paper say, Morningstar?"

"It says, 'Go back,'" Jim answered simply. He held the paper out. Bill Merriam took it gingerly, and examined it. But it was the knife for which Jennifer extended her hand. It passed from one to another when she was done with it. Dr. Birdsall gazed at the blade long and thoughtfully, turning it over and over.

"'Go back!'" he repeated to himself, in a tone of complete puzzlement. "Surely this warning can't have been meant for us? Why should anyone be interested in stopping us?"

"You can be sure it was meant for you," Jim declared, "even though it might have been the work of a crazed desert rat."

"There's no reason why anyone should want to stop the expedition," the doctor insisted. "There must be some mistake—"

"There's no mistake," Jim denied quietly. "People just don't come to this desolate country without a good reason. Until a few minutes ago, I would have sworn there's wasn't a man within forty miles of us."

"But doesn't the knife itself tell you anything?" Hans Krock, thin and meek-looking, with his thick-lensed glasses, queried anxiously.

"I presume it is an Indian knife," Dr. Birdsall declared.

"Of course!" Professor Stubbs agreed.

"I'm sorry," Jennifer contradicted them. "It is a Chinese knife. See the small dragons etched on the blade here, near the haft?"

"But there are thousands of knives of Chinese make," Dave

Sprague pointed out. "We may even be carrying one ourselves."

"That's true," the girl admitted readily. "I only mentioned the fact for what it is worth."

Studying her, Jim decided she was not so much frightened as entertained by all this. Not so Bill Merriam, however. "Perhaps it would be best if you were to go to your tent, Jennifer," he suggested anxiously. "There's no telling what might happen next."

"We're in no real danger," Morningstar assured him. "Whoever tossed the knife could have killed one of us had he wanted to. Evidently he isn't prepared to go that far."

"I still think Miss Orme is exposing herself needlessly," Merriam insisted. Jim had no trouble reading his keen interest in the girl. But just now Jim had something else on his mind.

"Doy Kee!" he called. The Chinese came forward stolidly. Both Morningstar and Dr. Birdsall questioned him concerning the knife. To all their questions, however, the cook only answered woodenly, "No sabby." Plainly nothing was to be got out of him.

"The knife was thrown from somewhere up on the butte," the doctor said. "Let's have a look up there—"

"No use," Jim told him. "It would take time, and whoever dropped the knife would be gone before we could hope to reach him. We'll move out from the butte a hundred yards and the boys will take turns standing guard. It's only a guess, but we may have come close to someone's secret, and it may not have anything to do with the ruins. We should reach Pueblo Grande before dark tomorrow. There's no occasion to be alarmed until someone tries to stop us."

It was a final word. Even Dr. Birdsall made it plain that he approved Jim's judgment; and yet, if the others were satisfied, Morningstar himself was not. He did not forget what Jennifer had said about the tiny dragons etched on the blade of that dropped knife. Unconsciously, through his trousers, his fingers followed the hard outline of the jade dragon given him by Carlotta Soong. Was there a connection here? What did it all mean?

CHAPTER III

DEATH IN THE DESERT

THERE was a somber austerity about Pueblo Grande, seen under the solemn afterglow of a desert evening. Extending for more than a quarter mile beneath the shadow of a lofty cliff, the venerable ruin lay at the foot of a vast and nameless rimrock flanking the desolate Fortification Mountains. This lonely site of bygone grandeur held the party of scientists in thrall. Only the cries of the canyon swallows, dipping and wheeling overhead, broke the heavy silence.

"We'll set up camp down here under the mesquites," Morningstar told Dr. Birdsall. The doctor nodded absently, absorbed to the exclusion of all else with the prospect of imminent discoveries.

Under Jim's direction, the tents were set up and the camp laid out with a view to its being a permanent base. Doy Kee soon had supper sizzling over a fire. The swift desert evening descended while they were eating. The crumbling battlements of the pueblo melted into velvet obscurity, somehow only enhancing the brooding mystery of this place. An owl's mournful hoot echoed on the rocks.

Had Dr. Birdsall and his associ-

Led by Jim Morningstar, the expedition headed into the desert, not knowing that mysterious, sinister forces moved with them.

ates taken time to notice, they would have observed Sulphur, Johnnie, and Happy Failes slipping quietly out of camp after a murmured word from Jim. If the others had momentarily forgotten the incident of the knife in the excitement of arriving at their destination, their guide had not. Nothing further had been heard of the mysterious prowler who had conveyed the warning to turn back, but Jim, not disposed to let it go at that, had sent the three punchers out on a little scouting trip.

They returned late, to report their failure to see anything suspicious. Morningstar felt somewhat relieved. He turned back to the fire, where several members of the expedition still lingered in restless anticipation of the morrow. One of them was Jennifer.

"I see the boys are back," she smiled at him. "I've been trying to

convince myself that they didn't find anything."

He showed frank surprise at her acuteness. "It does no harm to make sure of these things," he responded lightly.

"None at all," she agreed at once. "But I want you to know I appreciate your thoughtfulness for our safety."

He watched her move toward her tent as if he had never quite clearly seen her before. He felt admiration and a new respect for her. "She'll make a better hand than some of these others, unless I'm pretty much mistaken," he told himself. "I thought I was moving on the quiet, but not much escapes her!"

Morning saw the work of exploration begun at the ruins. With one or two exceptions, these scientists were like children in their utter preoccupation with their work. And it was work of the hardest kind; slaving and grubbing amidst dirt and decay for uncomplaining hours on end to recover a single broken dish or a few beads belonging to an earlier period of civilization, all the while totally oblivious of the life about them. Morningstar soon saw that he could never trust them to scent threatened danger of their own accord, though its shadow were thrown at their very feet.

Nor was he mistaken. The long desert day drew out to a hundred

fascinating finds, announced by repeated shouts of enthusiasm echoing weirdly from these walls of the dead; evening had come, and the tired, dirt-stained archaeologists were about to quit when a sudden muffled rumble and tremor rolled through the mud-walled passages.

A puff of dust in Jim's face, as if blown from a giant bellows, warned him what to expect. Even as he sprang toward the spot from whence it came, there was a second, and louder, rumble. A yell rang out. The next moment he saw a whole section of the ruins crumbling down, wall after wall toppling forward, the fog of dust so thick and strangling that the trapped explorers could not see which way to turn.

Jim saw Balto Stubbs rushing away with some ancient treasure in his arms, forgetting his associates, in his concern for the object. Then Dr. Birdsall stumbled into him.

"Morningstar, this is terrible!" he gasped. "Can't something be done to stop it?"

Jim thrust him aside and leaped toward Jennifer Orme, as she ran, bewildered and desperate, straight toward the crumbling walls. Another few seconds and anything might have happened. But, sweeping her up in his arms, he made for the open.

"Thank you," she said with surprising self-control as he set her on her feet. "The dust blinded me. I lost my head completely."

WITH Sulphur Riley, Jim saw to it that the others got out of the danger zone at once. They stood in a sober group a little apart, questioning one another with their eyes. The destruction had ceased, but a pall of dust would cloak the area for hours.

"I don't ever want a narrower squeak than that one!" Dave Sprague exclaimed. And Hans Krock mourned: "I lost half a dozen priceless photographic plates that time—one of that very section before it fell!"

"I d-don't know about the rest of you," Balto Stubbs stuttered in his nervous excitement, "but I thought I heard a sort of dull explosion just before the c-crash!"

"What's that?" Jim Morningstar caught him up sharply. "Are you sure it was a blast you heard?" Carlotta's warning came back to him.

"Nonsense!" Dr. Birdsall interposed, before Stubbs could answer. "It was the first wall crashing that he heard. Who would blow up a ruin of this nature? It's preposterous. These accidents happen," he drove on as if determined to look on the least alarming side of things. "From now on we'll simply have to exercise more care. I don't propose to send any member of the expedition home crippled, or worse."

Even Stubbs was inclined to agree with him, admitting that he could not be sure about the explosion. The party returned to camp, shaken by their adventure. But by the time supper was eaten, they had succeeded in convincing themselves it was no more than a thrilling interlude to be retailed around the Foundation's council table in New York.

They would have been considerably interested could they have overheard a conversation between Morningstar and Sulphur on the same subject, later that evening. "Them ruins tumblin' in like that was no accident, by a long shot," the lanky puncher opened up forebodingly. "Somethin' snaky's goin' on here, Jim!"

The other had already arrived at the same conclusion. "In my mind, it hooks up with that knife business.

Whoever threw the knife knows plenty about this affair."

"Yo're dead right," Sulphur assented, adding: "Thing fer us to do right now is to pull up stakes an' drift—an' I mean the whole outfit! Whoever these gents are, it's mighty plain they're all done tossin' knives with notes stuck onto 'em!"

"Something in that," Jim agreed. "But Dr. Birdsall will hardly listen to any such proposal, and I believe the others would feel the same way. It looks like it's up to us, Sulphur. We'll just have to keep our eyes peeled day and night."

The following afternoon, Jim found Doy Kee loitering near the water tanks when he should have been elsewhere. He ordered the Oriental away sharply. "Don't ever let me catch you here again!" he warned. He had not forgotten how closely events seemed to follow Carlotta's veiled hints made in Reno.

THAT day a series of inexplicable discoveries were made in the mud-walled rooms, some of them sealed, behind the section which had crashed down. In an underground kiva few days later, Dr. Birdsall found a small carved Buddha. It dumfounded him.

Doy Kee, on being questioned, had nothing whatever to contribute in the way of a solution; but later a sort of explanation turned up when Stubbs and Bill Merriam unearthed several skeletons. Bamboo-soled slippers, obviously Chinese, still clung to the foot bones. Even to Jim and the cowboys it became plain then that in some strange manner these Oriental remains had been superimposed on the older, authentic Indian culture of the pueblo. However it had happened, Doy Kee insisted he knew nothing about it.

"It seems incredible that the Chinese should have used a crumbling pueblo for their own burials," Jennifer remarked to Morningstar as they talked it over. "Usually they'll go to any lengths to send their dead home to be buried in China."

"I've been wondering," Jim nodded, "whether this isn't the real answer to all our difficulties. Naturally the Chinese, knowing their dead were going to be dug up, would go to some lengths to put a stop to it." Even as he spoke, he was remembering certain words of Carlotta Soong's; and there was that otherwise meaningless warning received when the knife had been thrown into camp. The dynamiting of a part of the ruins, timed to endanger the lives of the Flagler party, did not in any wise conflict with this theory.

"It seems fantastic to think there are living Chinese in this wasteland," said Jennifer. "However, I shall suggest to Dr. Birdsall that we carefully rebury these bones. Then, if we really are being watched, they'll see that we intend no desecration. It may put an end to all this mystery." Jim said he hoped she was right. "As for myself," she went on, "I've been thinking of making a trip to the rimrock. I've been letting my own work go too long."

"I shouldn't, if I were you," he surprised her by saying.

"But why not?"

"I don't know," he said slowly. "But my suggestion is that none of us leave camp till we know exactly where we stand." Mildly as he spoke, there could be no doubt of the firmness of his position.

"I think you're taking the wrong slant, Morningstar," objected Bill Merriam, who had come up as they were talking. "Personally, I don't intend to let anything stand in the way of my going into the rimrock today."

Jim attempted to dissuade him from his plan, but without success. Merriam's faith in his ability to take care of himself in any circumstances remained unshaken. At length Jim said: "Well, if you're bound to go, then I'll go with you."

They started an hour later. Although Sulphur and the other punchers had pulled away earlier that morning, Jim was not worried about the safety of those remaining behind.

Scarcely had they got beyond sight and sound of camp when there was a flash of color in the sunlight, and Doy Kee stepped from behind a boulder to confront them. As usual, his seamed, waxen yellow face was inscrutable.

"What are you doing out here, Doy Kee?" Jim inquired. For answer, the Oriental held up a hand.

"Go back," he said. "No go 'way flom clamp."

Jim's smile concealed his immediate interest. "Don't you think we'll be quite safe in the hills, Doy Kee?"

Seeing at once how lightly they meant to take his warning, the latter seemed to gain in stature, and a scowl overspread his face. "Go back!" he repeated authoritatively. "Doy Kee no joke! You no go limlock!" A gun suddenly appeared in his hand, its muzzle trained on them.

Bill Merriam's jaw dropped in his surprise. But Morningstar had half expected something of the sort. He had edged closer to the Chinese as he spoke, the kick he let fly sent the Oriental's gun sailing through the air. Doy Kee grasped his stinging fingers and seemed to shrink.

"What's the idea, Doy Kee?" Jim demanded sharply. "Why are you so interested in what we do?" But he soon found that he was going to get nowhere with questions. Doy Kee went dumb. Jim could only give him up with a rueful grunt, and head him back toward camp with a curt warning.

"What in the world do you suppose was behind that move?" Merriam queried as they started on.

"I don't know," Jim answered. "But I don't intend to let it worry me any." Whatever his private thoughts were on the subject, he kept them to himself.

FOR miles the rimrock stretched out above the pueblo, broken by lonely canyons and craggy cliffs. Merriam was an ornithologist. There was little he did not know about the desert birds, and Jim soon became interested in his work. Despite a lifetime spent in the open, he found there was plenty to be learned from Bill.

They were high in the lonely hills, with the sun standing almost directly overhead, and were beginning to think of stopping for the lunch they had brought with them, when a distant halloo reached Jim's ears. It came from somewhere down the rugged slope. A moment later he made out Johnnie Landers, hurrying their way. Obvious excitement gripped the puncher as he rode up. "Sure had me wonderin' if I could find yuh!" he burst out.

"What's up?" Jim demanded.

"Me an' Sulphur an' Hap was ridin' the hills over west when we spotted three strange riders," Johnnie explained. "They knowed we was watchin' 'em, 'cause they made tracks in a hurry."

"Were they Chinese?"

"Unh-uh." Johnnie shook his head. "They was whites, Jim—range men, near's we could make out."

Morningstar was considering his line of action even while he went on with his questioning. Finally he turned to Merriam. "I don't like to

do this, but if you think you can make your way back to camp all right, I'll pull away and see what I can make of this business."

"Don't worry about me," Merriam answered promptly. "I'll be all right."

Taking him at his word, Jim swung into the saddle. He and Johnnie struck off across the hills at a brisk pace. "Did you spot the tracks of these men?" he asked.

Landers nodded. "Sulphur an' Hap are trailin' 'em now. We'll overhaul 'em before long."

He was not mistaken. Less than an hour later Jim sighted Sulphur waving from a ridge a mile away. They were soon there. The lantern-jawed cowboy pointed to pony tracks on the faint trail leading into the deeper fastness of the rugged and broken Fortifications.

"There's three of 'em, Jim," he declared, "foggin' it tight as they kin go! We only seen 'em the once!"

They took up the chase without delay. The way led deeper into the desert hills. Time was lost in finding the horse tracks which petered out again and again on the bare rock. Once they thought they had lost the strangers altogether. An hour later they were pushing ahead once more. The afternoon dragged out. An hour before sunset the sign faded out in the malpais, and this time they failed to find it again.

"We've lost them for good this time," Jim said. "There's nothing for it but to turn around."

They made better time on the return, despite his decision to pick up Bill Merriam on the way. Sunset was painting the lonely ranges when they reached the spot where the ornithologist had been left. He was nowhere about, nor did an extended search through the neighboring canyons afford a glimpse of him.

"He's prob'ly back in camp puttin' on the feed bag right now," Sulphur remarked.

Jim wasn't so sure, but there was no point in asking for trouble, so he said nothing. They rode the last mile to camp in thickening darkness, to find the expedition's members anxiously awaiting their return.

"Where's Merriam?" Dr. Birdsall asked. "He started out with you, didn't he, Morningstar?"

Jim wasted no time in futile inquiries. Something told him in a flash what had happened. "If he isn't here with you, then he's disappeared," he said, and related the circumstances of his parting with Merriam. "Of course, there's the chance that he's got himself lost; that rimrock is a tricky stretch of country. But nothing can be done tonight. If he doesn't show up by tomorrow morning, we'll start a search for him."

The finality of it threw them into a state of suppressed excitement. Even they began to realize that something sinister lay behind the mysterious happenings of the past week. They talked it over at length, their voices unconsciously lowered. If they had lost a member of their party, another had come to take his place; and the name of the newcomer was Dread.

JIM found himself watching Doy Kee's every move speculatively. What did the Oriental know of Merriam's disappearance? There was nothing to be learned from that impassive yellow face, and yet Jim was so engrossed that it was not until Jennifer Orme spoke to him a second time that he realized she was there.

"You seem rather worried," was what she had said.

He smiled wearily. "I told you what could be expected. I blame

myself for having let Merriam leave camp at all."

Jennifer appeared little enough alarmed by the situation, however. "Bill Merriam is all right," she declared her conviction quietly. "He'll return. Somehow, I feel sure of it."

But Merriam had not yet returned by the following morning. Jim knew, for the first place he went on rising at dawn was to the ornithologist's tent. It was empty. He was still standing there, asking himself what the upshot of this would be, when a hoarse shout from the other side of camp disrupted the deep morning hush. Recognizing Sulphur's voice, he started that way quickly. Dr. Birdsall, Balto Stubbs, and the others appeared in their tent doors, inquiring of one another what was afoot.

Jim found Sulphur at the modest pup tent occupied by Doy Kee. The puncher looked green in this early light, and his long jaw hung slack. "Take a look in yere, Jim!" he said hoarsely, and indicated the tent.

Pushing him aside, Morningstar bent forward for a look. What he saw froze him with horror and surprise. It was a long moment before he dropped the flaps and straightened. Dr. Birdsall hurried up.

"What is it, Morningstar?" the doctor demanded. "What have you found now?"

"It's Doy Kee," Jim told him. "He's lying in there, dead! His throat has been slashed from ear to ear!"

The others soon gathered at the spot. Their faces went white as paper when they learned what had happened. They stared at one another, silenced for once.

"This ain't no surprise to me, whatever they think about it," Sulphur muttered ominously. He had joined Happy and Johnnie Landers, standing to one side. "I been expectin' somethin' of the kind fer a long time."

"Right!" Johnnie responded. "Whoever finished Doy Kee didn't make no mistake about it. An' if yuh ask me, Bill Merriam got the same thing!"

If Morningstar, standing nearby with Dr. Birdsall, heard the remark he gave no sign. He was staring at something which lay on the ground beside Doy Kee's twisted body, and which he had not seen before. He leaned down to pick it up and a shock coursed over him as he recognized it for what it was.

It was a small jade dragon, the exact replica of the one he carried in his pocket—but this one had been broken squarely in half! For Jim, that small fact bore a deep significance.

CHAPTER IV

IN THE DARK

"MORNINGSTAR, this is incredible!" Dr. Birdsall exclaimed. "A brutal murder! What is to be done about it?"

"Nothing—if you're thinking of the law," was the reply. "We don't happen to have a policeman handy, doctor."

"But the lives of all of us may be forfeited if this is allowed to go on—murderers slipping into camp at night without leaving a trace!" He made no attempt to hide his bewildered indignation. "I'm worried about Merriam, too."

"I intend to start a search for

him at once," Jim assured him. "If he's anywhere within reach of the pueblo, and I'm sure he must be, we'll find him."

"Do so," the doctor nodded curtly. "The rest of us will set out, too—"

"I'll have to ask you not to do that, doctor," Jim interrupted. "Keep your people busy. I'll do the looking." He turned to the punchers. "Get up the broncs, boys," he directed. "And stick some grub in your rolls. This may prove to be a long job."

Once they were alone, the buckaroos were outspoken. "Jim, yuh might's well not be huntin' fer Merriam at all, fer all the good it'll be doin' him," Sulphur declared. "After that"—he nodded toward Doy Kee's tent—"I reckon we all know what's happened to him."

"You may be right," was the unemotional answer. But there was no clue to what Jim himself thought in his tone.

Swinging in the hull a moment later, they were starting away in the direction of the hills when a hail from the pueblo turned them around. Balto Stubbs was standing on a low dobe wall, waving his arms excitedly.

"More grief, dang it all!" Sulphur groaned. But Johnnie Landers was more optimistic.

"Mebbe they found somethin'," he suggested, adding: "It must be mighty interestin', the way the perfessor's takin' on."

Stubbs waved them forward urgently, and as soon as they drew near he cried: "Merriam's been found! He's here in the pueblo! They're getting him out now!"

Morningstar needed no more. Leaping from the saddle, he was soon at the spot where Dr. Birdsall and the other members of the expedition were lifting Merriam, bound and gagged, up through the narrow opening in the roof of the kiva in which he had been found. He was alive and breathing, but half suffocated. They soon had him in the open. It was Jim who stripped the gag off and freed his wrists.

"Are you all right, Bill?" Dave Sprague exclaimed. Jennifer and the others waited anxiously for the response.

Merriam mumbled something incoherently, and then seemed to come to himself. Looking about the circle of familiar faces, his own showed lines of strain. He sighed heavily. "I thought it was all up with me that time," he managed.

"What happened to you?" Jim demanded.

"I . . . I hardly know," Merriam confessed vaguely. He seemed struggling to grasp something which eluded him. "After you left me, I was all right for perhaps an hour, when suddenly something struck me on the head. I think I lost consciousness then."

"But you saw nothing or no one?"

"Not a thing. There was a period when I seemed to be carried a long ways; and at another time a voice said something to me, over and over. But what was it?" He paused, perplexed. Finally his lips parted, then: "'Leave the dead alone. Go back.' That was it!"

There was a murmur of astonishment from his associates at the words.

"Was it a white man who said that to you?" Jim asked quickly.

"I don't know."

"But the voice was guttural?"

"Yes," Merriam admitted.

"Could it have been Chinese?"

Merriam appeared struck by the question. "I hadn't thought of that," he admitted, "but of course it could have been."

HE had more to tell of his adventure, but nothing which added materially to what Jim already knew. Dr. Birdsall agreed that finding him in this manner was a particularly fortunate outcome, all things considered, but he found the situation sufficiently serious to merit calling Jim aside for a private conference.

"What is your opinion of these strange occurrences, Morningstar?" he asked bluntly.

Jim considered his words carefully. "Well, let's cast up what *has* happened, doctor. First, there was the knife that was thrown into camp. The warning attached to that was plain enough, and I'm satisfied now, after your strange discoveries in the ruins, that the knife was Chinese, as Miss Orme suggested. Later," he pursued, "we saw the three strange white men in the hills. I've asked myself a dozen times how they could hook up with what has happened, without finding the answer. But the cave-in here at the pueblo that first day seems plain enough reading now. That brings us up to Merriam's experience, and Doy Kee's murder—"

"How do you explain that?" the doctor queried. "If I understand you, it is your belief that the Chinese are largely responsible for everything that has happened. Yet certainly they would not murder their own kind to get rid of us!"

"I'm not so sure," Jim answered slowly. "It's just possible that Doy Kee had a task to perform, in which he failed. In such an event, they would think nothing of taking his life."

"That's possible—but too far-fetched," Dr. Birdsall said dryly.

"Not at all." And Jim told how, the previous day, Doy Kee had attempted to stop Merriam and himself from going into the rimrock. He confessed that on learning of the ornithologist's disappearance, his suspicions had leaped at once to the possibility of the cook's knowing something about it. Subsequent events seemed to indicate that Doy Kee had not. "But that doesn't mean that Merriam wasn't slugged by a gang of chinks, who warned him and flung him into the kiva," he finished.

The doctor was impressed by this reasoning. "What course of action do you recommend?" he asked.

"I should give up this exploration immediately," Jim told him. "It may be one of us who'll be killed next. It's mighty plain that whoever objects to our being here will go to any lengths to gain their ends."

"I was afraid you might suggest something of the kind," said Birdsall. He shook his head. "I refuse to be frightened by any such methods, Morningstar. We'll go on with our work. It's important."

"In that case," Jim concluded, "there's nothing more to be said."

He watched the doctor move away. Birdsall was tall and spare, and there was a dignity in his bearing and his habitually severe features which Jim had always considered artificial. Now, however, he was forced to admit that there was iron under the man's polished surface. Even in the face of a real threat to the safety of himself and his party, he meant what he had said.

Balto Stubbs found occasion to accost Jim later in the morning.

"Dr. Birdsall declares we will go on with our work as usual," he said. "What do you think, Morningstar? Is there any particular danger in following the course?"

"Of course there's danger," Jim replied. "I told the doctor as much."

"Once he has made up his mind to anything, I fear he's a hard man to

dissuade," the professor declared uneasily. "But do you really think we are being foolhardly in staying?"

"I can't say as to that." Jim was curt. "I'll do my best to keep you out of difficulties. That's all I can promise."

Stubbs didn't like the sound of this, and showed it. "You understand it's not myself I'm concerned about," he explained with elaborate frankness. "It's Miss Orme I'm thinking of."

JIM looked at him. He wondered if Stubbs realized that Jennifer was less troubled by all that had happened than anyone else in the party. "I don't believe anything is likely to happen to her," he said.

But it left him with something to think about. Unconsciously, his interest in Jennifer had grown until the thought of danger to her chilled his blood and left him shocked with the realization of what she meant to him. The irony of it did not escape him; a few weeks, a month, and she would be gone from his life forever.

Johnnie Landers hailed him ten minutes later.

"Boss," said Johnnie, "your orders was that no one was to stray away from camp. The lady perfessor thinks different. I tried to stop her, but no dice. That's her movin' up the slope."

Morningstar's mouth tightened. "Thanks, Johnnie," he muttered, striding away.

He was a mile from camp before he overtook Jennifer. Her field-equipment case was slung over her shoulder. She also carried a canteen and a small rucksack. Proof enough to Morningstar that she proposed to be gone for the day.

She stopped in answer to his hail, her annoyance visible.

"Jim, do I have to go all through this again? Landers tried to stop me. Believe me, I am quite capable of taking care of myself. I'm armed."

A faint smile touched Morningstar's mouth at sight of the little .22 she carried. "I'm afraid your armament is hardly adequate, Miss Orme," he said. "Dr. Birdsall holds me responsible for the safety of the expedition. I'm sorry, but I've got to ask you to turn back."

Jennifer tucked a rebellious strand of hair into place. "And if I refuse?"

"I don't think you will," Jim answered, distracted by a pulse that beat in her throat. She was wearing a man's shirt, open at the neck. It revealed the soft loveliness of her white skin. He told himself she should never wear glasses; she was beautiful without them.

He knew there was earnestness and a deep sense of resolve in this girl. It showed in the proud tilt of her finely chiseled chin and her strong mouth. For the right man, she held a rich store of happiness. Suddenly her mood changed.

"Why must you and the others go on treating me as a woman?" she asked. "Can't you remember that I am a scientist? This isn't my first field work. I was on the Amazon last winter. We lived on a diet of head-hunters and poisoned arrows, and I came through without a scratch. I'm sure I'll be all right here. After all, I had to put up quite a battle to be included in this Flagler Expedition. I don't propose to sit penned up in camp and accomplish nothing."

"I know how you feel," Morningstar told her. "Maybe I'm being overcautious, but until I see what the aftermath to the killing of Doy Kee amounts to, you'll have to keep out of these hills."

Jennifer Orme gazed at him with

a more personal interest than she had ever shown. "Obviously," she said, a smile touching her face, "argument would be wasted on you. Suppose we compromise. Now that we've come this far, let's not waste the day completely. I have sandwiches and a bottle of coffee with me—enough for two, if you're not too hungry. After lunch, you can try your hand at capturing a lizard or two for me."

"Lizards?" he queried. "You mean these chuckawallas?"

"Lizards or chuckawallas, as you prefer," she smiled.

Jim Morningstar often remembered that afternoon as one of the happiest of his life. But they had no sooner returned to camp than he caught the taut expectancy of the members of the expedition and even of his own men. Faces were unconsciously tense. Surface amiability had cracked, revealing the frayed nerves underneath.

Sulphur and Johnnie had dug a grave for Doy Kee on a bench below camp. Jim wondered what Carlotta Soong would think when she learned that her chef was dead. But it was barely possible, he amended thoughtfully, that she knew of it already. He had not yet satisfied himself concerning her part in the mysterious occurrences here at Pueblo Grande.

Doy Kee was buried with a simple ceremony at sunset. Dr. Birdsall read a few words of the burial service, and the punchers filled in the grave with their spades.

It was a somber, thoughtful evening, despite the appetizing supper Happy Failes, their new cook, set before them. The sky turned blood-red as the sun disappeared and night swam up out of the draws. The expedition turned in early; silent, depressed.

Morning was more like a return to the good cheer of sober reality. Happy's breakfast call was loud and brisk. Dr. Birdsall, Stubbs, Merriam, and the others rolled out promptly, looking forward to a busy day. Glancing over those gathered about the table as coffee was being poured, Morningstar noted that Jennifer was late. Perhaps she had failed to hear the summons.

Thinking only to call her, he made his way to her tent. It was exactly as usual; quiet, undisturbed, the flaps hanging closed. Jim hesitated. "Miss Orme!" he called.

There was no answer. He waited a minute. Then: "Breakfast is on the table, Miss Orme. Are you coming?"

Still no answer came. Alarm leaped alive in him, but he refused to give rein to his apprehensions, calling again, louder this time. His efforts to arouse the girl attracted the attention of the others. They turned around, looking a question.

"What's the trouble, Morningstar?" Merriam demanded. "Anything wrong?"

Instead of answering, Jim grasped the flaps of the tent, flung them aside. He stared in. He had been prepared in a manner for what he found; but, even so, a dagger of anger and remorse struck at him as he saw that the tent was empty. He stood there for a long moment as if stunned, and when he turned to the others his face was gray.

"She's gone!" he said jerkily. "She isn't here! Her tent's empty. Miss Orme has disappeared!"

Will Jennifer's disappearance mean the end of the expedition? Who murdered Doy Kee? Is Slade Salters correct in believing the Chinese are secretly operating a gold mine in the vicinity of Pueblo Grande? Thrilling new discoveries are made in the second installment of this absorbing mystery. Don't miss it!

RETURN OF A GUN GHOST

BY S. OMAR BARKER

"I REGRET very much to inform you," wrote the sheriff of Wide Gap, "that Sam McCally, if living, as you infer, can only return to New Mexico at his own risk. McCally escaped from this State, following the well-known battle of Wide Gap in 1897, a wanted man. He is still a wanted man. I have no right, either legal or moral, to promise him

immunity. If he returns and is detected, he will be arrested and brought to trial for the killings in which he was implicated.

"Very truly yours,
"JAMES W. KOKANOUR, *Sheriff*."

With a lean brown hand the sheriff shoved what he had written across the desk to another sun-bronzed man dressed in laced boots, "funnel" pants and light-gray shirt, open at the neck. Both men had that ageless look of leathery vitality characteristic of those whose life is lived under the southwestern sun.

"That's his answer, Leb," said the sheriff in his throaty drawl.

Lebanon Kokanour, District Engineer for the State Highway Department, took the letter and read it. He looked up from it frowning a little, his mild brown eyes quizzical.

"You're the cat with the whiskers in this case, Jim," he said. "If it was me I'd tell him to come ahead, unmolested."

"But Leb, you're forgettin' that he—"

"Sure, I know. But this McCally was a young pup then, running with wolves. No doubt he did his share of the killing. We've always heard he was the deadliest shot in the gang, outside of Black Gabe himself. It might even have been his bullets that made me . . . I mean us . . . fatherless. Mom always sort of thought it was, but she'd forgiven him, I think, before she died."

"Supposin' she had? The law—"

"From what I hear the line between the law and the outlaw was pretty wabbly in those days, Jim. Mom always said there were some just as lawless in that posse as out of it, though she didn't mean dad, of course. But those days are gone. McCally would be a harmless old man, now."

"So might Sheriff Teague," said Jim Kokanour a little grimly, "and Deputy Ezra Kokanour and three other possemen, not to mention the three of Black Gabe's gang that was shot and the two they hung, if deadshot young pups like McCally hadn't a habit of runnin' with the wolves!"

"Just the same, when an old man begs to come back from exile, like as not because he hankers to look upon the old scenes once more before he lays him down, I'd forget all that, Jim, and let him come."

Sheriff Kokanour slipped the letter into an envelope addressed to "The Judge, Box 69, Nogales, Arizona," and sealed it. His gray eyes were as cold and steady as a gun barrel.

"The law," he spoke a little sharply despite his drawl, "has got no right to forget anything."

"You've got too damn much official conscience, Jim."

"Yeah?" the sheriff retorted. "How about an engineer that bristles up and risks his job rather than let the politicos fenagle a little ol' bend in his new road? Ever hear of the jackrabbit that died laughing at the burro's long ears?"

SHERIFF KOKANOUR stood up to his long, lean height, strolled to a window, lighted a cigar. When he turned again the grim lines were softened in a broad grin.

"Hell," he said, "I'm givin' McCally a break, ain't I, not to trace that letter, locate him and get him extradited? When do you and Bull Edwards start movin' dirt?"

Leb laughed. "Bull's not movin' any! My outfit starts gouging about next week."

His own official conscience had just now brought him out on top

in a big row over locating a stretch of the new Wide Gap-Santa Josefa highway soon to be built. Bull Edwards, a paunchy and powerful politician, had put the screws on to make him swing the road in a wide curve around the barren, ridgy west edge of No-gold Valley instead of along the straighter, more logical eastern edge.

Bull owned the worthless land at the west and expected a neat sum from the State for a right of way through it. The straighter route ran through public domain, a patch once homesteaded, but long since abandoned. The right of way here could be had for nothing. The straight road, even with a few ridges and knolls to bust down, would cost thousands less to build, and Bull Edwards also had an interest in a dirt-moving outfit bidding for the job. Bull's mouth had watered for his usual graft. But he didn't get it.

With more official conscience than political concern, the new District Engineer had r'ared and bucked for the shorter route—and won out.

The fact that Wide Gap had been the scene of the last dramatic stand of Black Gabe's gang in the not too long gone frontier days had made it a story, and the newspapers had played it up. It was in that bloody battle, they recalled, that the now prominent Kokanour brothers had been made fatherless. The reporters told how Ezra Kokanour's widow had bravely carried on, managing somehow to give her boys a better education than the average for those hard, pioneer times, thus fitting them for the important public trusts they held today.

Jim Kokanour, the younger of the two, came in for a special paragraph. He had started to become an attorney, then, following in Ezra Kokanour's footsteps, he had left college for a deputy sheriff's star, later becoming sheriff himself.

Old-timers recalled, the newspapers said, that only one outlaw of Black Gabe's gang had escaped, never to be heard of again: a man named Sam McCally. The story was that McCally's homestead in No-gold Valley had been a hide-out for outlaws. After his disappearance a citizen's committee had burned his abandoned cabin.

Some old-timers said that McCally had had a wife. Some said not. If so, she too, had disappeared.

Doubtless, the reporters surmised, McCally, known to have been wounded in the gun fight, had either died in some hidden gully or had fled to Mexico, there to perish after the inevitable fashion of renegades who live by blood and bullet.

The new, straight highway route for which Leb Kokanour had thumbed his nose at the politicians, would run through the old McCally homestead, approximately across the knoll where the cabin had stood.

All this frontier history and legend the newspapers had dug up and printed. There were a few old-timers left who might have pointed out an error, but didn't. Actually, Deputy Ezra Kokanour's death had left his widow with only one fatherless child. The other boy she had found on her doorstep a day or two after the battle. She had never disclosed the contents of the note left with the child. Nor was it generally known that some two years later, and thereafter as long as she lived, the Widow Kokanour found certain sums of money mysteriously added to her account in the Wide Gap Bank from time to time. Where it came from, old Jules Grauheimer, the banker, would not divulge. Mrs. Kokanour had never used any of

that money for herself, but it helped put the boys through school.

Even without these items the account of Leb Kokanour's straight road through No-gold Valley was a good news story, salty with human interest, and it appeared in many papers far east and west of Wide Gap.

IT was when it appeared in the Nogales, Arizona, *Nugget* that gray-eyed old Jim Williams, more generally called "The Judge," sat down and wrote his letter to the sheriff of Wide Gap, asking that Sam McCally be allowed to return to his old home.

For thirty-odd years Jim Williams had lived at or near Nogales, a silent, hard-working man, who made his living, first as a mule skinner, later as a cowpuncher and still later as owner of a ranch and cattle. In those days, along the border, if a man minded his own business, nobody bothered about his past. Even in the election that made Jim Williams a Justice of the Peace there was no prying into his former history. To the Arizona borderland he became "The Judge," well liked, respected.

But though he thrived and should have become well to do, he never showed any outward signs of prosperity; and when cattle prices slumped he was one of the first to go under. The same bank that foreclosed on him, however, promptly hired him as manager for the ranch that had been his own. It was a mark of the esteem in which he was held in the community.

On the day the Judge received Sheriff Kokanour's answer from Wide Gap, he went to his boss at the bank, dusty from the long ride in from the ranch.

"Mr. Marland," he said abruptly, "I want a couple months off."

"Sorry, Judge," Marland shook his head. "Can't spare you right now, what with—"

The Judge's gnarled, weathered hands were shaky as he interrupted, his lips tight as a new stretched wire. Something of long-outgrown youthful belligerence crept into his drawling voice. For years he had not worn a gun, but Marland noticed that he wore one now.

"That bein' the case, Mr. Marland," he said, "I reckon I'm obliged to quit. I'm a-goin' to New Mexico —an' I may not git back!"

That night he was a passenger on a train roaring eastward. Anyone who knew him would have noticed that for the first time his shoulders were the sagging shoulders of an old man, as if the burden of piled-up years had fallen on them all at once. There were a six-gun, cartridges and little else in his bag. His eyes, with something of grimness fogging their usual keen clearness, gazed unseeingly out into the passing dark.

THAT was a Saturday night. On Monday morning a small army of plows, scrapers, caterpillars, mule teams and men with shovels, picks, pinch-bars and all manner of stone-loosening and dirt-moving equipment advanced into No-gold Valley and began the broad earth-slash that was to become a smooth, straight highway. Dirt, some of it still impregnated with the lead of pioneer and bandit bullets, began to fly.

Bill Girven and Shorty Reuter, sent ahead by Engineer Kokanour to "bust off" the knoll on which Sam McCally's cabin had once stood, came to a stop in puzzlement. The marker stakes were gone!

"Them engineers expect us to bust

'em out a road by smell or what?" growled Bill Girven on the "cat." "To hell wit' 'em! Snoot 'er in, Shorty, an' we'll bust through once fer luck without no lines!"

They roared up the grade to the knoll top—but no farther. There a barricade of rocks and juniper stumps barred their way. Over its top a gun snout menaced them, and behind it were two steady gray eyes in a leathery face grizzly with two or three days' growth of whitish whiskers.

Startled, Bill threw out the clutch, stopped her and throttled down.

"Young feller," the old man's deep-throated drawl came from behind the barricade, a little crackly with age, but doggedly businesslike, "I'm right sorry to put kinks in your road fer you, but there ain't no plow a-comin' through here! You kin gee or haw, as you like, but you're goin' around!"

"Yeah?" Bill Girven's snort sounded businesslike itself. "This here's a State highway, gran'paw. Leb Kokanour laid it out without no curves—an' it's goin' through! Straddle your gouger, Shorty! I'm goin' to bust this little playhouse all to hell!"

With roaring motor the caterpillar jerked forward. From the barricade sounded the baby boom of a six-gun, once—twice—three times. Two bullets spanged through the tractor's radiator. A third ripped open the gas tank. Bill Girven swore and turned off the switch. He leaped down and started toward the barricade at a crouching run, a big monkey wrench swung high.

"You damn old fool!" he yelled. "I'll—"

The round, deadly eye of a gun barrel stared him in the face. Behind him Shorty Reuter yowled a panicky warning. Bill Girven plowed to a stop. Grumbling, he backed up to where Shorty crouched behind the tractor.

"Come on, runt!" he snapped. "We gotta go find the boss!"

They found Leb Kokanour and made their angry report.

"Git me a gun!" urged Bill. "I'll go back there, an' I'll—"

"Get yourself slaughtered!" Leb broke in dryly. "You squat right here and keep your mouths shut. I'll go up there and look into it. No, I don't want a gun. What would I do with it?"

As Leb Kokanour approached the knoll alone, he saw the strange old man's tall figure straighten from beside a roundish blue granite boulder a few steps back of his crude barricade. Then with a long-legged stride in which Leb sensed something strangely familiar, the oldster came back into his little fort and stood waiting. When Leb was about fifty yards the man called out a challenge:

"Halt, there!"

Again Leb felt that queer sense of familiarity, as if somewhere, sometime, he had heard that voice before. He came on a little closer, but at the next command he stopped.

"You might just as well put down that gun, old man," he called quietly. "I'm not armed. Let's talk it over."

His voice was crisp and clear. The old man's drawled answer carried in it a certain chilling grimness.

"No talk needed, I reckon," he said. "I've done told your men. This here is one spot your road curves around."

LEB KOKANOUR was puzzled, but in the back of his mind drummed the idea that somewhere back of this peculiar interruption

must be the crooked hand of Bull Edwards. Why or for what, he could not imagine. Or maybe this old man was simply crazy.

"Take it easy, old-timer," he called out soothingly. "If you don't want the road cut through here, maybe you better tell me why."

"Because . . . well, I got reasons, young feller, that ain't nobody's business but my own."

"They better be! I'm Leb Kokanour, engineer in charge here. I can tell you right now that this road is going through *without curves*. But I'll listen if you want to explain your objections. Who put you up to this, Bull Edwards?"

"Bull Edwards?" the old man's drawl sounded honestly puzzled. "I never heerd of him. I jest—"

"No, I expect not," cut in the engineer dryly, remembering Edwards' threat to dish him out plenty of grief on this particular job. Bull had probably hired some old fool prospector to file a claim here ahead of the right-of-way proceedings just to make trouble. But Leb Kokanour kept a curb on both his anger and his tongue.

"If you're not Bull Edwards' man," he said reasonably, "who are you, and what is it you want here?"

There was a pause before the old man replied. When he did, though his well aimed gun was not lowered, his drawl had lost some of its belligerence. But his reply was not exactly an answer.

"Who I am don't matter. An' what I want— Listen here, I knowed an Ezry Kokanour once. Are you his boy? His own son?"

"I am. But what's that got to do with—"

Strangely anxious, almost husky, the old man's voice came from over the barricade, cutting him off.

"It ain't much I'm askin', young feller. Maybe I've took the wrong way of gittin' it. Jest give me your word that this granite rock back here nor the ground around it won't be touched, an'—an' that you won't say nothin' about me bein' here to . . . to nobody, an' I'll plumb disappear, *pronto*, an' give you no more bother. If you're Ez Kokanour's boy, I kin trust your word, I reckon."

A strange feeling of unreality had begun to seize and hold Leb Kokanour, as if this queer old man and his barricade were no more than a bad dream from which he strove in vain to awaken. But now he shook it off. He was a fool to stand here listening to the ravings of a crazy man—or like as not a gunman in the pay of Bull Edwards. He'd laid out a straight route for this highway, and straight it should go! A costly, awkward curve to dodge that chunk of granite? Hell, no!

This time his voice was both sharp and impatient. "I'll promise you nothing!" he snapped. "You've gunned my men off their work and threatened me. Now clear out—or we'll clear you out!"

When the old man did not answer, Leb Kokanour swung on his heel and started to stride away. The apparent probability of a bullet in his back did not seem to bother him.

"Wait, young feller! Halt there!" Command and entreaty mingled in the voice from the barricade. "Come back here an' I'll tell you my reasons now, if you'll jest—"

The voice broke off abruptly, even as Leb started to turn once more to listen. The old man dropped suddenly down out of sight again in his crude little fort, only the gun barrel showing. Up the right-of-way from the direction of Wide

Gap, already only a few yards distant, there came two men, riding harnessed mules at a gallop. Well behind them straggled more men on foot.

Bill Girven, the tractor driver, had not obeyed Leb's orders. Instead, nursing a grudge for those shots into his caterpillar, he had taken Leb's own scoot-about and whizzed into town for the sheriff.

On the return, when going got too rough for the car, Sheriff Jim Kokanour had commandeered a scraper mule and come on at a gallop. It was he on the first mule now, with Bill Girven on the second, not far behind, a carbine crosswise before him.

Evidently Bill Girven had already told the sheriff what was up. As Jim Kokanour came up to Leb some yards down the slope from the knoll he asked but one question:

"Is he still there?"

Leb stared at Jim's lean brown face, faintly stubblish with salt-and-pepper whiskers, as if just discovering something in it he had never seen before.

"Why . . . why, yes, he's still there, Jim. But hell, I can handle him. He's just—"

"Yeah, I know." Jim's grin interrupted him. "Just some ol' candidate for the bughouse, I expect. But he's got a gun, Bill says. You didn't have no business bracin' him unarmed, Leb. Them kind can be dangerous. I'll handle this. I've deputized Bill Girven to circle and close in from the other way if I have to holler for help."

BEFORE Leb could protest further, the sheriff was off his mule, striding up the knoll, with Bill Girven circling wide around it. In another second Leb Kokanour came hurrying on after them, while others of the highway crew, having jumped the job promptly at the scent of excitement, stopped a little distance off to watch what might happen.

When the sheriff came within some thirty yards of the barricade the old man's voice crackled out sharply:

"Halt, there! I see you've got a badge. You Sheriff Jim Kokanour?"

"Sure," drawled Jim Kokanour cheerfully. "And as a favor to you, mister, I'll halt—for the moment. An' now you do *me* a favor: Tell me what the hell's eatin' on you to block the buildin' of a public highway?"

To Leb's surprise the sheriff got his answer promptly.

"God knows I got plenty reasons not to tell you, but I'm a-goin' to. This here granite is a woman's gravestone, an' there ain't no road gang going to plow up her bones, not while I'm alive!"

Leb Kokanour suddenly exploded.

"Why in the name of ten hells didn't you say so? We'll remove the body decently and—"

"Move hell!" Again grim bitterness edged the drawling voice behind the little fort. "This woman was my wife! She asked to rest here, an' here she rests while I live to say so! Keep back!"

It was like a strange, fantastic play, this scene with the hilltop for stage, the road crew audience watching from an arroyo bank. But Leb Kokanour's voice did not carry back to them. He had fought the dirty politics of Bull Edwards like a crusader to put this road through straight. But there are some things a man cannot fight. He guessed now who the old man was—and a lot more.

"We'll curve the road, old man,"

he said. "Your wife's grave will not be touched."

Behind the crude barricade the old man rose to his lean height.

"Then I'll go," he said.

"Wait!" Sheriff Jim Kokanour gave the command sharply. He had been rapidly putting two and two together. There could be no woman buried here at the site of the old McCally cabin except Sam McCally's wife. The sheriff's tone dropped to his usual quiet drawl: "So you came back anyhow, McCally," he said. "I'm mighty sorry of the circumstances, but as sheriff, it's my duty to arrest you for your part in the killin's by Black Gabe's gang thirty odd years ago. You might just as well surrender peaceable."

"I don't aim to be took—alive, sheriff!" The old man's gun gleamed in the sun. "I've got you covered. Turn around—an' git!"

"You might miss, McCally," Jim Kokanour drawled evenly. "Watch yourself; *I'm a-comin' in after you!*"

"Don't, Jim! Man, he's—"

"You keep out of this, Leb!"

As if paralyzed, Leb Kokanour saw the man with whom he had grown up as a brother start forward, his lean form erect but apparently as carelessly carried as if he were just stepping across the street for a cigar. Before him a gun barrel protruded a blue inch or two over the barricade, aimed dead center between the sheriff's eyes. At any second, Leb thought, it would spurt fire—and the old man who had come back from exile to defend his young wife's grave would have murdered his own son.

"Jim, for—"

Even as Leb Kokanour cried out, the blue nose of the old man's gun barrel moved unsteadily, then suddenly dropped from sight. From behind the barricade "The Judge" of Nogales, who had once been Sam McCally, rose to his full height. His shoulders sagged, the bristles on his aged chin were quivery.

"Sheriff," he drawled, "if I'd 'a' had a son, I'd be proud to see him do his duty, same as you're doin' yours. You can put up your gun now; I'm surrenderin'. I jest didn't want nobody to know that—"

What it was he did not want folks to know, the old man never got to say. From somewhere beyond the knoll came the venomous crack of a carbine as Bill Girven fired from ambush. For a brief instant Sam McCally's lean form drew erect, then toppled and lay still.

THERE was some hullabaloo over the new curve in the highway through No-gold Valley. The day Bull Edwards started to raise a complaint about it a lean, gray-eyed man called at his office.

"This highway matter, Bull—I'm tellin' you: lay off it—or else."

"What right have you to threaten me, Kokanour?" blustered the burly politician. "Maybe you don't realize who I am!"

"Maybe you don't realize who I am, neither," drawled the lank sheriff, "me having just found out myownself. It ain't as an officer that I'm tellin' you to lay off; it's as the son of a one-time outlaw named Sam McCally—an' don't you forget it!"

Today, a few miles west of Wide Gap, the modern highway curves respectfully around a certain little knoll, upon the top of which a granite boulder holds eternal barricade over the graves of a returned exile and the wife of his youth.

THE END.

FRONTIER JUSTICE

by C. K. SHAW

CHAPTER I

A LAWYER GOES WEST

NICK BAILEY broke a match in two pieces, dropped them into his battered hat, shut his eyes and stirred them about with a long finger. He picked one up and opened his eyes. He had drawn the short end. That meant Salt Lake City. His forehead creased at the chances fate was taking by starting him for Salt Lake with little money above his stage fare. Fate was, in fact, kicking up her heels and getting frisky with his future, for the soles of his shoes were worn and the very hat that had held the match pieces was not fit for a young lawyer to be wearing.

"Salt Lake or bust!" he said aloud, and smiled to recall that some of the wagons that had started to the gold rush with "California or bust!" painted on their sides, had returned with the single word "Busted!"

Well, Salt Lake couldn't be worse than Kansas City for a young lawyer, and he might run across Buxton. His smile died when he thought of his older brother. It was strange how he could miss Bux when he had scarcely known him. He had been reared in the Missouri hills by his granddad, and Bux had been brought up by an aunt in New York. They were strangers except for a few fleeting visits. The last had been ten years ago, in the middle of the night.

Bux had stood in the deep shadows by the door, for men were trailing him. He had said a few words to Nick, advising him to forget him because their paths were separating for all time. He had stuffed a roll of bills into his grandfather's hand and faded into the night. That had been the last Nick had seen of his brother. Nick had been a boy of eleven, and Buxton Bailey had been considered one of the coming young lawyers of Kansas City, until he had killed a man and vanished into the West.

Nick hoped he'd run aross Bux. Still it was a large country out there. He buckled the straps around his valise with savage jerks. The grave might have received Bux Bailey that night for all the world knew and for all Nick knew.

"He could have gotten me word a hundred different ways," Nick thought, his mind falling into the old groove. "If he had cared! I pretty near waited my heart out while I was growing up. Guess he was having too high a time. Bux always was one to roll them handsome." He picked up the valise and winked into the cracked mirror.

"When my name has become known all over the Oregon country as a crack lawyer—or maybe I've found a creek rotting with gold—Bux will come catfooting it into my office, and hold out his slim hand and say, 'Remember me, kid? I'm your brother.'"

Nick always included that slim hand part, when he thought of Bux. His own hands were thick through the palms from handling an ax. Bux had said on one of his rare trips to the Missouri hills that Nick was the flapping image of their granddad, Elias Hummer. Both Elias and Nick flapped and rattled, he said, when a gust of wind hit them. But Nick hadn't minded, for Bux had thrown an arm about his brother and smiled down with a proud light in his dark eyes.

"Some day there'll be a firm of Bailey & Bailey," he had said, and Nick had never forgotten. He had worked his way through some schooling in Kansas City, after his grand-

dad's death, because he remembered. But it seemed Bux had forgotten.

"I won't crowd him," Nick told the empty room he was leaving. "I'll hang out a shingle in Salt Lake and then it will be his move."

IN the Santa Fe House in Independence, where the cups were thick and the coffee muddy, Nick Bailey dropped his valise on the floor and straddled a stool. The old waiter, his few long gray hairs lying across his scalp like a trail ribboning a patch of desert, mopped the counter with a brown rag.

"How're you, Nick?" he asked. "You're gettin' to look a mite, just a mite, mind you, like Bux. I was speakin' of it to my wife some time back. Just a mite across the bridge of the nose. But you ain't Bux and never will be. He was boilin' under his shirt like a tea kettle about to blow its lid, and you're easy goin' like your granddad was. Never hear from Bux, do yuh?" He leaned close. "Reckon he don't dare let you know where he is. That Anton Decker would be after him like a vulture. Decker won't never forget Bux cost him a gold mine."

Nick took a swallow of coffee. "I've never had a message from Bux of any kind. He dropped from my life the night he walked down the path and out between the two trees at the foot of the yard. If he hadn't made that trip into Missouri to tell me good-by, I'd say to hell with him. But he did, and he made it with bloodhounds smelling his tracks. I like to remember he thought that much of me."

The old man tapped Nick's arm with a bony finger. "Betcha leatherneck he thought of you. Bux had some wild ways with him, but forgettin' his friends wasn't one of them. Jehoshafat! It was goin' tryin' to help that old lady in Georgia that got him all the trouble. Our courts here in Independence was purty close to the end of nowheres ten years ago, not civilized like today. Bux saw Anton Decker was goin' to steal that old lady's mine, so he went after them forged papers Decker held. He got 'em, but he had to kill a man. I don't reckon his conscience ever got him lathered up any, but he's rememberin' you. He's thinkin' about you. That's why he's layin' low, knowin' a young feller like you would be better off without havin' a . . . a— Well, dod-rot it, you know Bux is still wanted by the law. He's showin' good sense, not draggin' you in."

Nick was searching the old man's face. "You think that's the way he's figuring?"

"Dead certain. What're yuh doin' with that valise?"

Nick's wide smile broke. "Where is this town of Bannack?"

"Jumpin' frogs, it's clean to hell and back. Beyond Salt Lake by the Overland Road and then across the mountains that are so tall you never see the tops, and where you freeze to death in winter." The old waiter's eyes flamed up. "If I was your age, I'd hit fer them gold fields. I've talked to fellers that've come home with their fortunes made! And I've talked to them that are mighty glad to get back to civilization with their lives. They say men are killed fer a poke of gold and left alongside the trail fer the coyotes to gnaw."

Nick held out his hand as he rose. "Here's hoping I beat the coyotes."

"Go get 'em, Nick. Look me up when you get back—if you do—and tell me if them tall-stories are true. Nope, this coffee is on me."

CHAPTER II

NEWS FROM AN ENEMY

THE stage trip from Independence to Salt Lake was an ordeal, even for the toughened frame of Nick Bailey. He sat with the driver when he could, and hung his long legs over the side of the coach. When he was forced to ride inside, he folded them away under his chin and got what sleep he could, with his head rolling to the jerk of the stage. His mind wasn't as cramped as his body. All the years he had been waiting for a letter from Bux, the thought had grown that his brother had forgotten him. Now that thought had left him. He could see why Bux had kept still. He was wanted by the law and had considered himself a handicap to his kid brother in the Missouri hills.

Bux hadn't intended to kill anyone to get possession of the papers that Anton Decker had stolen. He had been taking them from a safe when a man entered, firing as he came through the door. Bux had come off alive, but the other fellow hadn't.

Bux had ridden in that night with a roll of bills for their grandfather, Elias Hummer, and a few bitter words for Nick.

"Good-by, kid, and don't waste your time studying law. Make a preacher out of yourself. It's a better racket."

Nick hadn't much money left when he landed in Salt Lake, but he had an idea. Herbert McCracken was a big distributor for all points west, south and north of Salt Lake. He even owned a few freight outfits, and at least one stage line. He owned almost anything, and sold almost anything. To help him run his complicated affairs, he kept an army of attorneys scattered over the several thousand miles where he did business. It was said that McCracken never turned down a chance to hire a good man, whether lawyer, teamster, clerk or blacksmith. It was toward the office of this firm that Nick headed his first morning in Salt Lake City.

He settled his wrinkled coat, looked sadly at his worn boots and opened a door that said, "Herbert McCracken. Enter." He found himself in a large, square room with four doors opening off. He rapped on the one that bore the lettering "Herbert McCracken. Private."

He walked in when he was commanded. A fat man looked up with one eye from a letter. He waved Nick toward a chair and took both eyes back to his reading.

"What do you want?" he asked, when he had finished with the letter.

"A job. I've heard you'll always hire a good man."

The fat man puckered his lips, tipped back in his armchair and studied his visitor across the deep, hardwood desk. With shrewd eyes he took in the lanky youth from wiry hair to worn boots. His glance returned to the hands. The thickness of the palms bothered him.

"What's your line?"

"Lawyer, mostly."

He still frowned. "Swung an ax any?"

Nick held out a large hand. "I've split a few rails, and I've guided a foot-burner some."

He began to feel uneasy. Even after his schooling in Kansas City, there were times when he felt downright awkward without his long-barreled rifle in the crook of his arm. If he had it now, he'd feel as easy as a squirrel on a limb, even though he did stand on a plush carpet and was looking over a walnut desk. He had packed a rifle since he had come

of age to pack one, and that was nine years ago. Elias Hummer always held against a lad packing a rifle before he was nine.

"Think you're a lawyer, eh?" asked McCracken solemnly. "What's the name?"

"Nicholas Bailey."

"Bailey, eh? Nicholas? Grandson of old Elias Hummer, aren't you? Brother of Bux Bailey? I try to keep informed on what's going on in the East."

"Bux Bailey is my brother, yes, sir."

Nick had not completely closed the door behind him as he entered, and now Herbert McCracken looked into that outer room and rose. He nodded for Nick to follow.

A TALL, slim, dark man stood at the big desk in the outer office that seemed to serve as a reception room. He was in the early forties, and there was a carefulness and expensiveness about his dress that brought back to Nick his wrinkled, shabby clothes.

"Decker," said McCracken, "this is Nicholas Bailey. He wants a job." He turned to Nick. "This is Anton Decker, my Salt Lake manager."

The words were like a ducking in an icy pool to Nick Bailey. Decker! The man that Bux Bailey had beaten out of a gold mine in Georgia! The man who had sworn ten years ago, that he would bring Bux Bailey back to justice!

Herbert McCracken stood with his hands shoved deep in his pockets, his lips puckered slightly, his shrewd eyes missing nothing of the play before him.

"Bailey!" Anton Decker exploded. Then years of training rose to his assistance and he oiled most of the rasp from his voice. "The brother of Buxton Bailey!" His sallow face was flushing with hot spurts of blood.

"I didn't know you were connected with McCracken, Decker," Nick said, and the stress of the moment brought out his Missouri twang. His thin, craggy face was slightly flushed, but his greenish eyes were not inflamed like Decker's. He moved a step toward the outer door.

Anton Decker remembered Herbert McCracken's presence and spoke to him.

"It's very likely this Missourian did not know of my connections here. News travels slowly in the hills. He isn't as smooth as Buxton; Bux was a snake who didn't hesitate to sell his friends out."

Nick checked his course toward the other door. "The first rule I learned in law, Decker, was that every case has two sides. The side you just presented is yours."

Decker's inky eyes snapped. "Buxton Bailey beat the hangman's noose, but he didn't beat his punishment. He's a saloon bum today. A drunkard!"

The words lay like rocks on Nick's chest. "That's a lie!" he said.

Decker's veins swelled on his temples, still he kept control of himself. The look of a satisfied cat came to his eyes when he saw how deeply his words had scored. "Buxton Bailey is a beggar," he said. "A man that passes from saloon to saloon begging drinks, shunned by honest men!"

Nick turned loose his right fist with all the swiftness of hill lightning and the power of the same hill mule. The fist, hardened from handling an ax, landed on the bony jaw. Decker's head snapped back and his heels up. He landed on his back with a smack that shook the building. From the three offices opening off the big square room, three men appeared. They took in the spec-

tacle of their division head lying on the floor and a lanky hillbilly-looking fellow towering over him. The three of them charged.

Nick squared away. He had been feeling out of place in these surroundings, but now he was at ease. He let the trio barge to within good arm's length and then he began lifting his fists from deep at his sides and straightening them out with the whir of a buzz saw. The freedom of the hills flowed through his muscles and the call of battle ran through his blood.

The trio found they had somehow become tangled with a whirring windmill. They were not cowards, but they did not know the ways of rough-and-tumble fighting, as did this wild cat from the hills. A stubby, short-winded fellow was the first to throw in the sponge. He stumbled backward, arms folded over his too-well-fed stomach, and a chair caught his collapsing form. A second man staggered to the wall, shaking his head, knees pointing alternately east and west. The third man went down to rest beside Decker.

NICK wiped the blood from a scratch across his cheek and looked into the level eyes of Herbert McCracken. "I wouldn't work here if I were starving—which I won't ever be!" he said.

The man nodded. "You and Decker wouldn't get on, with both of you touchy on the subject of Buxton Bailey. I attended that trial in Kansas City, when Decker was trying to get hold of that mine, and I want to say that Bux Bailey was one of the—"

Nick removed his hand from the knob of the outer door and stepped back in arm's length of McCracken. He liked to be on his heels when he brought up a haymaker. It worked faster, saved wear and tear on the knuckles.

"Go on," he invited. "Bux Bailey was what? Don't pull your punches and I won't pull mine."

McCracken regarded him severely. "I'll say exactly what I started out to say, and that is that Bux Bailey was one of the smartest lawyers the profession ever lost. Now you can come out of that tiger stance and get out that door before my division head awakes and asks for your arrest. Get out of Salt Lake. There isn't room in one town for a Decker and a Bailey."

"Then it's going to be rough on the Decker," Nick retorted.

McCracken lifted a fat hand in dismay. "Lift your cowhides out of this office before these four come to and you have to beef them all over again. In spite of all the hell you've raised in my office, I wish you luck. You're a good man, and Herb McCracken hates seeing a good man slip away, but I need Anton Decker and I can worry along without you. You're young in the law game, but green timber cures rapidly in this mountain air. With the courtroom shrewdness that runs in your veins, and that pair of fists operating like the hind heels of a mule, you'll make your mark. Now get out!"

Nick Bailey walked out into the sunshine. The streets of the Mormon town were wide, the mountain air pure. The bustle of prosperity was everywhere. He stepped back into an alley. The sunshine didn't suit him, it was too dissecting. It might show to passers the hurt that was inside him. He had forgotten the fight. He had forgotten everything but Anton Decker's words.

Bux a saloon bum, a drunkard that begged his whiskey. A pain twisted in Nick's heart. Maybe that

was why Bux had kept silent these years. It was all a lie. It had to be. Bux Bailey wasn't a man that could be broken.

Nick stepped into a doorway to let a cart loaded with wood pass. He did not know it was the side door to the building where Herbert McCracken had offices, but he knew when he heard the bellowing voice of McCracken. He caught the name "Bailey," and opened the door and climbed the dirty steps to the second floor. It was easy to hear now, for a door from the office opened out to the landing where he stood. He heard McCracken's authoritive tones.

"This is a business house, Decker; first, last and always. Don't forget it! I know you're after Bux Bailey, tooth and nail, and this swat on the jaw today isn't going to be balm to your wrath, but don't get mixed up on whose paying the wages of the men around here. I am, and I want them kept to the job, not sent off chasing up clues of Bux Bailey's whereabouts. I don't give a damn where Bailey is!"

The low, sullen voice of Anton Decker didn't carry through the closed door, but whatever he said, it did not tend to sooth McCracken.

"When you see Dan Evens tonight," he rumbled, "see that you make it clear to him that his business isn't chasing up Bux Bailey. I've heard he's been doing man hunting on the side."

Herbert McCracken's big voice rolled off in another direction as he bellowed at three men, berating them for letting a long-hanky from the Missouri hills come in and wash them up clean as a whistle.

Nick moved down the steps, out of the alley and away from the building. So Anton Decker was having the McCracken men keep a lookout for Bux? The McCracken interests covered a large territory, so Decker was in a splendid spot to get word of his man. Nick knew that some way he had to hear what Anton Decker said to the man he was seeing tonight. The man McCracken had called Dan Evens. From the remarks he had made, it appeared Evens was expected in from a distant field.

Early in the afternoon, Nick set himself to watch the front entrance of the building housing the firm of McCracken. Decker would leave his office for supper, and from then on Nick intended to follow him.

CHAPTER III

BANNACK BOUND

THAT evening Anton Decker ate his supper in the best restaurant Salt Lake afforded, then walked back to his office. Nick Bailey slid into the alley that was now thick with shadows, and up the flight of stairs at the back of the McCracken offices, and tried the door before him. It was locked. He could hear Decker now and then, moving about in the inner office that was his. There would be no chance of hearing anything unless he could get into the reception room.

Nick went back down the stairs, and around to the front of the building. He climbed the wide stairway to the second floor. The door to the reception room was open a crack. Nick walked by, hat drawn low, long stride noiseless. A wall lamp was burning, dimly lighting the face of Anton Decker as he paced in impatient waiting. Nick went on to the end of the hall and waited. He could still see a thin wedge of the doorway.

In a few moments a man banged the street door and came tapping

up the stairs. Decker heard the sound and walked into his inner office. Nick saw nothing in the bare hall that would hide his lanky figure. He moved swiftly to the lighted room, widened the crack and slid inside. A brighter light was streaming from Anton Decker's office. Nick slid behind a clothing stand, ornamented by mirror and deer horns, and barely had himself stowed from sight when the man he had heard on the stairway reached the office.

The composed voice of Anton Decker invited the newcomer into his own, smaller quarters, but first he cautioned him to lock the outside door. Nick heard the door to the inner office click shut on the two men. He slid from behind the tall piece of furniture, noted the key was in the lock of the outer door, and blew out the lamp. If Decker should open his office door suddenly, it would be a shade better to have darkness.

Nick could see Decker as he sat at a large, gleaming desk, for the desk was in direct line with the keyhole. He could catch fleeting visions of Dan Evens, slightly built, with a tight, hard face. Their talk dealt with gold and claims and the mining camp of Bannack. Then it traveled to two names Nick had heard a lot of since arriving in Salt Lake: Alder Gulch and Virginia City.

"A rich one! Millions will be taken out! Millions!" Evens spoke with conviction.

Anton Decker's sallow skin looked more yellowish than ever under the lamplight, and his inky eyes were calculating. "But there'll be no advance cash," he said firmly. "I don't do business that way."

Evens argued obstinately. It appeared that Decker was supplying the money for the deal, and Evens making the contacts.

"The sheriff of Bannack isn't hard to know," Evens went on. "Henry Plummer hasn't been in office long, and I've heard of him some in Nevada and California. He likes to be friends with anyone who knew him in those spots. I've wasted a lot of time and we'll lose a fortune if you balk at a few thousand at the start."

"I have heard of Plummer." Decker tapped a pencil nervously on the polished desk. "It all sounds good, except the advance cash. Did you pick up that business for McCracken? Somebody has been telling him tales of your activities."

"I picked up enough to hold him a while longer—and I picked up something else, too. Word of Bux Bailey!"

DECKER leaned back in his chair. "You've brought a story like that to me often. I suppose you want to put me in a good mood."

"Bailey is in Bannack!" The words rustled. "Picking up a man in a hell camp like Bannack is a big job, but I was lucky. The new strike at Alder Gulch brought him."

Decker's long fingers rubbed the welt on his jaw. "Is Bux Bailey a saloon rat like we've heard?"

"He's a tobocco-chewing, half-nutty, saloon bum. Burro Ike Middleton, is the name he uses. I suppose that's the tag the camp hung on him. Anyway, Middleton is the name folks know. He cusses all law courts and lawyers as crooked. That's how I first got onto him. I talked to him some and he sure is bitter, about the most bitter piece of humanity I ever crossed, and I've crossed plenty. His talk still smacks some of the courtroom. He's been a lawyer; I'll swear it."

"How old? What build?" Decker

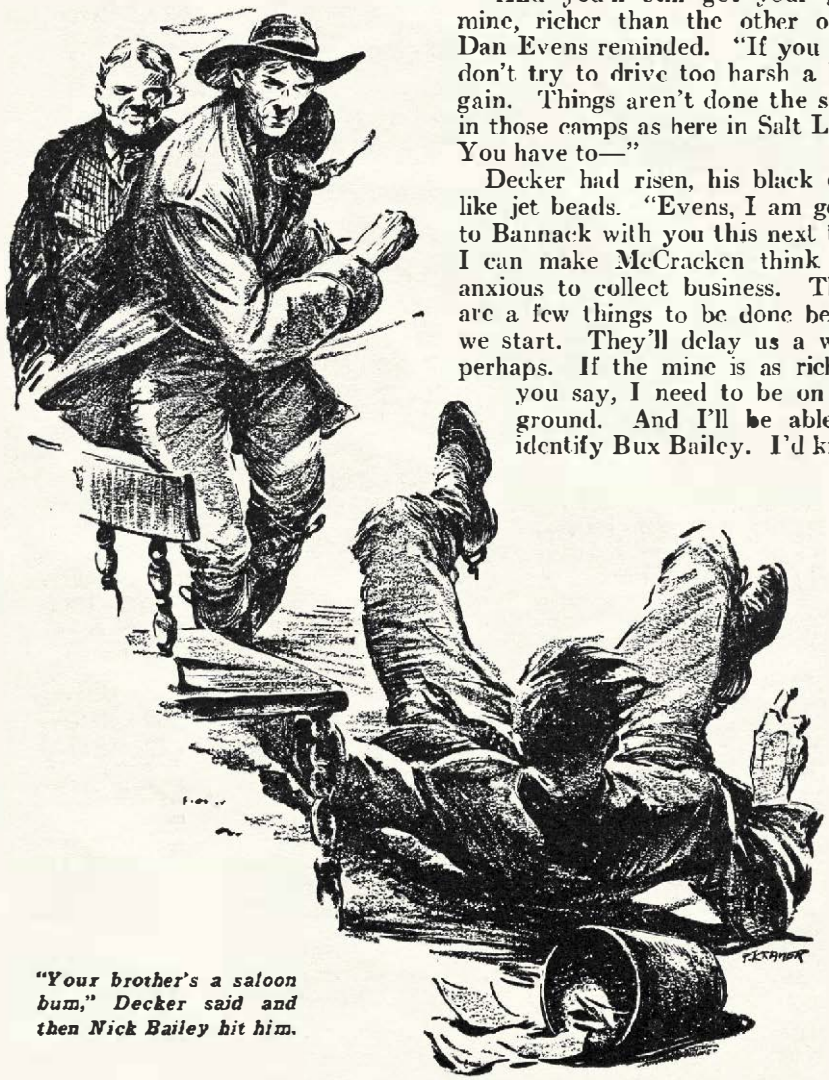
rapped the questions out.

"Round forty. It's hard to tell what's behind the matted beard, but he's of medium height, and still mighty agile. Every point tallies, Decker, every one."

"It sounds right." Evens was leaning across the desk. "Buxton Bailey would be bitter, the most bitter man alive. He liked to dress well and eat good food and match his wits against the keenest in the land. That was all taken from him. Evens, Bux Bailey took a gold mine away from me, but I took more than that away from him! Now he'll be handed to the law as a finishing touch!"

"And you'll still get your gold mine, richer than the other one," Dan Evens reminded. "If you just don't try to drive too harsh a bargain. Things aren't done the same in those camps as here in Salt Lake. You have to—"

Decker had risen, his black eyes like jet beads. "Evens, I am going to Bannack with you this next trip. I can make McCracken think I'm anxious to collect business. There are a few things to be done before we start. They'll delay us a week perhaps. If the mine is as rich as you say, I need to be on the ground. And I'll be able to identify Bux Bailey. I'd know



"Your brother's a saloon bum," Decker said and then Nick Bailey hit him.

him in hell, a thousand years from now!"

Nick crossed to the door of the outer office and turned the key soundlessly. In the hills he had learned the trick of moving without sound, gliding, feeling every step. That knowledge saved him now. His mind was in a fog and Decker's words kept ringing in his head as he passed down the stairs to the street.

He slid into a crowd of men and trailed along with them. During his ten years of waiting for Bux, he had thought of everything but this. A saloon bum! He had never associated failure with Bux. He had pictured him a conqueror, someone who would win by sheer brilliance, if nothing else.

"I'd have been here long before, if I'd guessed, Bux," he whispered. "We'd have fought this together."

Nick turned his steps toward the stage office. His eyes were like green surf, and dangerous whitecaps were breaking in their depths as he entered the lighted office. He laid his money on the desk.

"I want to go to Bannack. How far will that take me?"

The clerk considered, then glanced at the set face of his questioner. "Fort Hall is as far as I can get you on this cash," he said, half apologizing. "That's clean to the Snake River, and there's lots of traffic 'tween the Fort and Bannack."

"Such as what?"

"Freight wagons and pack trains. A packer is usually glad to have an extra man mornings to help load the mules."

Nick bought the ticket to Fort Hall.

"I hope you strike up with a packer," the agent said.

"I'll get to Bannack," Nick returned.

NICK arrived at Fort Hall after dark. He took a short walk to work some of the kinks from his legs, broke into his last dollar for coffee and a plate of beans, took his rifle in arms and started for the camping yard of freighters and packers. There was only one pack train at the Fort that night and it was headed back for Walla Walla.

"Any freight wagons headed for Bannack?" Nick asked of a man who had just finished putting down trouble among some mules. The man pointed into the starlight.

"Count two outfits west and kind o' in the gully. Them six teams belongs to Californy Bill Niles and he's headed fer Bannack with freight from McCracken's in Salt Lake. His teamsters got into a gunnin' row a hour or so back, and one's ready to be buried. 'Nother one, Charley Webber, is winged, so's drivin' won't be no cinch fer him. Californy is frothin' at the mouth. He's hired one man, but the feller's been on a two weeks' drunk here in the Fort and ain't very steady."

"It sounds like I might work my way to Bannack with California Bill," Nick said. "Thanks."

"You'll probable be cussin' me 'fore you get to Bannack," the man told him. "Californy is a hard man. Strike him easy or he might give you a shave with his fists. He ain't sweet tempered at best, and he's a curly wolf tonight."

Nick could find no trace of California Bill, and not a man seemed about the six big outfits. A fellow noticing him wandering about, said like as not they were burying the dead teamster so the outfit wouldn't be held from an early start in the morning.

Nick went for his valise, returned, and with a rifle at his side, bedded down in some hay in the feeding

corral. He needed a good night's sleep after the stage trip. He knew the first stir of activity in the morning would awaken him.

Nick crawled out at the first shout, and shivered in the cold grayness. California Bill Niles' outfits were astir.

"How about a job helping these teams to Bannack?" Nick asked a man who was cursing steadily as he worked with the handicap of a bandaged arm. The fellow's face was matted with whiskers, and in the gray light, his eyes were the only live spark.

"Get to hell out o' my way," the man answered in a soured voice.

"Is that big man down there that's cussing everyone and threatening to beat everyone's brains out, California Bill Niles?"

The teamster gave Nick a closer look. "Betcha fool neck. Californy ain't nobody fer boys with peach fuzz on their face to be monkeyin' with."

NICK set his valise down, shifted his rifle to an easy spot and turned to face a man who was riding toward them at a gallop. California Bill was big, and every inch of him was hard as rawhide. A wicked, blacksnake hung about his neck and a Navy pistol was strapped to his thigh. He brought his horse to a stop with a jerk and leaned down toward his teamster.

"Ain't you got nothin' to do 'sides stand and jaw with strangers, Webber?" he barked.

"I'm wanting a job with your outfit to Bannack," Nick announced, before Charley Webber could speak.

California Bill swung to earth as though Nick's words had snapped a wire in his tense body. "A job with me? What doin'?" He stepped almost into Nick's face, and a glint of surprise struck him as he saw the youth's eyes were on a level with his own. "What can a damn tenderfoot like you do fer Californy Bill Niles?"

Nick noted that the thick, strong fingers were at the handle of the blacksnake. He had heard of the way an expert could wind an eight-foot snake around a man's body.

"I thought you might need somebody to hold an umbrella over your drivers to keep them from getting sunstroked," he answered coolly. "Or somebody to read your mail to you—or maybe somebody to help this wounded man drive a team. I'll go to Bannack for my keep and take any odd work you have."

"Have you ever heard of me, kid? Californy Bill Niles? When I hire a man, he does what I say. My wagons go through on time, regardless of men or horseflesh."

"I hope you make this trip on time. I'm in a hurry."

"I got a notion to knock you down, just to see if you can take it. If a man has the nerve to get up and start throwin' leather on a team after I've knocked him down three times, I consider him worth a trial."

"Lay off that blacksnake and come at me," Nick invited.

"And if I don't lay off the snake?"

"Then I don't stand my rifle. I don't go for leather trimmings."

California Bill stepped back and sized Nick up the same as he would a horse. "You ain't a teamster," he announced definitely.

"I haven't said I was. I'm not asking wages."

California Bill turned to his horse and swung to the saddle. "Get to helpin' Webber. If you're runnin' a bluff, it'll be the sorriest one you ever pulled."

Nick put his valise on the freight and stood his rifle down in the front

of the lead wagon. California Bill spurred away. Charley Webber took a chew of tobacco and shook his head.

"You're plumb lucky Californy didn't lay you cold with the loaded end of that blacksnake," he said. "I'm tellin' you, kid, I wish you was in hell, 'stead of here makin' trouble fer me. My pard was killed last night, and Californy don't give a damn, save that it made him shorthanded. Now you come hornin' in, which makes me too much trouble fer one trip. I'll have to try and keep Californy from killin' you."

Nick grinned at him. "I'll tend to that job personally. All you have to do is teach me to handle these eight horses and two wagons."

Webber ceased his tobacco chewing. "Blast your hide, do you mean you never herded a big team?"

"I've driven old Frank between the rows of corn. That's about the extent of my driving."

"Hell fer damn! Gimme the name of your mother so's I can write her where we buried you 'long the road."

CHAPTER IV

QUICK-TRIGGERED TEST

NICK'S lips were split and dry from the hot winds. The wagons seemed to be making agonizingly slow progress. He had to beat Anton Decker to Bannack. Swaying grimly along beside Charley Webber in the high seat, he would try to reassure himself by recalling Decker's words about business keeping him a week in Salt Lake.

Charley Webber squinted into the dust. "This is a steep pitch ahead of us," he said. "A bad pull 'cause there's a sharp turn at the top. I allus wait till I see the blue sky 'tween my leaders' ears 'fore I swing Dolly out, then I speak to them swingers so's they cut my trail wagon into the bank."

Nick's mind snapped back to his surroundings. He took in the import of what Webber had said. The teamster had let him handle the lines on the straightaways and easy grades. He had learned a lot.

California Bill Niles was galloping along his line of teams.

"Hey! Unlimber some buckskin, Graves," he yelled at one teamster. "This outfit is lettin' too much grass grow under its feet."

"He's spoilin' fer trouble," Webber said to Nick. "He's comin' at us. Keep your lips buttoned and let me handle him."

California Bill reared his horse down and let his hand fall to the Navy at his waist. He called for Webber to halt. Webber brought the team to a stop.

"Now!" growled California Bill, "I'm seein' what Bailey can do. Get over into that driver's seat. I've been watchin' you, Webber, and you've been only givin' him the lines on the easy stretches. I don't think he can drive hogs to water. I ain't feedin' him from Fort Hall to Bannack fer his good looks. Let's see him hoist this team up that pitch and around that turn."

Webber cursed under his breath. Nick placed one foot on the front board of the wagon and stood up for the change of positions. Webber seemed to have trouble with the lines. He threaded them apart, making it plain how his fingers held the lead and the swing.

"Set back with some weight on these lines when you start that pitch," he said softly. "Let the team know there's a pull ahead. Lift 'em into it. Damn these lines!" He hurled a curse down at California Bill. "I'm usin' this man fer help, but I like to drive my own team on

the pull, and you know it." Under his breath he whispered: "Speak to Dolly when you see the blue sky shinin' 'tween her ears. Don't do nothin' but hold the lines. She'll take you around."

California sat his horse a few feet to the side where he could see the entire behavior of his new teamster. Nick took the lines, separated them as Webber had shown him. "Kick me when it's time to speak to the swingers," he said with a grin to his companion.

"Never mind the gab," California called. "See you start that team without jiggin' 'em."

Nick leaned back on the lines and spoke to the horses. "Yeah, boys, take up the slack!" The team leaned to the collars and the wagon rolled. The leaders were already at the steep pitch. He put a little more weight on the lines and spoke to them again. Then he held the lines steady and waited for the blue to show between his leaders' ears.

"Dolly!" he called sharply, with the drop in his voice that Webber always used. The lead mare swung to the very edge of the grade and the big team swung with her. Webber touched Nick lightly with his toe at the moment when it was time for the pointers to lift over.

"Barney!" Nick called commandingly. "Ben!"

Slowly the swing team ground the wheel wagon toward the bank. The eight horses were working smoothly. At their snail's pace, they finished the pull and rounded the turn. Nick shoved on the brake and called a rest stop.

California Bill rode up alongside. "You got up," he said to Nick, his face blacker than it had been before. "You got up, but, Bailey, you ain't a teamster!"

Nick knew the man's reputation from Webber. California Bill Niles was a teamster who knew his business. He knew how much a team could pull by looking at them, how much was still left in them. He could tell a teamster by the way he climbed up the wheel and picked up the lines.

"I hired out as helper," Nick reminded. "I never passed for a teamster."

"Thought you could work me for a cheap ride to Bannack, did you?" California's hand was at his blacksnake that always hung around his neck. His anger was black and boiling. "I always handle men that try to put one over on me so's it'll be a lesson to the next one. Get down off that seat!"

NICK handed the lines to Webber. His rifle was standing in the front of the wagon, and as he threw a leg over the high front of the bed, he swung his gun to his arm. He landed in the dusty road with it at a dead bead on California's heart.

"Aim to shoot me, do you, hillbilly?" Niles asked.

"Just guarding against you drawing that blacksnake, California."

"Drive on." The order was given to Charley Webber. "This feller is hittin' the road back to Fort Hall ridin' shank's mare. Next time he'll not pick Californy Bill fer a free ride."

"I'm not riding free," Nick said with a tightening of his loose frame and a rising of the whitecaps in his eyes. "I'm working plenty to pay my way. I'm going to Bannack with this outfit and all hell isn't going to stop me."

California's fingers gripped the short handle of the blacksnake.

Nick thumbed back the hammer of his rifle. The click was loud in

the stillness and heat. Webber hadn't started the team.

"Let that snake fall to the dirt," Nick ordered. "Let her fall!"

California's eyes squeezed tighter. "Aim to make this a killin', do you, Bailey?" He deliberately threw the blacksnake from his neck and it slithered down at the feet of his horse. He hadn't been intimidated by the order. He was just allowing the Missourian to play out the hand.

"Now what?" he asked.

Nick never took his glance off the squinted eyes of California, as he laid his rifle, still cocked, on the front tire of the wagon.

"Maybe the coyotes will gnaw my bones; maybe they'll gnaw yours," he said to the mounted man. His elbow was still bent, ready for a sweep toward the rifle. "I figure with that Navy you're packing, we're now about even."

California's eyes became hard streaks of triumph. A brush of the fingers could send that rifle spinning to the dust; a swift reach didn't stand much chance. The teamster's hand swept downward in a flash draw that was well known on many miles of freight roads. Nick's elbow flew open and his fingers closed on the wood of his gun. He fired as he swept it upward. Smoked spilled from California's gun, but a twitch of his body spoiled his aim. Nick's hat flew to the road. It settled in the dust beside the pistol that had been knocked from California's hand when a bullet took him in the shoulder.

With his left hand, California Bill pulled himself erect in the saddle until the first shock of his wound had passed. Anger, and the complete hardness of the man, drove back the grayness that for a second threatened to stamp his face.

"You ain't a teamster, Bailey," he said grudgingly. "But you ain't no ordinary hillbilly, neither. I never saw a quicker, surer use of a rifle. Damn your hide, you musta been born with that long barrel in your hands."

He slid off his horse and spoke to Webber. "Get some water and see about this shoulder of mine."

Nick picked up his hat and examined the bullet hole in it. "My Sunday best," he said sadly.

When California rode on to overtake his other teams, Nick crawled to the seat beside Webber. "Will California hold it against you if I ride, Charley?"

Webber cursed. "It won't be the first thing he ever held against me, but I don't reckon he'll shoot off his bazoo about it. Old Californy is hard himself and he likes a man to have leather in him."

Nick Bailey sat hunched in the swaying seat as the dust clouds rolled and the mountains ahead became slowly more distinct. He cleared his throat.

"Are you much acquainted around Bannack, Charley?"

"Tolerable."

"Know a fellow they call Burro Ike?"

The teamster nodded. "Yup. Cracked on lawin' and laws of all kind. Ain't old, neither. I've allus thought somethin' awful tough must have struck that squirrel to make him what he is."

Nick looked straight down along the horses' backs. The progress of the wagons seemed slower than ever.

CHAPTER V

NICK BAILEY'S FIRST CASE

IN Bannack, Nick walked from bar to bar. The mining camp had many places where a drink might be bought—or begged. Miners

clumped about, relaxing from their day's work, flexing tired muscles, warming their stomachs with whiskey. Nick asked no questions, but his eyes searched every face.

He saw many men, some with defeated faces and ragged clothes, but he did not see Bux. He had no doubt that he would recognize his brother, even though ten years had passed. Bux would not know him, of course, for he had been just a kid when Bux came to the farm in the hills. Nick strained his ears listening for an educated voice as he threaded his way through the crowd.

A cry of "Stage!" went up, and the buildings poured forth their crowds. The arrival of the Salt Lake stage was an event, for it carried the mail. Nick trailed along, his eyes roving in their restless search. The six horses galloped down the street, and the driver held an arm up in greeting to the town. The coach slithered to a standstill before the stage office and Nick caught a glance of a tall, thin man stepping down from the coach.

The sight of Anton Decker's thin, dark face was like a force pressing the breath from Nick's lungs. Sweat burst out on his forehead. By such a narrow margin had he beaten Decker to Bannack. He turned to a miner.

"Do you know where I might find Burro Ike Middleton?"

The man scratched his head. "It jest comes to me I ain't seen ol' Burro fer a spell."

Nick hurried for a saloon. He had not asked questions earlier, because he wanted no attention attracted to him. Now minutes were valuable. He had to find Bux ahead of Anton Decker.

"Where would I find Burro Ike?" he asked the bartender.

The man looked amused. "He got some Easterners to swallow his gold story and they took him with them to Virginia City. Burro's been itchin' to get to Alder Gulch for a month."

"Virginia City is the new strike in Alder Gulch?"

"Yep. Follow the Beaverhead and the Passamari and you'll get there."

"Far?"

"Seventy-five miles. The stage makes it 'tween suns."

Nick walked toward the livery stable as he left the saloon, his strides long, his rifle easy on his arm. Virginia City was where the claim was located that Evens and Decker had come to purchase. They would only pause in Bannack overnight. Decker would soon learn that Burro Ike was in Virginia City, and by tomorrow night he, too, would be there. Nick drew into the shadows of the stable. Twilight was settling and the town was growing more boisterous.

"If I had a horse," he mused, listening to the animals stamping back of the board walls, "I could beat that stage to Virginia City." But with thirty-five cents in his pocket, he knew he might just as well wish for the moon.

ABRUPTLY his attention was jerked to some loud talk a short way up the dusty road. "Get off that spotted horse 'fore I blast you off!" shouted an angry voice. Nick sauntered up to investigate. A swaggering bully with a holstered gun on his thigh was hurling threats at a badly frightened man mounted on a big spotted horse. The rider held the lead rope of a leggy bay, and he was crawling down from his saddle as though each second he expected lead to plow through him.

"Both them horses is mine!" snarled the gunman. "A horse thief without a thimbleful of brains, you are. You mighta knowed I'd foller you!"

Miners were crowding around. An angular man in mud-splattered boots cautioned the gunman to go slow.

"Slow!" yelled the fellow, waving a paper. "Look at this bill o' sale!"

The miner took it and began to read. Immediately all sound died, even jaws ceased wrestling with tobacco, so earnest became the crowd. The two horses were described point by point, the location of the red spot on one shoulder, the white star in the bay's forehead. The miner shook his head as he handed the bill of sale back to the gunman.

"It's them all right," he said, glancing at the two horses. "And this says you've owned them a year. Ain't never seen you ridin' either of 'em, Black."

"I bought them in Oro Fino," Black said glibly. "You better keep shut till you got somethin' to say."

The man charged with horse stealing looked around him desperately. "I raised both these horses from colts. I haven't anything on me saying they're mine. I never thought of any trouble."

"You ain't got a scratch of nothin'?" asked the tall miner.

The man shook his head. "I raised them from colts."

A friend of Dan Black's had shoved to the center of the ring. He dangled a rope in his hand. "We got medicine to take care of horse thieves," he said darkly. The accused man went gray as the evening shadows.

"His story sounds mighty lean to me," said a miner in the crowd.

The tall spokesman nodded. "It's lean, yup, but there's been a lot of bills of sale croppin' up lately. This is the second one Dan Black has presented."

The gunman surged forward. "Meanin' what, McCay?"

"Meanin' this is the second bill of sale you've sprung, and nobody ever saw you with either set of horses 'fore."

Evidently the man holding the hang rope was the only friend Black had in the gathering, and there were thirty or so miners, all armed. They tightened the circle and shifted their shotguns until a solid wall of steel was glistening.

Black cursed and shot a glance at his friend. "Let these miners have their horse thief if they want him. We'll take them horses and go." He moved toward the stranger and started to reach for the reins.

The man who had the horses clutched the reins and lead rope. "You can't get away with this! That bill of sale is a fake!"

Dan Black beat the rope against his boot with the slowness of a funeral march. "Hand over them reins," he ordered.

"You oughta have sense enough to pack some proof on you," the angular miner said.

The stranger shook his head. "I raised them from colts," he repeated desperately.

Black shoved forward and so did Nick Bailey. The tall Missourian shoved through the ring of miners and approached the stranger. Nick had seen men frightened before when they were facing serious questioning. This man was trembling with apprehension, but he was holding out. Nick looked around the tightly knotted circle.

"I'm a lawyer," he announced. "It's only right this man have somebody to talk for him." His slow speech gave the words a deceptive innocence, and the slight twang as

they came through his nose bore it up. Nick had drilled himself out of this nasal quality to a large extent, but now, with the anger and nervous trigger finger of a gunman to contend with, he slipped back to the hill drawl. He had no time to bother with resonance.

THE miners stiffened at this interruption. Even the angular spokesman looked at Nick with a frosty glint in his eyes.

"These gents are workin' together," Black announced, sensing the hostility of the miners and taking advantage of it. "Swing 'em both up!"

His mistake was in glancing away from Nick Bailey in order to make the miners feel his words. The gangling Missouri youth moved like a flash and whipped his rifle hard into Black's side.

"Drop your iron and make it fast!" he ordered.

The miners snickered as Black let the gun drop to the earth. Nick grinned at them. "I had my rifle resting right in the spot where I carry her for speed," he said. "Like I pack her when I'm hunting squirrels. It keeps a man limbered up to lay a bead on a squirrel when the critter is bent on moving quarters. I never saw this man before. I came in tonight with one of California Bill Niles' teams. Ask Niles if you want."

A ripple of approval passed over the miners and suspicion faded from their faces.

"He ain't no long-jawed lawyer hornin' in to mix us up," one said. "He knows how to take care of hisself plenty. Let's have a go at what he's got to say."

Dan Black sullenly extended the bill of sale toward Nick. "Start defendin' your horse thief. Read this and see how it sets!"

Nick fitted his back against the shoulder of the spotted horse and made no move to lower the rifle and take the paper. "I heard it read," he said. "I have a good memory."

The miners snickered again. They had no love for Dan Black and his kind. Nick nodded toward the angular miner.

"You act as judge," he said. "Declare court opened."

The miner he spoke to shifted his shotgun and switched his tobacco to the opposite cheek. "This feller ain't got nothin' to say," he protested.

"But I have," Nick said.

Black leaped at the words. "Thought you said you was a stranger? Thought you'd never seen this gent 'fore!"

"I answer 'yes' to both counts," Nick replied. "A good lawyer doesn't have to have a lot to work on."

"You figure you can prove who owns these horses?" the angular miner asked.

"I calculate to do that, yes."

"Then, by thunder, court is open. Black has already presented his side, so let's hear your proof."

Nick kept his eyes on Black and his friend. "That bill of sale was dated a year ago, wasn't it? You've owned these horses a year?"

"That's dead right. Goin' to take a ride to Oro Fino to make sure?"

"What's their names?" Nick asked, his tones twanging like wire unwrapping from a spool.

Black stiffened and the miners went instantly tense.

"Spot and . . . and Star!" he shouted.

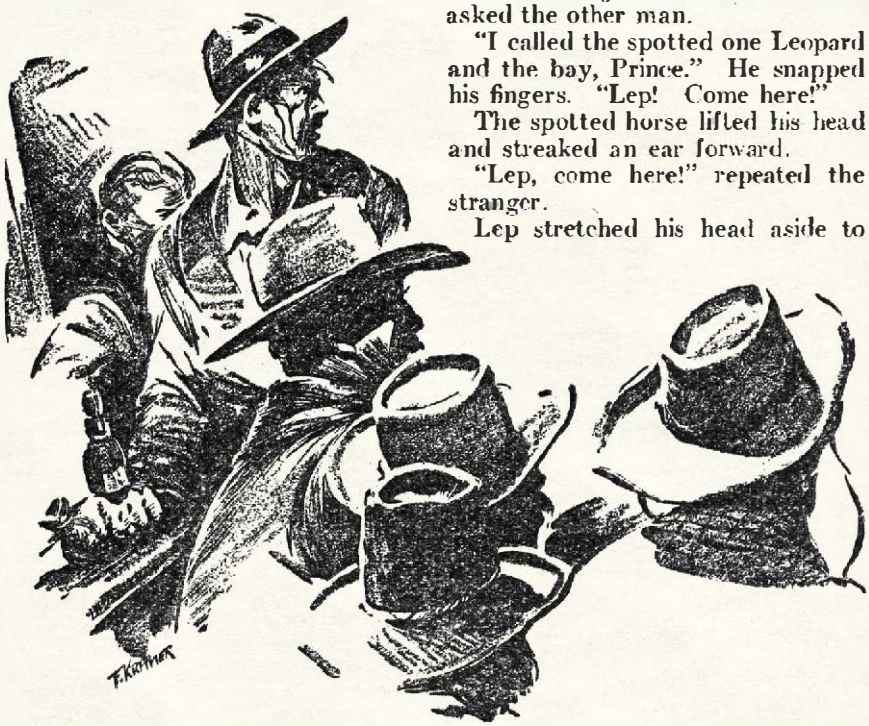
"Might easy be," Nick admitted. "One is spotted and the other has a star in his forehead." He turned to the other man. "Step over here

beside Black. No, leave the horses there."

The stranger moved out to the center of the circle.

"Now," Nick said to Black, "speak to Spot and have him come up to you."

That brought an instant of dead silence. Then a miner cleared his



throat raspily. "Speak to Spot, Black. He oughta know your voice plumb well in a year."

Dan Black's face was twitching with anger, and the impulse to kill blazed in his eyes.

"Don't reach nowheres," Nick drawled warningly. "I might think you were feeling for a hide-out. Call your horse up to you."

"Spot!" Black exploded the name. "Spot, come here!"

The spotted horse continued to stand with lowered head, occasionally rolling his bits.

"Maybe Star would remember you better," Nick hinted.

"No fool horse comes when his name is called!" the man snapped. "Them horses is mine and I'm goin' to have 'em."

"What did *you* name them?" Nick asked the other man.

"I called the spotted one Leopard and the bay, Prince." He snapped his fingers. "Lep! Come here!"

The spotted horse lifted his head and streaked an ear forward.

"Lep, come here!" repeated the stranger.

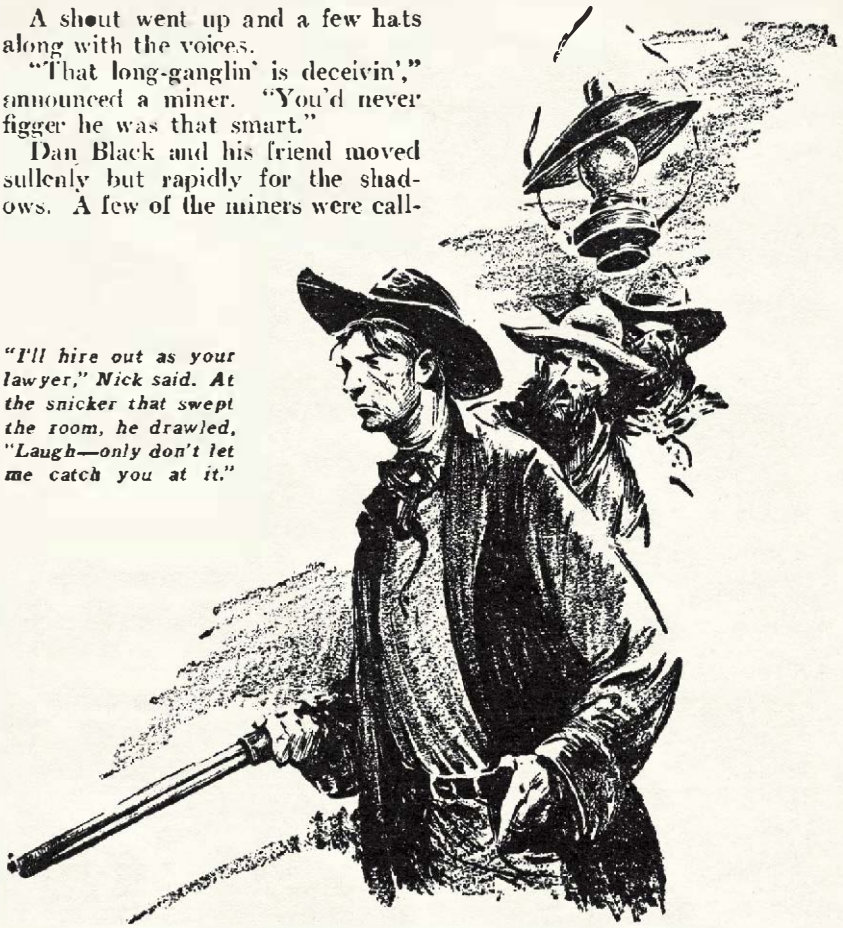
Lep stretched his head aside to avoid his dragging reins and approached.

The miner who was acting as judge shifted his shotgun and lifted his hat to the back of his head, scratching his left ear as he pondered. "This court declares them horses belongs to the stranger," he said, and dropped his left hand to his gun. He glanced over the ring of miners. "Is that verdict suitin' to you?"

A shout went up and a few hats along with the voices.

"That long-ganglin' is deceivin'," announced a miner. "You'd never figger he was that smart."

Dan Black and his friend moved sullenly but rapidly for the shadows. A few of the miners were call-



"I'll hire out as your lawyer," Nick said. At the snicker that swept the room, he drawled, "Laugh—only don't let me catch you at it."

ing for something to be done with them. There was no knowing how fast the idea might take hold.

The owner of the horses shook hands with Nick. "What you've done for me can't be paid for in gold, and besides I've little gold. Name a price, though, and I'll see you get every cent of it."

"I have to be in Virginia City before the stage arrives tomorrow night," Nick said. "Take me there and we'll call the deal square."

He was riding to Virginia City himself, the man told Nick, and would be more than glad to have company.

CHAPTER VI

VIRGINIA CITY BOOMERANG

NICK and his companion rode into the first town of the long string that was Alder Gulch just as the sun was slipping behind the western mountains. When they reached Virginia City, they shook hands and parted.

Nick walked up the street that turned with every bend of the creek. Dust was fetlock-deep in the rut-

ted road and tents and makeshift cabins of every description supported each other in the thickest intimacy along its snakelike course. This street had never closed since the day it opened. Twenty-four hours a day glasses clicked and fiddles whined. Guns exploded, men gambled, fought and cursed with their last breath. The gulch was rich with gold, and life was frequently bartered for its possession.

The bartender of the first saloon into which Nick stepped said he hadn't seen Burro Ike for a time and suggested the possibility of Ike's being at the Kansas City House.

"That's the swellest spot on the street," he enlarged, "and Ike hangs around there to bait some of the Easterners. He's got a line on a hidden gold mine that always pries a drink or two out of these fellows from the East."

With gray face, Nick moved up the street. The Kansas City House was beginning to fill with its evening crowd. Gold was flowing everywhere in a careless stream. Leather pokes lay on the bar before the miners, and gold scales, waiting to weigh out the price of a drink, were near at hand. Nick moved quickly through the crowd, toward a group of men circled about a table.

"Buy him another drink," one suggested. "Maybe there's something to his yarn."

Nick pierced their circle and saw a medium-sized man sitting at a table, talking easily of a hidden mine. His face was matted with black whiskers above which dark eyes gleamed sardonically. Dark hair, white now at the temples, showed beneath his old hat. His voice was satin-smooth.

"This mine is hard to reach," he was saying. "You climb up and up till your heart chokes you and your legs—"

"It's the same story he used for the drinks last night," a man said, turning away.

The crowd began to break and drift. Nick was left alone beside the table at which Burro Ike sat.

A numbing chill from deep within had frozen Nick's muscles to inaction. His brain alone was alive; his thoughts were not part of his stiff body. They were something that flamed higher as the seconds ticked away and his body became more numb.

Burro Ike looked up, expecting another drink. His mocking eyes drove against Nick's; his sensitively curved mouth tightened.

"This can't be Bux!" was the thought leaping through Nick's mind. "If it is . . . I'll know it somehow. I'll *feel it!*"

Burro Ike leaned toward him. "Who are you?" He laid both smooth hands on the table as braces. "I say, who are you?"

"Bux!" Nick whispered, and the single word rustled.

The dark eyes became charged; the whole body woke to awareness. "You're owling me pretty hard, fellow," he said softly. "That isn't good manners."

"Have you forgotten me?" Nick asked. "And the Missouri hills and granddad?"

Burro Ike's tenseness lessened. "Go on, talk," he said. "This visit is your idea."

Nick leaned closer. "Anton Decker will be in on the stage tonight. He knows that you are here."

Burro Ike laughed softly. "And who the hell is Anton Decker? You've sold your information to the wrong party."

LIFE seemed to pour into Nick's stiff muscles; his eyes were released from the fear that had glazed them. He began to laugh with Burro Ike.

"I've made a mistake," he apologized. "When I strike my pay dirt, I'll buy you a flock of drinks."

Burro waved one of the perfectly molded hands. "I'll be around when the dust starts streaming through your fingers."

Nick hurried from the place, gulping in the air of the street in deep, grateful gasps. He had been a fool to think Bux could ever sink to the level of that unfortunate saloon bum. He had been blind! Ten years wouldn't break Bux Bailey—a hundred years wouldn't break him. He looked about, aware for the first time of the crooked street and the frenzy of a rich camp. Miners were pouring into the town now; a few early lamps were being lighted. The stage was due.

The stage from Bannack arrived with a strong bid for attention. The driver cracked his long whip and brought the sweaty team in at a gallop. Anton Decker descended, showing no disarray in his clothing from the long day. Dan Evens followed him and after their baggage was unloaded they walked swiftly away. Nick followed them, for he knew Decker would allow no time to elapse between his arrival in Virginia City and his search for Burro Ike.

He heard Evens, after a drink at the first bar, ask for Burro Ike. The bartender shook his head and mentioned the Kansas City House. The two men walked on. Nick kept at their heels and entered the glittering gambling house a few seconds behind them. Burro Ike was standing at the bar and he had the close attention of several well-dressed men. Evens reached out and laid a hand on Decker's arm and jerked his head toward the slim figure of the miner.

A knife seemed suddenly to drive to Nick's heart. What if there had been a slip? What if Burro Ike had been too drunk to comprehend the name of Anton Decker? What if this were really Buxton Bailey?

Nick's long legs reached out in three swift strides that brought him to Decker's shoulder. His rifle was at the exact spot where it rested easiest. Anton Decker was too absorbed to note who was at his back. His inky eyes were cutting behind the matted whiskers, racing over the slim body, listening to the mocking voice of Burro Ike.

"Gold is where you find it, same as happiness," Burro Ike was saying. "You lift up a shoveful of dirt and there is gold! The same as you step around a corner and there is happiness; you round another corner and it's gone. Played out, the same as your vein of gold."

Decker turned on Evens angrily. "That's not Bux Bailey!"

Evens' mouth fell open. "He answers the description you gave me, coloring, build, gift of gab, been in the law game. Look again!"

Decker shot a low curse at him. "I don't have to take a second look! I'll know Bux Bailey when I see him!"

Nick melted back through the crowd. He wiped his forehead when he was in the open and rubbed his sweating palms on the legs of his trousers. Then he made for a stable and a bed of hay. He had slept none the night before and suddenly his lids were heavy. They were like lead, but his heart was light. He would find Bux; he never doubted that. He slept the sleep of the dead, and the sun was high in the sky

when he came to life. He crawled down and shoved a fist under his sagging belt.

"When a man's that hungry, he's got to eat," he said to the stable owner. "How about letting me do some work for my breakfast?"

"Breakfast's been over for hours," the man said dryly, "but dinner will about be ready by the time you clean out them four stalls to the left side. Get them ready for some gents that ride good horseflesh and likes them tended right. There's four gamblers due today from Oro Fino. Comin' over to take Virginia City, so I hear. Slick things up. These fellers pay good and I treat 'em good. I've stabled their horses a lot of times."

NICK did the work, took his pay and bought himself a meal. Then he ambled from the restaurant into the sunshine of the narrow, crooked street, rested, fed and easier in mind than he had been for a long time. He shoved his hands in his pockets and walked up the street, whistling. He chopped off the tune and ducked into a saloon to avoid Anton Decker and Evens.

The two men entered the saloon, but they did not see him. Decker invited the miners in the room up to the the bar for a drink, and chatted with them as the whiskey was drunk.

"It isn't like Decker to pass out free drinks," Nick thought. "He aims to collect on this somehow."

While he stood there, a burst of voices flooded the street as a rider came into town at a swinging lope. Nick could see the fellow as he flung down, and could hear his charges that he had been run off his claim by a couple of thieves. Decker and Evens had moved with the crowd to the street, but Nick was watching the goings on from a corner in line with the door.

Evens stepped forward and laid a hand on the arm of the fellow. "Stolberg!" he cried. "What's happened to you?" He pulled him toward the bar and ordered a drink for him.

Stolberg flashed Evens a stormy glance and took a quick look at Decker. He was a big man, thickly built, and he wore a pistol at his thigh.

"I staked this claim out regular in May, right at the beginning of the rush," he explained rapidly. "I drove the stakes plenty deep. Now, today, I take a ride out there, and an old man and his son open up on me. Before I could say a word, the old man cut down on me with a shotgun." He indicated his roughly bandaged shoulder. "Lucky I saw the move coming or I'd 'a' been left for the buzzards. I hit the gravel fast and then cut loose with my pistol. I settled the old man, but his son opened on me from behind a pile of boulders. I hit it back to town."

There was a dead silence. "Didn't know you'd staked any claim in the Gulch, Stolberg," somebody said. "Didn't know you went in for diggin', at all."

"I staked a claim and I got plenty of proof." Stolberg turned to Evens. "Dan Evens, here, was in Bannack when Bill Fairweather made his big strike. Evens had to go back to Salt Lake, so he grubstaked me and says, 'Joe, go get us a rich claim.'"

Anton Decker stepped smoothly into the gap the words made. "That's entirely correct. Evens came back to Salt Lake with the news that a man was staking him a claim in Alder Gulch. In fact, gentlemen, Evens and I made this trip to Virginia City to inspect that

claim. I shall probably buy Joe Stolberg's interest."

"And now old man Pitt and his son has pulled up my stakes and are working the mine!" Stolberg said angrily.

"You mean Abner Pitt?" someone asked.

"Who else would I mean?"

"That's the richest claim in the Gulch!"

"That's why they jumped it."

"Did you kill the ol' man, Joe?"

"I didn't leave him alive to pour a second volley into me!"

The news of the shooting spread over the town and the bar was soon crowded. Nick kept at the edge, for he saw no good in being recognized by Decker. Evens called a doctor for Stolberg's wound and gradually the crowd began to split into smaller units. Anton Decker kept circulating among them, and men listened to him with respect.

IT was nearing evening when a youth came rattling into town in an old wagon. Nick heard the word passed along that this was young Abner Pitt and he followed the crowd of curious miners as they flocked around the boy in one of the saloons. The lad was slight, and not more than seventeen years old. His face was gray and streaked with blood and sweat, and his eyes were burning coals.

"I just come from buryin' my dad!" he announced grimly. "Joe Stolberg killed him!"

"I 'low your dad took the first shot," someone said.

"I 'low he did," the boy replied. "I know I can't get Stolberg fer killin' dad, but I aim to stop him from stealin' our claim. It's mine now and I'm goin' to fight for it."

The crowd grew and questions were shot at the youth, questions which he answered without hesitation. His dad had seen Joe Stolberg in town and Stolberg had warned him to get off the claim. That was why the old man had taken his shotgun in hand at the first sight of Stolberg.

"He aims to steal it from me," the youth finished. "I'm goin' to hire a lawyer and I got the dust to pay with." He shoved toward two men that had been listening intently to all he said. "Which of you fellers will take my case?" he asked.

Nick was not surprised to learn they were lawyers. One of them lifted a thin white line of eyebrows at the boy and spoke with finality.

"We've both been retained by Joe Stolberg."

Young Pitt blinked, at a loss for words. "You mean he's hired two lawyers?"

"We both have been retained by Mr. Stolberg."

The boy gripped his lips together and walked toward an older man, one who had been drinking constantly during all the excitement. "Mr. Alexander, will you take my side?"

The man tried to draw his stomach in and expand his chest. The effort tipped him forward and he had to reach to the bar for support. "Mr. Stolberg has hir—retained me, also," he announced thickly.

The boy stood a second. Then he unbuttoned his shirt and drew a sack of dust from hiding. He threw it on the bar. "I have gold to pay with, more gold than Joe Stolberg. How much will you take?"

"Stolberg has Salt Lake backing," Alexander said aloofly.

The boy turned a white face to the room. "It's a plot to steal my mine!" he cried passionately. "Ain't there a lawyer in Virginia City that will take my side of the fight?"

Anton Decker, Dan Evens and Joe Stolberg entered the saloon as the boy asked the question. Decker approached him and spoke with grave dignity. "Your father had no right to that claim, my lad. Don't be stubborn and foolish."

The youth must have seen the respect the miners had for this smooth-speaking businessman from Salt Lake. It brought a flare of madness to his eyes. He streaked a finger toward Burro Ike, who was hanging at the edge of the circle. "I've heard you're a lawyer. Won't you take my case?"

Burro Ike's slim figure stiffened with anger. His lips parted as if to let out a stream of hot words. Then something in the white face seemed to touch him.

"So another fool beats his breast and calls upon the law!" he said bitterly. "Take your gun and fight it out now with Joe Stolberg. Fight it out as your dad did. Bullets go straight, but the tongue of a lawyer is cunning and winds over a path so crooked a snake would blush to follow it."

Joe Stolberg surged toward Burro Ike, but a low word from Decker snapped him back. "This battle, if the boy insists on a battle, will be decided honestly and quietly in a law court," Decker said to the room.

"But you've hired all the lawyers!" the boy charged.

"I have naturally retained legal assistance," Decker said quietly.

NICK BAILEY opened a path through the crowd with spread elbows, and stepped into the space around Abner Pitt. His gait was loose, his rifle like a lazy snake on his arm, the battered hat, now decorated with a bullet hole, pushed back off his face. His clothes were wrinkled, shabby.

"Wanting to hire a lawyer, were you, mister?" he asked the youth.

He caught the snicker of the crowd, and chided himself for forgetting to clip that Missouri twang out of his voice. The snicker spread, and it dawned on Nick that they were laughing at more than his nasal tones. With two long strides he managed to back the bar and his rifle made an arc that dried the snicker.

"Go on, laugh," he said. "Only don't let me catch you. I said, mister, were you wanting to hir—I mean retain a lawyer?"

The boy looked at the steady rifle, the greenish eyes set in a firm face, and breath was expelled from his lungs in relief. "You're hired!"

"You mean I'm retained." Nick bowed to the three lawyers. "These gentlemen are sticklers for the right expressions."

Anton Decker came forward. "So this is where you are hiding, is it, Bailey?" he asked. "These men might be interested to know you are wanted by the Salt Lake police."

Nick smiled. "They'd probably be more interested in knowing I'm wanted for stretching out four men in the office of Herbert McCracken, you being one of the four."

Decker's face was thunderous. "I'll let McCracken know where you are."

"Do, and also let him know I'm defending a boy in a claim-jumping charge you and Evens are placing against him. McCracken would like to know that." The green eyes were tipped with whitecaps, the voice steel-hard.

The miners craned their necks as they followed this byplay which they did not quite understand. The gawky Missourian was gaining favor in their eyes. They rolled their tobacco in roomy cheeks and whetted

things up by side remarks. Decker stiffened as he realized he had lost some ground. Words stormed his lips, but caution forbade his risking another tilt with Nick Bailey. He turned to leave the room and nodded for Evens and Stolberg to follow him.

"Guess I'll let the ol' rocker rest tomorrow," a miner said. "This trial is goin' to be worth hearin'. Salt Lake tried to throw a double scare into Missouri, but Missouri come right back and hiked the bet."

Others reckoned they'd see it, too, and the crowd broke up into small groups.

CHAPTER VII

BROTHERS MEET

IN a corner of the saloon Nick Bailey had a conference with his client.

"Bailey," Abner Pitt said, his eyes sunken in his white face, "Joe Stolberg is after your hide. He doesn't intend to let you fight my case."

Nick shrugged. "He'll be after you, too, Ab."

"I'm watchin' tooth and nail! But you, Bailey, 'tain't nothin' to you to stake your life in a fight like this. You could law in a heap safer places."

"I'm not at those safe places, Ab, and I'm busted flat."

The boy's lips were a blue line across his face. "I'll stake you to the stage fare."

"That's mighty fine of you. Are you planning on going, too?"

"Nope. Dad's buried up yonder on a bar. I'm holdin' the claim or joinin' him."

Nick laid a hand on the thin shoulder. "You can expect me in court in the morning, Ab. The miners are getting set for a big show. What we have to do is keep them on our side." His voice dropped. "Ab, were you with your dad when he staked the claim?"

"Drove the stakes! As the Almighty bears me out, Bailey, there warn't any other stakes. Stolberg is lyin' 'cause dad and me has the richest diggin's on the crick. We was late to the rush, and took land back on the bench away from water. Nobody figured it much good, even dad, but we dug like gophers and we struck it rich. Rich, Bailey!"

"You staked that claim the middle of June?"

"Yes, we was late to the rush."

"Stolberg claims he staked it the last day of May."

"But he's lyin'."

"He is lying, Ab, but we have to prove it. He has Evens and Anton Decker to swear he's telling the truth. Go along now. Stay away from dark alleys and watch your front, back and both sides."

Nick wandered up the string of saloons and gambling houses, talking a few moments at each place. Occasionally he leaned across the bar and asked if there were any old Salt Lake papers around.

He was in the Kansas City House when the entrance of four men caused some stir. Games were stopped as all eyes followed them to the bar. The men took a single round of drinks, then sifted apart, nodding to acquaintances, pausing to watch a play. Nick knew they were the four gamblers that the livery man had been expecting. They were high-play boys, who gave a town a royal turn for its money.

Other gamblers in the house warily watched the Big Four circulate. Nick watched them, too, and he realized that they were a grim power. He was certain it wasn't accident that each of them settled to positions that were valuable in relation to the rest of the room and

to his companions. They would shortly be playing for high stakes, and each would be guarding the other's back. They were providing their own protection. It showed Nick the utter lack of law that prevailed in Virginia City.

A miner shoved in close to Nick. "Watch your knittin' tomorrow, Missouri," he said rapidly. "Guns sometimes go off plumb accidental here in the Gulch, and the bullets sometimes finds a mark."

Nick thanked the fellow as he hurried away. It was against an accidental gun going off that those four gamblers were guarding. It might be well to have a word with one of them. Nick walked toward a little figure that was taking up play at a polished table. A gay reflection was shot back from the gleaming surface. The man was medium tall, with slim hands that made Nick swallow, they were so different from his. With all their molded smoothness, those hands were not weak. Long fingers clinked a stack of twenty-dollar gold pieces, and only a fool would have tried to wrest that money from them.

"I hear Virginia City is having a trial tomorrow," the gambler said. His voice was husky and amused. "That should be a dog fight worth seeing."

Nick lifted his glance slowly along the arm that was clothed in soft, grayish buckskin, on up the shoulder line to the white softness of a frilled shirt showing at the opened neck of the buckskin jacket. He studied the chin next and the nose and the forehead sloping slightly back to iron-gray hair.

COLD sweat poured over Nick's body. He turned his face away until he felt it had lost some of the stiffness of shock. This man was Bux Bailey! It was as certain as death. His eyes and ears told him and his pounding heart. It was like turning a leaf in the family album, from the boy to the grown man.

The slender fingers of the gambler lifted the stack of double eagles from the shining surface, and he smiled. The smile was like a slap in the face to Nick. It was the old smile Bux used to use when he didn't give a damn about anything, and mostly that was the way Bux had felt.

Then Nick remembered Anton Decker. Any second Decker might walk in the door, for this would be the night spot that would draw him. Slowly the gambler in the soft buckskin suit lifted his glance and met Nick's. For a fraction of a second his lids were motionless and Nick felt the dark eyes driving clean through to his backbone. Then the man turned back to the game. He had no money in sight now and he nodded briefly at the man behind the table.

"I'll be around to see you later."

The fellow was surprised, but relieved. The miners looked disappointed. They had been settled to watch some high plays. The gambler lifted a glance to a companion across the room and walked toward the side door. Nick's body throbbed. Bux must have known him! Then he knew the thought was foolish. Bux couldn't recognize in him the kid he had scarcely known back in the Missouri hills.

Nick took a few long strides to be sure he would not lose the two gamblers on the street, for that second man had now joined Bux. He stepped from the building and into the darkness. A moment later a gun jammed into his side.

"Walk along and keep still!" came an order.

Nick obeyed, for the gun had him foul. The voice had been low, cutting and devoid of tone. It couldn't be Joe Stolberg; his voice was much deeper. But Nick knew Stolberg had many friends among the gunmen class.

He was guided up an alley and into a hotel from the back. There was a dim light as they started to climb a flight of stairs. Nick cast a glance over his shoulder and the tenseness went out of his body. The man with the gun was Bux. The other gambler was beside him and the three of them entered a room. Bux held the gun firm while the other fellow lighted a lamp.

"Get that rifle," Bux said to his companion. "It's resting too easy to suit me."

They slapped Nick for other weapons and seemed surprised to find none. Bux dropped his gun to an under-arm holster, but he left the buckskin jacket hanging open. He leaned against the wall, far enough away to see the whole of the tall young Missourian.

"When a man wants me bad enough to crowd me at the gambling table," he said, "I always oblige him." A tightness crept into his tones. "What's your game?"

Nick felt the hot blood crawl to his cheeks and forehead. He could not help but notice the carefully planned, expensive dress of the two men. His own battered hat began to burn his head and his worn boots crowded his feet. He noticed the way his hands loomed large at the end of his shirt sleeves. If they'd only have left him his rifle he'd have felt better dressed.

"I'm waiting for you to talk, fellow," Bux said crisply, "but not very patiently. And don't bother with lies."

Nick met the hard, confident eyes. "I want to speak with you alone."

Bux's companion gave a mocking laugh. "The fellow thinks heaven and earth hangs on this second."

"Go ahead and spill your story," Bux ordered. "This man and I share all deals."

Nick forgot his uneasiness under that mocking laugh and Bux's crisp order. The slump straightened from his long body. "If you're afraid to see me alone," he said to Bux, "you can tie my hands."

The coolness of this suggestion brought sharp lights to the eyes of the gamblers. "I'll see him alone, Crome," Bux said to his friend.

"I'll take a walk up the hall," Crome answered.

"You can go back to your play," Nick said. "I have lots to say."

Crome stopped short with his hand on the knob. "You've got a lot of crust for a fellow that's on the short end of things," he remarked.

"Go on back and see how the boys are coming," Bux suggested.

The other hesitated. "This kid may not be as easy to handle as you think."

Bux half smiled. "I think he's playing his cards aboveboard."

Crome left and his swift steps faded down the hall. Nick and Bux stood eye to eye, and the banging of a door in the hotel came with unnatural loudness.

"Get to howling," Bux ordered.

"Have you forgotten you had a kid brother, Bux?" Nick asked softly. "Have you forgotten me and granddad and the Missouri hills?"

BUX'S eyes spat out a flame, then the glow was smothered. Coldly his glance cut over the loose-jointed frame, the face, the hands. Something within him pounded blood to his temples, but his frozen body gave

no response. He took a step closer and suddenly snatched the battered hat from Nick's head. Wiry yellowish hair was exposed.

Nick grinned sheepishly. "I can't make that cowlick stay down."

"Nick!" Bux said woodenly. Then the dam of emotion burst. "*Kid!*"

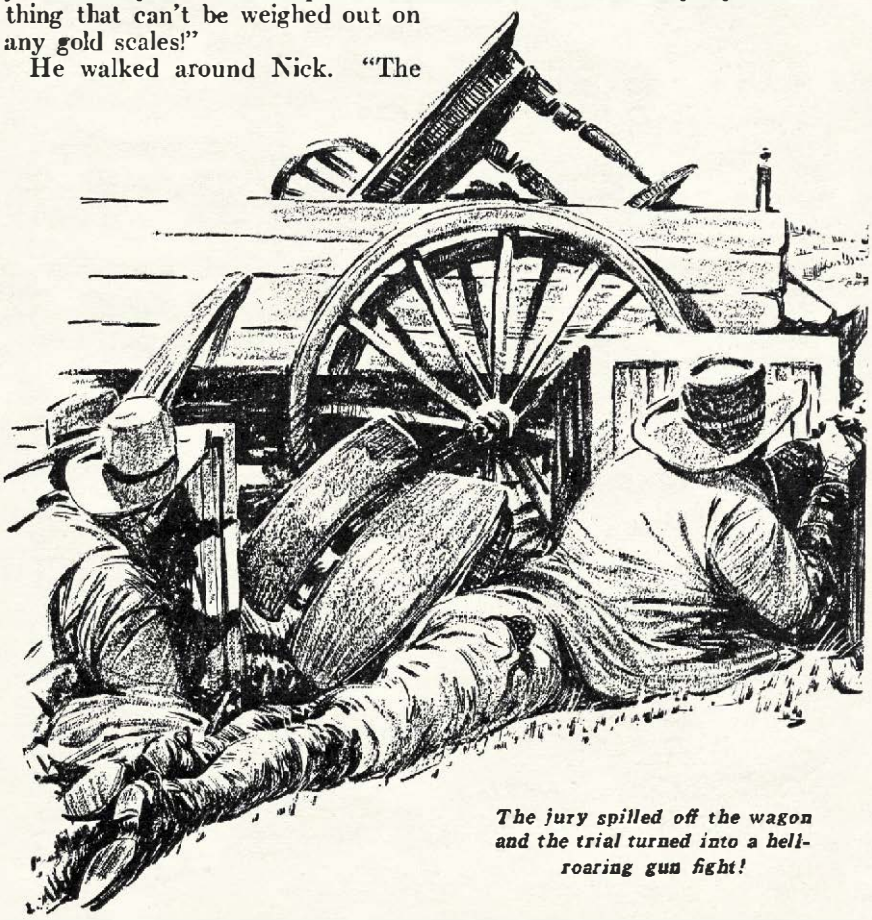
Nick laughed as Bux pounded his shoulders, back, and shook his long arms.

"You're the same kid!" Buxton Bailey cried. "The same huckleberry! Seeing you is worth a million dollars, but realizing that you've really hunted me up is something that can't be weighed out on any gold scales!"

He walked around Nick. "The same gangling kid that tramped the hills with a squirrel gun. When you leaned down toward me at the gambling table, Nick, I felt a red-hot iron reach out and touch me. That's why I lit out of there so fast."

Nick shoved both hands into his pockets. "I always thought we'd get to know each other some day."

Bux regarded him, memories pouring through his dark eyes. Moldering ideals lifted from the dust to lose themselves again. For a fleeting second, bitterness crept in, then it was washed away by a flood of



The jury spilled off the wagon and the trial turned into a hell-roaring gun fight!

mellowed memories.

"Did you get some law study, Nick?" he asked as though of his own ghost.

"A smattering. I'll never set them by the ears, like you."

The words seemed to bring pleasure and then a piercing pain to his brother. "My entire stack of blues goes on you, Nick. We used to talk of a firm of Bailey & Bailey; now it's going to be Nicholas Bailey, attorney at law."

Words stuck in Nick's throat and he could not speak.

"We'll see a lot of each other," Bux went on. "But I'm a bird of rapid passage, Nick. Never too long

in one spot." His voice was harsh. "Anton Decker never got over my beating him out of that mine. He still dreams of seeing Bux Bailey hang."

Nick met the dark eyes squarely. "Decker is in Virginia City tonight," he said.

Bux tensed. His voice, when he spoke, was sharp. The mellow memories of a moment before were laid aside. "Does he know I'm here?"

Nick shook his head. "He hoped Burro Ike would turn out to be you. Decker is here to rob a seventeen-year-old boy out of a rich mine —he's still at that kind of crookedness. He had the boy's claim jumped. The trial starts in the morning."

"I heard of it. So he's the Salt Lake man they mentioned that was back of Joe Stolberg? That boy would do well to pull out while he's still alive. Stolberg is a killer, and Decker isn't one that would hold him off. And they say Stolberg has hired all the lawyers in town."

"Not *all* of them, Bux."

Bux looked at his brother sharply. "I did hear a few words of a stranger in town—Nick, you're not that huckleberry that leaped to the kid's defense?"

"Yup. Did you hear how a lanky Missourian had stuck his neck out and was due for the whaling of his life?"

Bux shook his head at Nick's grin. "You don't know mining-camp trials, Nick. Stolberg is out to win, and so is Decker. Their lawyers will have a story bought and paid for that will prove Stolberg staked that claim any date that suits. You and I will saddle up and hit out of Alder Gulch."

"You must get out, Bux—tonight," Nick agreed. "I'll follow you in a couple of days."

A baffled expression struck the dark eyes. "You're asking me to go alone, kid, when I haven't seen you in ten years?"

"Bux, there's one thing I've always looked ahead to—that's being with you. But this boy, Abner Pitt, hasn't a friend to stand at his side.

Tomorrow, if I leave, he'll not even have a lawyer. His dad was murdered; now they're trying to take his claim. I can't leave him to fight alone."

BUX BAILEY'S lithe body grew tense. "Nick, ten years ago I took on a legal fight for an old lady. Decker was all set to rob her; my hands were tied, because he had an army of bought witnesses. There was only one way to save that old lady from the poorhouse, and I took that means. I didn't think I'd have to kill to get the papers, but a guard came in shooting and we fought it out. I walked out with the papers, but that night everything I'd worked for all my life was swept away from me. The man I killed was as deep in the thing as Anton Decker, and my conscience has never kept me awake on his account. But I have paid, Nick. Don't forget that!"

Nick stared straight at the wall for a few seconds, then he turned his gaze on his brother. "Bux, are you sorry you stole that will and kept Anton Decker from robbing an old woman?"

Bux's breath exploded in a curse. "No!"

"Don't forget I'm molded from the same tallow as you. Decker may have bought witnesses and fancy lawyers, but I'm still going to see this kid through."

Bux smiled. "Nick, you trapped me on that question." The smile grew from a thin shadow to something of depth and warmth. "It'll be worth a lot to see you take hold tomorrow. I have a feeling in my left elbow that you're a hard man to whip."

"But you can't stay for the trial, Bux. You have to get out tonight."

"Bux Bailey has looked after Bux Bailey in a lot of different climes and in some hot moments. Tomorrow, you keep your mind to the law end of the fight, and when threats start circulating—which they will—you just remember I'm out there watching your back. Crome will stick with me and maybe the other two gamblers. Joe Stolberg's gang is going to find the going slippery."

"Bux, if Anton Decker sees you—"

Bux held up a hand. "Forget Decker." His voice grew warm. "Go in to win; keep the miners with you; they're an honest lot. Nick, tonight is like turning back ten pages in a book, only the pages are years. Funny that you should tangle with Anton Decker. Go in to win, kid!"

They shook hands. "We'll win," Nick said. "Lies won't hold against the truth."

CHAPTER VIII

MINER'S TRIAL

JOE STOLBERG swung a neat-fitting cowhide boot over the side of the wagon that served as judge's dais and witness stand. He faced the court and loudly swore to tell the truth. His wide spread of shoulders, the clink of his spurs and the shimmer of silver on his hatband had a quieting effect on the miners.

Boyd Franklyn was Stolberg's main lawyer. Harlin Blackenbury was decidedly second fiddle, and Benjamin Alexander was so drunk he could hardly hold his head up. The wagon was drawn up before the livery stable, and seats were placed in a half-circle for the jury. Miners too late for front positions had climbed to the roof of the stable. They considered this their trial, and felt at liberty to make suggestions. Their miners' judge occupied the

bench, and they had been attentive to the selection of the jury.

Boyd Franklyn's move to place some of the Stolberg crowd on the jury had met with vehement objections.

"Fellers like that don't know which end of a shovel goes into the ground. They can't judge intelligent," was the cry from the roof.

Nick Bailey grabbed up the fight at that point. His slow drawl hung in the air after the echoes of Franklyn's hot retorts had died away.

Joe Stolberg took the stand and twelve honest jurymen looked up from the semicircle before the wagon. Abner Pitt, white-faced, sat on a box by the wheel. Decker and Evens sat near the other wheel.

Franklyn had Stolberg tell about being grubstaked and about staking the claim that Abner Pitt was now holding. Stolberg's answers were loud and decided.

Franklyn scowled at Nick. "Want to ask this man any questions?"

Nick rose, standing with his right hand close to the rifle he had stood against the judge's table.

"I congratulate you, Mr. Stolberg," he said, his Missouri twang slowing the words, "on being such a keen judge of mining ground. You came to Alder Gulch in time to get a claim on the crick, yet you selected a rocky bar back from water. It showed amazing knowledge of mining conditions. How long, Mr. Stolberg, have you been a miner?"

"Hell, he never washed a pan of dirt in his life!" cried someone on the roof.

The judge rapped for order, and the snicker died.

"I've mined all my life," Joe Stolberg answered loudly.

"How much did your first test pan go on this claim?"

"I object," snapped Franklyn.

"On what grounds?" asked the judge.

"The question is irrelevant and immaterial."

"How much a pan of dirt tests ain't never irrelevant. Answer the question, Stolberg."

Joe Stolberg's face was darkly flushed. "Fifty dollars a pan!"

Nick whistled sharply. "How come you didn't stay and work it?"

"I had business in Bannack."

A juryman now leaned forward. "Meanin' to say you left dirt that tested fifty dollars a pan to set in Bannack and play cards?"

The judge pounded down the outburst that rose.

Franklyn leaped to his feet. "I ask that this testimony be stricken out! Bailey is attempting to prejudice the jury against Stolberg!"

"Set down, Franklyn," ordered the judge.

But the lawyer would not sit down. "I insist this testimony be stricken out!" He shook his fist. "I *demand* it!"

The judge lifted his shotgun from the bed of the wagon and cocked both barrels as he laid it across the table before him. The click as he thummed back the hammers fell flat in the heat. "You aimin' to dispute my authority here, Franklyn?"

The lawyer sat down.

Nick again turned to Stolberg. "You say Dan Evens staked you along the last of May and you immediately came to Alder Gulch?"

"I do."

Nick stepped back and sat down.

FRANKLYN called three men to prove Stolberg's testimony regarding the staking of the claim. Then he questioned Anton Decker. Decker swore that Evens had told him about grubstaking Stolberg,

and about the claim turning out rich. Franklyn waved for Nick to take the witness.

"When Evens returned to Salt Lake the first week in June," said Nick, "was that when he told you of having grubstaked Stolberg?"

"It was."

"That's all I have to ask."

Dan Evens took the stand next, and he verified the statements of Stolberg and Decker. Franklyn turned to the jury.

"Remember that this boy, Abner Pitt, and his father make no claim to having staked this claim before the middle of June. They tore up Stolberg's stakes and stole it! Claim-jumping is a serious business, gentlemen. The Gulch must make strict examples of those who attempt it, so honest miners will feel safe." He waved for Nick to take the witness.

Nick nodded to the jury. "Claim-stealing is serious business, mighty serious." Then he turned to Dan Evens. "Mr. Evens, if you were hiring a man to buy you a stock of goods for a general store, would you hire a merchant or a blacksmith?"

"That question is without bearing on this case," snapped Franklyn.

"It doesn't appear to have much to do with minin'," agreed the judge.

Nick leaned down to the witness. "I'll make it plainer. When you were grubstaking a man to find you a gold claim, Evens, why didn't you grubstake a miner instead of a gunman?"

Franklyn sprang forward with a cry of rage. "We've proved, your honor, that Joe Stolberg is a miner. Bailey now takes the position that Evens hired an inexperienced man!"

"All the minin' Stolberg ever done you could stick in your eye," the judge snapped. "But three fellers has swore he was a miner, so I can't allow that question."

Nick Bailey grinned at the jury and held out a hand for the plug of chewing that was being circulated. It was handed up and he bit off a chew. He turned back to the witness.

"Evens," he said, and the single word brought the jury forward, "when you say you grubstaked Stolberg in Bannack City the last of May, you are lying! You were not in Bannack in May! You never had any dealings with Joe Stolberg until after Abner Pitt and his father had struck it rich! You and Stolberg and Anton Decker have lied and I can prove it!"

Nick drew an old Salt Lake *Times* from his pocket and tossed it to the jury. "Read that! Dan Evens was in Independence, Missouri, during the entire month of May. He was chief witness in a lawsuit between Herbert McCracken and an Independence firm."

Franklyn was on his feet shouting, but the judge lifted the shotgun from the table and the lawyer was forced back to his chair.

Nick leaned down toward the jury. "Anton Decker and Dan Evens wanted a rich mine. Dan Evens hired Joe Stolberg to steal one. Stolberg was not grubstaked; he was bought with cold cash. He didn't locate that claim, for he knew nothing about mining; he attempted to steal the claim for Evens and Decker, but he didn't stop at theft —*he committed murder!*"

Joe Stolberg leaped to the wagon wheel, a gun gleaming as it streaked from cover. His eyes were hot for the kill and Nick caught their blast as he swept an arm back for his rifle. He knew he was too late; Stolberg's gun was flashing up. Then a rifle blasted from the stable and Joe Stolberg threw up his arms

and toppled backward from the wheel.

Nick swung up his rifle and drove back a fellow who was training a gun from across the street. Then he snapped a second bullet after the man's companion. The gun by the stable, the one that had downed Joe Stolberg, was reporting with the regularity of drumbeats.

"Bux is doing a nice business," Nick thought fleetingly, and fell backward out of the wagon bed as bullets whined around him. Cries of "Wipe out the Missourian!" were rising from several angles. The Stolberg crowd was making a stand.

The judge and other occupants of the wagon had gone over the edge at the first flash of gunfire. The voice of Dan Evens reached Nick as he flattened behind a wheel and surveyed conditions from between spokes. Evens was urging the fight on, and his voice cracked to high notes as he spotted Nick on the ground.

"By the wheel! Get him!"

NICK dived headfirst for the pile of boxes and overturned wagon seats that had been the jury box. It wasn't much protection, but it was better than the spokes of a wheel. His rifle snapped to his shoulder as he lit and he poured a hot reply in the direction of Dan Evens.

Evens jerked from his protection, his determination to kill the man who had spoiled his game blazoned on his narrow face. Only a short distance separated them, and Evens' anger flamed to a curse as he pressed trigger. Nick rolled his lanky body closer to the boxes as the bullet cut across his cheek. His rifle boomed and Evens' wild scream rode high and terrible above the heavier sounds.

Nick caught a stir at his heels and jerked his head around. Two jurymen, having no guns, were doing their best to conceal themselves behind a box and a couple of wagon seats.

"This is the last jury I'll ever set on," one complained.

Nick's eyes were back along his rifle barrel and he was sinking his body flat to the earth. His roughly hewn profile was unshaken as rock.

One of the jurymen nudged his companion. "You might think Missouri would rip apart at the seams in a fight, him bein' so loose-hung, but 'stid of that he just knits closer together."

"He's got a good, clean fightin' face," the other responded. "And a man's fightin' face shows what he really is."

His words chopped off short. He was gazing through a crack to a spot by a clump of trees out of line with Nick's vision. Abner Pitt staggered to sight, his fingers losing their hold on his shotgun. He straightened sharply, then sank back to the ground.

"Missouri!" the man snapped. "Ab Pitt just went down over yonder by the clump of trees. There's a man liftin' a gun to finish him. It's Decker!"

Nick Bailey shot his long body into the clear, his rifle rolling to his shoulder and belching flame as he came into line with the slim figure of Anton Decker. The man's yellowish face was a crumbling mask, but he was twitching the gun to a bead on the still body of Ab Pitt. Nick's bullet caught him and he pitched forward, his gun crashing aimlessly.

Nick's backward leap for shelter was halted in midair. His lanky body doubled and he went to his knees. Dust was whipping around

him and lead was singing. He felt a slug tear at his shoulder, but he held onto his rifle. Weaving, still keeping to his knees, he lifted his gun and blasted out a shot.

From a stable a man was sweeping toward him. He knew the lightning movements of that body. It was Bux! He was coming with two guns wide open and a cry on his lips for his friends to cover him. Guns roared with the full-throated note of doom. Bux swayed once, but kept coming. His fingers settled on Nick's collar and the two of them covered the short distance to the pile of wagon seats that had been the jury box. One of the jurymen snatched Nick's rifle from his relaxing fingers and rolled up alongside of Bux Bailey.

"This is the last jury I'll ever set on," he offered as he snapped out a shot. "Leastwise unless they let me take my shotgun with me." He aimed carefully and fired again. "Just now I saw Decker a-lifting his gun to finish Ab Pitt, and his face wasn't purty. I never knew Missouri would go bustin' right out into the open when I told him. Next time I fetch my shotgun or I don't serve!"

Suddenly a bunch of miners cut into the fight. Their shotguns thundered and spilled lead in a deadening circle. The Stolberg crowd melted before this added strength. Men began to slink away. Guns began to cool.

WHEN Nick opened his eyes, a doctor told him to lie still. He saw Bux standing by the bed and remembered just in time that he must not speak his brother's name. The doctor smiled.

"Young Pitt is going to live," he said. "I think when I go to law, Bailey, I'll retain both you and your rifle. You certainly do a good job of defending your client."

Whitecaps rolled up and spilled over the green in Nick's eyes. "Decker was going to kill Abner Pitt. He was making sure he'd get the mine."

The doctor nodded. "Decker won't be bothered about mines where he is now, unless it's coal mines. Joe Stolberg is dead, too, but he lived long enough to babble out his cowardly soul. You've done a good day's work, Bailey, so just rest back and take it easy."

Bux edged up to the doctor's side, his eyes shining with pride. A memory of old emotions stirred his voice when he spoke. "You've laid the cornerstone for a reputation today, Nick, and you've laid them on a good, strong foundation."

"I calculate I wouldn't know anything about it, if you hadn't 'a' dragged me in out of that rain of lead."

The doctor glanced from one to the other. "You fellows are as different as night and day," he said. "Still there's something—"

Bux turned to him with his old cool smile. "We're both from Missouri."

Nick's happiness was dimmed. It would always be like that; they'd have to be constantly on the watch.

The doctor said he was going to call on Abner Pitt, and suggested Bux remain with Nick. "Tell our patient the things he's wanting to know," he said. "It'll ease his mind."

Bux drew a chair close to the cot, and his first words showed he had caught Nick's reaction to the doctor's unsuspecting remark.

"We'll always have to watch a bit," he said softly. "The first year I was always dropping something that made sharp ears prick up. Now

I'm too smooth a worker for that. I smile to myself when I rub elbows with men that know my story, but make no connection between Buxton Bailey, the lawyer, and the gambler who's taken their chips. You have to think of it as a game, Nick, or it will make your wits fuzzy." His lips were touched with a mirthless smile. "Like poor old Burro Ike."

Nick asked if his brother knew anything about Burro Ike, and Bux nodded.

"Burro was a lawyer in Kansas City. I guess I'm the only man out here that knows his history. The first time I saw him, his voice and eyes stirred something in my memory, but his ragged beard and old clothes threw me off. Then one day he dropped something about a judge with a billy-goat laugh. That placed him. I knew him for a young lawyer that came up before Judge Hermon, the billy-goat judge in Kansas City. The charge was buying witnesses to win a case. I attended the last day of his trial and I believed him when he stood up there and pleaded his innocence. There was strong evidence against him, but I believed him and I still do."

"I promised to cut him in when I struck it rich," Nick whispered. "I'll remember that."

Bux nodded. "Talk to him occasionally, kid. There's only a few of us who know how dreary it is to be locked on the outside. Don't hold his degeneration against him. He's known hell."

SIX months later a letter came from Herbert McCracken. It was addressed to Nick, but he and Bux read it together. The firm of McCracken had suffered a great loss in business with the Far Western camps since the dishonesty of Anton Decker had become established. Merchants in the mining camps regarded the firm suspiciously, and its representatives were coldly received. The letter ran:

> I'm going to need strong contacts to build up what Decker and Evens tore down. A couple of attorneys representing my interests could do a lot of good if they took hold and worked hard. I thought about you, Nick, and then I thought of Bux. In the light of Anton Decker's exposure as a crook, the governor was easy to approach. Decker was trying to steal a mine that first time, and Bux blocked him. This last deal, he sure enough drew the short straw.
>
> A pardon is awaiting your brother. I want to talk to the two of you in my Salt Lake office. I hope, by associating the firm of McCracken with the attorneys, Bailey & Bailey, to get things straightened out.

Bux spoke first. "Bailey & Bailey," he said in an awed voice.

Nick's smile broke from ear to ear. "Remember the morning we sat on the log, back in the Missouri hills? You said then that some day there would be a sign swinging in the breeze reading, 'Bailey & Bailey, Attorneys at Law.'"

It was some time before they gave attention to the postscript penciled in Herbert McCracken's sprawling hand:

> P. S. California Bill was in, asking for you, Nick. He said he could use you as assistant teamster, and thought some day you might make a skinner. Don't get puffed up over the offer of two jobs in one day.

Bux looked across at Nick. "Maybe," he said, "you'd rather take a job with California Bill."

Nick looked at his hat, decorated with a single bullet hole, and grinned. "Nope. Working for California Bill is too hard on hats."

THE END.

OUTLAW PAYOFF

BY NEY N. GEEB

FROM the very first, Wayne Parker and the Kid seemed to be drawn together by some strong attraction. Perhaps it was because both seemed out of place in Keno.

Keno was a rough, sprawling settlement that had grown up where a number of Western trails crossed. It was a stopover for restless, tight-lipped men who'd do a few days' serious drinking, ask news of the outside world, then ride on along their undeterminable ways. But Wayne Parker was a different sort, bluff, hearty, talkative. Perhaps for that very reason Sam Slack promptly nicknamed him "Windy."

Slack owned the general store, hotel, stage station, and the only saloon. In fact, he owned Keno, such as it was.

With a hot September sun high overhead, Parker rode in one day out of nowhere. He rode a big pinto bronc and his Mexican saddle was a worn and battered affair, with a long rifle slung to it in a rawhide scabbard. He tied up at the hitch rail in front of Sam Slack's saloon and came on in, stepping light and silent as a cougar.

Sam looked him over with eyes that were shrewd and greedy. He looked all strangers over when they first came in, and always tried to figure out straight off just how much money they'd leave in his pocket when they had gone. He was never satisfied unless they left their all.

Parker was a big man, all solid bone and muscle, with long hair that brushed his shoulders. It was red hair, a flaming, rusty red the shade of oak leaves touched by frost. And his face was also red, bitten by hot winds and high desert sun. A face that never tanned much, just stayed red, always peeling a little, like a rattler in August trying to shed its skin.

"Howdy, gents!" he rumbled in a deep-chested, not unmusical voice. "Step up and wet your whistles with a dram of forty-rod rye. I'm dry as the desert, and it ain't my nature to drink alone."

Sam smiled. This young pilgrim would be easy picking. He signaled to his hangers-on at the poker table. They readily quit their game and lined up at the bar. All but the Kid, who only paused in his irksome chore of cleaning sand boxes strung along the wall.

Parker hitched up his belt and looked at the Kid. The latter, all gangling legs and dangling arms, seemed as awkward as a sandhill crane. A humorous twinkle came into the newcomer's light-blue eyes.

The Kid was absorbed in the newcomer's garb—fringed buckskin and moccasins. A smoke-tanned belt fastened with a huge gold buckle. From the belt hung two horn-handled Colts. Their holsters appeared to fascinate the Kid, for his dark eyes riveted upon them. The holsters were fashioned from cow tails, hair outermost, and the long brush of the tails hung well below Wayne Parker's knees. Presently the Kid pulled his eyes away and looked up into Wayne's face with a shy grin of admiration. Wayne grinned back at him.

"Step up, Kid," he suggested.

"Step up and drown your sorrow in a dram of forty-rod."

THE Kid looked startled and uncertain. A sand box slid from his rawboned hands. Never before had anyone called him to the bar to have a drink. Sam Slack and his hangers-on always treated him like a skulking coyote pup. The Adam's apple slid up into his throat, and the Kid swallowed it.

Sam Slack gave a roar of laughter. "Your mistake, Windy. That's only my flunky and roustabout. No sense in wastin' good liquor on him." He laughed again, and the others joined in gustily.

One of them, Broken-nose Charley, spat at the Kid's bare toes sticking through his dilapidated boots. The Kid looked down at his feet. Color ran up his neck into his uncut hair and his face took on a whipped expression.

Windy's eyes became opaque. From his buckskins he drew a coin and flipped it to the Kid, who caught it with unexpected deftness.

"See that my paint is watered and fed, will you, Kid?" A new quality had come into Windy's rumbling

"Easy there," Windy said. "Take your hands off that lad."

voice. He watched the tall, awkward lad stride out, then turned to the bottle and glass Sam had placed before him.

Outside, the Kid examined the coin in his palm. It glinted warm and yellow in the sun. A gold double eagle! Before now strange riders had tossed him an occasional coin, but never one like this. This was more money than he had ever owned. He'd buy new boots, new shirt and jeans, he decided quickly.

Then he caught his breath sharply. The stranger had carelessly made a mistake, he thought, or else this coin was meant to pay the feed bill in advance. Yes, that must be it, the money was for the feed bill. The Kid sighed heavily and put the coin away, then untied the big pinto at the hitch rail.

At the bar, Windy had poured his second drink. "Whose boy is that?" he asked casually. "He looks half starved. No more meat on his bones than on a tepee pole."

"Just a maverick I'm raisin'," Sam answered grudgingly. "His folks drowned makin' the Green River crossin'. A worthless whelp, the Kid is. No 'count a-tall."

Broken-nose Charley parted his mustache and spat over his shoulder. "Yeah, the Kid don't work much, so Sam don't feed him much." The uncouth hanger-on guffawed, and Windy's blue eyes narrowed.

"Drink up, Windy," suggested Sam Slack. He motioned to Broken-nose to take his place behind the bar and moved unobtrusively away to the rear.

INSIDE the log stable behind the saloon, the Kid suddenly felt a rough hand fasten on his arm. He gave a start and tried to pull away. Sam Slack held him with a punishing grip.

"Give it me!" he ordered. His greedy eyes had not missed the golden glint of the spinning coin in the air. "Give it me, you ungrateful whelp. Hand it over!" With a cruel twist of the arm he brought the Kid down to his knees in sickening pain.

In vain the Kid tried to pull free. "Let go! It's not mine," he cried hotly. "It's to pay his feed bill. Lemme go!" He lost hold on the pinto's lead rope and the uneasy animal went out the stable door. "Lemme go!" the Kid repeated fiercely, then tried to sink his teeth into Sam's hand.

Sam's free hand clutched at the Kid's scrawny throat. It quickly fastened there, shutting off the Kid's breath. The Kid made a vain struggle to break free of the strangle hold. Everything was slowly turning purple before his eyes.

Sam was hurriedly searching the Kid's pockets when the doorway darkened.

"Easy, there, hombre," a deep voice rumbled. "Take your hands off that lad." Sam turned with a snarl. Windy stood in the door, picking his teeth with a bowie knife.

"Damned whelp!" Sam rasped. "Tried to sink his fangs in me. I'll learn him! Just you keep out o' this, Windy, if you know when you're well off," he warned. "I run this town!"

Windy Wayne came forward. "You won't run it—with your throat cut."

For an instant, only, Sam paused, then loosed his grip on the Kid's throat and backed away. He started to draw his holstered gun, then thought better of it. With a muttered curse he turned and sprang nimbly through another door and vanished into the hay corral beyond. Thumping boots signified his swift flight to his saloon.

The Kid leaned against the log

wall, fighting to get his breath back. Presently he felt in his pockets, brought out the coin. "Here, mister," he gasped. "You better pay your feed bill personal. This money ain't safe on me. Better if you pull out sudden. Keno ain't healthy for them as cross Sam Slack. You better drift, stranger!"

Windy smiled. "Keno isn't a healthy place for you, either, Kid. That's your money, son. Keep it. Tell me, why do you stay here?"

The Kid hesitated, then uncertainly returned the coin to his pocket. He swallowed hard and gingerly rubbed the marks Sam's fingers had left on his throat. "I don't hanker to stay, mister."

"Then why not pull stakes and drift?" asked Windy Wayne.

"I tried that twice," the Kid said bitterly. "But Sam sent Broken-nose after me. He brought me back." His dark eyes kindled. "Come another spring, I aim to try again, mister."

"How old are you, son?" asked Windy.

The Kid studied a moment. "Seventeen, I reckon." Then he looked down at his broken boots, having stretched his age considerable.

"How long you been here at Sam's place?"

"Three years last spring," said the Kid, as if it were a century.

"That's too damned long!" declared Windy Wayne. He stepped outside and returned, leading his mount, from which he stripped the riding gear.

The Kid watched inquisitively. "You don't aim to drift?"

Windy grinned. "Why, I just got here, Kid. This paint needs a few days' rest. You spend that money, buy some riding duds." He tossed the Kid a second coin. "Here's another to match the first. And if Sam troubles you, just let me know."

"But Sam owns the store," the Kid pointed out. "He may not let me buy anything. Maybe you better keep this money, mister."

"What's a few dollars between friends?" said Windy. "You buy some duds. And don't worry, 'cause I'll be close around."

The Kid squared his thin shoulders. "Thanks, mister. I'll do that," he promised. Then from a peg on the wall he took down a rope. "It's near time for the northbound stage. I gotta get the fresh teams ready." He strode off to the horse corrals behind the stable.

A LITTLE while later the stage rolled in and made a short stop, allowing the passengers time for a scanty meal at Sam Slack's hotel. While the horses were being changed, Windy Wayne lounged about observing that it was the Kid who did most of the work. The boy was a good, steady hand with horses.

One of the passengers, a portly gentleman, wearing gold-rimmed glasses, seemed very ill at ease. An attractive young woman, obviously his daughter, accompanied him. She viewed the buckskin attire of Windy Wayne Parker with shy interest. And Windy, naturally, was not unconscious of her glances. But taking notice of this, the traveler's uneasiness seemed to increase.

He had heard his fellow passengers discussing the notorious Biddle brothers, who were reported now to be in this locality, possibly in the Black Rock Mountains just ahead, and he was clearly worried. He removed his glasses, polished them on a silk handkerchief and hurriedly replaced them to stare at Windy and his cow-tail holsters as if he were looking at one of the dreaded Biddle

brothers, and from much too close proximity. Then he grasped his daughter's arm and led her away to a safer distance.

When all was ready and the stage driver signaled, it was the Kid who sprang aside from the heads of the leaders. He stood watching longingly as the swaying coach faded into the distance. In spirit he, too, was racing along toward some far destination, free of enforced bondage.

One day followed another, stages came and went, yet Windy Wayne remained in Keno. Slowly his gold pieces were finding their way into Sam Slack's pocket. Perhaps for that very reason Sam made no hostile move, nor did anyone of the barroom hangers-on. Quite frequently Windy called them all up to the bar and bought a round of forty-rod. Other than on these occasions he did not drink.

However, Windy told many tall tales of wild adventures in his booming, gusty voice, tales of violence and gunplay. He spoke familiarly of Jim Bridger, Bill Cody and Kit Carson.

Behind Windy's back, Sam Slack discredited all these tales. But the Kid always listened with rapt attention, accepting these stirring accounts as unquestionable facts. At Sam's store the Kid purchased new boots and clothing, paying outrageously high prices for them, and discarded his tattered garb. Now he carried his shoulders more squarely and his head high. A new quality of determination was in his eyes. All Keno understood that he had found a friend, and wondered what would come of it. The barroom crowd stopped plaguing the boy. For just how strong Windy was backing the Kid, they did not know. They talked with Sam about it.

"Let 'em alone," Sam cautioned. "Any way you figure it I'm money ahead. Let Windy buy his clothes, his meals, and help him with the stage teams if he's a mind to."

"But Windy's puttin' queer notions in his head," said Broken-nose.

"I'll knock 'em out," promised Sam, "soon as Windy pulls his freight from here."

Broken-nose scowled and spat over his shoulder. "Don't reckon he aims to pull," he grumbled. "Windy's tryin' to get on yore good side. Soon as his coin is spent, he'll just hang on, expectin' to ride the grub line through the winter."

"Never fear," Sam cackled. "When he's broke, I'll damned soon smoke him out o' town. For all his two guns and cow-tail holsters he's just a bag o' wind."

THEN it happened—seemingly the very chance for which Wayne Parker had been waiting. Down from the Black Rocks came a stagecoach pulled by a single span of horses. It was a shambles! The coach carried a load of dead and wounded. One of them was John Drake, the portly gentleman who had ridden away a short time before. He had a bullet through his arm. The Biddle brothers, he said, had robbed the stage and had taken his daughter.

The express guard and two rough-and-ready passengers, returning from the Goldhill mining district, had made a fight of it. But the guard and one of the passengers had been instantly killed, while the other man was seriously wounded.

The stage driver, always considered a neutral party in such affairs, had stuck to his lines and escaped unscathed. He had recognized the three Biddle brothers. He explained how they had shot the lead team,

cut out the swing team for their own use, looted the express box, then forced Leora Drake to mount one of the stage horses and ride off with them. The driver declared he believed one of the outlaws had been wounded in the gun fight.

"Low-down skunks, the Biddle boys!" the driver declared.

"Uncouth savages!" exclaimed John Drake as his arm was being dressed. "I'll pay five hundred dollars to the men who bring her back. Form a posse at once! Start after her!" He peered uncertainly from face to face, much at loss without his glasses.

This offer brought forth no response. Neither Sam Slack nor any of the Keno barflies showed any eagerness to trail the notorious Biddle brothers.

"Come, come!" cried Drake. "I'll make it a thousand—five thousand! Only bring her back. She's my only child. Don't you understand?"

His anguished pleas had no effect on the crowd. Sam and Broken-nose exchanged glances.

"The Biddle boys ain't healthy to monkey with," Sam excused himself.

"Besides," added Broken-nose, "if we was to trail 'em, they'd be certain to murder the gal."

Drake groaned. "I've the money. I'll pay you!" he pleaded. "I hid my roll behind the stagecoach seat. Come, come, men! The driver says snow is due to fall in the high hills, then their trail will be lost."

"That's right," agreed Wayne Parker, who had listened attentively this while. "Come snow, tracking won't be easy. Gents, let's saddle up and take after them."

But they only shook their heads. It was perfectly clear that none of them wanted to notch sights and swap lead with the Biddle brothers. Not at any price!

Windy Wayne shrugged. "Then I'll go alone," he declared. "But I was hoping at least one other gent would keep me company." His blue eyes fixed on the Kid in a steady, insistent gaze.

Standing behind the others, the Kid swallowed hard. It was as if Windy's eyes pulled the words right up from the boy's new boots. "I'll go, mister," he offered huskily.

Sam's laugh was the signal for general merriment. Windy's flashing eyes silenced it. "Kid, I couldn't pick a better man," he said. "The two of us will do this job pronto. But you'll need a fast horse, riding gear and guns."

John Drake squinted intently at the Kid. Without his glasses, he probably thought he was looking at a full-grown man. "I'll pay for anything you need," he spoke impatiently. "Just get started!"

Everything was arranged so speedily, Sam Slack scarcely had time to grasp the situation before Windy and the Kid were riding from town. Sam hated to lose the Kid. So he charged a fancy price for the Kid's outfit and thus felt some measure of compensation for his loss. With the money safe in his pocket he spoke his mind:

"Just a bag o' wind, that cow-tailed gent," he informed the portly Drake. "You'll never see those two again."

At a loss for words, Drake blinked his nearsighted eyes. Then his lips tightened firmly. It was as if he felt a thread of hope and clung tightly to it.

TWO dead horses in the stage road marked the scene of the holdup. Windy swung down, handing the Kid his reins. He went carefully over the ground, studying every track.

At the roadside he discovered Drake's glasses, unbroken. He smiled as he placed them in his pocket. Presently he returned to his horse and mounted. Then for a considerable distance he slowly followed the departing trail of the bandits. It was leading into rough and broken country. At length he spoke over his shoulder to the Kid, who had remained silent and watchful.

"Those stage broncs don't lead up good. The loot's on one, the gal on the other. The driver was right, one of the gang is wounded, judging by these tracks."

"Gee, mister!" marveled the Kid. "You must be mighty good at readin' trail sign."

"That's my business," chuckled Windy Wayne. "In case we're caught in a tight, just how good can you handle that new rifle?"

"Pretty good," said the Kid. "I've hunted rabbits. And once I shot a coyote on the run."

Windy did not laugh. "That's fine," he said. "Now I've ridden these hills before, Kid. I believe I know exactly where this gang will hole up. One's hard hit. They can't travel fast nor far. But they'll watch their back trail mighty close. At first sight of us they'll shoot to kill."

"Yes," agreed the Kid. "And with the girl among 'em we wouldn't dast shoot back. This looks like a mighty tough job."

"Plenty tough!" said Windy. "We better swing wide from this trail and ride fast for that hide-out. I've a hunch they'll blind their tracks some way, then split up and ride straight there. Maybe we can surprise them. It's about our only chance."

"We gotta get that girl back," said the Kid. "I don't reckon she likes being with those murderin' skunks. Not a-tall!"

"We'll do our best," promised Windy Wayne. "Stick tight, Kid. It's rough ridin' and we gotta make fast time."

The Kid gave his mount its head. With brush clawing at his legs, low tree limbs endangering his face and eyes, he followed at a breakneck pace, one hand gripping the saddle-horn. His teeth were set, while in his dark eyes the sparkling light of adventure kindled.

Night came and a cold wind swept the mountainside.

"They're down there," said Windy, drawing rein. "See that light glinting through the cabin wall where the old chinking has dropped away? We'll keep on high up along this ridge and then drop down into the coulee where the cabin is. We'll tie our hosses way above it and work down on foot."

The Kid was tired and saddle-sore. Excitement and the cold were making him shiver. He tried to keep his teeth from chattering and said, "Sure thing, mister. That way we'll take 'em by surprise."

Time passed swiftly while Windy rode on at a steady walk, keeping far distant from the corral below, for if the horses of the desperadoes caught scent or sound of his and the Kid's animals, their presence here might be revealed by a nickering call of greeting.

Down in the coulee, a mile or more above the camp, Windy came upon a spot to his liking and dismounted. They were in a parklike meadow. "We'll loosen cinches and peg our ponies. They can feed while we scout around. Bring your rifle, Kid."

Moving along an invisible game trail the moccasins of Windy Wayne made no slightest whisper, but the Kid's new boots raised small squeaking sounds. By now a pale moon had set, leaving only twinkling stars

to shed their feeble glow over the pine-shrouded hills. The Kid had difficulty in following the vague shape and noiseless steps of his companion.

SOME distance farther on, Windy paused. "Take off your boots, Kid," he whispered. "Carry 'em in your hand. The Biddle boys have mighty sharp ears an' their hosses, too."

The Kid obeyed, and with increased caution they moved on. Presently they emerged upon a little clearing hacked out among tall pines. Below the clearing was an open meadow from which came the contented sound of horses grazing hungrily. On their near right a streak of light revealed the cabin's location. For a time they listened intently to the low murmur of voices within that cabin's walls. The conversation was indistinguishable.

"Wait here, Kid," ordered Windy. "I'll slip up and have a look." He moved out into the clearing and gained the cabin. Its windows were not of glass, but closed with heavy hewn-plank shutters. But much of the dobbing and chinking was out, and through a gap between two weathered logs he peered inside.

On a pole bunk lay a bearded outlaw from whose lips issued moaning sounds. Two other men worked over him, their rough, hard-bitten faces sinister in the flickering light.

"I can't stop this damned blood," growled one.

The other shrugged. "Don't matter much," he said callously. "Jud's too hard hit to travel, and we can't stop long here."

They straightened up and exchanged glances. Then one of them deliberately reached down and pulled a string of packing from the wound. Cold, unfeeling, murderous, these Biddle brothers. The wounded desperado uttered a ghastly groan, but did not rouse from his stupor as his companions insured his death.

Two lighted candles stood fixed with their own tallow to a rickety table. Embers glowed cherry red on a stone hearth where coffee simmered in a blackened pot. A pile of riding gear lay along the wall. The only door was barred from within, and in the corner nearest it three rifles stood ready at hand. The girl was not in sight.

Windy moved around the cabin. Through another gap between the logs he saw that Leora Drake lay huddled against the far wall on the dirt floor. She was tied hand and foot. At first he thought she was asleep, so still did she lay. But, looking closer, he made out that her terrified eyes were fixed on the two outlaws, who now stood staring down at her.

"Well," said one, "we may as well divide the loot, then hit the trail come dawn—"

TO the Kid it seemed he waited a very long time alone. Then Windy materialized beside him.

"Kid, there isn't a chance of getting at 'em in that cabin," he whispered. "It's tight as a jug. We'll have to wait until they come outside."

"But what about that girl, mister?"

"She'll be safe enough—for a while. They've divided the stage loot, and now they're playing cards. There's only two of 'em now; one's dead. It seems they're planning to head south to a safer hide-out and take the gal along. But they're taking different trails to get there. There's a question as to which one the gal goes with. They're gambling to decide it."

The Kid, who understood the agony of waiting, was thinking of the girl. "Mister, we've gotta get her out of there!" he said earnestly.

"Sure, Kid," Windy replied. "But we can't jump 'em now. They could stand off a dozen men. Their game will last some time. Daylight will soon be here. I've a plan to nail 'em. I know a good spot where you can watch one side of the cabin. I'll watch the other. When they come out, let me start the fireworks, then notch your sights and join in. Savvy?"

"Yes, I savvy, mister," said the Kid. But when he was left alone, crouched down behind a log, he was not so sure. The fact impinged upon his mind that, after all, this was far different than shooting rabbits, or even coyotes. But he set his teeth and waited.

In the gray of dawn the cabin door opened. One of the outlaws stepped outside, a water pail in his hand. He took a look around, then fixed his attention on the picketed horses. Satisfied, he began following a dim trail leading to a spring.

Standing erect and openly before an old and weathered pine trunk, his buckskin garb blending perfectly with it and his rust-red hair matching the autumn color of the oak brush behind, Windy Wayne Parker waited, utterly motionless. His brain was racing. He had hoped both desperadoes would emerge from the cabin at the same time, but only one had come out! The other was safe inside with the helpless girl.

While he weighed his chances, the outlaw with the pail was coming dangerously near. It seemed now or never, Windy quickly decided. He blew a gusty whistle through his teeth and pulled his guns from their cow-tail holsters.

Instantly the man whirled, dropping the pail as he shot quick hands toward his guns. But before the falling clatter of the water pail had even died away, he fell, a bullet through his brain.

Motionless again, Windy Parker waited, eyes and gun now on the cabin. For a time there came no sound, no movement. Then at a window the heavy shutters cautiously opened a little and a rifle barrel slid stealthily out. It pointed in Windy's direction. The outlaw inside had spotted him and had taken careful aim.

Windy's guns thundered, bucking upward. A bullet ripped through his jacket, smashed into the snag behind. Then the smoking rifle muzzle vanished. From inside the cabin came the unmistakable thud of a falling body hitting the dirt floor, followed by an involuntary scream from the girl. Windy knew she was only frightened. His steady hands had sent those bullets true. He called to the Kid, who came running.

"It's . . . it's all over with?" he asked in awe.

Windy nodded. "Maybe you'd better go in and untie the lady, Kid," he suggested matter-of-factly. "I'll go up and fetch down our hosses."

NEXT day in the lobby of Sam Slack's hotel, John Drake nursed his gunshot arm while he listened attentively to the Kid's enthusastic account of the rescue. The portly gentleman seemed highly satisfied. Even his indispensable glasses had been safely returned. Moreover, the stage loot and the bodies of the three notorious Biddle brothers now reposed quietly in Sam's saloon.

From Windy Parker, Drake had learned something of the Kid's upbringing and life as Sam Slack's chore boy. Now he asked the Kid a forthright question:

"Son, wouldn't you like to be my boy? This town is certainly no place for you. Let me legally adopt you. I'll take you home, buy you good clothes, see that you have a proper education. How about it?"

The Kid looked down at his new boots. Deep color came up into his hair. He swallowed and seemed to find it hard to frame his answer.

Leora Drake came over to him and put an arm across his shoulders. "Please!" she coaxed. "We'd like very much to have you. Won't you come?"

The Kid braced himself against the tide of emotion that threatened to overwhelm him. It was easy to see how unused he was to having people actually concerned about him. But he looked over at Windy Parker, the first man in Keno who had ever given him a friendly word, and then he answered the Drakes:

"I sure thank you folks," he said huskily. "But I reckon I'll just string along with my pard, Windy. Come another dawn and we're hittin' the trail out o' here."

THE END

WESTERN JAILS

THE distaste of cowboys for the old-time jail was not wholly a matter of having their liberties restricted nor of disgrace. The buildings themselves were for the most part small, low-ceilinged and unsanitary. During the day, those incarcerated for minor offenses were let out under guard. A sign once hung over the door of a State penitentiary to the effect that "Any prisoner not inside the walls before nine o'clock will be locked out for the night." This may not have been as absurd as it sounds, for there was no other place for him to sleep, and with the nearest town two hundred miles distant and no means of transportation, the prison was his only refuge. He knew better than to try to escape, for the law officers of that day didn't talk much—they acted.

The first steel cells appeared in the West after the Civil War, but in many villages, even as late as 1880, the only jail was a hut of logs, twelve by twelve feet, with a door of plank and a small open window grated by iron bars.

At such places as Bents' Fort on the Arkansas, where detachments of cavalry guarded the frontier, there were military guard houses. These were sometimes used for the accommodation of too hilarious cowboys or trappers, who were placed there to sleep off the effects of their celebration.

Some of these old jails have been preserved as historic relics. That the spirits of the prisoners had not been greatly depressed by their confinement is shown by the names carved deep in the wood of the walls and door. The names are, for the most part, those of mischievous cowboys. At least none of the famous outlaws left their signatures on the walls.

THE STORY OF THE WEST

told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

With the increasing traffic on the Santa Fe Trail and the frequent passage of returning traders laden with gold dust, specie and other valuables, banditry grew and flourished. The law was hundreds of miles away and the lonely stretches of the Trail offered innumerable opportunities for ambush.

One of the most dreaded of the outlaws who plied their trade along the Trail was a Cheyenne half-breed named Charles Bent. He was the son of Colonel William Bent of Bents' Fort and a full-blooded Cheyenne named Owl Woman. His father had had him educated in St. Louis, but this merely trained his Indian mind to think more clearly.

Charles Bent formed a semi-military band of outlaws who were known as the Dog Soldiers.

Bent's usual method was to hide his band near one of the camping places along the Trail. He himself would then manage to be found asleep along the Trail by incoming traders. On being waked he would appear rested, but very hungry. While the traders fed him, Bent was busy sizing up their numbers and armament. Then, after profusely thanking his hosts, he would hurry back, gather his band and, returning amid a wild thunder of hoofs, would murder everyone in the party.

Finally the Dog Soldiers executed a raid on a fine herd of horses which belonged to the Kaw tribe. A stiff fight developed, the Kaws being much stronger in numbers than was supposed. Amid the rattle of rifles and bloody hand-to-hand encounters, many of the Dog Soldiers lost their scalps. Bent himself was mortally wounded, and after his death the band dissolved.

Other ruthless land pirates had drifted up from Texas and made their headquarters at Westport Landing. This little prairie town which in 1843 sprawled along the bank of the Missouri had become an important point in the Santa Fe Trail, for it was at this point that many prospective travelers of the Trail disembarked. There was little about the squalid town at that time to suggest the present size and dignity of Kansas City.

These highwaymen carried on their banditry in a systematic way. As a rule a confederate was kept in Santa Fe to send swift word when a caravan which promised a good haul set out on the eastward journey.

So it was that in April of 1843 a half-breed came racing along the Trail on his swift pony, entered Westport Landing quietly and hunted up his leader. His message came tumbling out in broken English: A very wealthy Mexican, Señor Don Antonio José Chavez, was on his way with several thousand dollars in gold and silver and practically no escort, and was even now nearing the Missouri frontier.

Hastily calling his gang of fifteen cutthroats together, the leader led them out along the Trail to Cow Creek. There, among the willows and cottonwoods, they lay in wait.

Chavez had only five servants with him and a young boy. When he reached Cow Creek he had only one wagon and his private coach. He and his servants were mercilessly murdered. The boy, however, had slid out of the back of the wagon to get a drink. Unseen, he crawled away into the bushes and hid till the bandits had gone. In the evening he caught one of the stampeded horses and reached Fort Leavenworth after a hard ride.

As soon as his message was delivered to the commander, the bugle was sounded and within an hour a detachment of troops, guided by the boy, was on the trail of the murderers. Two days later the troops surprised the band at dawn and in a brief, hot fight killed one and captured most of the others, taking them to St. Louis to be hanged or imprisoned.

NEXT WEEK: WAR WITH MEXICO

Banditry flourished on the Santa Fe Trail, and every wagon train made its journey in fearful anticipation of attack by ruthless land pirates.

NEVER TRUST A TINHORN

BY L. P. HOLMES

THE only reason the Bar Hook crowd did not go after Tex Wheelock then and there like a pack of ravening wolves, was because of that reeking, deadly gun which he still held in a rock-steady hand.

On the floor beyond the green baize-covered poker table, Curly la Verne was drumming a dying tattoo with his boot heels. And then, after a queer, choking grunt, those heels were stilled.

Tex Wheelock raked the crowd with remote, cold eyes. "He had to have it that way," he said harshly. "And the evidence of my rights in the affair—is there." He rested the forefinger of his left hand on a spot on the table top, where a .45 slug had ripped the faded baize and

gouged a groove in the hard wood underneath, before glancing up and on to crash into the wall beyond. "He had the first shot."

"Too damned bad he didn't make it a good one," rasped Chappy Hill. "Wheelock, Curly makes the third man you've downed across that damned table of yores since you hit town a year ago. And from where I stand, that makes just three too many. This town has had a big plenty of you."

"It's a free town," Wheelock pointed out. "And I like it here. Men who can't lose without going for a gun, got no business sitting into a draw-poker game."

"The game is all right," growled Hill. "It's the way you always manage to hook that third ace when you need it."

"My hand is still full, if you care to call it," said Wheelock, moving his gun meaningly.

MEN began crowding into the Belle Union, drawn by the sound of the shots. They milled about, staring at the dead man on the floor, and at the cold-eyed gambler who stood so still and quiet behind the card table with his drawn gun. Some of them began to mutter.

Then Sheriff Bush Bradley came in, pushing through the crowd, gray, wrinkled and leathery, with cold, shrewd, sun-puckered eyes. He took in the set-up with a glance.

"How did it happen, Wheelock?" he demanded brusquely.

"He held a pat diamond flush," the gambler explained quietly. "I had two pair, aces on tens. I drew one and caught the third ace. He took one look and went for his gun. There's where his slug hit." He pointed to the gouge in the table top again.

"He drew and shot first?" asked Bradley.

"He drew and shot first."

Bradley faced the Bar Hook bunch. "That right?"

Chappy Hill shrugged. "Call it so, Bush. But it's damned queer how Wheelock catches that third ace so often."

"That's damn-fool talk, Hill," the sheriff said curtly. "Tex is a square gambler. And any man has a right to defend himself. You better clear out. And take La Verne with you. He was one of yore crowd."

Sullen and growling, Hill and his bunch carried the dead man out. Wheelock put away his gun, sat down, shoulders drooping.

"Sorry, Bush," he said wearily. "But they will back a hand without judgment and then go for a gun when they lose. I hate this sort of thing."

"I know," said Bradley. "I suspect they'll be after me now to run you out of town."

Wheelock shrugged and began stacking cards and chips. The crowd, with morbid interest, had followed the dead man outside. For a moment only Wheelock, Bradley and Stew Beam, the proprietor and bartender, were in the room. Bradley strode over to the bar.

"Come here a minute, Tex," he said. "I want to show you and Stew something."

Wheelock went over to the bar, a tall, erect man, whose age might have been anywhere between thirty and forty-five. His face was thin, cleanly cut, grimly sensitive, his eyes remote and shadowed. He wore the garb of his profession, long dark coat and dark trousers tucked into black calfskin boots.

The sheriff drew a paper from his pocket and spread it on the bar. "This is private dope, just between

the three of us," he said. "Remember that Wells Fargo robbery six weeks ago on the Arapahoe City stage? Well, there was fifteen thousand dollars in new currency, mostly tens and twenties lost in that holdup. The currency was on its way to the Arapahoe City Bank. The Wells Fargo people sent me this list of the serial numbers of those greenbacks. I want you both to look the list over and memorize the serial letters. And if a twenty or a ten greenback comes in over the bar or over yore table, Tex, I want you to take a good look at it. If it fits into the serial letters, get hold of me, pronto."

Stew Beam wrinkled his forehead thoughtfully. "Then you think the hombres who pulled that holdup, came from around here, Bush?"

"Who knows? Maybe yes, maybe no. But it won't hurt to keep an eye open. You never can tell."

"Fair enough," said Stew. "I'll do my best. Tex, you got a lot better memory than me. You take the list first and then let me have it. I won't trust my memory too far. I'll copy those cussed numbers and keep the list in my till."

Bush Bradley went on. Tex Wheelock stared at the list thoughtfully, then looked at the saloon owner. "I'm sorry about that shooting, Stew," he murmured. "I'll be giving yore place a bad name."

Stew snorted. "Forget it. If you dealt 'em crooked, Tex, I'd run you out myself. But I know you're a square gambler. And one of these days these knotheads will realize you're a better shot than you are a gambler—which is plenty. Then they'll behave themselves. I always stand behind the men who work for me when I know they're square. Say, how the hell can one man remember all those cussed numbers, anyhow?"

"You don't have to. Take this list of tens, for instance. The numbers start with 'A' and end with 'A.' That's all you have to watch. A ten-spot comes across the mahogany with letters like that, then you compare it with yore list. Savvy?"

Stew nodded slowly. "I get you."

"I'll take the list along and study it while I eat supper," Wheelock said. "I'll bring it back with me later and you can keep it to refer to."

Wheelock put the paper in his coat pocket, got his dark, flat-brimmed Stetson from a wall peg and went out into the waning afternoon sunlight. The cabin where he lived stood at the west end of the single street of the little cow town of Mesa Grande, and Wheelock turned his steps that way. It was a pleasant street, lined on either side with cottonwoods which flaunted bright-green crests to the sun and blocked out welcome shadows underneath.

As Wheelock passed Charley Wright's general store, old Buck Carson and his slim, auburn-haired daughter came out. Darlie Carson was in her early twenties, lovely to look at and with a certain shining quality of spirit and character that could strike a lonely man like a blow.

As Tex Wheelock glanced at her, a guarded, wistful shadow formed, far back in the remote depths of his eyes. He tipped his hat, inclined his head gravely. The slender, graceful girl seemed to hesitate slightly and then gave him a rather reserved nod and smile. Evidently she had heard about the shooting of Curly la Verne.

So, no doubt, had Buck Carson, for he faced Wheelock and spoke bluntly. "At it again, eh, Wheelock? You're going to wear out yore welcome in this town if you don't go slow."

Wheelock faced the white-haired

old cattleman gravely. "No one regrets a thing like that more than I do, Mr. Carson." His voice was quiet. "But I believe it's instinctive for a man to defend himself."

"Depends on the point of view, I reckon," said Carson roughly. "But I learned one thing a long time ago: Never trust a tinhorn."

Dark color flooded Wheelock's face and throat. His eyes flashed, then veiled again. "Funny thing," he said huskily. "Even a tinhorn has feelings. Maybe you don't believe that, but it's true."

He touched his hat again, then went on, a somber, solitary figure in the last flame of the sun. Darlie Carson stared after him, biting her crimson lips. Then she turned to her father. "That was brutal, dad—and unnecessary," she said reprovingly. "I'm a little ashamed of you."

"Bosh!" snorted the old cattleman. "Who gives a damn about the feelings of a tinhorn gambler? Every dollar that hombre earns comes across a poker table. And he has the blood of at least three men on his hands that I know of."

"I could remind you of a few things," said the girl quietly. "For instance, that old gun you keep on your bureau at home, with four notches cut in the handle. And I've heard you brag that you got your start in the cattle game on the money you won in an all-night poker session."

Buck Carson reddened. "Don't tell me you're interested in that tinhorn," he growled. "You go getting foolish ideas about him and I'll turn you across my knee, old as you are."

"I'm interested only in being fair and honest. You know that. And I don't like to be threatened. I think you'd better apologize to me—and later, sometime—to Mr. Wheelock."

Buck Carson began to growl, then shrugged and put his arm about his daughter. For he worshiped this slender girl of his. "I'm sorry, honey. I guess I am getting pretty crochety. Only, I do a lot of worrying these days about Chet. He's riding a little too wild to suit me."

"Give him time," said the girl. "He'll settle down. He's the son of his father. He's got a lot of your explosiveness and restless spirit. I suppose he'll have to bump his head—hard—a few times, before he comes down to earth."

"I hope you're right," grunted Carson. "For yore age, you're a very smart young lady."

She laughed softly. "I have to be, to get along with a father like you and a brother like Chet. Come on. It will be dark before we get out to the ranch."

IN this cabin, Tex Wheelock cooked and ate a solitary supper. He ate by force of habit, for he wasn't hungry. His mind was seething with the events of the afternoon. It wasn't the shootout with Curly la Verne that weighed upon him. That was just one of the things that had to be accepted philosophically. Things like that had happened before, would happen again, perhaps. The odds were at least even that the next slug thrown his way would be better aimed than the one Curly la Verne had cut loose. And that didn't worry Wheelock, either. It was one of the hazards of a gambler's life, a thing not to be concerned about until it happened. The profession made a man pretty much of a fatalist.

What concerned Wheelock most was the meeting with Buck Carson and his daughter. Tinhorn! "Never trust a tinhorn!" The words kept turning over and over in his mind.

What the hell did that old pelican of a Carson have to brag about? What about that wild-riding, hard-drinking, hard-gambling son of his? Wheelock had heard plenty about young Chet Carson. Some pretty shrewd men were already prophesying no good end for that young hellion.

After a bit, Wheelock's anger faded. One thing Buck Carson could be plenty proud of. That girl of his. Once before Wheelock had met a girl like Darlie Carson, back when he was young and eager and riding the high golden clouds of idealism. A girl with the same sparkling brilliance, the same breathless charm. There was only one difference. Darlie Carson was also—honest.

Tex Wheelock sat for a long time after that, sunk in moody reverie. He hated moments like these, when the past crawled up to whip him. To get rid of those racking thoughts, he got out the list Bush Bradley had furnished and concentrated his keen memory on it.

An hour later he went back to the bar, through the cool, blue darkness.

Play was heavy at his table that night. It always was, after a shooting. Men, Wheelock had often thought, were like moths. The bright flame of danger called them. And they found, perhaps, some kind of a vicarious thrill in sitting in the same chair Curly la Verne had used and in looking at the gouge in the table top where La Verne's bullet had struck.

It was after midnight before Wheelock could compare notes with Stew Beam. Stew shook his head. "No soap. Some tens and twenties both came in, but none that figured in the list."

"The same at the table," nodded Wheelock. "We'll keep on watching."

THE next morning Wheelock was up early and out on the handsome morro gelding he kept at the livery barn. He liked to ride over the wide range in the morning, before the sun had a chance to burn away the dew of the night and dissipate the pungent fragrance of the sage. He liked to watch the far, soft mists when they coiled and fled before the first golden onslaught of the sun. He liked the peace, the quiet, the sense of freedom.

The sun was two hours high and he was thinking of turning back for town when, from the crest of a ridge he saw two riders sitting their mounts in the little basin beyond. He recognized them instantly: Darlie Carson and her brother, Chet.

They were arguing. He could see Chet Carson wave an angry arm and knew, by the way the girl was leaning forward in her saddle, that she was pleading with him. Then, abruptly, Chet made that angry gesture again, whirled his mount and spurred off in the direction of town.

The girl just sat her saddle, staring after him. And when Chet disappeared over the far edge of the basin, Wheelock saw the girl rub the back of her hand across her eyes. He could not resist the impulse to ride down to her.

She saw him while still a hundred yards off, and straightened in her saddle, her head lifting proudly. Wheelock took off his hat as he rode up.

"Good morning," he said gravely. "I'm sorry your brother has been causing you worry. I couldn't help seeing."

She stiffened, then let her shoulders droop. She looked like a forlorn little girl. "Dad and Chet had a terrible quarrel," she said steadily. "Chet hadn't been home for weeks.

Dad tore into him about it and Chet said that next time he wouldn't come home at all. He left early this morning and I came after him. I caught him here and tried to talk sense into him. It . . . it didn't do any good."

"I'm sorry," said Wheelock. "Sometimes we wonder why life shouldn't be more pleasant for all of us. But it never is, somehow. Everyone has some sort of trouble. It's too bad you should have any."

She studied him. "Why do you say that? I'm just an ordinary mortal."

He shook his head. "No—not ordinary. There is a fineness, a brightness about you too rare to be marred with worry or trouble."

Her laugh was a little shaky, a little uncertain. "I'm afraid I don't understand. But it sounds nice. So —thanks."

She started to rein away, then hesitated. "Yesterday afternoon, in town, dad said something to you. I believe he was sorry for it—after. I know I was. I'm apologizing for him—and for myself."

"Thanks," Wheelock said gravely. "Now I think you should understand what I meant."

She gave him a queer, veiled look, then rode away. Wheelock, hat in hand, watched her out of sight.

HOW about a little game of two-handed stud, tinhorn?"

Wheelock, sitting at his favorite table, playing solitaire, looked up, his eyes flashing. The speaker was young Chet Carson.

Carson had been drinking. His eyes were bloodshot; he needed a shave. There was a sullen, quarrelsome surliness about him.

"Sure," Wheelock said softly. "Any time."

"I mean now. Right now."

"Sure," agreed Wheelock. "Right now."

Chet Carson sat down, fumbled in his pocket, poured a handful of loose change on the table. "That will do for a starter," he growled.

Carson played, his sullen moroseness increasing. He pushed his luck to the limit, bet recklessly and without judgment. The change was soon gone.

"Satisfied?" asked Wheelock.

"No, just beginning. I got more."

He dug a bill from his pocket, a twenty. "Chips. All of it."

Wheelock counted out the chips, threw a casual glance at the greenback as he drew it to him. His eyes noted the serial number and something crashed softly, far back in his brain. It took all his iron self-control to hold back the start of consternation he felt. His fingers shook slightly as he counted out the chips. Then his brain began to race.

He had to handle this thing carefully. Funny, how his first clear thought was of Darlie Carson and what it would mean to her if she learned the truth about her brother. If he made a misstep, that brightness, that fineness would be dulled forever. And that couldn't be. For such people as Darlie Carson were all too rare in the world.

He played mechanically and for the first time in a great many years, used all the card deftness in his lean, flashing hands. He had to be sure. Maybe this wild, wayward young fool opposite him had just picked that bill up somewhere. Cashed a check, maybe. And so, in five hands, he had used up that twenty. Young Carson cursed and produced another. And then Wheelock was certain.

And now he made the cards work the other way. In half an hour, young Carson had won both the twenties back, along with thirty dol-

lars of Wheelock's money in assorted small currency and coins. Wheelock wanted him to have enough small change to last him through, even if he spent recklessly. It was pretty certain that he wouldn't flash those twenties again, if he had enough other change.

Wheelock glanced at his watch, pushed his chair back. "That's enough for this trip," he said.

"Just like a damn tinhorn!" sneered Carson. "When the luck is running against him, he quits."

Wheelock managed a stiff smile. "They say that's the mark of a smart gambler. However, this evening, if you've got enough to make the stakes real interesting, I'll try you again."

"I'm calling that bluff, too," boasted Carson. "I'll be here. We'll make the sky the limit! I got plenty."

Wheelock's brain was seething as he left the Belle Union. He had to get hold of that fool kid somehow, get him out of sight. It was dark before he had his plan worked out—and a desperate gamble it was. But he was used to desperate gambles when the stakes were high enough. And this time they were plenty high.

Unobtrusively he kept track of Chet Carson, who made the rounds, drinking at several saloons. And it wasn't until young Carson headed, a little unsteadily, for the Bluebird Eating House, that Wheelock had his chance. There was an alley, just short of the hash house and Wheelock, throwing a swift glance up and down the street, closed in fast on young Carson, meeting him just where the alley opened.

"Hey, Carson!" he hailed softly.

CHET CARSON turned, growling. The growl broke off short as Wheelock smashed a whistling right fist to his jaw. As Carson began to sag, Wheelock caught him and dragged him into the blackness of the alley. He laid Carson down, turned back and looked up and down the street. No sign of anyone, no alarm. So he went back, got the unconscious rider over his shoulder and made a quick circle, back through the alley and around behind the buildings on that side of the street. Five minutes later he was in his own cabin, the door barred behind him and Chet Carson laid out on his bunk.

Carson was beginning to stir and Wheelock worked fast. With rawhide thongs he tied his prisoner securely to the bunk. He hung blankets over the windows and lighted his small kerosene lamp. Then he bent over Carson and began going through his pockets.

Carson glared up at him, still stunned from that crashing blow on the jaw. He mumbled a curse. "Damned tinhorn—might have known. What the hell is the idea? I'll—"

"Shut up!" Wheelock said curtly. "You're in the tightest spot you've ever been in. Maybe you'll come out of it, maybe you won't. Ah! This is what I want to look at."

"This" was a worn, sweat-stained money belt that Carson had worn about his waist, next to the skin. Wheelock dragged it forth. It was fat with tight-packed contents.

Chet Carson began to fight his bonds savagely, but without success. "Keep yore hands off that," he blurted hoarsely. "That's mine, you damned robber!"

"Don't yell," advised Wheelock grimly. "Because if Bush Bradley should walk in here, it means you'll go over the road for the rest of your life."

Wheelock had the belt open now, and from it he took bundle after

bundle of crisp greenbacks. The serial numbers told their own story. The amount lacked but a few dollars of being five thousand.

On the bunk, Chet Carson had grown very still. His eyes were desperate, glazed with fear. Wheelock stood over him.

"You damned, complete young fool," he growled. "Do you know what this means? Do you realize what it can do to your father, your sister? Not content with throwing your own future away, you'd ruin theirs. You ought to be taken out and whipped within an inch of your stupid life. The word about that Wells Fargo robbery says that there were three in the gang. Who were the other two?"

"I . . . I'm not saying," Chet Carson said hoarsely. "Go ahead. Call Bradley and get it over with."

"I'm not sending for Bradley. I'm sending for your father and sister."

"No!" cried Carson. "Don't do that. They never did anything to you!"

"That's right, they haven't. But you've done plenty to them! And now—this."

Chet Carson writhed against his bonds. "All right, say I have treated them rotten. I might have straightened out, if I hadn't got in this deep. But—ah, what the hell! What's the use of anything, now?"

"There might be a chance—if you'd tell who the other two were in that holdup with you."

"No! I've been plenty low. But I won't squeal on men who shot square with me."

"In that case," Wheelock said flatly, "we'll have to wait until something drops. Which means you'll stay here, tied to this bunk, for a long time."

Wheelock took a clean handkerchief, wadded it, forced it into Chet Carson's mouth and bound it in place with a towel. He went over Carson's bonds, made sure they were secure. He stowed the bundles of currency inside his coat, blew out the lamp, locked the cabin door and walked slowly down the street and into the Belle Union.

The usual evening crowd was there, riders from the range about Mesa Grande, some of the town citizens. As Wheelock went to the bar to get a rack of chips, he was startled to see Stew Beam signaling him with desperate eyes.

WHEELOCK went around behind the bar, apparently busy getting chips and cards. Stew moved close. "I got one of those bills," he

murmured hoarsely. "A twenty. No mistake. I checked it against that list."

"Who?" asked Wheelock, his pulse drumming.

"Pete Torres."

"Keep still about it. Let me handle it."

Wheelock went through his usual routine. He went to his favorite seat at his favorite table, hung his hat on a wall peg, sat down, laid out cards and chips. He built a thin, brown-paper cigarette, lighted it and looked around.

"Ready for a little action, if any of you boys feel inclined that way," he called cheerfully. "Name your own limit."

Charley Wright took a chair. "I'll go for a few hands of four-bit limit draw."

Two others agreed, and the game got under way. Wheelock looked around. He saw Pete Torres and his brother, Sinko, playing pool. Well, the evening was young and this was a game for patience.

For an hour that draw game went on. Then one of the players, a cowboy, dropped out. "Three-handed draw is a poor game," Wheelock declared. "Five-handed is just right. Maybe the Torres boys would be interested. Ask 'em, Charley."

Charley Wright nodded. "Hey, Pete, Sinko. We need a couple of men for a five-handed game. How about it?"

Pete Torres racked his cue. "Good," he said in his guttural voice. "Not enough action for me in pool. Come on, Sinko."

The Torres boys were breeds, squat, swarthy-faced. Pete had a twisted nose, broken in a barroom brawl and never properly set. Sinko was pock-marked. They took seats on either side of Charley Wright, which put Sinko at Wheelock's right hand and Pete directly across from him. Old Bob Seymour, who owned the Cottonwood Hotel, was on Wheelock's left.

"Want to open the game up a little?" asked Wheelock casually. "How about a dollar limit? Little more action for our money."

The rest agreed. "Gimme twenty bucks' worth of chips," growled Pete Torres.

"Same here," grunted Sinko.

Wheelock stacked the chips and slid them over. He glanced at the two twenty-dollar bills they laid down. Cold, electric excitement mounted in him. No mistaking those bills. This was going to be the biggest hand he ever had to play.

When his deal came, his deft fingers were a blur of movement. Charley Wright won the pot, after a brisk skirmish with both Pete and Sinko, which left the two brothers with less than half their chips. On his next deal, Bob Seymour won, topping Pete Torres after another session of stiff betting. Pete Torres cursed and produced another twenty-dollar greenback.

Wheelock slid a fresh stack of chips across, noting the number of the bill. It told the same story.

On Sinko's own deal, it happened that he was cleaned of chips and he bought again, with another of those fateful bills.

Wheelock was certain now. All that was necessary was the showdown. He wondered if the two of them would go through with the play. He hoped they would. A cold-blooded thing, this that lay before him. But when it was finished, neither of the Torres boys must be able to talk about it. If they did, it was inevitable that the name of Chet Carson would be brought into the light. There was only one answer.

Tex Wheelock knew why he was doing this. It was for Darlie Carson. It would move her further away from him than ever, for of course she would never know enough about it to understand. But that didn't matter. The main thing would be that her bright, shining happiness would be unspoiled. And he, Tex Wheelock, would have preserved it for her.

By sheer will power he drove a cold, alert purpose into his brain and nerve centers. With his left hand he spread those four damning twenty-dollar bills on the table, while his right hand slid under the lapel of his coat. His voice rang like a whiplash.

"Pete, Sinko—where did you get these greenbacks?"

For a moment, dead silence held the table. Then Pete Torres shoved his chair back. Wheelock heard the startled hiss of Sinko's indrawn breath.

"What do you mean?" snarled Pete Torres. "What's the matter with those bills?"

"The numbers. They're part of the loot taken in that Wells Fargo holdup on the Arapahoe City stage!"

THE renegade brothers hit their feet like startled cats. And Wheelock came up with them. As he did so, he grabbed the edge of the table and upended it against Pete Torres. He whirled toward Sinko, smashing out and down with his left hand, driving the gun Sinko had whipped out, a little to one side. That gun bellowed and Wheelock felt the burn of the lead as it barely scorched his left thigh. His own gun was out now, and he shot Sinko through the body, heart high and from side to side. The breed fell across Charley Wright.

Pete Torres came up from the tangle of chair and table, snarling like a cornered wolf, his gun high and ready to chop. Wheelock shot him twice, once in the center of the body, again, as he was falling, through the head.

The saloon was a bedlam. Wheelock did one more thing under the cover of the wild confusion. He slid a fat handful of currency from his inner coat pocket and dropped it beside the body of Sinko Torres. Then he watched the room alertly, gun still drawn.

It was Stew Beam who read the temper of the crowd correctly and went for Sheriff Bush Bradley as fast as his fat legs would travel. And men were circling back and forth in front of Tex Wheelock, uttering threats and curses when Bradley came racing in. The crowd quieted before the authority of the sheriff. He looked grimly at Wheelock.

"Well?" he growled. "At it again, eh? There's a limit to this sort of thing, Tex—even for you."

Wheelock shrugged. "There are your Wells Fargo holdups, Bush," he said quietly.

"What?" Bradley exploded. He dove for Pete Torres, began going through the dead renegade's pockets. He grunted with satisfaction as he brought out a heavy wad of currency, glancing quickly at the serial numbers. "I'll be damned!" he sputtered. "You're right, Tex."

"I asked them where they got that kind of money," said Wheelock. "They answered by going for their guns."

"That's just what they did, by gollies," blurted old Bob Reynolds.

Half an hour later, in the back room of the Belle Union, Bush Bradley stared at the pile of currency on the table. "It's all there, the whole fifteen thousand, lacking a hundred or so. There was supposed to be

three men in that holdup, but it seems there could have been only two."

"Maybe," suggested Wheelock, "the Torres boys got rid of the third man so they'd have all the loot. Probably we'll never know, Bush."

"Probably. Anyhow, we got the money. Well, I always knew those Torres boys were no damned good. There's a reward that will go to you, Tex."

"No. Don't want it. Give it to charity."

Bradley shook a wondering head. "You're a strange hombre, Tex. Sometimes I think I know you and other times I ain't so sure."

Wheelock smiled thinly. "Never trust a tinhorn, Bush."

AGAIN it was after midnight when Tex Wheelock let himself into his cabin and barred the door. The blankets were still over the windows. The pale-yellow light of the lamp showed Chet Carson still on the bunk.

Wheelock took out the gag, began loosening Carson's bonds. "Pete and Sinko Torres are dead," he said succinctly. "Neither had a chance to talk. The money from that holdup is in Bush Bradley's hands. Only two living people know about yore part in the affair, you and me. I'll never tell, unless you force me to. You know the price of my silence. How about it?"

Chet Carson sat on the edge of the bunk, rubbing his wrists and staring at the gambler. "I've never given you cause to do me a favor," he said wonderingly. "So—why?"

"I don't think you'd understand," Wheelock said coldly. "You're going to behave yourself?"

Chet Carson nodded. "That lesson took—plenty. I've never rated a hell of a lot before. But I'll do my best to show the old man—and sis that I've turned over a new leaf." He stood up. "Can I go, now?"

"Not a thing holding you."

Carson stood by the door a moment, staring at the floor. Then his head came up and it seemed there was a new strength in the way his eyes met the hard impact of Wheelock's gaze. "I've called you a tinhorn—and worse," he said steadily. "I'm taking it all back. You made a bet on me. I'll see that you don't lose."

He was gone then and Tex Wheelock stood for a long time. He was thinking of roaring guns and dead men on the floor. Probably he'd have to move on. Probably it would be better if he did.

He walked to the door, looked out and up at the stars. They, too, had a shining brilliance, but were beyond any reach of his. Yet, looking at them made him feel better. Fate had had a way of casting the rôle a man was meant to play.

THE END.

Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

WE have had a lot of fun preparing these departments for you the last eight or nine months. Now we ask you for a bit of help. What would you like to read about in this department? You boys are the ones who will control the policy. Pardon me, folks. I should include the ladies. We have had a number of interesting letters from ladies who follow this department regularly.

That's one thing about this shooting game—it isn't a strictly male proposition. I go to many of the major matches and I watch the girls step in to give the boys a run for their money. They ask no handicap and need none.

We have a few general topics, of course—old guns, new guns, target shooting, hunting, fancy shooting, trick shooting, rifle shooting, shotgun shooting, handgun shooting, muzzle-loading, modern guns. Brothers, it's up to you. This is not a department belonging to the writer, it's all yours. If you don't get what you want, it's merely because you didn't ask for it. So let's have your letters.

Most of the boys like to smash things up. There is a great deal of satisfaction in shooting at breakable targets and in this you have a wide variety from which to choose. Among the most inexpensive are mothballs. You can have a lot of fun with them. Buy yourself a big bag and line up a row of them on the edge of a board with a suitable backstop, spaced at least six inches apart. Then try your .22 on them. If you hit them, there is never any argument about it.

Another way to get a lot of fun out of the same thing is to string mothballs overhead on six-foot strings. If you will lay your string across the mothballs, you'll find you can readily attach it by melting the surface slightly with a match. Let the mothballs swing around in circles and try to hit them. Always remember to have a safe backstop.

Readers of this department are invited to suggest topics for future articles. Mr. Sharpe will also be glad to answer any inquiries. A personal reply will be sent to you if you will inclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope with your letter.

Interesting targets include ordinary candy wafers. They can readily be attached to any wood surface with a bit of glue.

Another target available at this season of the year is Christmas tree ornaments. Many professionals keep a stock of these on hand, buying them after Christmas when dealers are always glad to clear their stocks. They require altogether too much warehouse space to hold until next year and are extremely fragile so that annual breakage is heavy. You can practically buy them at your own price. I know one professional who for three dollars bought enough in their original containers to entirely fill his auto. He does this each year.

If you have a small power saw in your home workshop, excellent wafer-thin targets can be made out of discarded broom handles. And so on. Use your own ideas in this respect.

A new game we have been shooting the last six months is decidedly interesting—a bustible target game. This is known as Mo-Skeet-O. Essentially, the game is a little miniature trap with miniature composition targets similar to the standard skeet and trap targets.

The little trap throws them into the air and you shoot at them, not with expensive 12, 16 and 20-gauge shotguns, but with a specially bored .22 rifle handling a new long rifle shot cartridge. Ammunition will cost you about thirty-five cents for a box of fifty and I have been able to break these flying targets at a distance of sixty feet, from all sorts of angles. You will always find plenty of volunteers to load the trap and throw them at your command.

If you have to shoot alone, you could tie a rope to the trap lever and the other end around one ankle. Load the trap and then step back slightly to release the bird.

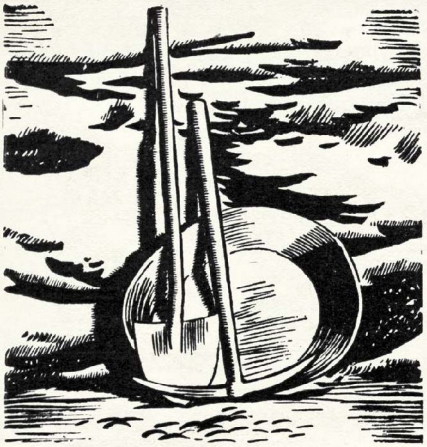
This shot cartridge is a safe one to use as it is harmless to individuals, animals, and even glass windows at a range of one hundred and fifty feet. Better double that range, though, for safety's sake.

And that reminds me of a new development which should be in my hands even before this article makes its appearance. High Standard is bringing out a special automatic pistol, smooth-bore, which will handle this same .22 shot cartridge. I hope to try a bit of wing shooting on the same target with it and am looking forward to this added sport with keen anticipation. High Standard tells me that this shot cartridge in this pistol will kill rats at twenty-five feet.

Indoors or out, you can have a great deal of sport shooting at bustible targets—and if you use .22's, the cost is extremely low.

If you are interested in making a cartridge collection and would like to hear from other collectors, write to this department, inclosing a three-cent stamp for a list of names which will be sent to you as soon as it is compiled. In this way you may be able to trade some of your duplicates with others for something you really need for your collection.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

THE small-scale placer prospector out to make beans and bacon gets a real break at Octave, Arizona. A man can work there virtually the year round.

Octave, mostly a tent down on a gravelly mesa at the southern base of the Weaver Mountains in Yavapai county, is just eleven miles by graded dirt road from the main Phoenix to Prescott highway. Supplies can be obtained at Congress Junction, where the turn-off leads to Octave, or about ten miles farther south at the larger, busy little city of Wickenburg. Moreover, Octave is only seventy-five miles from Phoenix which is the capital of the State.

All of which makes an ideal set-up for the small-scale operator. There is placer-gold, much of it pretty coarse stuff, in the Octave sector. Like the majority of Arizona's desert gold regions, the placers there are mainly a dry-washing proposition. But the Octave soil is sandy. There is little or no clayey, tight-packed stuff to gum dry washers and bedevil the dry-washer operator.

E. G. K., of Lowell, Massachusetts, has asked about a placer field in Arizona, "where," as he said in his recent letter, "a man can stay put all year and have a chance to get his beans and bacon out of the ground." Then he adds, "At the same time, if such a thing is possible, I would like an area easy of access and not too far away from towns and centers of civilization."

Octave should fill the bill for E. G. K. and other readers with similar aims in view. A short while ago we spent some time there visiting a friend who is one of the real old pioneers in that country and who owns and works claims there himself. He is one of the few remaining former members of the famous early-day Arizona rangers, and as fine a man as you could meet anywhere.

His own claims are along Weaver Creek, and take in the ground once occupied by the famous old bonanza million-dollar gold camp of Weaver, which flourished like the green bay tree up until about 1896. Now all that remains are the crumbling ruins of the old stone houses. He lives in the historic old 'dobe originally built by Captain Pauline Weaver, one of the discoverers in the early '60s of the tremendously rich gold-at-the-grass-roots placers on Rich Hill, adjacent to Weaver Creek.

Hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of nuggets were literally picked off the surface of Rich Hill, when the bonanza deposit was first encountered. Our friend showed us a little bottle full of coarse gold and nuggets that he himself had won from his claims in the region.

He also showed us his homemade power-operated dry washer with which he gets his gold whenever he needs it from his "bank," as he calls, and apparently rightly, the yellow-metal-bearing gravels on his claims. Speaking of dry washers, this expert in their construction and use said: "We of the Arizona deserts are wholly dependent on the dry washer for eight months of the year, and sometimes longer. We use various types, but the Yaqui washer is the most satisfactory and recovers the greatest amount of gold from the sand and gravel. It is easily made and costs comparatively little. The average size dry washer has a hopper that holds about four sifted pails of sand, and weighing only between thirty and forty pounds is light enough to carry from place to place.

"Power machines are heavier and more bulky and are mostly used at fixed stations at placer banks. The one I constructed (and which we examined) will run from five to seven yards of dirt a day, depending on the dryness of the dirt. It will recover better than ninety-five percent of all gold, including fines.

"The entire cost, including motor, was thirty-five dollars, and twenty-five of that went for the motor. Hand machines can be built for four or five dollars.

"There is also a fan-type machine that can be used where there is only a little fine gold, but that type is more complicated and requires an expert to build it. Nor will it run the amount of dirt that a Yaqui-built machine can handle. Yaqui machines are so-called because the first ones were copied from plans of the machines used by the Yaqui Indians in Mexico for countless years."

We have already told E. G. K. where he can obtain an authoritative booklet that contains line drawings of a power-operated dry washer, and we will be glad to pass along the same information to any other readers who write in and ask for it. Just inclose a stamped, self-addressed return envelope with your request and we will give it prompt attention.

To L. Grimes, Chicago, Illinois: Nevada is definitely a mining State that produces turquoise. Some of the best-grade gem material is found and mined around the vicinity of Austin. Small properties are worked at Dry Creek and in the Grass Valley sector. Most of the product is shipped direct to Los Angeles and sold to gem dealers and jewelry manufacturers there.

To J. B., Columbia, South Carolina: A twenty-acre placer claim should cover evenly half of a quarter of a quarter section if located on surveyed land, and will measure six hundred and sixty by thirteen hundred and twenty feet.

● 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.

The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

Well, folks, if it's cheering up you need, we've picked just the gals to do it! The letter below is from a couple of bright happy-go-lucky girls who sound as though they have enough life and pep for all of us. They're talented, too, and we'll just bet that if you get that old pen to pushin', you'll have a couple of friends who'll make your dark days bright and your bright days dazzle. But here's their letter and you decide for yourself whether they don't sound like a couple of rootin', tootin' Southern belles just made to order to chase your blues.

Dear Miss Rivers:

How about letting two singing cowgirls through the corral gates so that we can join the Hollow Tree gang? We would both enjoy having friends and are looking for Pen Pals throughout the world. How about giving us a break, all you folks between the ages of twenty and twenty-eight? We're both happy-go-lucky cowgirls and play the guitar, accordion, banjo, mandolin and piano. We promise that our letters will be interesting and will exchange pictures with all who send us theirs. If there are any other entertainers who are interested in Western songs, we'd like to hear from them, too. So, come on, you lonely Pen Pals, and write to us so we can drive away your blues with a happy, cheerful Western song.—Linda Rodgers and Iris Mellor, L. B. No. 651, Short Creek, West Virginia

This sailor wants to hear from young folks—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Here is a sailor who would like to hear from some Pen Pals. I am twenty-two years old and have done some traveling in the past four years. I am interested in auto racing and as a hobby collect stamps. Practically all my correspondence is with my mother, so I would like to write to some young people. Come on, folks about my age, and drop me a line. I shall do my best to answer all letters.—D. R. Lowe, U. S. S. *Ontario*, Tutuila, American Samoa

A cowboy's life interests Bruno—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like you to publish this at your earliest convenience and hope it will be very soon, for I am eager to get a few Pen Pals. I am a young boy who likes the wide open spaces. I enjoy sports such as football, basketball and soccer, and like to hunt and trap. My hobby is collecting cowboy pictures and songs and I enjoy the movies. I would like especially to have a few real cowboys to write to as I am very interested in the cowboy's life, work, pastimes and lingo. I'll be waiting to hear from some of you wild cowboys from out West, so please don't disappoint me.—Bruno Giannini, Second Avenue, New Eagle, Pennsylvania

Jack aspires to play professional tennis—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Here comes a lonely twenty-year-old Canadian youth seeking some Pen Pals. I gave up life in the city for the wide open spaces in the country and am very fond of cattle and horses. I also enjoy such sports as hockey and rugby, and it is my ambition to some day play professional tennis. So come on, all gun-toting six-shooters, and blast some missives my way. Here's hoping I get lots of letters from nature-minded fellows and girls, and I promise my answers will be packed with interest.—Jack Tuck, R. R. No. 3, Wellandport, Ontario, Canada

Christian is talented—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I do truly want to exchange letters with boys and girls around my age, which is seventeen. I am a senior in high school, and am extremely fond of art and music. I studied last year at the Museum of Fine Arts, and would especially like to hear from someone who paints, too. However, I also swim, dance, fence a little, and am fond of dogs—I have three and would like more, if possible. At present my ambitions are centered on the stage, but I'm afraid they will never be realized. Will someone somewhere please write to me, as I have written about twenty letters which have gone unanswered. I'll answer very promptly—honest!—Christian MacBride, 34 Langley Road, Brighton, Massachusetts

Write cheery letters to this pal—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Please may a lonesome widow seventy years old join your friendly corner? I'm so lonesome—surely there must be other lonely men and women right here in Chicago who long for companionship. Loneliness is the worst sickness on earth, so all you lonesome folks, please write to this lonely lady and get acquainted.—Rose Kelting, 8411 S. Racine Avenue, Chicago, Illinois

Ruby is lonely—

Dear Miss Rivers:

May I edge my way into the Hollow Tree? I am eighteen years old and love to write letters. I collect rocks, match-box tops from various States, and post cards. I am interested in all sports and like music. I am lonely and want to hear from everyone regardless of age. I will answer all letters and exchange snapshots with everyone. Come on and fill my mailbox.—Ruby Jackson, Little River, Texas

Joe has visited some interesting places—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been an ardent reader of Western Story for some years and always read the interesting letters printed for the benefit of Pen Pals. I am a young sailor twenty years old and have been in the navy for three years now. I have been lucky enough to travel to such places as Hawaii, the West Indies and Alaska, and think it would be interesting for anyone who has not visited those far places to hear about them. So come on and send me lots of answers to this plea. I would prefer folks between seventeen and twenty-two. I would also like to exchange snapshots.—Joe Cossey, U. S. S. *Whitney*, San Diego, California

Mrs. Baker is back for a second visit—

Dear Miss Rivers:

About seven years ago I wrote to you and lots of Pen Pals came to my rescue and helped me over a really tough spot. I became so busy that I had to drop most of my correspondence, but now I'm home again and just aching to write loads of letters. I am thirty-five years old and, one and all, you're welcome to write. I'll sure try to answer all letters.—Mrs. Helen Baker, 1611 G Avenue, New Castle, Indiana

Raymond is an outdoor man—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am an outdoor man twenty-eight years old from Wyoming and want to become a member of your department. I want to correspond with lots of Pen Pals, but especially those who are interested in the hill country of Wyoming, truck gardening and flower raising. Fill the T-X mailbox with letters. Everyone will receive an answer.—Raymond Norberg, T-X Ranch, Evanston, Wyoming

Write to this CCC boy—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a CCC boy twenty years old and I would like to hear from Pen Pals from all over the world. I am a member of the CCC and have lots of time to write letters. I come from Chicago, but at present time am here at Three Creek. Here's hoping I get lots of letters.—Edmund Farrell, CCC Company 3696—DG 110, Three Creek, Idaho

And here's a junior member from New York—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young girl fourteen years old and I would like to hear from other girls living all over the world. I live on a farm and go to a one-room schoolhouse. My favorite pastimes are swimming, fishing and skating. I promise to answer all letters.—Shirley Lewis, c/o G. A. Saur, R. F. D. No. 2, Valley Falls, New York

Bob and his pal want to raise horses—

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are two lonesome ranch hands who would like some Pen Pals. Morris is nineteen, and I am eighteen. We enjoy hunting, riding, fishing, and our ambition is to build up our horse herd and raise an A Number 1 bunch of horses. We will exchange snapshots and answer all letters. —Morris McCarty and Bob McFarland, Zero, Montana

Mary is interested in the West—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Here's hoping you can find space to print this letter in an early issue of Western Story. I am a young girl of sixteen and would like to correspond with Pen Pals between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one. I would like to hear from boys and girls way out West, as I am interested in cowboys and anything that pertains to them. My favorite pastimes are reading, writing, swimming, dancing and singing cowboy songs, so come on, boys and girls, and write to me. I'll answer all letters.—Mary Lazor, R. F. D. No. 1, Box 326, Macungie, Pennsylvania

Richard will send a souvenir—

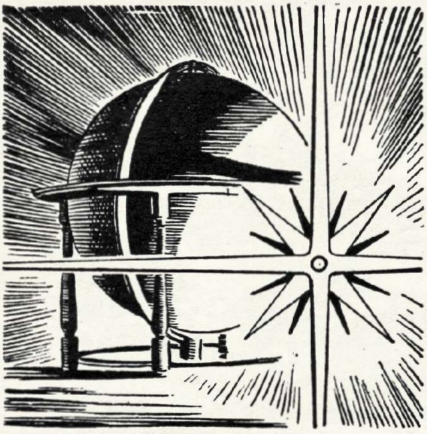
Dear Miss Rivers:

I'm writing you in the hope that I can get some prompt action. I am in need of friends, though I have plenty of them here at the post. I want them from all over, north, south, east and west. I am twenty-two years old, and my hobbies are writing letters, collecting snapshots and making riding crops. My favorite sports are horseback riding, boxing, baseball and swimming. I was reared in Texas and can spin some yarns about ranch life. I am now a soldier and can tell you all about the Panama Canal. To the first fifteen who write, I promise a souvenir, and to the rest a picture in exchange for one of theirs. Get your pens going and let your letters drift my way.—Private Richard Kamper, 1st C. A. C., Battery G. Fort Sherman, Canal Zone

This pal wants long letters—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I live a quiet, lonely life, but I enjoy writing and receiving letters, and wondered if some of those who gather at the Hollow Tree would drop me a line to cheer me up. I am middle-aged and will write to anyone who writes me long letters. I do not mind if they are young or old. I collect stamps and handkerchiefs, and love writing, reading, gardening and doing fancywork. My husband is a builder and is away a good deal, which leaves me with lots of time on my hands. Brooweena is just a small sawmill settlement, so there are few entertainments and most of the folks here lead a very quiet life. Here's hoping I get a train load of letters from members of the Hollow Tree.—Mrs. Lawra Brown, Brooweena, Gayndah Line, Queensland, Australia



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

J. G. H., of Kansas City, is planning an automobile trip out to the coast. He says: "En route, I will have occasion to stop over in Salt Lake City on business. Since I have heard so much about the attractiveness of this section, I want to spend the time enjoying a dish of it. Therefore, would you be kind enough to tell me a little about this section so I will know what to look for?"

You are headed for a very attractive recreation spot, J. G., when you set out for the neighborhood of Salt Lake City, or in fact almost any part of Utah. Nature has given that section an almost exclusive endowment of natural resources for pleasure-bound people. In fact, one thing you can get there which you can get nowhere else in the world is the swimming in the Great Salt Lake itself. That alone is a unique experience.

Saltair Beach, which is a world famous resort, is built on a pier one mile out in the lake. The water of the lake is about twenty-two percent salt and, on account of its density, will buoy the swimmer up better than ocean water. It is impossible to sink even if you can't swim, since if you get tired all you have to do is to turn over on your back and float, as though you were lying on a soft mattress.

Another interesting spot is Lagoon Resort, located halfway between Salt Lake City and Ogden on U. S. Highway Nos. 91 and 112. Here there is dancing, boating and swimming, either in the lake or the big filtered fresh-water natatorium, which is one of the largest in the West. You might try the water toboggans if you want a real thrill.

The Wasatch Springs, large pools of warm mineral water piped from nearby hot springs, is another example of Salt Lake City's great list of municipal provisions for the health and recreation of residents and visitors.

In the city there are seventeen parks, exclusive of privately operated resorts. Liberty Park is the largest of these, being nearly a hundred and ten acres in extent. The Hogle Zoo, near the entrance of Emigration Canyon, is well worth a visit.

The fisherman will find it hard to

Spring won't be long a-coming, and the call of the highway will soon be heard. Those who are thinking of taking to the open road, either afoot, by canoe or by car, will want a copy of John North's leaflet, "How to Prepare for a Camping Trip." It is free for the asking, if you'll just send a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

believe his ears when he hears of what is offered around Salt Lake City. There are miles and miles of stream shores within easy motoring distance of the city, and many small lakes as well.

Fish Lake, only six miles from the city, is a beautiful mountain pool about seven miles long by about a mile wide. It is unusually deep, and the water is sky blue and almost as cold as ice. And that, my friends, is where the fighting trout abound! Mackinaw trout weighing twenty-five and thirty pounds have been taken out of this icy pool!

Not far from Salt Lake City are some of the finest duck hunting grounds in the United States. These are the famous Bear River Marshes, at the northeastern end of the Great Salt Lake. Deer hunting, too, is usually very good in some of the lesser populated sections.

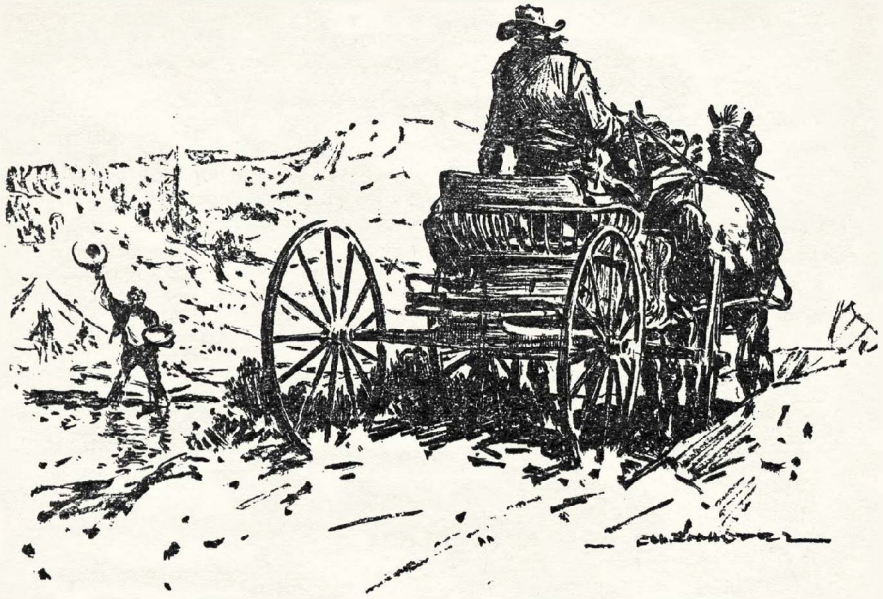
The mountain sports in this section of the country are naturally unsurpassed, what with the mighty backyard of the city full of mountains. If one wants his mountain climbing done by sitting in the soft leather cushion of his car, all he has to do is to take a ride over the Alpine Scenic Highway, a loop trip around Mount Timpanogos. And if he prefers to get out and walk, or, rather, to climb, he can take the jaunt to the "top of the world" a mountain-climbing expedition over America's southernmost glacier and on up to the craggy crest of the Timpanogos, twelve thousand feet above the sea, whence he can see hundreds of miles over a regular bumpy ocean of mountains.

In the northern slope of Mount Timpanogos is the weirdly beautiful Timpanogos Cave. This subterranean grotto is reached by a zig-zag foot trail from the American Fork Canyon Highway. It is lighted by electricity inside and a glimpse of it presents a succession of fairyland pictures which never fail to excite the admiration of the visitor. It is one of those pictures which is so pretty that it can't be true—but is.

And by all means, the visitor should not fail to drop into the quaint, historical Old Mill Club in the mouth of Big Cottonwood Canyon. This club is built on the site of the first paper mill in the West, the spot where, in 1861, Brigham Young started manufacturing paper, continuing the plant until 1893. At that time a fire destroyed everything except the massive granite walls, which now form the nucleus of this interesting and picturesque club.

The old mill was run by water power, and consequently was built over a mountain stream. So, the club still has a stream of water running through the building itself, still turning the old water wheel, while the visitors sit around it and eat brook trout, or dance around on the new floor of that part of the building which was never reroofed.

And, with all its scenic and sporting possibilities, I am sure that no one who visits Salt Lake City will ever forget any part of that exciting and enjoyable trip.



NUGGET BAIT

BY CLIFF WALTERS

"I TOLD Neil I'd give him a year to get back here, and I'll keep my bargain. But if he ain't back here by then, if he's goin' to chase around forever huntin' a damned mythical gold mine that his worthless dad was s'posed to have discovered—and lost—I'll lease the Bar W outfit to you, Ed, and you can run it yourself."

That was what old Ben Robertson had told Ed Fleming. But old Ben's eyes had looked off toward the mountains to the north as if he were praying that young Neil Blair, his nephew, would forsake his gold seeking.

Now fifty-one weeks of that year had dragged by. And Ed Fleming, who bought and sold livestock in and around the little town of Arminto, smiled narrowly as he looked at the calendar in the office of his own uncle, the temporarily absent sheriff of Hereford County.

It had become a fascinating game, this calendar watching. It was like watching a race horse, upon which you had pinned your hopes, draw nearer and nearer to the finish line. A finish line which promised a reward of big profits to be reaped from a five-year lease on the Bar W outfit. The manner in which Ed Fleming would handle such a lease would guarantee that reward.

Fleming's gray eyes shifted at last to the open doorway of the little office. Idly those enigmatic gray eyes followed the course of a rider and

pack horse moving through the dusk on the flat below town. Finally the rider was coming down Main Street. And Ed Fleming cursed viciously under his breath, for he knew that the rider jogging up to the livery barn was—Neil Blair!

A minute later Fleming had recovered his smile. He walked over to the livery barn and with firm handclasp greeted the tall, brown-haired, brown-eyed lad who had left Banjo Basin nearly a year ago.

"Have you seen Uncle Ben lately, Ed?" That was the first thing Neil Blair asked. "How is he?"

"Oh, fair," Fleming said casually. "You look tired, Neil."

"A habit I fall into when I ride day and night. But I've got to get to Banjo Basin. I promised Uncle Ben that I'd—"

"You better rest them horses of yours," Fleming interrupted. "And get some rest yourself, too. If a cold beer would help any, come on and I'll set 'em up."

"Thanks. I'll take you up on that."

In the Stockmen's Bar they found their beer and also a loud-mouthed, abusive freighter who had lingered in the badland oasis to get drunk. Sighting the deputy's badge on Fleming, the freighter decided to leave the saloon. But he did a rather ineffectual job of walking, so Neil Blair piloted him out into the fresh air and put him to bed in his wagon which stood in front of the livery stable.

When Neil returned to the bar, Fleming said, "Well, now that you've done your good deed for the day, let's finish our drink."

"After which," said young Blair, "I'm taking on some supper and shut-eye."

AT dawn the next morning the freighter pounded on the door of the sheriff's office. When Fleming responded to the summons, the man growled, "You remember the tall feller that helped me outa the saloon last night? Well, him and his horses are gone. Yeah, and so is my sixty-dollar watch! They say he left town about an hour ago."

Fleming's gray eyes were suddenly hard in the dawn light. He said, "You want to swear out a warrant that'll put me on his trail?

"Damned right, if you know which way he—"

"I've got a hunch."

Fleming got into his clothes, went over to the Busy Bee Café and drank some black coffee. Then, with the hint of a smile on his thin lips, and with confidence in the big bay team which had whisked him over to the Banjo Basin country so much of late, he sped up the road leading to the Chain Mountains. He knew that he could overtake Neil Blair's tired horses before they reached the summit.

Nine miles from town the bay team trotted briskly around a sharp mountain curve, dipped down to the pole bridge spanning Clear Creek and stopped. Old Mac McConnell, a prospector who stood on the sandbar above the bridge, was gesticulating wildly.

"What's up, Mac?" shouted Fleming.

"A strike!" yelled the old man excitedly. "You've got to take me to town, Ed!

Leaving his buckboard in the road, Fleming skirted the thicket of brush between sandbar and bridge. Soon he met the old prospector who, a pan clutched in trembling hands, came running to meet him. In that pan were coarse grains of gold and several small nuggets. The shining

metal kindled a strange gleam in Fleming's eyes.

"All that from two shovelsful of sand, Ed!" old Mac shouted. "You've got to haul me to town so's I can file location. You've just got to!"

"Sorry," Fleming answered coldly. "I'm chasin' a man. The law comes first, you know. How long has it been since you saw a young buck ridin' an old sorrel horse— Maybe you know him—Neil Blair."

"To hell with sorrel horses! Get me back to town!"

"Sorry." It was difficult for Fleming to take his eyes off the yellow metal in the prospector's pan. But he did finally and hurried back to the road.

A minute later the bay team swung about sharply and, with a whip cracking over them, dashed away—back toward town! Eyes glued on the road, Ed Fleming could see only the shine of gold nuggets in early morning sunlight—that much in two shovelsful of sand. There must be a fortune lying back there. And within a stone's throw of the road. Nobody was going to beat him to filing on that ground!

AFTER the buckboard driven by Fleming was out of sight, old Mac McConnell sat down on a boulder and started stuffing tobacco into his pipe. Pretty soon Neil Blair emerged smiling from the clump of pines above the bridge.

"Looks like Ed Fleming's goin' to file on a placer claim," he grinned. "Sure was lucky I found you camped here, Mac."

"Maybe it wouldn't been so lucky —if you hadn't stopped to repack your horse and found a gold watch planted in your bedroll. If Fleming had ketched you, tossed you in the Arminto jail, your Uncle Ben wouldn't have knowed where you was. Or if you was ever comin' back to Banjo Basin. Why, the old boy

might've leased the Bar W to that Fleming—and got robbed blind."

"Robbed blind is right," Blair agreed.

"You shouldn't have used up so much of that year your uncle give you," old Mac went on.

"How did I know I was goin' to get snow bound 'fore I could get outa them mountains to the north last fall?" Blair countered. "But now I'm glad I did. Otherwise I'd never have found dad's claim that Uncle Ben always thought was a myth. Wait'll I show Uncle Ben the stuff—"

"You'd better take back this nugget bait that ketched Fleming, lad."

"Keep that little dab of stuff," Neil told him. "I've got lots of it, Mac. And I'd give some more of it to watch Ed Fleming's face when he finds that gold watch I planted in his buckboard when he was talkin' to you. Well, I'd better be travelin', Mac. See you later."

"So long, lad. I'll be over to the Bar W one of these times if my old jackasses have got that many miles left in 'em." Old Mac chuckled softly as he indicated a pair of burros grazing down there by the stream. "I'd rechristen them two 'Ed' and 'Fleming,' if it wasn't an injustice to 'em. But even they'd know that I didn't find that much pay in two shovelsful of sand."

THE END

Part Five

HARDROCK MEN

by SETH RANGER

The Story So Far:

As superintendent of the Old Glory, a gold mine extending under the Deception Straits in Alaska, Jess Reagan had built up an impressive reputation in the field of low-grade mining. After Reagan's death, Tim Bradford is appointed superintendent, but is soon replaced by Ray Turner, the son of Kirk Turner, president of the company.

Tim learns that Ray, in order to increase production, has been "robbing" the pillars of rock which support the roof of the mine in the Submarine Vein which extends under the Straits. Some of the miners take Tim down into the mine, without Ray's knowledge, and he discovers that salt water is seeping in.

Tim advises the building of a reinforcing bulkhead, but Ray refuses and dynamite blasting causes the flooding of the mine. Tim and another man are trapped in one of the stopes. They are kept alive with food sent down to them through a compressor valve, and, after several weeks, are rescued.

Tim gets to work on a plan to "beat the sea." After locating the fault, he puts into operation a mechanical refrigerating device which freezes the water and plugs the opening with ice. Then the mine is pumped out and the construction of a cement bulkhead begun.

Meanwhile, Ray Turner has returned to Alaska determined to wreck Tim's work. One night an attack is made on the barge from which the refrigeration plant is controlled.

CHAPTER XXII

HIS WEIGHT IN GOLD

TIM BRADFORD boarded the barge just in time to hear one of the attackers order a retreat. The connecting pipes to the ice plug were broken, the refrigeration machinery smashed and thawing would begin. But Tim didn't propose that the culprits get off that easy, and Ann Sloan had helped by smashing her boat into the attacking craft and shoving it clear of the barge. Sam Pelton, ever eager to protect his own skin, had leaped aboard Ann's boat and covered her with a gun. The boat, Tim noticed, was lost in the darkness, but there was nothing he could do about it just then.

"Someone stole your boat," he said to the boatman who had joined in the fight.

"Can't go far," the boatman answered. "Not enough gasoline."

Nordstrom had gathered a crew of rough-and-tumble fighters together. He had selected fishermen and miners who always took part in the annual battle royal and they thrived on brawling.

Lights on the barge glowed dully, but it was possible for each man to see whom he hit, and just who hit him. Tim shifted a man's nose off its base, stepped over the prone body and faced Ray Turner. The situation was to Tim's liking in many respects. He lashed out and Turner lashed back. The fight was on.

It was not a brief fight; the men were too evenly matched. No holds were barred, no referee counted time when a man went down, and both Turner and Tim went down repeatedly.

A dozen other fights were going on, and one by one the tough customers Ray Turner had imported for his dirty work took the count. Often the victor made sure the vanquished remained unconscious by dealing out a lusty kick in the face or stomach.

"Bay Yiminy!" Nordstrom yelled, "you ban sick, Tim. Let me finish Turner."

Tim had never felt better when he went into the fight, but he realized after ten minutes of battle the old reserve strength had not built up within his body. His blows lacked sting and he went down more and more frequently. He was like a battleship with light armor; he couldn't stand the impact.

Ray Turner sensed this and pressed the fight. His repeated rights

to the jaw began to tell. Tim went down, and got up slowly. His eyes were clear, but he pretended to be nearly out. He didn't look at Turner's eyes, but watched his feet, and by them judged when the next punch was coming. It was a left to the stomach, and Tim rode the blow. Then Turner's feet set for a killing right as Tim's guard went down. The blow whistled past Tim's rolling head. Momentarily the stronger Turner was off balance. Tim put everything he had into the punch. It was now or never. He felt the small bones in his hand buckle under the impact. Then Turner seemed to melt and run down into his shoes.

"What'll we do with 'em?" Nordstrom asked. "Dump 'em into the bay? They've attacked our property."

"Each is worth his weight in gold to us, things being as they are," Tim answered. "Tie 'em up, take 'em ashore and into the mine."

"Hell," a miner snorted, "there ain't a miner in the lot. Just a bunch of bums Turner found on the Skidroad."

"Yes, but they can mix concrete," Tim declared. "We've got a bulkhead to build down there. And it's got to be built and have time to set before our ice plug melts. And nobody knows offhand how long the melting will take, or when the pressure will blow it out."

One of the Turner men, a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound giant of a man, turned pale. "You can't do this to us," he whimpered. "We might be caught like rats. It's murder, that's what it is. You can't do it!"

"You brought it on yourselves," Tim reminded him grimly.

The man turned savagely on Ray Turner. "You didn't tell us anything like this would happen. You said our job was to beat up a barge crew and cut the anchor chains."

Tim Bradford grinned. "Sure!

That's what you did, and you earned your money, but something backfired and there isn't a damned thing you can do about it. Because if you don't come of your own accord, I'll throw you into the skookum house and bring piracy charges against you."

"You can take us into the mine," another admitted sullenly, "but a hell of a lot of work you'll get out of us."

"Wait'll you get down there and figure the faster you work the better chance you have of not being caught in a flooded mine," Tim retorted. "You'll work."

THE attacking boat had drifted into the darkness along with Ann's, but Daylight, never taking anything for granted, had lined up another boat and several miners. "Better go out there; they may need help," he told them.

The boat came alongside the barge and the miners clambered aboard. "Take a turn around out there," Tim ordered, "and see if you can find a loose boat."

In a few minutes the man was back again, towing the attackers' boat. It was a heavily built craft with a fine engine.

"Nordstrom," Tim directed, "you take charge. And don't let these boys even catch their breath until they're in the mine. We'll send down grub and blankets."

"Now, see here, Bradford," Ray Turner protested, "this has gone far enough."

"We won't argue that point," Tim answered. "I'll agree that it's gone too far, and you stand a fair chance of losing your lives, and we our mine. Maybe you can build up a good case against me, but right now you're going into the mine and stay there until the job's done."

Two trips cleared the barge and landed the men. Tim chartered a

small tug with powerful searchlights to search for Ann. He was tired and battered, but he joined the tug crew in watching the waters while the lights moved back and forth. "No use," he said at last, "we'll have to wait until daylight, then search the coves."

Tim was landed on the wharf and the first man he encountered was Dr. Small.

"I've never heard so much racket in my life," the physician said. "I saw prisoners going by—sentenced to the mines, no doubt."

Tim managed a grin on his battered face. The doctor's lighthearted acceptance of the situation and his pleasure at finding himself in the thick of a frontier fight were somewhat of a surprise.

"Tim, I realize you can't take me on any bear hunt," Small continued. "Suppose I take the *Kodiak* back. I've had a swell vacation, anyway."

"You're a sportsman, all right," Tim said. "But I promised you a bear hunt and you're going to get one. I can't take you out, but if you'll charter a small boat and go north to Salmon Creek you'll find a good spot for a base camp. I'll line up a couple of young fellows to do the packing and skinning."

"Oh, so there'll be skinning, too?" The doctor's eye brightened.

"Yes. Work along the ridges, watch the canyons and streams and you'll see your bear," Tim said. "But be careful. They're meaner'n sin this time of the year."

"But what about this licensed-guide business?"

Tim looked a little uncomfortable. "Say, I'd forgotten all about that." His tone didn't sound very convincing. "But if you heard of a miner in that region who had a cinder in his eye, and you went up there to relieve him of his suffering, and a bear attacked you and you shot in self-defense, well—I don't think the game wardens would expect you to leave his pelt there to rot. They're a pretty reasonable lot when they know all the facts of the case."

Dr. Small looked at him with a mixture of amusement and chagrin.

"Tim, you're a gentleman and a scholar," he said, "and you have the mental processes of a society crook. I thank you. I'll do a favor for you sometime."

"You've already done it," Tim answered.

CHAPTER XXIII

"I ALWAYS FOOL 'EM"

ANN SLOAN, being her father's daughter, instantly reacted to a frontier situation that would have caused the average girl to stop and think, and thus lose a chance to strike.

Knowing that the attackers had smashed the refrigeration machinery and cut the barge's anchor chains, the girl knew their first thought would be of escape. She had cut off their chance by depriving them of their boat, only to have Sam Pelton dive into her own craft.

Sam had landed across the motor with such an awkward plunge that the girl was sure he had injured himself. But he twisted around and covered her with a gun. She knew he meant business and obeyed his order to clear out. As the boat sped through the darkness Pelton said little. The lights of the mining camp faded in the distance and were lost as she followed a turn in the channel.

"Keep goin'!" her captor ordered when she slowed down.

"Where?" she asked.

"As far away as we can get," Sam answered. "Ray Turner sure got us into somethin' that time. Bradford's

licked, but he's liable to send a bunch of boys to the pen before he's through with 'em."

"What are you going to do with me?" Ann asked quietly.

"Haven't figgered that one out yet," Pelton answered. "But I don't aim to get caught. I always fool 'em, just when it looks as if the enemy was goin' to get somethin' on me."

"If I were to take up a career like yours, Pelton," the girl said ironically, "I'd depend more on the consideration people have for a fine woman like Tess Lee than I would on guns."

Sam chuckled. "I found that out long ago. I was always bein' let off because folks didn't want to do anything to hurt Tess Lee. Sister, I worked that one plenty."

"You must be proud of yourself," said Ann.

"Why shouldn't I be?" Sam had landed flat on his back on the bottom of the boat and he remained there. With the girl's outline against the sky, he could see what she was doing, whereas she couldn't see his movements. "Take you, now," he continued. "You'll think about Tess and you'll say, 'What's the use of identifying Sam as one of the men who raided the barge? Sam's gone, and it'll only hurt Tess.' And so, you'll go back and keep your mouth shut. When things die down, I'll pop up again. I always fool 'em!"

Ann Sloan had nothing to say to such callous reasoning. The boat forged on for a while, but near daybreak the motor suddenly died.

"Gasoline's exhausted," Ann said. "It looks as if you'll have to take the oars." She had been expecting this, and had kept close to shore.

"O. K.," Sam agreed, "I'll row—with a gun in my lap." He started to straighten up, but there was no muscular response. "Can't move!" he said. "I feel all right—no, I don't feel all right either. I feel funny, like I'm kind o' dead in the legs."

"What do you want me to do?"

He thought about this for several moments, then put down the gun. "You've got me. Maybe I won't fool 'em this time," he said heavily. "I musta hurt somethin' inside when I fell across that motor."

"We'd better go back to camp," said Ann. "There's a hospital there."

"No," he said flatly. "That won't do. I'll be connected with the fight and . . . you know Aunt Tess. She thinks I'm a hero ever since they took us out of the mine. I know of a cabin about a mile from here. It's on the beach. Can you row a mile against the tide?"

AFTER a half hour of rowing, Ann brought the boat within a hundred yards of the cabin. She went in, built a fire, dried out the place, then returned to the boat, dragging a board behind her. She put the board in the boat and got Pelton on it, then dragging it across the gunwale, swung it around so the lower end touched the ground. She dragged the awkward load into the cabin, and with the help of chairs and a little levering back and forth, got him into a bunk without bending or twisting him too much. She was confident Pelton's spine was injured and thought he might be suffering from internal injuries.

"Give me a drink of somethin' hot," Pelton said. "Then you'd better go back to camp and tell Tim what's happened to me. He might figger somethin' out. Better walk. You can't row against the tide. Too far."

Ann rowed a half mile and cached the boat. She didn't want possible searchers to find the craft near the cabin. The trail to camp was poor,

but she fought her way through the brush and went directly to the superintendent's office.

Tim was just getting ready to go below ground after a short sleep. His face was bruised, and one eye was closed.

"Ann!" he exclaimed. "I'm glad to see you!" He took her hands and noticed for the first time that her engagement ring was gone. "You're all right? It was Pelton, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Do you think anyone else saw him land in the boat?" she asked.

"Some of the fellows thought he'd been knocked from the barge and drowned. Maybe I'm the only one who knows the truth. Where is he?"

She related what had happened. "He's using Tess Lee, of course, to save his skin again. Now we'd better get a doctor down there."

"You go down and report you landed safely and walked home because the tide was too strong."

Tim chartered a boat and put Hogan aboard. Hogan was no fool, but he kept his mouth shut and never asked questions. Like most hard-rock men he didn't "run off at the mouth," even in his sociable moments.

Tim looked Hogan right in the eye. "We received a report that a man fell down a mountain and made his way to a cabin down the channel. See if there's anything in it. Better take a stretcher along."

"Sure," Hogan answered. "And mum's the word."

Tim went into the mine and hunted up Ray Turner. He wanted to have a talk with him before making a definite decision in Pelton's case.

The prisoners were hurrying sacks of cement toward the proposed bulkhead. They were exhausted, but the threat of another flood kept them moving.

Tim went up to Turner. "Pelton's hurt," he said. "He's one of your

men. Are you paying his hospital bill?"

Turner thought a moment. "No," he said flatly. "He ran out when the going got tough."

"Just wanted to find out your feelings," Tim observed. It had been his experience that even a man who runs out can be dangerous on occasion. He had a hunch Turner was making a major mistake, and he was quite pleased over it.

"Just a minute," Turner protested as Tim started away, "I'm probably in a jam because we got caught on your barge, but you're getting yourself into a sweet mess, holding Americans prisoners below ground. This isn't Siberia, you know."

"I know," Tim answered. "And when it's all over, I'll be right here in Mineral Mountain ready to face any music your particular band wants to play. One thing is certain: you and your partners in crime are not coming out of the mine until the bulkhead is finished."

"But I notice you're saving your precious skin," Turner taunted.

"Just while I'm looking after some loose ends," Tim assured him. "I'll be back soon."

TIM was at the hospital when Sam Pelton was brought in. He asked the injured man if there was anything he wanted to talk to him about.

Pelton was puzzled. "You might tell Ray Turner I want to see him."

"Ray doesn't have complete freedom of movement," Tim answered.

"Jail, eh?"

Tim shook his head. "He's working in the mine. I told him you'd been badly hurt and asked about his paying the doctor bills. You were hurt in his service and it seemed to me he should pay the freight. He holds you had left his service—in fact, were leaving it on the fly—and he owes you nothing."

He left Pelton to think that over and didn't return to the hospital for another twenty-four hours. Then it was to see the doctor, who had sent for him.

"Internal injuries," the doctor reported, "and a bad spinal injury. He can only last a few days at the outside. Then he'll go fast. I've broken the news to him, but he doesn't believe me. He said he'd fool me yet."

"He takes a sort of pride in fooling people," Tim explained. "And he's gotten away with it often enough to convince himself it pays."

"He won't get away with it this time," declared the doctor. "I've told Tess Lee. She's a good soldier, as usual."

Tim entered Pelton's room. "Want to see me about anything?" he asked.

"No," Pelton answered. "Not now, or ever."

Tim went back to the mine. He wondered when Pelton would crack. He knew, from his experience in the stope, that the man didn't have the nerve to continue his defiance.

He went down into the mine and helped some of his own men load the steel onto cars. Presently the train moved away under mule power. The steel was sent down on a skip to the lowest level, where Ray Turner and his companions labored under the watchful eyes of several hardrock men.

Raw Meat Riley came to talk things over with Tim. "Seems to me like the plug's beginnin' to leak," he said. "Ain't there more seepage water than usual?"

Tim tasted the water. It wasn't pure sea water, but it carried a heavy content of salt. Men exchanged glances, and the Turner crowd shifted uneasily on their feet.

Ray Turner started his usual protest, but Tim cut him off.

He knew he faced a real problem. The wooden forms that would hold the concrete while it was setting were almost in place. Several carpenters were working at top speed. But the instant concrete was poured seepage would commence to back up, and in time would fill the crosscut. The pressure would not be great until the sea broke through, but it would weaken the structure, perhaps stop the concrete from setting. Then the real pressure, when it came, might shatter the bulkhead.

"Keep them busy on the forms," Tim told Riley. "I'll be back."

He went to the surface, organized his men, and told them to locate every grain and sugar sack they could find in town. "Fill them with sand and bring 'em to the mine mouth. I'll want some of you to go below and load them onto cars. The boys down there have all they can handle right now. Only volunteers are wanted underground. I'm ordering no man down there."

Tim raided the storeroom, then sent for Daylight Lee. "I want some good, heavy pipes and valves," he explained. "Stuff that can stand better than three hundred and sixty pounds of pressure. Where can they be found?"

Daylight named several places and Tim sent men for the items. "Get 'em at any price," he ordered. "Speed is the main thing right now."

Ann Sloan dropped into the office just as Tim was getting ready to go below again. "Hello, stranger," she said. "Can I help?"

"Your bank roll has been all the help we could expect from you, and more," Tim answered. He looked at her sharply. "You've got something on your mind. Let's have it."

"You've worries enough," she said slowly, "but perhaps I had better tell you. We don't want an eleventh-

hour mistake. Kirk Turner is coming. He talked to a fishing-boat master by short wave and learned that Ray and his companions departed for this camp to engage in some adventure. They haven't been heard from and Mr. Turner is worried."

Tim grinned. "I hope all the fat will be out of the fire by the time he shows up," he said. "But if it isn't, he'll have to take his place in line."

"One more straw on the camel's back," Ann said ruefully. "He'll be around, ready to take advantage of any situation that develops. I've heard dad cuss that trait in the man again and again. I'll stick here in the office so I'll be on hand if you need me. And I hope you do. Sometimes I wish I were a man."

"I don't," Tim answered. "And when I can catch my breath I'll tell you why."

AT the mine mouth Tim found that a traffic jam had formed. Men staggered up with bags loaded with sand. Others bore loads of pipes, valves, pipe wrenches, dies and even a vise or two.

"Cut the pipe into forty-foot lengths," Tim ordered, "and put a valve on the end of each length. Wait, better make the lengths twenty feet, with couplings. They'll be easier to handle in the mine."

Water was coming in faster when Tim reached the scene of operations. Daylight Lee was on hand, oiling the pumps that were carrying the water away.

"It's pretty near a hundred percent salt now," he told Tim.

Rows of sandbags were placed from wall to wall at a point beyond the bulkhead forms, then pipes were laid, valves opened, and more sandbags piled on top of them. The pipes more than took care of the immediate flow, leaving the rock under the forms free of water.

Carpenters cut planks to fit around the pipes, then bolted them into place. By three o'clock in the morning, one side was completed. "You can start mixing concrete now," Tim ordered.

"Hadn't you better put in a new crew?" Daylight suggested. "I can tell by the way the men breathe and drag their feet that they're all in."

"Good idea," Tim agreed. "All you boys clear out. Old Glory men go home. Turner, you and your gang go to your quarters on the tram level, eat and get some sleep. I'm giving you four hours. No more."

"Damn you, Bradford," Turner snarled, "I'll—"

"Oh, shut up," Tim interrupted wearily.

Ten minutes after the tired crew quit, fresh men who had been waiting for a chance came down. "We'll go like hell," one of them said, "and when we blow up, there're plenty more to take our place. Every Old Glory man wants a chance at this, even the married ones."

"Men with families won't get down here," Tim answered. "You boys know what to do: build up this side of the bulkhead and pour, and keep at it."

Tim stayed until Raw Meat Riley returned, then he followed Daylight's advice and went up for a rest. Ann Sloan met him at the mine mouth.

"What're you doing up this time of the night?" Tim asked.

"Sam Pelton has taken a turn for the worse," the girl said. "He's scared, too."

"I've been expecting it," Tim answered. "But not so soon."

"He's been asking for you, but I felt the job came first," she explained. "It was a hard decision to make."

"I know," Tim said. "I'll go."

TESS LEE was in the corridor crying softly when Tim appeared at the hospital. He gave her shoulder a comforting squeeze. Then he entered the room and closed the door.

"Tell her to go out," Pelton said, looking at the nurse. She went out immediately.

"My number's up this time, sure," the dying man said. "I thought I'd fool 'em once more, but I can't. Queer, but I've always been yellow. Now, I'm still runnin' true to form. I'm so yellow I want to try and fix things up. Figger to square myself for the judgment to come."

"I'm here, and I'll help if I can," Tim said. "Sure you're strong enough to talk?"

Pelton nodded. "Doc explained I'd go quick. He ain't foolin'. Tim, you knew I dropped that rock on Jess Reagan, didn't you?" Tim nodded. "I was sure you knew it, but when you didn't make a move I figgered maybe you didn't, or else couldn't prove it."

"I couldn't prove it," Tim said.

"I backed the wrong horses," Pelton said regretfully. "Reagan fired me and I was sore. I had it comin', but I went haywire. Now, I'm knifin' the Turners because they let me down at a time like this. I'm a heel, ain't I?"

"Up to a few minutes ago, yes," Tim admitted.

"Tim," Pelton said earnestly, "Kirk Turner's sick of this whole business. He hates you for bootin' Ray around, and he hates Ray for bein' booted. Every time they have a go with this bunch, they get licked. He'll sell out."

"He doesn't own any stock to speak of," Tim said.

"He's got the Manning Group. He paid three hundred thousand for the bunch of claims," Pelton said.

"You can buy 'em for a hundred grand if he's sure he can't get more. He'll figger if you don't take 'em at any price, it'll be one more lickin'."

"Thanks, Pelton," Tim said. "Now, maybe you'd better rest a few minutes. I'll stick around."

"I'm all right," Pelton insisted. "When I go, it'll be—pop, like turnin' off a light. Aunt Tess has been around me a lot, fussin' over me the way she's always done. She told me about this Doc Small who come up bear huntin' and what he said about Daylight's eyes."

"She did?"

"Yeah. Tim, bend down close, I want to tell you somethin'." Tim bent down and Sam talked rapidly. "That's on the level, Tim. I ain't kiddin'."

"No, I don't believe you're kidding, Pelton," Tim said.

"Will you do it, Tim?"

"Yes," Tim answered. "Right away." He was still amazed at the man's request.

Pelton's eyes searched Tim's face and he smiled weakly. "Fooled you again, didn't I? I always fool 'em."

"I guess you're consistent," Tim said. "I'll hurry along now."

CHAPTER XXIV

IRON AND CONCRETE

TIM found Tess Lee still waiting in the corridor. "You can be proud of that nephew of yours, Aunt Tess," he said. "I'm going to send a man for Dr. Small. You understand, don't you?"

"Yes." She caught her breath sharply. "That's wonderful; but I must remember that the operation mightn't be a success. Have you told Daylight anything about Dr. Small and what he can do?"

"Not a word," Tim answered. "Do you want me to explain everything, or will you talk to him."

"I'd better do it," she said.

"O. K.," Tim answered. He searched about the saloons and pool halls until he found the man he wanted, a thin fellow who smelled of dried salmon and tanned fur and knew the northern country like a book. Tim sent him to find Dr. Small. Then he returned to the mine.

He heard Daylight coming along through the darkness and stopped him. "Knock off work, Daylight, and go see your wife. She's at the hospital."

"Sam's nearin' the end, eh? If you told the truth—and I know you ain't above lyin'—Sam turned out to be a man Tess has a right to be proud of. Him measurin' up big in the stope that time. Funny he'd be hurt fallin' down a mountain. I always figgered he'd be killed when he was up to some dirty work," Daylight mused.

"He turned out to be quite a man," Tim said, "and I really mean that, Daylight."

They separated, Tim to continue on to the scene of the fight with the sea, Daylight to hear news that would startle him, then stir a flame he had kept quenched all these years, the flame of a deep hope.

Nordstrom was gripping a length of drill steel when Tim got down to the bulkhead. "Goin' to be trouble, Tim," he said. "Them bruisers are scared stiff, and are ready to fight their way out."

"What's up now?" Tim asked.

"Look at the water comin' out of them pipes," Nordstrom said. "Bay Yiminy, there's plenty of pressure behind it." Water was spurting from every pipe Tim had ordered run through the bulkhead. It looked serious.

All that stood between the crew of workers and the deluge was the wooden form blocking off the Submarine Vein area. It would vanish like so much tissue paper if the sea really spilled through the fault again. Then came the tangle of reinforcing iron, and not a few lengths of discarded drills thrown in for good measure. Some of them were twenty feet long.

The second side of the form was slowly rising and men were pouring concrete into the finished part. The concrete would offer no protection until it extended from floor to roof and had been given time to set.

"We're gettin' out of here," Ray Turner bellowed. And this time it wasn't a protest. It was a declaration of war.

"We're stayin' down here," Raw Meat Riley shouted back. "And, by hell, you're stayin' with us, Turner. You got us into this jam!"

Hardrock men dropped their tools and picked up steel and began using it effectively. A two-foot length was most effective, for it could be swung without its striking a wall. Lashed by the dread of the deluge, the rebels put everything they had into the fight.

"Don't hit 'em too hard," Tim warned his men. "We don't want to put 'em out of commission. Need 'em for work."

Someone hurled a six-foot drill, much as an Eskimo would hurl a harpoon. It struck Ray Turner in the midriff and nearly drove the buckle of his belt into his stomach. He dropped in his tracks. The others sullenly fell back. Raw Meat Riley tossed a bucket of icy salt water over Turner, revived him and made him go back to work.

Men worked at fever heat for the next few hours. A rise in the tunnel made it possible to complete the filling of the bulkhead clear to the roof. In places the heavy planks

bulged from the strain of concrete, but the job was done.

"Everybody out!" Tim ordered. "Turner, you can take your men up to the bunkhouses for baths and some sleep if you want to. A freighter leaves tomorrow noon. She carries steerage passengers. If you're wise, you'll be on it. That's all."

Miners and bruisers hurried away from the bulkhead as fast as conditions would permit. Many ran from sheer relief. Others, feeling with some justification that the sea might break through, raced at top speed. The waiting cage shot up again and again with capacity loads.

TIM, Raw Meat Riley and Hogan remained below for a final check. Here and there they put in timbers to brace the forms. The drain pipes continued to spout salt water through wide-open valves. Tim cleaned the sumps so the pumps picking up the water wouldn't clog, then he followed his companions from the mine.

"What do you think would happen if the sea broke through now?" Riley inquired.

"If it came through with a rush, it would punch holes through the concrete and wash the whole works out in a matter of seconds," Tim explained. "Later, when the concrete begins to harden, draining water coming through faster than the pipes can carry it off, will pile up behind the bulkhead. If the pressure reaches the limit, it might force water through and make the bulkhead sweat. It'd sweat particles of concrete, gradually work little conduits through the structure and then it would soon go out. Let's hope that won't happen."

"Well, we've done our best," Riley said. "All we can do now is wait. Me, I'm going to do my waiting in bed."

They separated at the mine

mouth. Everyone was above ground now, and no machinery was in operation except the pumps. Even the cage was left well above the shaft in case the water came through. They didn't want it wrecked again.

Ordinarily, with the fate of the mine in the balance, Tim couldn't have slept, but he was so exhausted physically that he was dead to the world the instant he crawled between the blankets.

It seemed only a few minutes later that a steamer whistle awakened him. He looked at the clock. He had slept fourteen hours and his head was filled with pounding hammers. He got up, took a cold shower, and looked down on the waterfront. The freighter was just casting off her lines and Tim could see a group of men on deck. He looked at them through binoculars. It was a relief to see that they were Ray Turner's gang of bruisers.

Tim dressed. He walked over to the cookhouse and spoke to the cook, who was sitting on the steps, peeling potatoes.

"How about some breakfast?" Tim said.

"Comin' up," the cook said. "I've been watchin' your window and as soon as I saw you I popped things on the stove. *Kodiak's* due in an hour."

"Then I can take my time," Tim said. "For the first time in days I don't have to bolt my food."

The cook looked through the window every time he passed it, and he passed it often. Suddenly he stepped outside and met a disturbed pump man. "You can't go in till he's et," the cook said flatly.

"Grayish-lookin' water comin' out of the pumps," the pump man said. "Looks bad. Bulkhead's goin'!"

"I'll tell him. Anyway, they ain't nothin' he can do."

While Jim was devoting himself to bacon and eggs, Ann came in and had a cup of coffee with him.

"All must be quiet on the Western front," Tim remarked. "You haven't spoken a word about the mine. Can it be possible fifteen hours have passed without incident?"

"Ray Turner's gang sailed, but Ray didn't go with them," she said. "He's going to have the law on you."

"I know the mood. He'll serve a prison stretch himself just to hook me," Tim said. "What else?"

"Dr. Small bagged a brown bear with a pelt that'll run almost eleven by eleven feet. Nice little thing to step on when you roll out of bed on a cold morning," she said. "He arrived seven hours ago, and sometime within the following two hours there was a death and an operation."

"Sam Pelton died and they operated on Daylight's eyes, eh? How'd Daylight come through it?"

"They won't know for several days," Ann answered.

The pump man was waiting when Tim came out. "I wish you'd take a look," he said. "I'm worried."

"You want company in your worrying, I suppose?" Tim murmured wearily. He turned to Ann.

"You do what you can for Aunt Tess, and I'll look into this pump business," he said. "Tell her I'll make the arrangements for Sam's funeral."

THE sound of steamer whistles echoed musically in the air. The freighter was passing the incoming *Kodiak*. Tim hurried over and inspected the water coming through the pumps. There was a trace of discoloration in it.

"Damn the Turners!" he said aloud. "We may have to do this all over again. I'd give plenty to outfox

them." He lit a cigarette and pondered. The *Kodiak* came around a bend, a trace of smoke from her stack, her bow cutting the water cleanly and sending waves that reached both shores of the straits. The tide was high and the spruce boughs almost touched the water.

Tim told the pump man, who had accompanied him, to turn on the power. "I'm going down in the cage and see what's happening down there," he explained. The pump man warned him to be ready to come up fast.

As soon as Tim was on the tram level, he broke into a run that ended when he stood on the brink of the shaft leading down to the Submarine Vein. He turned his light down and saw water. It was coming in faster than the pumps could handle it. Tim returned to the surface to find the pump man on the telephone.

"Here he is now," he said, and handed the receiver to Tim.

"Raw Meat Riley speakin'." The hardrock man's voice was crisp. "Listen, Tim. The *Kodiak* just docked. Kirk Turner came down the gangplank flanked by half the deputy marshals in Alaska. He's up to somethin'."

"Thanks, Riley," Tim answered. He hung up and stared speculatively at Jess Reagan's tomb, high on the mountain. "You'd certainly have enjoyed this fight, old-timer," he said. "Now it's a case of the devil take the hindermost." He turned to the pump man. "You can knock off for the day. I'll take care of things here."

The man mopped his forehead as he hurried to the bunkhouse. "That means he knows it's no use to keep them pumps goin'," he told some of the men there. "The mine's floodin' again."

CHAPTER XXV

AN EXPENSIVE GAMBLE

TIM BRADFORD spent several days waiting in his office before Kirk Turner appeared. Apparently the latter had wanted to get complete information about everything that had happened before making his moves. He arrived, accompanied by deputy marshals who looked as though they were expecting trouble and were ready for it.

"There isn't going to be any riot here, gentlemen," Tim said mildly. "And even if trouble should develop, one deputy ought to be enough to handle it."

The officers looked uncomfortable.

"You're not fooling me," Turner snapped. "This place is loaded with dynamite. Now, Mr. Bradford, a while back minority stockholders took action against me. I'm now a minority stockholder myself and I am taking action against you and Ann Sloan."

"Why not?" Tim inquired amiably.

Bradford looked surprised. It sounded very much as if Tim's scheme had blown up in his face and the mine was worthless. "I have here a paper which authorizes me to inspect the mine to determine the situation underground, and to do so without advice or interference on your part."

"All right," Tim agreed, "go ahead!" He picked up the telephone and called the engine room. "See that the lights and power are turned on in the shaft. Send a man over to operate the cage. Mr. Kirk Turner is making an inspection."

The party stepped into the cage ten minutes later and were lowered to the tram level. "I know this mine like a book," Turner said to the

deputies. "We travel some distance slightly downgrade. Crosscuts lead off from either side, then we make another drop and— *Stop!*"

Turner's warning cry echoed eerily through the tunnel. He had stepped into six inches of water and his light showed nothing but water ahead. He turned and splashed to higher ground. "We're getting out of here, gentlemen," he said. "The mine's flooded." When Turner reached the surface he dismissed his armed escort. "Your presence, gentlemen, has seemed to clear up things. I wouldn't . . . er . . . mention the flooded condition of the mine. It will only make these poor people feel badly. Let them have a day or two longer of hope."

"Never a word," a deputy said.

KIRK TURNER went directly to the superintendent's office. Tim was waiting. "Well, Bradford," Turner said pleasantly, "I've been down inspecting things. To tell the truth, I thought some of putting in a small mill and developing the Manning Group of claims myself. After examining the rock and estimating the cost of development, I've come to a conclusion."

"What is it?"

"We could do it and make a little money, but we can make more money by confessing you've got us

licked and making a deal. If we had made that confession long ago we'd be hundreds of thousands of dollars better off right now."

"What's your proposition?" Tim asked.

"That we sell the Manning Group to you."

"I see. If we've been successful in sealing the mine," Tim said, "we can use the Manning Group. If not, it isn't worth a dime to us. Its value lies in our being able to extend our underground operations, not starting from above, as you hinted you might do. What's your price?"

"Originally they were held at a half million, and cheap at the price. When the mine flooded the price dropped to three hundred thousand dollars. We paid that for them," Turner said. "And we'll be glad to turn them over to you at that figure."

"I expect you would be glad," Tim said evenly. "But we're not interested. Under the new reorganization plan, we're geared to make money on our present holdings."

"But think of the money you'd make if you owned the Manning Group!"

"I realize that," Tim told him. "But if our sealing failed, we'd be stuck the price we paid for the group. We'll give you a hundred thousand dollars and no more."

Kirk Turner began to take on a harried look, but he wasn't ready to give in. "You're crazy, Bradford, to think we'll unload at that price."

"Maybe you've hit the right word," Tim said, " 'unload.' I think before I go into this deeper I'd better see how the mine is getting along."

"I'm taking the *Kodiak* out," Turner said hastily. "We might as well come to some kind of terms. Suppose we split the difference? Two hundred thousand dollars?"

"No dice!" Tim reached for his

hat. "We're still miles apart, and we're wasting time. I'll give you a hundred and twenty-five thousand, and one minute to decide."

Turner talked for fifty seconds, cursed bitterly and said: "We'll take it."

Tim put on his hat and they walked down to the lawyer's office in silence. Tim stopped at Ann's cabin. "Come along, please," he said when she came to the door. "I've just bought a bunch of claims and the chairman of the board will have to confirm the deal."

A half hour later Kirk Turner joined his son. "I pulled a fast one on Bradford," he said. "As a minority stockholder, I got a court order permitting me to inspect the mine. She's flooded again, but he doesn't know it. I shoved the Manning Group into his lap and have their check. Get packed. We're through with this damned country."

"Oh, no, we're not," his son said. "I'm swearing out a warrant for this bunch; kidnaping, criminal assault and—"

"And he'll come back with piracy," Turner roared. "Damn it, won't you ever learn to use your head? Your blasted conceit and my damned foolishness in backing you have cost us hundreds of thousands of dollars. Now you've got your neck bowed. Listen, Ray, you're licked. Tim Bradford has beaten you seven ways from the jack, and there's nothing you can do about it. You are *l-i-c-k-e-d!*" He spelled the word. "Is that clear, or shall I draw a diagram of it?"

"You don't need to be so damned unpleasant about it."

"You have to be rough with a fool," his father said brusquely. "Now, if you go ahead with this, and Bradford kicks back with a piracy charge, I won't spend a dime for your defense. I'll write you off as a loss along with my Old Glory stock. The hell of it is, I can't deduct you from my income tax return. Now, pack your bags. And fire that damned valet of yours. You're getting soft."

TIM watched the *Kodiak* sail late that afternoon. Then he went down to the hospital to see Daylight Lee.

"How's he getting along?" he asked the nurse.

"Restless," the girl answered. "You see, he resigned himself to blindness, and now he suddenly has hope. He finds the suspense and uncertainty almost unbearable."

"Maybe it was wrong to take the chance," Tim said.

"I don't think so," the girl answered. "And Daylight was eager to take the gamble."

Tim went in and, recognizing his step, Daylight said: "How're things at the mine?"

"Fine, Daylight," Tim answered. "We've bought the adjoining property, and we'll go ahead on a large scale. You should have some real dividends coming in in a few years. Then you can take that trip."

"How'd Tess take Sam's death?"

"Sam's a hero in her eyes, and—well, the rest is water over the wheel," Tim said. "I couldn't go to the funeral. Something was happening underground. When are they going to take your bandages off?"

"The twentieth," Daylight answered.

"That'll be a big day," Tim declared.

The morning of the tenth Raw Meat Riley and Hogan came to Tim's office. "We've been keepin' something from you," Riley said.

"The mine's flooded. We wanted to give you time to build yourself up for the shock. We've just figgered out Turner knew it was flooded and that's why you got a bargain on the adjoinin' property."

"Trying to save the old man a little grief, eh?" Tim said. "I appreciate it, boys, but I've got a surprise for you. I knew cement was coming through the pumps, so I let the mine flood. I thought the water on this side of the bulkhead would build up a pressure and help counteract the pressure on the other side. If my theory was right, the bulkhead would have a chance of staying put. I don't know even now if I'm right, and won't until we pump her out again. We start today, with every possible pump."

Riley looked at him with admiration. "And maybe you figgered Turner would go down into the mine, see the water pilin' up and break his neck tryin' to unload that Mannin' Group on you?"

Tim grinned. "Maybe you're right, Riley. Now get out and start the pumps to working."

ON the morning of the nineteenth Tess Lee knocked at Ann Sloan's door. It was evident she had something troubling her. "Tomorrow mornin' they take off Daylight's bandages," she said, "and he'll see his ugly wife for the first time. It'll be worse because he's made his own picture of me all these years and I'm beautiful. There ain't much that can be done, Ann, but I was thinkin' a beauty parlor might fix this red mop of mine—"

Ann felt the tears coming to her eyes. "And there isn't a beauty parlor in town."

"I know it," Tess said. "You always keep yourself lookin' sweet and pretty and I was wonderin' if a fine lady like you would tell me a thing or two that might be done. Us women have been makin' ourselves look better'n we are ever since Mother Eve commenced playin' 'round with apple blossoms."

"Why, bless you, Aunt Tess," Ann said, "I'll do the job myself."

She took three hours to do the job, then she sent Tess home, her hair carefully wrapped in nets. On her mind constantly was the thought that Daylight might never see his wife.

Ann and Tim were on hand the following morning when Dr. Small arrived at the hospital. He had stayed over to get himself a mountain sheep, he said, but it wasn't hard to guess the real reason he had stayed on. A man in Daylight's circumstances couldn't very well hire a specialist to stay on day after day.

The doctor was a long time in Daylight's darkened room. At last he opened the door and called them in.

Tim was at the foot of the bed with Ann beside him. Tess stood near the doctor. Even in the almost dark-

ened room, she looked pale. Daylight found his wife's hand and took hold of it. "O. K., doc!" he said. "I'm ready."

Dr. Small removed the last bandage and stood back. In that moment of painful tension, Tim wished

the stamps were roaring again, or a steamer would whistle. Anything to break the silence. Ann caught his wrist and her fingers went deep into his hard flesh. Tess Lee was like a ghost.

Then Daylight's head slowly turned. He took a deep breath and said: "So you're . . . Tess? It's just like I've always known it would be. You're beautiful!"

Tess began to cry. It was the first time any of them had ever seen her break down.

"And you two shadows at the foot of the bed," Daylight said, "must be Ann and Tim."

Dr. Small only gave Daylight a few minutes to revel in his returned sight. The bandages were replaced, temporarily. In a few weeks they would be taken off and Daylight would be allowed to leave the hospital.

"And I'll go down into the mine," Daylight said. Then he chuckled. "Unless I shut my eyes, I'll probably get lost in the mine."

Tim took Ann's arm and they went out into the street. "We're going up to the mine now," he said, "and face another crisis."

"What's the situation down below?" Tim asked the pump man who had just come up out of the mine.

"We're pumpin' on the Submarine Vein level," the man answered, "and pumpin' like hell."

"I'm going down," Tim said.

"*We're* going down," Ann corrected. "We've been through a lot together, Tim, and we're going through this."

He didn't try to dissuade her. They dropped down to the tram level, plodded through puddles of water to a long ladder and Tim led the way down. They could hear water roaring and pumps working at top speed. Water surged about their rubber boots as they reached the

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bottom. Tim turned his flashlight on the bulkhead. Each of the drainage pipes spouted a stream of water, spouted it with a fury that told of the tremendous pressure behind it.

"These pipes were put in to take care of the drainage behind the bulkhead until it hardened," Tim explained. He grasped the nearest valve and slowly closed it. He went on to the others and closed them. He screwed the gauge onto one outlet and opened the valve slowly. The needle leaped to three hundred and sixty pounds, trembled, slid slightly higher and held.

"That proves it, Ann!" he shouted. "The full pressure of the sea is behind that bulkhead and she's holding." He closed the valve, removed the gauge and examined the bulkhead. "Not a leak, anywhere. Not even a trickle." He turned to her. "We've done something, Ann. A couple of people we both cared about —your dad and Jess Reagan—would have liked the way we came through."

"Oh, Tim, I can't believe it!" Ann cried. "To think that in a few weeks the stamps will be roaring again—the sweetest music in the world to hardrock men."

"You're a pretty good hardrock man yourself, Ann," Tim told her. "I . . . I wish I knew you well enough to propose that we form a permanent partnership—you know, Mr. and Mrs. Bradford. But I never have had time to get to know you. Do you think I might be able to persuade you to wait a while before you accept any other offers?"

"Tim Bradford, I . . . I've done all the waiting I'm going to do," Ann said. "Oh, Tim, don't kiss me yet. Wait till I get out of these oilskins and powder my nose."

"I've done all the waiting I'm going to do," Tim assured her as he bent to kiss her.

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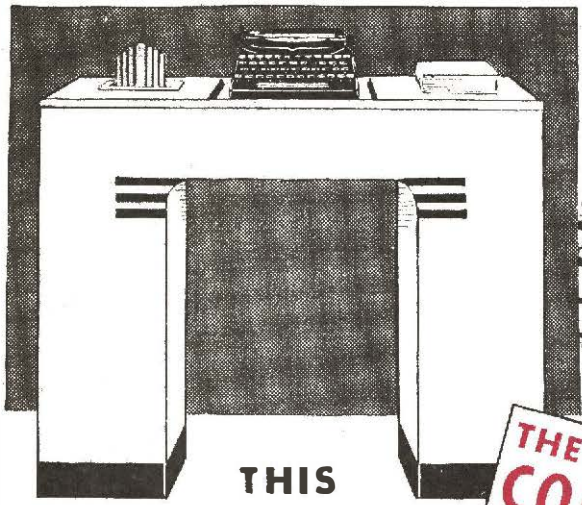

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