

MAY 11, '40

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STORY 10

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VOL. 182 • No. 3

MAGAZINE

MAY 11th, 1940



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BY
Bennett Foster

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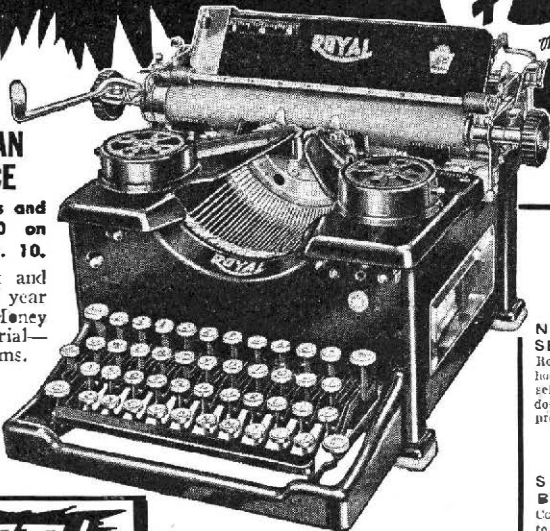
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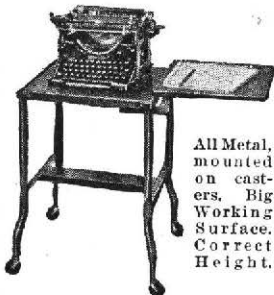
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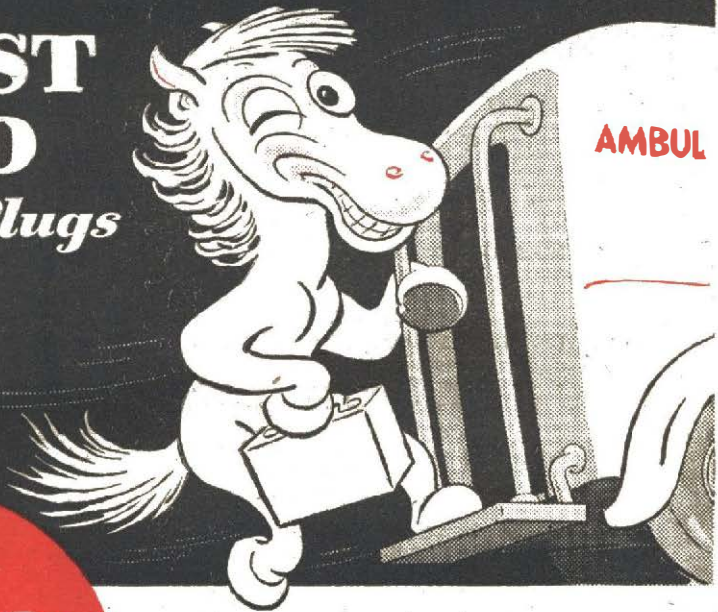
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WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

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VOL. CLXXXII NO. 3

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All fictional characters mentioned in this magazine are fictitious. Any similarity in name or character to any real person is coincidental.

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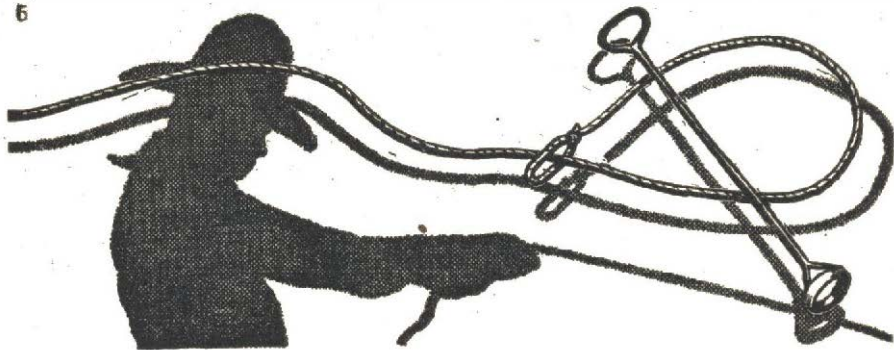
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The Roundup

WE know you're all familiar with the moving tales of the Old West which have come from the pen of Peter Dawson, whose *SPAWN OF YUMA* appears on page 50 of this issue, so now we give you, in his own words, a bit about the author himself:

"Having delayed a little over two years in reaching your Roundup column, this letter is going to be short on autobiography, but long on something a heap more interesting.

"Maybe the first mentioned can be crowded into a sentence, a long one. This gent Dawson is thirty-two years old, lives in Pojauque Valley near Santa Fe in a two-hundred-year-old adobe house, has two children—both boys who'll be bow-legged before their teens from forking the barrel of a horse—and wishes he'd lived sixty or seventy years ago and known the Santa Fe country before the railroad, the telegraph and the law came in to give it the cloak of respectability and make it unsafe for the man on the dodge. Now to this other:

"Santa Fe has had a lurid, sometimes bawdy, history. One of its

neglected chapters, fairly recent, was written in the boom towns of the Ortiz Mountains. Thirty miles southwest of Santa Fe, dwarfed by the Sandia Peaks, the Ortiz hills diggin's fifty or sixty years ago cast their shadow as far as Wall Street, where the names Rel de Dolores, Carbonatesville, Bonanza, Cerillos, Madrid, Golden and San Pedro were bywords in metal shares trading.

"Those towns, most of them, are today nothing but rows of crumbling adobe and stone walls lining streets littered with rusting machinery too heavy to salvage, lengths of soldered sheet pipe, and gutted with caved-in and abandoned shafts. But up on Cunningham Mesa, above Dolores, a new generation is getting 'gold from them thar hills' with drag line and power blower, rocker and stamp mill.

"Better yet, the week-end prospector with his home-made dry washer and pan, is taking yellow metal out of the tailings of the old mines. A few of the really serious have taken out leases on some of the old claims and are waiting for spring weather to open things up. So, you arm-chair prospectors, give up that Niagara Falls vacation for next summer and try the Santa Fe country, where the old boom towns may soon be booming again.

"A little more of the history of the Ortiz Mountain country: The Indians were working a turquoise

mine long before the Spanish came to work the old Spanish placers. In the Carbonatesville-Bonanza district is, reputedly, the oldest mine in the United States. Deep in its shaft is an underground lake where the remains of a boat and stone axes were found to testify to the ingenuity of the Indian, who wouldn't let a little thing like water stop him from following up a vein.

"In now deserted and desolate Carbonatesville, the home of some fourteen hundred souls back in '87, Lew Wallace read proof on some sheets of a new novel he was writing, titled 'Ben Hur'. The big drag line at Dolores lays open the drifts of the old Spanish placers, where Spaniards had as much use for a gun as for pick and shovel, Indians being their prime trouble. Some of these old shafts were ninety feet deep and drifted better than a thousand.

"The new placers at Golden—a town that at one time boasted more saloons than Santa Fe—hand down the legend of the biggest nugget ever taken from the Ortiz hills. *Eleven pounds!* Found by an Indian who sold it for a pint of whiskey, a crownless hat and a half-blind horse. Golden is coming alive again today, as is Dolores.

"Carbonatesville, Bonanza, Dolores, Golden, San Pedro. Silver, copper, zinc, lead and gold. Take your pick. And bring your pick with you when you come after it. Some water, too, for it's dry over there. Which explains, and partially excuses, the habit the old-timers had of making a friend of the local brands of rot-gut whiskey. It used to be a tough country. Still is, but that's what makes it interesting."

We feel sure that the many fans who enjoyed H. Frederic Young's recent INTERESTING AND TRUE, will

be pleased to see him back again in Western Story with a new feature—RANGE SAVVY (page 75). Hope you like it!

And a word of thanks to Dick Cole, of Haines, Oregon, who has not missed a single issue of W. S. in twenty-five years. "What has happened?" he writes. "You have been humping your backs and putting in some real stories lately, such as HARDROCK MEN, MURDERS AT MESQUITE FLATS and DEAD FREIGHT FOR PIUTE." We assure Mr. Cole we'll do our best to keep the editorial back humped so that we can hogtie a lot more yarns like the ones he mentioned. ●

In next week's issue—

A story you'll never forget—BUFFALO TRAIL, a full-length novel by Tom Roan. When you read this action-packed story, you'll thrill to the adventures of the gallant men who fought for justice at a time when human life was cheaper by far than the treasure that could be stripped from the prairie, and you'll find yourself living in another age—the glorious days when intrepid pioneers fought to bring law and order to a new frontier. Among the many other fine features in a story-packed issue are HOT LEAD WITH PRINTER'S INK, by Norman A. Fox, LATIGO LOAN SHARK, by Cliff Walters, KINITAK KILLER, by Jim Kjelgaard, LONELY GRAVES, by Stephen Payne, ONCE A COWMAN, by Wilfred McCormick, and many others. And don't forget there'll be another dramatic installment of Bennett Foster's BARB WIRE OR BOOTHILL!

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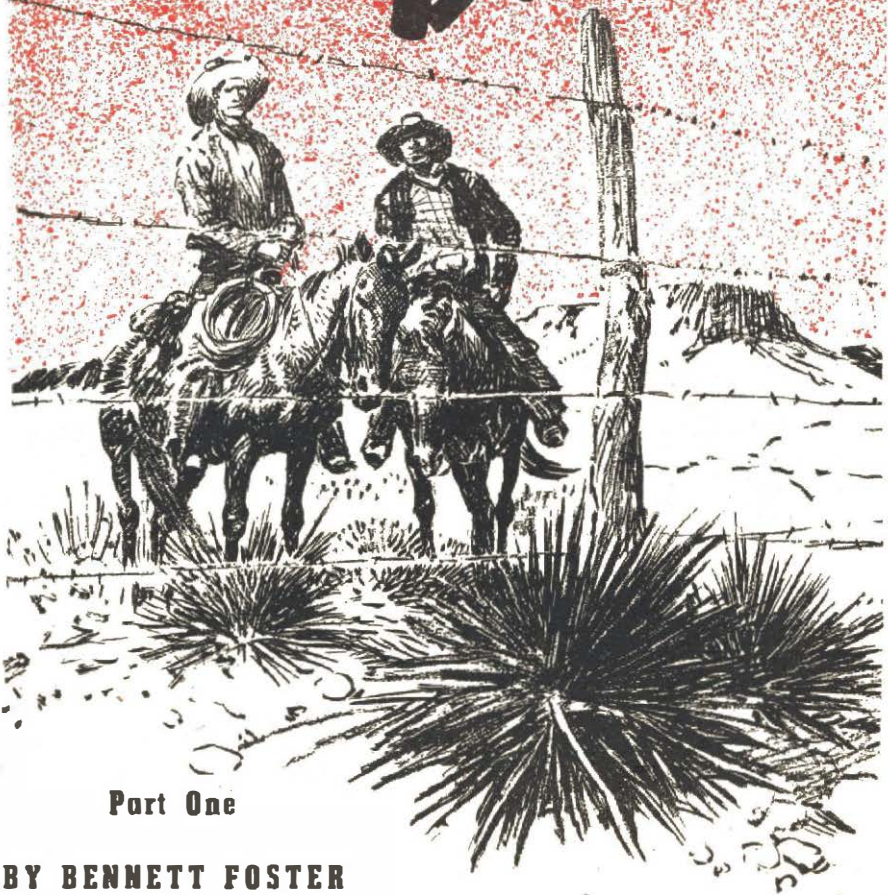
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WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE
79 SEVENTH AVENUE
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Barb Wire or

Boothill!



Part One

BY BENNETT FOSTER

CHAPTER I THE SUMMONS

WHEN they reached the last bench of the mesa, Dave Cloud and Pug

Wells stopped their horses. Below them the Curampaw flats spread away to the east, dotted here and there with red buttes that rose like little citadels of stone from the flat

land. Between the men and the nearest butte, Vinegar Creek ran, a thread of silver in a golden waste.

Dave Cloud, caught as always by the spell of the country, sat easily on Stormy, his big bay gelding, and grinned at his companion. Pug, his two hundred pounds compressed into a bare five feet eight inches, returned the grin. There was no poet in Pug; he did not rise in spirit to the vastness of the country below. It was enough for Pug that Dave was happy and smiling. He pulled his battered hat a little lower on his round face and, eyes so shaded, studied the benches of the mesa.

"Gettin' dry," he commented. "We ought to see 'em movin' to water from here."

Dave, his right hand resting against the worn leather of his shotgun chaps, nodded agreement. "There was sign at Boot Springs yesterday," he said. "They're pretty hard up for water when they'll work through the rocks to the springs. We'll pick up a couple today, Pug."

"An' then we'll go to town," Pug announced with satisfaction. "I ain't got a whole shirt to my name, an' my pants is all held together with rawhide."

Dave, amber eyes scanning the country below for movement, grunted. "We got eighteen head," he remarked. "There ought to be thirty dollars in every one of 'em. They're all big steers."

"An' narrer as rails," Pug contributed. "That ol' roan we caught stands fourteen hands an' he's as long as from here to there. But I'll bet he won't weigh a thousand pounds."

Dave laughed. The roan steer was a freak, a big outlaw that had run in the Curampaw breaks for years, gaining size if not weight. "This beats workin' for wages," he

declared. "We been at it ten days an' we already got eighteen. That's five hundred dollars. Beats thirty a month an' chuck."

Pug did not reply. He was looking to the north and now, raising his arm, he pointed and asked a question: "What's goin' on down there, Dave?"

Dave followed the direction of Pug's pointing arm. His eyes squinted as he searched the flats. There, far below them, a wagon stood, vehicle and horses blurred miniatures in the distance. Dots that were men moved about the wagon and formed a line toward the west.

For perhaps a minute Dave studied the scene, and then his voice drawled a slow answer. "They're buildin' fence," he said. "Sure as I'm a foot high, that's what they're doin'! I saw the sun flash off the wire."

Pug took his eyes from the wagon and line of men and looked at his friend. Glancing back, he caught a flash of movement. "There's cattle movin' down there," he said softly. "Let's go, Dave. They're workin' up to Boot Spring."

Stormy was already moving, and Pug, starting Champ, his own big bay, fell in beside Dave. Threading their way through cedar, rocks, and clawing brush, they started down from the bench, the horses, sure-footed as mountain goats, picking the path.

THE bottom bench was wide. Here boulders, tumbled from the rim above, lay like giant blocks strewn by some Gargantuan child. Mesquite grew here, and sharp yucca and cactus. Dismounting, Dave pulled his front cinch tight and, taking down his rope, tied the end hard and fast to the horn of his saddle.

Pug, likewise employed, mounted when his companion did, and sat his horse, staring at the brushy wall ahead.

"Right in there," Dave said softly. "There's three of 'em."

A steer coming through the brush pushed his head into the opening the men occupied, and stopped, snorting with alarm. Ears wide, big horns canted, the steer stood but a moment and then, with a crash of brush, was gone. Instantly the men were in motion.

Here was no easy riding, no canter down a well-kept trail, no spirited galloping across a level, grassy meadow. Low in their saddles, heads bent, ropes in hand, Pug Wells and Dave Cloud stayed with their horses. The horses ran, stretching out, wise eyes picking a course, intent on but one thing: to give the men that rode them a throw at the animals they pursued.

There was no room to swing a big loop in this country; the brush precluded that. Both men held their ropes ready, the loops cocked open by their shoulders, their gloved hands eager. One throw and no more in country like this, so that one throw had to be good.

Pug had swung north; Dave was going straight down the hill. An opening, perhaps ten feet square, appeared before him. Across that opening, a big mottled steer dashed.

Dave's rope went out, the little loop dropping true. Then he and Stormy were in the opening and the steer was crashing through the brush. Two more jumps Stormy made. Dave flipped his rope, angled the horse to the left and swung out on his left stirrup. Steer and horse hit the ends of the rope. The steer, feet cut from under him, went into the air and crashed down. Stormy, nostrils wide, was squatted at the

end of the rope, facing the animal he had caught, while Dave dropped to the ground, pigging string in hand. Off to the north he could hear the crashing progress of Pug's horse as he ran toward the yellow steer.

When Dave straightened, his steer was tied. He could no longer hear Pug, and so, breathing a little rapidly, for it is hard physical labor to tie down a thousand pounds of five-year-old steer, he sat down upon a heaving, mottled side and, unbuttoning his brush jacket, reached for the makings. He was sitting on thirty dollars and he felt good. Stormy, wise and knowing that his work was done for the moment, gave the rope slack and reached out for a mouthful of grass.

Dave was smoking contentedly when his partner rode up. A fresh rip in Pug's shirt had reduced that article of apparel to a rag, and through the rents of his underwear an ugly red scratch showed upon the barrel of his chest. Pug dismounted and walked over.

"I knocked a horn off of mine," he announced. "He's about a quarter north of here. That big yeller steer we seen when we first come in here."

"Let's fix this one up an' call it a morning," said Dave. "How'll that suit you, Pug?"

Pug nodded. Dave, getting up from the steer, walked over to Stormy. When he returned he was carrying a piece of baling wire and a rawhide thong. The rawhide was tied about the steer's leg, close above the hock, and pulled tight. The wire, looped from one horn to the other, was twisted with a piece of stick until the horns popped.

"Didn't have to wire yours," Dave remarked. "Losin' that horn will make him tender-headed enough, won't it?"

Pug grunted. "I cracked the

other horn with a rock, just in case," he said. "Ol' Yaller won't be huntin' brush for some time, I guess. There, that'll do, Dave."

His rope freed, Dave bent over the pigging string. Pug mounted and sat waiting for any eventuality while Dave freed the steer's feet and made a run for his saddle. The steer lumbered to his feet, stood head lowered and angry, and then turned and tried to run. The rawhide cut painfully, and the steer slowed his pace. When he struck the brush that walled him all about he recoiled from it. His head was sore from the pressure put upon his horns.

"He'll be out on the flat in the mornin'," Pug prophesied. "Let's go, Dave."

The two turned their horses and rode on down the hill.

THEIR camp was a tent set close beside a rock wall. They could see the glint of sun from the canvas as they came down the slope, could see the loom of the brush corral close by the tent. They could see, too, a slender ascending pillar of smoke from a fire before the tent.

"Company," Pug said. "I put out the fire this mornin' when we left."

Dave made no answer. The horses came out into the clear country about the camp, and they could see a saddled horse standing, head lowered, close by the tent. A man rose up from beside the fire, stood watching, and as they came closer, spoke cheerfully:

"Dinner's ready. You boys look like you could eat."

Dave and Pug got down. Anchored by trailing reins, Stormy and Champ slumped their weight, and the riders walking toward the fire made their visitor welcome.

"Hello, sheriff," said Dave.

"I always knew you were a chuck-

wagon cook before you went to work for the county," Pug grinned.

Lee Pryor, sheriff of Las Olas County, shook hands with them. He was a big man, Pryor, broad-shouldered, heavy, with a paunch and sagging flesh along the line of his jaw. His eyes were bright blue, and his eyebrows jutting out above them were gray and bushy. Under his close-clipped gray mustache his lips parted in a smile.

"I couldn't find a whole heap for dinner," he drawled. "Beans, bacon an' biscuits. Looks like you boys will have to go to town pretty soon."

"We got some lick, too," Pug said defensively. "An' there's plenty of coffee. Only reason I want to go to town is to buy a shirt. This catchin' steers is hard on shirts."

Pryor laughed and moved around the fire. Dave already had a plate and was loading it. Pug tried to pull his shirt together, grunted ruefully and, giving up the effort, found a plate and cup.

"Out catchin' outlaws or just for the ride?" he demanded. "Yo're quite a ways from home, sheriff."

"I came to see you two boys," Pryor answered quietly. "I'll tell you after we've ate."

Few as the words were, they took all levity from the camp. Pug sat down and began to eat. Dave, plate balanced on his knees, watched the officer. For all his twenty-eight years Dave Cloud had known Lee Pryor. There was something, something other than friendship, some serious matter, that had brought Lee Pryor out from Marksham.

It was not until the sheriff, with a grunt, put aside his plate and reached for a cigar that Dave spoke. He formed a cigarette between his fingers and, lighting it, squinted through the smoke at the visitor.

"What's on your mind, Lee?" he asked.

Pryor rolled the cigar in his mouth, removed it and, looking thoughtfully at the brown cylinder, made answer. "I need a little help, Dave," he said quietly.

Neither Dave nor Pug made answer and Pryor, after a moment's pause, went on, "It's awful dry this year. We had no snow, and there's been no rains. Country's dryin' up."

This was not news. The partners still waited for the sheriff to explain the reason for his visit.

"Clear out across the flats," the sheriff continued, moving one heavy arm toward the east. "On top, too. Awful dry, boys."

"We can't make it rain," Pug announced seriously. "If that's what you come out for, you wasted yore time. I had a rain all ordered for last—"

"Wait, Pug," Dave said. "An' what else, Lee?"

Lee Pryor shifted his bulk. "An' so I need some help," he said dolefully. "Barry Trevis is puttin' up fence all around his place, from the Curlew wells on east to the river an' north to Cowtown. He's fencin' it all. He—"

"But that's all open country," the impetuous Pug blurted. "He—"

"It was State land, an' Barry bought it," Pryor interrupted. "Now he's fencin' it. Phil Killane is fencin' the country south. Frank Trilling is puttin' fence around the country he owns, an' the Mesa Cattle Co. sent me word that they're runnin' a fence line from the Curampaw breaks north to meet Trevis an' that inside a month they'll have all their pasture fenced."

"But that's the whole damn country!" Pug expostulated. "There won't be any open range left. They're takin' it all."

"They own it, Wells," Pryor reminded. "When one man started to fence, the rest of 'em had to protect what little grass they got left. That's the way it is."

DAVE CLOUD'S amber eyes were fixed on the sheriff's face. "An' what do the others say about the fencin', Lee?" he asked. "Yancy Yarbrow an' Vic McClellan an' Joe Chase an' the rest of them that run cattle in this country?"

Pryor shook his head. "You know what they say," he answered heavily. "They've been runnin' cattle on open range. Now that range has been bought an' claimed an' they're crowded. They don't like it."

"And so?" Dave prompted.

"So they say they'll cut any fence that's put up," Pryor announced gravely.

"I don't blame 'em," Pug declared. "They been usin' the country. They got some title to it. They—"

"Not a bit of title!" Pryor's voice was sharp. "They crowded in on country that was owned by other men. They been gettin' grass an' water that they never paid for. Yarbrow don't own a piece of ground except a house in town. Joe Chase ain't got but a little land. Vic McClellan owns maybe two sections where his headquarters stands. The rest of 'em are no better off."

"But—" Pug began.

"I was elected to keep the law in this country," Pryor interrupted. "The big men an' the little men alike elected me. I play no favorites. I'll protect a man's property the best I can."

"An' you came out to see me an' Pug," Dave said softly. "Go on, Lee."

"I need deputies," Pryor stated bluntly. "I need men I can trust

an' that ain't tied up with anybody. You an' Pug fill the bill. I come out to get you."

"You think there'll be trouble," Dave drawled, not taking the opening Pryor had made. "That's what you think, Lee, isn't it?"

"I know there'll be trouble," Lee Pryor answered. "There's already talk. I've told the talkers that they'll have to cut down the size of the bunch they run. There's range left. There's country that ain't owned. They can buy it an' fence it themselves or they can cut down the size of their herds until the open country will carry 'em. But they're sore an' they won't listen to me. They've had free grass an' water all these years an' they say they'll keep on havin' it."

"I don't blame 'em," Pug interposed again. "I—"

"Wait, Pug," Dave cautioned. "All Lee's got to go by is the law."

"That's right." Pryor's voice was eager. "That's all I've got to go by. You boys ain't tied up with anybody. You got your horses an' a camp outfit an' you don't owe a thing to the big men or the little ones, either. I need you two fellers. How about it?"

Neither Dave nor Pug answered the sheriff. They were looking at each other. "We're doin' mighty well runnin' outlaw steers," Pug drawled. "With what we caught this mornin' we got twenty head. That's pretty near six hundred dollars for ten days' work."

Dave said nothing. Lee Pryor was looking at him. Whatever Dave said would be the thing the partners would do and Pryor knew it. He had helped raise Dave Cloud, had Lee Pryor; he knew the history of the man, knew him from the time, a kid following a wagon, Dave had drifted into the Curampaw, on

through the years when he had been a rider for Phil Killane, when he had gotten an itchy foot and, over in Indian Territory, had worked as a Deputy United States Marshal. All Dave Cloud's life Lee Pryor had known him and been his friend.

"I kind of want to think this over," Dave said.

With a grunt, Lee Pryor heaved himself to his feet. "I thought you would," he said, some satisfaction in his voice. "I figured it that way."

"I don't say what we'll do!" Dave warned sharply.

"No," Pryor agreed, "an' I haven't put this on a friendship basis, Dave. You do what you think is right. But I've brought out your commissions an' yore badges, an' I'll leave 'em with you. When are you comin' to town?"

"Tomorrow, likely," Dave answered slowly. "We've got twenty steers, like Pug says. We thought we'd bring 'em in an' sell 'em to Carl Sobran."

"Let me know, then," Pryor requested. "I've put your commissions an' yore badges in the tent. I've got to be gettin' along now. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Don't count on us," Dave warned again.

"I've lived long enough not to count on anybody but myself," Pryor said heavily, "an' things have been happenin' that kind of showed me that I'm right. So long, boys, an' think it over."

Turning abruptly, he moved toward his horse. Without looking back, he mounted and rode away.

When the sheriff was out of earshot, Pug spoke. "He had his nerve!" he declared. "I don't blame them little fellers a bit. If I had cattle in this country, I'd cut every damned fence—"

"An' run yore cattle on the other

fellow's grass," Dave completed, interrupting. "No, Pug, you wouldn't do that."

"Well, anyhow—" Pug began defensively.

"Anyhow, we ain't got a stake in this business," Dave Cloud broke in. "I carried a star once, Pug. I had to do some things—" He broke off and was silent.

"Hell!" Pug said viciously, "I don't blame you for not wantin' any more of it, Dave. I know—"

"I killed a man"—Dave's voice was heavy and monotonous—"because I was wearin' a star an' it was my duty. I think we'll stick to cattle, Pug. Lee Pryor is the best friend I've got in the world outside of you, but I think we'll stick to runnin' outlaw steers."

CHAPTER II

DEATH AT THE FENCE

MORNING was barely gray when Pug Wells and Dave Cloud got up. Wordlessly they fell upon the duties of the morning, each taking a self-appointed task. Pug went for the horses and Dave built a fire and cooked. When Pug came in, breakfast was ready and they ate a silent meal. Dishes washed and the fire out, they went to the corral.

Dave roped out Magpie, coal-black save for a streak of white splashed across his rump, and saddled the horse. Pug took Blue, a tall roan. Saddling finished, Dave spoke of the thing that was uppermost in the minds of both.

"We'll pick up those two steers we caught yesterday an' take 'em to town with the rest," he drawled. "Lee will want those two badges, even if he can't use the commissions any more. You want to read that paper careful, Pug. Likely you'll

never see yore name on a deputy's commission again."

Pug grinned, the smile spreading across his round, homely face and settling in his eyes. "I read my commission good last night, Dave," he said. "Mebbe if we wrote 'Canceled' across the face of them, Lee would let us keep 'em to frame sometime. Let's ask him."

Dave grinned at Pug and, mounting, the two partners started north. They expected to find the two steers down on the flats. Sore-headed and lamed by the rawhide thongs, the steers would have come out of the brush; nevertheless it would probably take some little time to find and bring them back.

As Dave and Pug rode along toward the north, both glanced with approval at the pole fence they had built across the lower end of a canyon. That pole fence and the canyon held their steers, and the fence spoke eloquently of a great deal of hard work.

Riding north, they found no sign of the steers. They came, presently, to a fence, the barbed wire new and tight, the posts raw with their newness.

Following the fence toward the west, the two found the fence crew, and they stopped. Barry Trevis, a slender, middle-aged man with Texas twanging in his speech, came to make them welcome, and the partners, dismounting, squatted in the shade of the wagon.

"I ain't seen the steers," Trevis declared in answer to a question from Dave. "Likely they worked farther out on the flat than you figured. I'm pretty sure they ain't crossed above here on the benches. I rode up pretty near to the rim along the line an' I didn't see 'em."

"Then they're farther east," Dave

said. "How come this sudden fence building, Barry?"

Trevis scowled down the length of his long nose and then looked levelly at the partners. "I kind of had to,"

*"My neighbors
threatened me if
I put up fence!"
Killane roared.
"So I'm puttin' it
up! Pass the word
along!"*



he drawled. "The Mesa Co. started fencin' an' the rest of us had to. I didn't like it, but what else was there to do? If just one of us fenced, that would've thrown a load on the others. Hell, boys! I don't like fence any better'n anybody else, but what's a man goin' to do? He's got to protect his grass, ain't he?"

Dave Cloud nodded slowly. "I guess that's right," he agreed. "But it ain't goin' to set too well, Barry."

Trevis frowned. "I know it," he answered, his worry showing in his voice. "I already been gittin' hell. There's fellows I've knowed all my life that won't hardly talk to me

now. I've heard some talk about cuttin' fences, too. I'll tell you, Dave, it ain't goin' to be healthy to cut my fence. I won't stand for it!"

"What'll you do about it?" Pug asked ominously.

Anger flared suddenly in Barry Trevis. "If it comes to a showdown, I'll put a man with a gun behind every post!" he snapped. "That's what I'll do about it. I've grazed other men's cattle for years. I run a wagon an' I've fed every saddle tramp an' granger that called hisse'f cowpuncher, an' never turned a man away. I loaned horses; I done everything I could do to be square.



An' now when I set out to take care of myself I'm a damned grass hog an' a thief, an' I don't know what else! By damn, I'm through! I'm puttin' up a fence an' she'll stay up!"

Pug looked abashed. Dave Cloud got slowly to his feet.

"I can see kind of how you feel," he said quietly. "Of course, the other fellow is sort of ringy, too. This ain't findin' them steers, though. Come on, Pug, we'd better get at it."

THEY bade good-bye to Barry Travis and rode off toward the south, angling out now from the mesa front, spreading apart until there was perhaps a quarter of a mile between them. The sun was pulling up toward its zenith now; it was perhaps ten o'clock. The partners still had a long day's riding ahead of them.

Some four miles below Travis' fence they noticed a dust cloud and rode toward it. They came together,

struck a sandy road and, following along it, saw the cause of the cloud.

"Ol' Phil Killane's buckboard," Pug announced, squinting at the dust. "He always drives like he had just three minutes to get there. Look at them broncs run!"

The buckboard coming toward them was pulled by a pair of bay horses that ran vigorously. On the buckboard seat was the squat figure of Phillip Killane, lines in hand, legs thrust out to brace him against the dashboard. Another rode with Killane and, as the buckboard approached, Pug and Dave could see that it was Killane's daughter, Jessie. Killane pulled the team up, called, "Whoa!" and let the bays come down to their feet again. The girl clung to the grab iron on the side of the seat and laughed as if she were enjoying herself.

Everyone in the Curampaw country knew Phil Killane. From Colorado on the north, clear down the eastern side of the State of Texas, wherever cattle was run, there were tales of him. Phil Killane had but one leg; the other was buried at Antietam. As a trooper in a Kentucky regiment, he had followed the Stars and Bars for four years. A veteran at fifteen, he had come West and there, despite the handicap of his peg, had made his place. The girl beside him, daughter of his middle age, was twenty years old. Beautiful with the untouched loveliness of girlhood, she was loved clear across the Curampaw. Now she laughed and called her greetings to Dave and Pug. As befitted his dignity, Phil Killane waited for the riders to come up.

"Morning, Miss Jessie," Dave greeted, pulling off his hat. "Good mornin', Mr. Killane. You must have started early today."

Killane nodded to Dave and Pug.

Now that they had spoken, his dignity was satisfied, and he could let down the barriers. "Good mawn-in'," he replied. "We did start before breakfast an' that's a fact. How far is it to where Barry Trevis is buildin' fence?"

"About four miles north," Dave answered. "We just left him."

"This plagued fence will likely be the death of me," Killane complained. "For hawse pastures it has its uses, an' it's handy, I'll agree, to keep cattle from driftin' too far. But to fence in all God's outdoors is mighty near more than I can stand. Just whereabouts is Barry, Dave?"

"Right at the bottom of the mesa," Dave answered. "If you feel that way about fence, I'm surprised that you're puttin' it up."

"By Jupiter, suh!" Anger frowned across the high-bridged face of Phil Killane. "I was fo'ced to. Several of my neighbors, men I'd known for years, called on me an' threatened me with difficulty if I fenced my land. Naturally, under the circumstances, I was fo'ced to."

Dave Cloud barely restrained a smile. The best way to get Phil Killane to do something was to tell him not to do it.

"Layin' aside unpleasant subjects," Killane said abruptly, "I'd like to have you come to visit us at the Anchor, you an' yo' friend. There's certain business I'd like to discuss with you."

"I've been promisin' myself the pleasure of a trip out to see you," Dave said courteously. "I'll make it soon, Mr. Killane. Miss Jessie, there's a dance in town Saturday night. I'd be proud—"

"You're too late, Dave." Jessie's smile did its best to take the sting from her words. "I'm going with

Wade Samis. I'll save you a dance, though."

"I'll thank you kindly if you do." Dave smiled to hide his disappointment. "You'll find Barry Trevis right at the foot of the hill, Mr. Killane. Just follow along the wheel tracks."

"Thank you," Killane said formally. "An' I'll expect yo' company shortly. Good day!"

Dave tipped his hat again. Pug touched the brim of his Stetson, and Phil Killane called to his bays: "Geddup, Wilkes! Geddup, Booth!" The bays, encouraged by a touch of the buggy whip, hit their collars together and the buckboard bounced ahead. Jessie, clinging to the grab iron, turned to smile and wave.

"Mighty nice girl," said Pug.

"The best there is," Dave agreed.

"Ol' man Phil will fight a buzz-saw an' give it a good start," Pug observed, staring after the buckboard. "Wonder what he wants to talk to you about."

"He wants to talk to *us*," Dave corrected.

Pug grunted. "I'm just excess baggage," he said. "It's you he wants to talk to. Let's go find them steers, Dave."

ONCE more the two separated and rode on to the south. The country was broken, little arroyos crawling across it, splitting it. Yucca dotted the ridges and frequently the partners were lost from each other's sight. A mile more they rode, and then again Dave Cloud saw dust.

There was a rider under the dust, a single horseman. Dave rode to intercept him. The rider came on apace, his horse loping, covering country swiftly. A man in a hurry. He swung his horse to meet Dave, and Dave rode on toward him.

When they met the rider pulled up. It was Remedy Harper, a Killane hand. His horse stood, legs wide, breathing heavily, and Remedy, panting not from exertion but from some inner turbulence, threw words at Dave.

"You saw the old man?"

"I just left him," Dave said. "He was headed up to where Barry Trevis is buildin' fence. What's the excitement, Remedy?"

"I got to find him!" Remedy had a single-track mind and could not deviate from his course of thought. "You'll find him. What's the trouble?"

"Trouble?" Remedy exploded, turning so that he faced Dave fully. "The fence the old man's just got done buildin' is cut all to flinders."

Dave Cloud's eyes narrowed. So Lee Pryor had been right and trouble was coming to the Curampaw!

"An' that ain't the worst of it," Remedy continued. "Right at our corner, right where they begun to cut the fence, I found Lee Pryor!"

"You found Lee Pryor?" Dave questioned. He looked puzzled.

Remedy nodded grimly. "I found him. Dead. He'd been shot all to hell. I got to find the old man an' tell him, Dave. I got to find him!"

Remedy's horse jumped ahead. Dave Cloud sat there staring incredulously after the retreating horseman.

"What the devil's his hurry, Dave?" Pug Wells asked, coming up out of a draw. "I found them steers. What's got into Remedy?"

"Never mind the steers, Pug," Dave Cloud said shortly. "Let 'em go. Remedy's lookin' for Phil Killane. Killane's fence has been cut an' Lee Pryor killed. Let's go to town!"

"Killed?" Pug's voice was unbelieving. "But yesterday he—"

"He talked to us yesterday an' when he left us he rode straight into trouble!" Dave said bleakly. "Shake it up, Pug. Let's go!"

Pug's eyes were wide and round as he looked at his friend. Dave's face was set in harsh, deep lines, his eyes narrow, his lips a tight slash across his face. Pug swung his horse around.

"Let's go," he said simply. "I'm with you, Dave."

The partners did not go directly to Marksham, but first stopped at their camp. It was not a great deal out of the way, only a mile or two off the direct route. Riding in, they dismounted and, silently, because no words were necessary, went into the tent. Dave delved in his warbag, bringing out a belt and holstered gun. He fastened the belt about his middle, hitched at it once and the gun was in place against his hip. Pug had even less trouble. Pug withdrew a heavy, short-barreled single-action Colt from his bed roll, spun the cylinder and shoved the gun down into his trousers. Then, adding a handful of loose shells to his pocket, he was ready.

All the way into Marksham Dave kept silent. Pug, more loquacious, engaged in a monologue of conjecture and prophecy, but encountering the silent barrier that Dave presented, finally gave up his attempt at conversation. Not until three hours had passed and the water tank and squat buildings of the town were in sight did Dave break his silence. Then: "Lee come out to us for help yesterday, Pug," he said.

"Yeah," Pug agreed.

"An' we turned him down!" There was bitterness in Dave's voice.

"We turned him down," Pug echoed.

"If we'd gone with him this wouldn't have happened," Dave said.

Pug made no answer to that. There was none to make.

IT was almost three o'clock when Pug and Dave reached Marks-ham. They had pushed right along, not sparing their horses. Magpie and Blue jogged into the sprawling little town, along through the main street, where little knots of men stood under awnings or assembled on street corners.

Dismounting at the courthouse, the partners tied their horses and went in. Dave led the way down the corridor and stopped before the door of the sheriff's office. It seemed impossible that Lee Pryor was not at his desk, was not there to swing around in his creaking swivel chair and speak a slow welcome. But it was true; Pryor was not in the office. In place of the big sheriff, only Bill Ruby occupied the office, and Ruby was at the desk used by the chief deputy, cleaning it out. He glanced up when Dave and Pug entered the room, and then bent to his work again, methodically pulling litter from a bottom drawer.

"Is it right about Lee?" Dave asked quietly. "Was he killed?"

Bill Ruby straightened. "They brought him in," he declared in a rasping voice. "Remedy Harper found him at the corner post of that new fence Killane put up. Lee's dead, all right."

"What are you doin' about it, Bill?" Dave asked, hard-voiced.

"Nothin'!" Ruby spat out the word. "I'm through. I turned my resignation in to the commissioners an' I'm pullin' out right now."

"Got a little yellow up yore neck, Bill?" Pug asked gently.

"I'm not a damned fool!" Ruby retorted, not resenting the slur. "I'm not goun' up against boys I was

raised with, particularly when I think they're right!"

"Then it's right to kill Lee Pryor," Dave Cloud mused. "Bill, yo're a yellow pup. You got a little skunk blood in you."

Bill Ruby's face was red. "If you're so damned brave, you can have the job," he snarled. "There's nobody in yore way, Cloud."

"I see there ain't," drawled Dave. "Whereabouts are the commissioners, Bill?"

"They're holdin' a meetin'," Ruby growled. "Now, if you got no more fool questions to ask, get out! I'm busy."

Dave wheeled from the door and started down the corridor, Pug at his heels. When they had gone a few steps, Pug spoke. "What you figure to do, Dave?"

"Lee Pryor was a friend of mine," Dave answered, his voice controlled. "Are you in with me, Pug?"

"When did you have to look back to find me?" his friend drawled. "Go on."

Dave went on along the corridor.

He paused in front of a door from behind which came the murmur of voices. This was the commissioners' room. Dave placed his hand on the doorknob and stopped.

Ray Vincent, who owned the V Bar, Tom Forest, owner of Marks-ham's biggest store, and Dr. Freeman were the commissioners, and to Dave, outside the door, their voices were quite audible.

"Then whom would you suggest, Tom?" Freeman asked, his voice floating out over the transom. "I'll agree with you that Killane is the best man, but he won't do. If we appoint him, we precipitate a riot."

Forest's voice growled an indistinct answer, and Ray Vincent said: "You two got to get together, doc. I can't take a hand in this the way

things stand. I've built fence an' I'm buildin' more."

"We've got to have a sheriff," Forest snapped. "We—"

Dave turned the knob and opened the door. Standing there in the opening, leaning against the door jamb, he looked at the three startled men who sat about a table.

It was Forest who spoke first. The store owner got up and, with his hand resting on the table top, stared at the man lounging in the doorway.

"What do you want, Cloud?" he demanded.

Dave Cloud looked from Forest to Ray Vincent, and on to Doctor Freeman. "I heard that Lee Pryor had been killed," he said quietly. "I came in to see about that. What's been done, doctor?"

Freeman shook his head. "Lee was brought in," he said. "Handy Andy sent a wagon down from Killane's. We're busy here, Dave. If you'll excuse us—"

"I talked to Ruby," Dave interposed. "He said he'd quit."

Dr. Freeman was frowning. Vincent, too, looked annoyed. Only Tom Forest continued to stare at Dave, his eyes quizzical.

"Ruby quit, all right," Forest drawled. "What's on your mind, Dave?"

Dave stepped into the room. Pug stepped in behind him and closed the door quietly.

"Yo're lookin' for a sheriff," Dave Cloud said. "You don't need to look any farther."

"What do you mean?" Dr. Freeman demanded, and the suggestion of a smile began to form on Forest's lips.

"Before he was killed," Dave said deliberately, "Lee Pryor came out to our camp. He wanted us for deputies an' he appointed us. My com-

mission an' badge are in my pocket, an' Pug's got his."

"So?" Forest drawled.

"So"—Dave's voice was suddenly incisive—"you don't have to look any more for a sheriff. I'm taking the office over."

In the room there was silence following that statement, and then a grin broke across Forest's face. "Just like that, huh?" he drawled.

"Just like that!" Dave Cloud said flatly.

CHAPTER III

THE SHERIFF TAKES THE CALL

FOLLOWING Dave's bald statement, there was no movement in the room. Dave stood stock-still, just in the center, Pug a formidable bulk behind him. At the table, Forest, Dr. Freeman, and Ray Vincent sat and stared at Dave. Then the physician shrugged and Forest shifted in his chair.

"What makes you think we'll appoint you?" Vincent asked finally.

"Because," Dave answered, "you'll find nobody else that will step into this trouble that's comin' to the Curampaw." He let that statement sink in, looking unblinkingly from one man to the other. Behind him, Pug shifted position and parted his lips as though about to speak. Forest forestalled him.

"An' you are willing to step into it?"

"Not willin'"—Dave shook his head—"but I'm steppin' in."

"Why?" Forest was meeting Dave's eyes now, searching them.

Dave waited a moment before answering, gathering his thoughts together. "Lee Pryor helped raise me," he said finally. "Yesterday he came to camp an' asked my help. I stalled him off. I didn't figure I'd take the job of deputy. Lee rode away an' was killed. If Pug an' me

had gone with him he'd be alive today."

"Then you—" Vincent began.

"Wait, Ray," Forest commanded. "You figure that you owe it to Pryor, then, is that it, Dave?"

"That's it," Dave agreed.

"You want to clean up his murder?" Forest's eyes were sharp.

"Partly that," Dave spoke slowly. "There's somethin' else, too. Lee Pryor stood for the law. He looked at things from that angle. He wanted the Curampaw kept lawful. I kind of owe it to him to keep things that way."

Forest leaned back in his chair, his lips curved in a satisfied smile. Ray Vincent, leaning forward, threw a question at Dave. "Then you'll arrest any man that cuts a fence? You back the men who build fences?"

Dave shook his head. "I'll enforce the law," he repeated. "That'll be my job. I'll take no sides."

Vincent seemed ready to ask another question. It was Dr. Freeman who forestalled him.

"That is the duty of an officer," he approved. "I know you, Cloud. Your word is good."

"An' with me," Forest seconded.

"Now wait a minute," Vincent interposed. "I'm not satisfied yet. I want—"

"You said a minute ago that it was up to doc an' me to get together," Forest interrupted. "We've got together, Ray."

Ray Vincent leaned back, dissatisfaction written plainly on his face, and Forest looked at Dave. "The notice of your appointment will be in this week's paper," he drawled. "But I'm warnin', you, Dave, you're steppin' into trouble. You'll be alone, too. We can't back you too far. We've got ourselves to look after an' we—"

"He won't be alone," Pug announced sturdily. "Not by a long shot!"

Dave turned to look at his friend and his amber eyes were warm. "I won't be by myself, gentlemen," he announced, turning back to the commissioners. "Pug here will be chief deputy. An' now, if there's nothin' else, I've got work to do."

"Go ahead, Dave," Forest drawled. "An' forget that stuff I said about not backin' you. Ray an' doc an' me got too much at stake not to back you. I was just kind of testin' your nerve."

DAVE CLOUD nodded briefly, wheeled and made for the door. Pug followed him, reached the door and stopped. Dave went on down the corridor, but Pug tossed a thought back into the room.

"Dave an' me ain't so sure you was just testin' his nerve," he made succinct comment, and, turning, strode down the corridor.

In the sheriff's office, Dave found that Bill Ruby had departed. He went in and sat down at Lee Pryor's old desk. Pug crossed to the desk Ruby had cleaned out, sat down, pulled his Colt from his trousers because it thrust into his stomach, and waited.

Dave took his time. He sat studying the desk top. Presently he turned to Pug. "We're by ourselves," he said.

"Uh-huh," Pug agreed.

"Everybody in this county has got an ax to grind," Dave continued, voicing his thoughts aloud. "The businessmen will be afraid to chip in because it will hurt their business. The big fellows are puttin' up fence; the little fellows don't want 'em to. There's more little men than big men, Pug."

"Uh-huh," Pug drawled again.

"So it would be policy to play with the little men."

"You goin' to?"

"I never was a politician, Pug."

Pug's lips curled in a smile. "You fit into politics like a heifer in a flower bed," he said dryly. "What do you want me to do, Dave?"

"I want you to get lined out an' back to camp." Dave gave terse directions. "Right away. I want you to pick up a hand here in town an' a wagon. Better take two men an' a driver for the wagon. Bring the camp in an' put it in Forest's warehouse. Put the horses in Carl Sobran's corral. He's got a little pasture fenced an' they can run there."

"All of 'em?" Pug's eyes were wide.

"All of 'em," Dave said firmly. "We're goin' to need plenty of horses for a while, an' I'd rather have ours than rent from the livery barn."

Pug nodded, and Dave continued: "Bring in the steers that are in the trap. We'll sell them to Sobran. That's all, Pug."

Pug got up from his desk unhurriedly. "What are you goin' to do, Dave?"

"I'm goin' to start findin' out who killed Lee Pryor," Dave said pointedly. "Better pull out, Pug. It's past four o'clock. You won't hit camp till plenty late."

Pug thrust his Colt back in his pants, looked doubtfully at Dave, and then, turning, took his round-barreled body through the door.

FOR a time Dave sat at Lee Pryor's desk, thinking. Then, deliberately, he got up, unbuckled his chaps and, taking them off, hung them on the chair back. Freed of their weight, he walked out of the office and along the corridor until he reached the entrance. There was one place in Marksham where a

body would be taken, the barber shop. Dave walked down the street to it.

As always, there were men in the shop. The barber was behind his chair, shaving a customer, and three idlers sat on a bench. In the wide window two men played checkers. Dave Cloud stopped just inside the door.

"Where's Lee?" he asked quietly.

The barber gestured with the razor. "Back there," he answered. "Doc Freeman said to wait till they'd had the inquest before I fixed him up. Why, Dave?"

Now was as good a time as any, Dave thought, to make his announcement. "I'm acting sheriff now," he said quietly.

He walked on, not heeding the ripple of excitement his announcement had precipitated. Entering the back room, he closed the door behind him and looked at the long shape on the table. Dave crossed to the table and turned the blanket back. Lee Pryor, face impassive in death, stared up at him. The blue eyes were wide and sightless, and momentarily Dave expected the firm lips beneath the mustache to smile. For a long time he looked at the face of his dead friend, and then, steeling himself, he began his examination.

Lee Pryor had been shot four times—twice from the back by soft-nosed rifle bullets that tore great, gaping wounds when they emerged, once from the side and once from the front. Dave looked at the wounds, any one of which would have been deadly, examined the pockets of coat and trousers, and having finished, covered the body again. He walked out of the back room and through the shop, looking neither to right nor left. When he reached the street the sun was low.

Back in the sheriff's office, Dave sat for a time unmoving; then, methodically, he began to go through the drawers of Lee Pryor's desk. He was examining a list of the deputy sheriffs that Pryor had appointed when Amador Saiz, the jailer, came in. Dave looked up and smiled at the brown little man.

"Any prisoners, Amador?" he asked.

Amador shook his snowy head. "The commissioners tell me," he began in his careful English, "that you are the boss now."

"That's right," Dave agreed.

"An' I am the jailer?"

"Yo're the jailer."

Amador flashed a smile from under his white mustache. "*Gracias*," he said. "W'at you want me to do, Dave?"

"I want you to get a coroner's jury together," Dave instructed. "Here's a list of names. Get Doc Freeman an' I'll meet you at the barber shop. *Comprende*, Amador?"

"*Yo comprendo*," Amador assured him, and, taking the list Dave gave him, went out of the office.

He had been gone perhaps five minutes, and Dave was finishing the list of deputies, when there was a disturbance in the corridor. A man came rapidly along its length toward the sheriff's office and Dave laid the list aside. Ray Vincent appeared at the door, the planes of his face blurred, for the office was growing dark with the dusk.

"I thought you'd be here," Vincent snapped. "Yo're the sheriff now. Come on!"

Dave got up. "What's the disturbance?" he drawled.

"Plenty!" Vincent spoke with relish. "Vic McClellan an' Wade Samis are down at the Elite Saloon, an' so is Handy Andy Blare. They're havin' trouble."

"Over this fence business?" Dave asked.

"I don't know!" Vincent snapped. "Trilling is tryin' to get hold of the marshāl and I came for you. You declared yourself sheriff; now's a chance to do yore stuff."

"Let's go, then," Dave said quietly, and made for the door.

VINCENT, shorter than Dave, was half a step behind him all the way down the street. Dave swung along and Vincent hurried after him, striving to keep pace with Dave's long strides. Before they had gone a block from the courthouse there was a muffled crash of gunfire and Dave broke into a run. He saw men milling in front of the Elite, saw others running to join the growing crowd, but before he reached the front of the building the crowd dispersed, breaking and scattering like quail. A man came from the Elite, to fall sprawling across the walk, gather himself up and race off, and from Forest's store across the street three men came running out.

Reaching the edge of the scattering crowd, Dave slowed his pace, and half a dozen voices flung words at him.

"It's Handy Andy!"

"He's drunk!"

"He killed Samis!"

"McClellan got out!"

"Here's the sheriff!"

"He's inside, Dave—"

Dave Cloud reached out and seized the shoulder of a man. "What's happened here?" he demanded briskly. "Oh, it's you, McClellan. You were inside, weren't you?"

Victor McClellan, face white with fright, tried to answer the question, but for the moment, at least, he could do nothing but nod. Dave kept his grip on the man's shoulder.

shook him and repeated impatiently: "You were inside, weren't you?"

"It's Handy Andy!" McClellan found his voice. "You know how he is when he's drunk. He came in where Wade Samis an' me were standin' an' he said he wanted to talk to Wade. I moved off an' they talked. I couldn't hear what they said, but Andy was mad. Then Sid Crocker tried to get Andy to go out, an' he wouldn't. Sid went back to the rear room and Andy kept cussin' Wade till Wade knocked him down. Andy come up with a gun in his hand. He's killed Wade! I got out. I didn't have a gun an' he was shootin' at me! I—"

McClellan broke off. Dave had released his shoulder and was looking at the men grouped about. There was Ray Vincent, a taunting smile on his face as though he dared Dave to go and get the man who had done the shooting. Tom Forest was there; Yancy Yarbrow, tall and hawk-faced; Frank Trilling, a squat, formidable man; young Joe Chase with a shotgun across his arm; Gus Loren, Marksham's town marshal. These formed the immediate circle about Dave Cloud and Vic McClellan.

"What are you goin' to do, sheriff?" Vincent demanded. "It's yore job, you know. You picked it!"

Dave disregarded Vincent's sarcastic questioning. Giving the belt about his middle a hitch, he spoke quietly: "You fellows stay back. I'll go in for Handy Andy."

"He'll kill you!" McClellan shrilled. "He's already killed Wade."

"I'll go with you," young Joe Chase proffered eagerly. "I've got a shotgun. I'll—"

"Better stay back from the door," Dave warned. "Andy! Can you hear me in there?"

No answer came from within the Elite. Light streamed out from

above and below the half doors, came pouring through the windows into the dusk. The circle of men about Dave Cloud waited for the answer. None came.

Dave stepped forward toward the door. It was Tom Forest who caught his arm and held him back.

"No need of bein' a fool, Dave," he said warningly. "You know how Andy is when he's drunk. Got no sense at all. He'll kill you."

Dave shook off Forest's restraining hand. "Somebody has got to get him out," he drawled. "Like Vincent says, I elected myself to the job. Stay back, boys, out of line. Andy! Can you hear me?"

There was an answer then. A shot crashed inside the Elite, and one of the shutter doors swung wildly, banging back and forth under the impact of the bullet.

"You see?" Forest began. "I told you, Dave—"

DAVE went up the single step of the Elite in one swift, fluid motion. He paused beside the door, looked at the men clustered on the walk, out of line with the door, and his teeth bared in a mirthless grin.

"Andy!" he called again. "I'm comin' in. Can you hear me?"

No answer. Dave waited a moment. He had a plan, a play that he could make. There were few men as fast moving as he was. Dave knew that. It was not braggadocio, not foolish pride, but confidence in himself that prompted his plan, made possible the play he was about to try. He was fast, and he was a good shot. There would be time, a fraction of a second, for him to go through the door if Andy shot again. It would take that moment, that little point of time, for Andy to bring his gun level and cock it once more.

Dave believed that he could go through the door and shoot once in that fraction of time. He believed it firmly. He had no desire to kill Handy Andy Blare. Handy Andy was Phil Killane's foreman, and all across the Curampaw he was known and liked. But when Handy Andy had liquor in him he was mean as a snake. Lee Pryor had always handled Andy on a basis of friendship. When Handy Andy Blare went on the warpath, Lee Pryor or Phil Killane could tame him down. But Pryor was dead and Killane was not at hand. It was up to Dave Cloud; he had to handle it.

"Andy!" he called again, and, reaching out a hand, touched the shutters. His gun was in his other hand, and he stood poised.

Down on the sidewalk, Frank Trilling rasped an oath. "Give me that shotgun!" he demanded, reaching out to Chase. "Dave's goin' in when Andy shoots. I'll back him."

Chase wrenched the shotgun away. "I'll back him," he answered shrilly. "Wait, Dave!"

Dave Cloud did not even hear Chase. "Andy!" he called once more, and pushed open the shutter.

The shutter swung. On the sidewalk, Trilling cried, "Back him, then!" and shoved Joe Chase forward. Chase, lurching from the push, recoiled at the foot of the steps. In the Elite, Andy Blare's gun crashed and the shutter banged back.

Instantly Dave went in. He had been looking at the light, so his eyes were accustomed to it. He went through the shutters in a flash, throwing them back, stepping through and to one side all in a sin-

gle lithe motion. As he cleared the door his eyes encompassed the room in one swift, photographic glance. There was a man prone beside the bar, a bracket lamp glowed upon a wall, and overhead a chandelier with three brass-bowled lamps brought light to the room and a pool of shadow to its center.

At the far end of the bar Andy Blare stood, crouched a little, heavy gun poised above his head. Dave's gun came up and he took a snapshot at that upraised arm.

It was foolish, foolhardy and insane. To shoot at an arm and lifted hand when there was presented the broad target of a man's body and when that man meant murder, was clearly crazy. But Dave Cloud took that foolhardy risk, took the insane chance and made good!

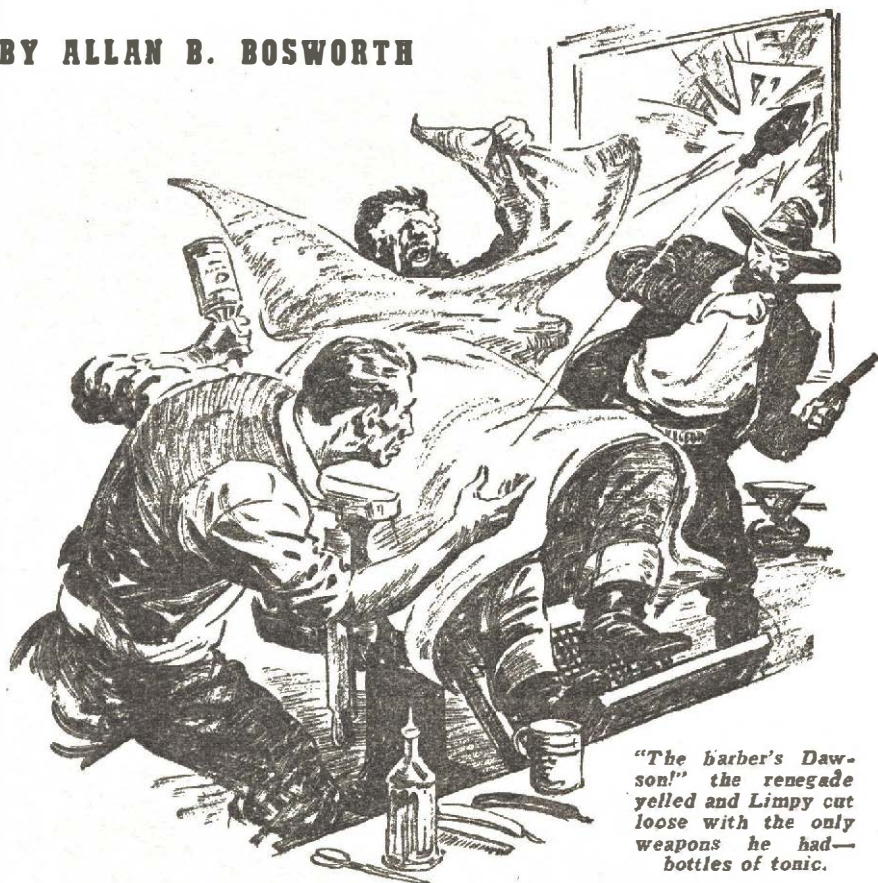
He did not hit gun or arm; that was too much to expect. But he did send his slug tearing between the arm and Andy Blare's ear, did send his lead crashing into the bracket lamp behind Andy.

The lamp shattered, clanging, glass flying. And Blare ducked and dropped his gun. Behind Dave Cloud, in the doorway, a man appeared and jerked up a double-barreled shotgun.

There was a crashing roar. A man yelped shrilly, and Dave Cloud leaped toward the wall. Under the shattered bracket lamp, Handy Andy Blare lurched with the impact of the shock of a charge of buckshot, tried to recover, and then slid slowly down the wall, slumping into an inert huddle. Powder smoke swirled inside the room, eddying up. Joe Chase stood in the doorway of the saloon, an expression of utter incredulity on his face.

Who cut Phil Killane's fence? In asking to wear the sheriff's badge, has Dave Cloud taken chips in a range war? Is Andy Blare dead? The second installment of this pulsing cow-country drama will appear in next week's issue.

BY ALLAN B. BOSWORTH



"The barber's Dawson!" the renegade yelled and Limpy cut loose with the only weapons he had—bottles of tonic.

ONCE IN A SADDLE

WHEN there was no customer waiting to be shaved or shorn in the tiny barber shop that fronted his living quarters, Limpy Jones liked to come out on the wooden sidewalk, with its shifting pattern of sunlight and shadow cast by the rustling cottonwood trees. He brought his own chair with him, to tilt back against the wall with the others from Tilden's Pool Hall, next door, and he always took the chair back in, too. The loungers would have whittled it

to bits in no time; that was why Pete Tilden studded all the pool-hall chairs with tacks that would gap a knife blade.

Out front, Limpy Jones could listen to the wind and watch it roll dust along the main street of Rosario; he could look down the street and across the gray-green shimmer of mesquite to where the Guadalupes lifted their wild-blue shadows into the sky.

There was a wistfulness in his gray eyes as he did this, just as there

was when he watched a rider toe his stirrup at the long hitching rack and ride away from town.

It was different when horsemen loomed on the road, coming in. Limpy seemed able to hear hoofs a mile away; his eyes turned intent and sharp, then, and held a glint that was like sun on a gunsight. Long before a man's features were visible, Limpy could say from the manner of his riding whether he was friend or stranger.

Limpy had been in Rosario five or six years, a quiet, steady man with a poker face and a tan burned so deeply it never went away. He lived in three rooms at the rear of the shop with his wife—a pretty, brown-haired woman people seldom saw—and a pig-tailed daughter just starting to school. Nobody really knew anything about him.

"There goes the one barber in the world who never opens his gab!" Pete Tilden laughed when Limpy picked up his chair and went in to wait on a customer. "I reckon that game leg kinda sobered him down. Horse must have rolled on it. I figure Limpy used to be a top-string cow-hand, way he knows horses. Too bad."

He said this without meaning to express any sympathy. Nobody ever had the impulse to feel sorry for Limpy Jones. He walked with a hobble, but he looked healthy and tough, and he appeared to be quite happy. Sometimes, sitting outside, he sang snatches of an old range song while he looked toward the Guadalupe range:

"Once in the saddle, I used to go dashing,
Oh, once in the saddle, I used to ride gay;
I first took to drinking, and then to card playing,
Got shot by a gambler, and I'm dying today."

"Yes, sir," Pete said, and absent-mindedly dulled his own knife on a chair arm before he remembered the tacks. "I'll bet there was a time when Limpy could top anything that wore saddle leather. Ever notice how he takes hold of a razor strop? Like it was a latigo and he was about to cinch up. Wish I could strop a razor the way he does. Never seen a man so quick with his hands."

DEKE WILLIAMS was in Limpy's barber chair, getting fixed up for the dance at the courthouse that night. This was quite a job. Deke had been riding the Winged W range for a month steady; he not only needed a haircut on his face, but he was hungry for conversation.

"Gimme the works, Limpy," he said, and lay back with a restful sigh. "Nice day, ain't it?"

"Fine."

"Looks like it might rain, though."

Limpy grunted.

"Well, we need it. Thunderclouds pilin' up over the Guadalupe. I figured yesterday it was goin' to rain. Flies started comin' in the house. I see you got some, too."

Limpy didn't say anything. He trimmed off the worst of Deke's beard and made lather in a mug while a hot towel muffled the cowboy's speech. The door opened and a big, broad-shouldered man almost filled it.

Limpy's eyes had the glinting gun-sights in them again, but his face showed nothing. He had never seen this man before. The stranger was quietly dressed in a gray suit; his trousers came down over his boot tops, and the boots showed the marks of spur straps. For a big man, he moved with a strange quietness to the waiting bench, nodded to Limpy and sat down.

"Howdy," Limpy said. "Won't be long."

The stranger picked up the San Antonio paper and began to read. Every now and then he lowered the sheet slightly to watch Limpy Jones work.

Outside a ranch wagon rolled slowly down toward the feed yard, which was around the corner from the barber shop, and there was a brisk *clop-clop* of hoofs that jerked Limpy's eyes to the window. Three riders from the Seven N halted at the hitching rack. And then there came a sound on the wooden sidewalk as though made by a man with only one boot.

The stranger saw Limpy pause expectantly; his face lighted up with a mixture of pity and pleasure. Once more the screen door swung open on the brightness of the morning. It was a small boy, freckled and skinny, who stood in the entrance leaning on a crutch.

"Hi, Mr. Jones!" he shrilled.

Limpy said: "Hi, there, Speck. How's tricks?"

"Fine, Mr. Jones. I was wonderin' if you could use me after school today?"

Limpy's poker face split in a grin. "Sure can. Lots of cowboys will be wantin' their boots shined for that dance. Big business for you, Speck."

Speck shifted awkwardly. "You think it'll take long to save up all that money, Mr. Jones?"

"Not long—that is, not very long," Limpy said kindly. And the stranger, having an adult's perception, knew he was lying.

Speck said with a sudden excitement: "There comes one, Mr. Jones! Let's see you get him!"

"All right," Limpy chuckled. He put down his razor. A big bluebottle fly had buzzed into the shop and was swooping in loud, angry spirals

against the white-painted walls. Limpy hobbled to the center of the room, while the boy watched open-mouthed.

Then Limpy's right hand blurred out and up. The droning sound switched off with that swift motion—and the barber reached his hand toward Speck with the fly caught between thumb and forefinger. He grinned as he drowned the insect under the faucet.

"Gee!" breathed Speck in admiration. "Gee!"

"Better shut the door and get on to school, before more flies come in," Limpy said. "See you later."

He finished with Deke Williams. The big stranger removed his coat and vest. "I'll have a shave," he said, and stepped into the chair.

Limpy began work in silence. Deke admired himself in the mirror and said: "How much dinero's the kid got in the mug now, Limpy?"

"Little over twenty dollars," said the barber.

"Here's another buck for him. I'll stop in this evenin' for a shine. So long."

His boots clicked out the door. The stranger's voice came through the steaming towel. "That's a lot of money for a shine, ain't it?"

"Speck's saving up for an operation on his leg. He'll have to go to San Antone and it'll cost a lot."

"Oh," said the stranger. "Reckon I'll have to come in for a shine, too. Nice kid."

"Fine," said Limpy.

He removed the towel and applied the lather with a brush. He began rubbing it in, and when the man in the chair spoke the words were given a jerky sound: "That fly trick—pretty good—never saw it—before."

Limpy grunted and took up the razor. While he was stropping it, the big man turned his head and

their eyes met. Limpy saw something in the other's gaze that halted the swift rhythm of his stroke.

"In fact," said the stranger, "I never even heard of but one man who was ever fast enough with his hands to pluck a fly out of the air. They say that used to be a favorite saloon trick of a man named Jack Dawson."

"Jack Dawson?" repeated Limpy. He was stropping the blade furiously now, and his face was a mask that had whitened a little under the tan. He could feel the pulse hammering in his throat.

"Yeah," drawled the big man. "Jack Dawson. Used to ride with the three Sadler boys—when there was three of 'em. You must have heard of him. There was a mail robbery in Arizona and the postmaster was murdered. Seems like Dawson and Ed Sadler fell out over the loot. Dawson killed Ed and hightailed it."

Limpy Jones sent the razor gliding down the man's left cheek. "That so?" he inquired. The razor was steady as a rock and so was his voice. "Must have been before my time out West, here."

"Might have. Nearly eight years ago. Bob and Irv Sadler are still looking for Jack Dawson, too."

Limpy turned his customer's head and shaved the other cheek.

"Law's still looking for Jack, too," the man in the chair drawled. "When it's the United States mails, with murder thrown in, the law don't forget, either."

Limpy murmured: "No, I guess not," and the razor was a heavy thing, grown cumbersome in his skilled hands. While he rubbed fresh lather into the man's chin his eyes strayed over to the gray coat and vest. On the left front of the vest was a spot darker than the rest. It was shield-shaped.

United States marshals wore badges shaped like that.

THE razor slithered across the man's throat, making a dry, scraping sound—the only sound in the room. It was still early; outside, children passed on their way to school. Deke Williams emerged from the pool hall and swung up on his horse, laughing as one of the school kids might have laughed. With a joyous, free sound. Limpy thought.

The man who called himself Limpy Jones was wielding the razor in a purely mechanical fashion; he stared unwinkingly at his hands and did not see them, or the officer's white-lathered face. He was seeing Ed Sadler, lean, hawk-nosed, with a deadly prison pallor on his face, leaning toward him across a tiny campfire in the hills. The other two Sadler brothers were loosening their cinches, lifting down the mailbags.

As if he had been in the room, Limpy heard Ed Sadler rasp: "You are in it as much as we are, Dawson! You killed that hombre!"

His own voice answered hotly: "You're a liar, Ed!"—and Sadler went for his gun. It was halfway out of leather before Jack Dawson made any move at all. He kicked a shower of blazing embers from the fire, there was that blur of his right hand, and two guns roared almost together. The difference between them was the difference between life and death. And then he was in the saddle, riding, the curses of the other two men behind him, hearing their bullets sing past.

The law wouldn't have believed him, even then. So he drifted. Punching cattle in the New Mexico malpais, in the Texas Panhandle, in the Nueces brush. A top hand. Then a horse rolled with him, and a brown-haired girl nursed him back to health

and took the name he had taken—Jones.

The law wouldn't believe him now, either. His eyes and his mind came back into sharp focus. The only man who knew reclined trustingly, comfortably, in his chair—with a razor at his throat.

Limpy knew the desperate thought, thrust it aside and closed his mind against it. But it came back to start chill perspiration on his forehead. One slip of that razor blade and the man would be dying. One swift stroke. And who could say that the man hadn't caused the accident himself? Sneezed with sudden violence, perhaps. Or unaccountably jerked upright in the chair.

Limpy glanced toward the street. Nobody passing. Nobody to see. He looked at the razor again, and his hand shook as he wiped its blade on a piece of paper. He put the keen steel to the officer's throat. And then took it away.

He was a coward. Afraid to do it. Afraid to save himself. Or, was it really cowardice? Limpy didn't know. It was cowardly to shoot a man in the back; he'd never done that. He thought: It'd take a worse coward to do this. But it's him or me—

The door behind him opened and closed. A thin voice said: "Good-by, daddy! I'm going to school now."

Limpy Jones laid the razor on the shelf and knelt on one knee to take the little girl in his arms. She had brown hair plaited and tied with a gay red ribbon; her eyes were big and blue.

"Good-by, Mary Lou," he said. "Better hurry, or you'll be late."

She skipped out the front. Limpy wrung out a hot towel and wiped the lather from the big man's chin and throat. He swung the chair's back forward so that his customer was

sitting erect and asked: "Shave all the neck, or feather-edge?"

"Feather-edge," said the other. He gave Limpy a peculiar look that was both keen and kind. And a minute later, when he was out of the chair and slipping on his coat, he said: "Sort of a coincidence, that fly trick reminding me of Jack Dawson. My name's Greer. I'm a Federal officer. Wouldn't tell you, except I think you can keep your mouth shut. Where's that mug with the crippled kid's money in it?"

Limpy could only point to a shaving mug that stood between two bottles of tonic. He heard a dollar clink into the other coins.

"You can keep quiet about that, too," said Greer. "I'll probably see you this evening when I get that shine." He started toward the door and then stopped. "Oh, yes. What I meant to say was that I'm in Rosario because we had a tip that Irv and Bob Sadler are headed here. Seems like they're planning a little bank job. Well, I'll drop in again."

Limpy nodded, and made his dry tongue work. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, drop in again!"

So now there was no escape. If Greer trapped the Sadlers, they'd take their revenge by maintaining that it was Jack Dawson who shot the Arizona postmaster. And if the Sadler boys saw him, recognized him!

He turned to the mirror and slowly raised his hand to cover his chin. In those days he had a mustache and had just come out of the desert with several weeks' growth of sandy beard. Maybe he looked a little different, now.

GREER only nodded to Limpy Jones when he came in that evening and sat on Speck's bootblack stand. Limpy heard Speck say: "Gee, thanks, mister, but you'd better take

your change!" And then Greer went back into the street. He was wearing a gun now, under his coat.

There were other men in the shop; it seemed that everybody waited until evening, and Limpy had to keep open until nine o'clock. An unreasonable weariness came upon him after he had closed the shop, and he sat staring over a cup of coffee until his wife wanted to know what was worrying him.

Limpy managed a grin then, and said: "Nothing, honey."

When the lights had been blown out, Limpy stood for a moment looking in the top dresser drawer. A pair of six-guns lay there among clothing and a faint odor of moth balls. He shut the drawer on the sight and smell; a family man had no business to be packing guns.

And, in the sleepless night, he heard horses coming down the alley behind their living quarters, heading for the feed yard. Two horses. Limpy arose and went into the kitchen as if to get a drink of water; he pulled aside the curtain his wife had made, and looked out.

The riders were only vague shapes jogging past in the hazy moonlight. They might have been anybody. Limpy went back to bed, and after a time the rain that Deke Williams had predicted really arrived, and its drone on the roof lulled him to sleep.

The bright, freshened morning brought cheerfulness. Mary Lou left early for school, her mother going with her as far as a neighbor's house. Limpy had the whole place to himself. He swept out the shop and shaved himself, thinking: "Greer'd have a hell of a time proving that I've ever been anybody but Limpy Jones, the barber!" And he sang softly, in a monotone:

"Once in the saddle, I used to go dashing,
Oh, once in the saddle, I used to ride gay—"

The screen door jarred. Limpy turned and the gun glint leaped into his eyes and his heart missed a beat. The first man would have been tall if his shoulders had not been drooped in a perpetual, long-armed crouch. He had a craggy face, half hidden now by whiskers, and smoky eyes. He was Bob Sadler!

And that was Irv Sadler, the younger brother, dropping to the bench to wait. He had a beard, too. Not just a few weeks' growth of whiskers, but a beard intended for a disguise.

Bob stepped to the chair, letting his sultry glance sweep the room. "Shave," he grunted, and sat down.

Limpy nodded. When he had spread the apron over Bob's long body he saw the outlaw move his arms under it, and knew that at least one gun was out of its holster.

Irv Sadler looked at him closely, and Limpy tried to keep his face averted. Now he wished he had taken those guns from the dresser drawer. Or if there were just some way of sending word to Marshal Greer!

"Want it all off?" Limpy asked.

"Clean," said Bob Sadler.

Outside, along the wooden sidewalk, came that *clump-clump* that sounded like a man with one boot-heel. Limpy rubbed the lather into Bob Sadler's dark whiskers and waited for Speck to appear. There was a kinship between the man and boy, the bonds of a mutual affliction. And now the sharpest pang Limpy had known stabbed him as he thought of what would happen if he were taken away, or shot down by one of these two men. The hospital fund he was building up slowly for Speck might never be completed. It would take years as it was, but some day it would be there if Limpy Jones stayed in the barber shop.

"Hi, Mr. Jones!"

Limpy forced a grin. "Hi, Speck!" And then he thought of a way that might work. "Come in. Say, you know that fellow who gave you a dollar last night—the man in the gray suit?"

Speck nodded. "Yep. I tried to make him take his change, but he wouldn't. Gosh, it won't be long, Mr. Jones. I got nearly twenty-four dollars!"

"No, it won't be long." Limpy began shaving Bob Sadler, trying to act and speak casually. "I wondered if you'd go to the hotel and tell him that he forgot what I owe him, too. Tell him if he'll come to the shop right away, he can collect in full."

"Sure," said Speck. "I'll go right away. I— Look, Mr. Jones, there's a mosquito. Can you catch a skeeter same as you can catch a fly?"

Limpy felt his face grow drawn and tight. "I don't think so," he said slowly. "Go tell that man, Speck."

Irv Sadler was slowly rising as Speck's crutch thumped the sidewalk. The outlaw's smoky eyes were aflame with a yellow fierceness, and he was holding his breath.

Limpy knew that Speck would never find Greer in time. In the next few ticks of his heart he thought of many things—the guns in the dresser drawer—the night in the Arizona hills when one of them blasted the life out of another Sadler—Mary Lou and his wife, and how thankful he was that they were not in the place. And Marshal Greer, and the man who rose yonder in a twisting crouch—

"Dawson!" Irv Sadler said, half in a whisper. His brother did not hear; Limpy had placed a hot towel on his face, and it covered his ears. "Dawson! I thought I seen some-thin' familiar about you!"

Limpy grinned. "Makin' a mis-

take, ain't you?" he asked pleasantly, but the intentness did not leave Irv Sadler's face, and there was still the killer-flame in his eyes.

He had hands on the butts of his guns; his elbows were close in against his sides, easy and flexible. He wanted Bob Sadler to be in on this, too, to know about it. He raised his voice: "Bob! Bob; It's Dawson! It's Dawson shavin' you! Get out of the chair, Bob, so I can blow the skunk in two!"

Bob Sadler's long body twisted, his eyes widening. The towel fell to the floor. Limpy Jones stood with a soap-filled shaving brush in his hand and counted the seconds he had to live.

Then, as the man in the chair breathed, "Well, I'll be damned!" and started to sit up, Limpy stopped counting. He let the shaving brush dip and sweep in a quick, stabbing gesture that thrust the soapy bristles squarely into Bob Sadler's smoky eyes; before the first howl of pain came from the big man, Limpy was ducking low behind the chair as Irv Sadler's guns roared.

THE mirror above Limpy's head crashed and splintered. He snatched a bottle of tonic by its neck and threw it with a sweeping, underhand pitch. Gun smoke swirled in the room; Irv was about to trigger again when Bob Sadler lurched to his feet on the step of the chair, trying to get the apron to his smarting eyes.

Bob was in the way of the guns and before Irv could leap aside in the narrow room as the bottle whizzed past his head and smashed the front window, Limpy caught the corner of the chair and gave it a quick whirl.

The blinded outlaw lost his balance and fell heavily. Limpy yanked

a razor strop from its hook on the chair and leaped for Irv Sadler with the quickness of a cat.

His good leg slammed its foot into Bob Sadler's groin, and the big man doubled up with a new spasm of pain. The strop flicked out like the lash of a whip, under the flaming guns. It cracked smartly, laying open a cut on Irv's hawklike nose. And then Limpy's shoulder drove into the man's stomach.

Irv Sadler gasped and brought one gun around in a smashing arc. It missed Limpy's head and sent a red-hot stab of pain through his left shoulder. He grunted savagely, and whipped his clenched right hand upward with all the speed it took to catch a fly on the wing.

The bruising shock of matted beard against his knuckles was a pain and a fierce joy. Irv's head popped back, he rocked forward on his feet. In a flash, Limpy grabbed a gun from his relaxing right hand.

"Set where you are, Bob!" he panted. Irv Sadler dropped to the bench, caught it, and knelt there in a queer slumped position, shaking his head and making little gasping noises. Limpy kicked out with his game leg and knocked the gun from Irv's other hand.

Bob Sadler, tears streaming down his face and his knuckles rubbing at his eyes, was just beginning to see when Greer ran heavily into the shop. There was a group of men collecting outside, attracted by the shots.

Limpy Jones handed Greer the gun, and hobbled to his barber chair. He leaned against it and panted: "All right. All right, Greer. Everybody's here."

Greer clicked handcuffs on Irv Sadler first. The younger brother lurched to his feet, blood oozing

from the welt on his swollen nose. He yelled: "If we go, that hombre goes, too! You know who he is? He's Jack Dawson! He's the skunk that killed that postmaster in Arizona!"

Speck was in the doorway, his eyes wide, the freckles standing out on his face like fragments of bran in a bucket of milk. Limpy saw the crippled lad's look, and swallowed hard.

Bob Sadler groaned: "That's right! He's Jack Dawson! He killed my brother, too!"

Greer yanked the apron from Bob's neck and gouged the gun into his ribs while he produced another pair of handcuffs. "Shut up!" he ordered. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"But he's Dawson, I tell you—"

"Shut up, I said!" roared the marshal. He looked toward the crowd and saw a gaunt man shoving his way through. "Here, sheriff! Would you mind escorting these boys to your jail? Before they go, though, I want 'em to realize what a mistake they made. Who is this barber, here?"

The sheriff's Adam's apple rose and fell. "Why," he blinked, "he's Limpy Jones, o' course."

Greer smiled. "See there, Irv? Hear that, Bob? The hombre you're talking about has been dead for years. A . . . a horse rolled on him."

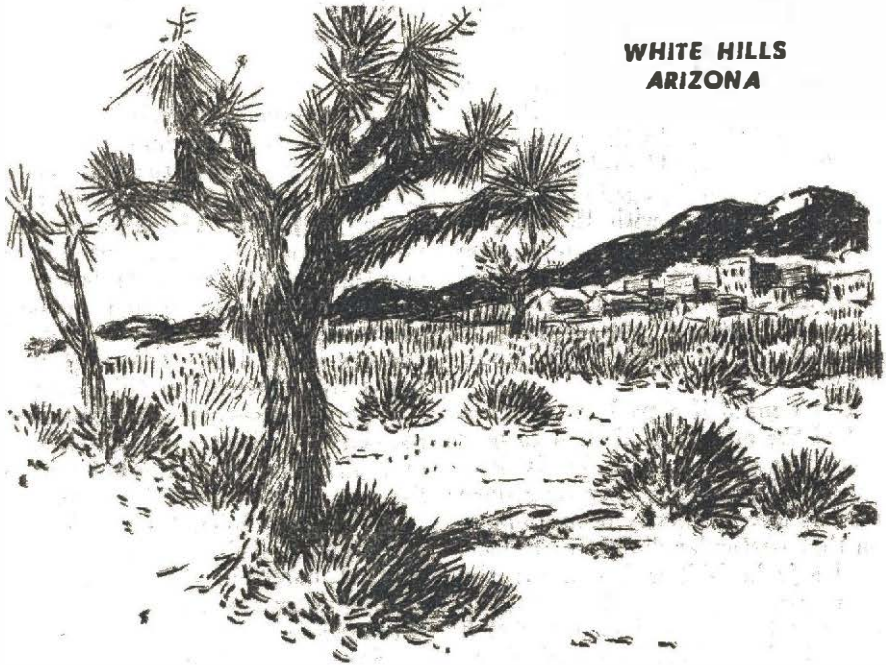
Limpy saw Speck smile. The boy's face began to shimmer and Limpy suddenly realized there was moisture in his eyes. He wiped it away, and saw Greer grinning at him.

"Thousand-dollar reward for each of them hombres," he drawled. "Looks to me like Speck will be going to San Antone before long!"

Limpy drew a deep breath and grinned back.

"Sure!" he said.

GHOST TOWNS OF THE WEST



WHITE HILLS
ARIZONA

BY JOHN A. THOMPSON

ABOUT thirty miles south of Boulder Dam where the first Joshua trees upraise their eerie, spike-tipped arms, you can, on a clear day, see the glint of sun flashing on metal to the left far across the broad, semi-arid Sacramento Valley. The glint comes from a cove in the base of a series of low-lying, rounded black mountains vividly splashed with geometrical patches of white rock much in the fashion of war-time camouflage.

The queerly marked dome-shaped mountains are the White Hills from which millions in bonanza silver ore was won right at the surface back in the '80s and '90s when the camp was one of the most important min-
WS—3C

ing towns in Arizona. The sun glint comes from a tin roof in the straggling cluster of dilapidated, decaying, broken-windowed wooden buildings—all that's left of White Hills today.

If you want to visit the ruins of this old ghost town and have a picnic lunch amid the memories of a lusty hellorado of a former era, turn off paved Highway 93 just below the first filling station south of Boulder Dam. Then point your car along the sandy trail that leads out across the big, stone-filled wash and up the broad talus slope toward that daytime beacon of a tin roof flashing in the sun. Six miles will bring you into White Hills.

The hotel is open. Just walk in through the lobby, past the bedrooms lined on either side with their doors ajar or hanging crazily from broken hinges. Inside some of the dusty, cobwebby rooms are rusted iron bedsteads, here and there a warped old wooden dresser with the drawers missing. In the back is the big dining room. The tables are still there. Spread out your lunch on one of them, and eat with the ghostly wraiths of silver kings, men who mined White Hills in its heyday and sometimes took out as high as thirty thousand dollars' worth of the gleaming white metal in a single week.

Don't mind if a pack rat scurries out of the adjoining kitchen to peer up at you with its sharp, beady little eyes. It has been a long time since crumbs have regularly been dropped on that particular dining-room floor. And a jackrabbit may come to the open back door and stare in from the desert glare outside. But watch the rotted floorboards, and don't go poking a bare hand into piles of debris junked in any dark corners. Remember rattlesnakes like the cool, remembered shade of such places, too.

One thing, you don't have to tip the waiter when you're through. And there are no toothpicks by the cashier's desk on the way out. There is no cashier, either. Thirsty? Just step across the street. Lined up like three old soaks are the leaning hulls, sun-faded and disreputable, of what were formerly a trio of White Hills' most popular emporiums—a ghostly triumvirate of booze parlors.

The fittings are gone. And in places the floors have been ripped up by persons looking for twenty-dollar gold pieces that might have been dropped through the cracks back in

the days when the saloons were a shouting, roistering jam of suddenly rich miners, and it required three bartenders a shift to tend the pleasure of the crowds that bellied up to the bar.

IF your imagination is good and you can handle yourself in such a company of rip-roaring, lusty ghosts, shove right up to front and name "yer pizen." Listen closely and you'll hear a lot of talk about mining and the mines in White Hills.

"Why, yuh long-eared galoot, what do yuh mean the only good Indians is dead ones? Wasn't it a Injun that opened up this camp?"

From a far corner, a bewhiskered, red-shirted miner rolls his bleary eyes and thumps on the bar with a fist like an eight-pound sledge.

"Who shesh In'ian? Lesh all have a drink to the In'ian. The damn bes' yuh got, bartender. S'on me."

You are getting interested, so you listen closer.

"Sure," says another prospector. "I knew him. He was a Hualapai. Belonged up here in this northern part of Mojave County. Come from over around Gold Basin and one day he shows a piece of heavy, wax-looking stuff to a cowboy friend of his and tells him it's rich silver ore. The cowboy don't know whether he's bein' spoofed or not. This wax stuff you can cut with a knife don't look like no silver dollar to him. So he takes a thin slice of it and heats it in a fire and as it melts a little drop o' pure metal rolls out. That looks more like the real McCoy to this waddy and he asks him does he know where there's a lot of it and the Injun grins and says he does.

"Still the cowpuncher is from Missouri. He ain't sure, and he's gotta be showed, so he takes a piece of the

soft, waxy rock and shows it to a friend of his who don't lose no time. He gets him a minin' partner and they find out where the stuff comes from. It's right here in White Hills. They stake twenty claims of the landscape right where they hit the first outcrop, and they ain't long in sellin' 'em out for a hundred and seventy-five thousand cash."

There's a pause. A little old wrinkle-faced Irish miner with his blue eyes and a belligerent red face elbows in to the front row and buys a drink for himself and his partner. "They wasn't too smart at that," he says. "Them claims run two hundred and fifty dollars a ton for better'n a year and then they was sold to an English outfit for a million and a half."

"That's right," agrees a newcomer, resting his pick and shovel against the brass rail at his feet. "That there strike, the Norma, Occident, and African Daisy were some o' the best silver claims I seen anywhere."

"Don't forget the Grand Diamond and the G. A. R.," adds the Irishman. "I worked a lease on the G. A. R. and hit a pocket that run three thousand ounces to the ton."

By this time you can hear the clink of chips at the gaming tables in the back of the room, and the whir of the little white ball bouncing over the red and black numbered slots in the spinning roulette wheel.

A dude in town to buy mines and pick up options irrelevantly mentions laundry. "I tell you it's criminal," he says. "The price those Chinamen down the street charge for washing and ironing a white shirt is outrageous."

A laugh goes up from the crowd. "I tell you how that happens, pilgrim," volunteers an old-timer. "Them chinks come in soon after

the camp opened. Got 'em a lot an' buildin' at a fair price, and I ain't sayin' who sold it to 'em 'cause he gets kinda proddy about it at times. Well, the Chinamen they sets up their tubs and ironin' rigs and a big stack o' them Chineese laundry tickets out on the front counter and is ready to do business.

"Just about the time the first customer hands 'em some wash, one of the Chinamen lets out a howl and comes tearing around all excited. Water! They'd plumb forgot all about water and of course there ain't no pipes in the buildin', nor anywhere else for that matter. So they go pilin' out and hunt up this jasper that sold 'em the place. Yeah, this fellow says no doubt they gotta have water to wash clothes, and bein' as he controls what water there is in town from a spring up in the hills, he'll be glad to deliver same at the usual haulage rates.

"All excited the Chinamen want to know how much, and this guy don't bat an eyelid when he tells them one dollar a barrel. Them chinks hit the ceilin' in a chorus. First, they're all for pullin' out. But all their loose dinero is tied up in the laundry plant and they can't. So they gotta buy water at a buck a barrel.

"That's how come White Hills kin boast the highest-priced Chineese laundry in the United States today. And that ain't all. Them Chinamen has got a duty quota rigged up fer a barrel o' water that's a caution. They'll wash in a tubful o' water till it's so thick it won't hardly bend no more."

The dude shudders and walks out talking to himself. By this time you are beginning to enjoy White Hills. You stick around and learn how the leasers have been fooled in the matter of stores by the "big company,"

the one that paid a million and a half for the best silver claims.

THE company opened the first store in town. Prices were high. Anyhow, free-born Americans always did like to buy where there's a little competition. In White Hills, you hear, there was a lot of talk about boycotting the company store.

After all the huge, creaking ore wagons hauled by teams of eight, ten and sometimes twelve horses took the rich products of the mines out across the sandy desert of the Sacramento Valley regularly, and then over the high mountains down to Hardyville on the Colorado River for shipment by boat to Yuma. Some of the ore was sent clear overseas to Swansea, Wales, for treatment.

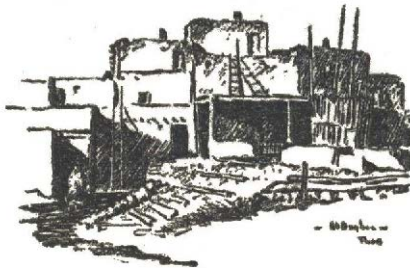
It ought to be possible to get supplies in. About the time plans were perfected, a new store opened up. Two fellows ran it. Prices weren't much lower, a cent less here and there, and some things were the same as in the company store across the street. Nevertheless, the boys flocked to the new establishment, determined to show the "big company" it couldn't control everything.

And they traded at the new place

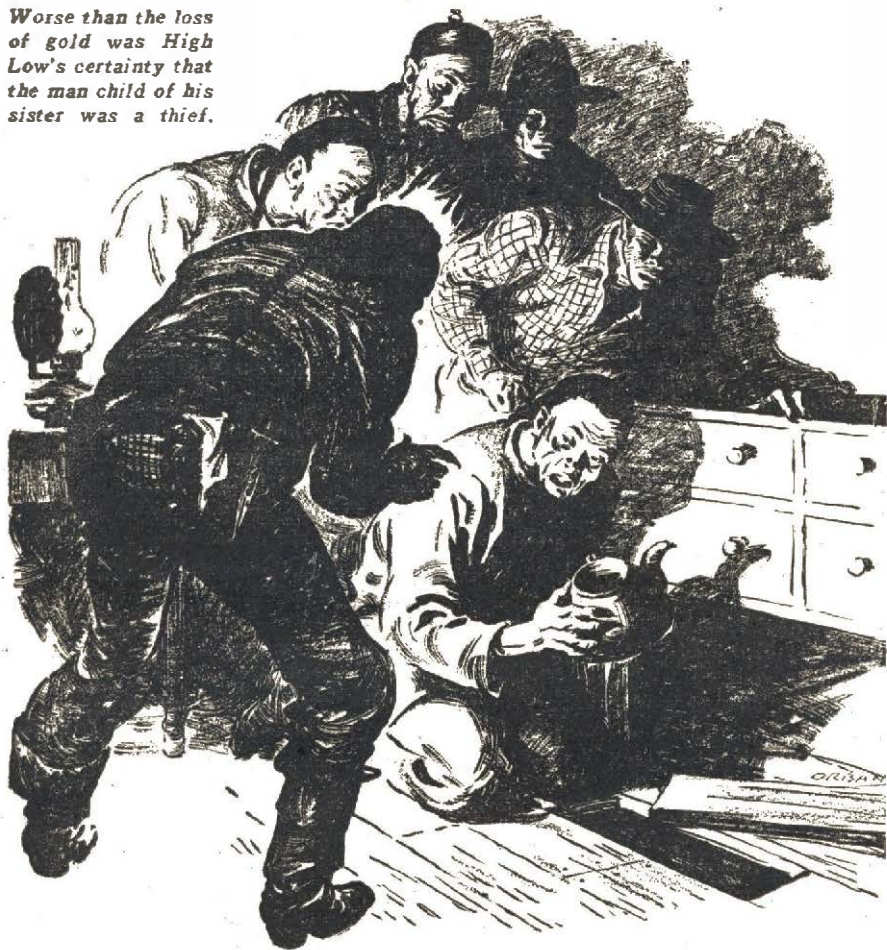
for more than a year before they discovered the payoff. Maybe you've already guessed it. The fellows that opened the new place were company men. The company really owned both stores all the time!

Suddenly you look around. Faces seem to fade. It's getting dark in the old saloon. Except for shadows along the rotting walls, the place is empty. You rush out into the swift desert dusk. Behind the ancient structures that line the street is the steep slope of the tunnel-scarred hill from which the silver millions poured until the close-to-surface highgrade was exhausted, and the downward toppling price of silver made further exploration unattractive. The tunnels are grim, black holes.

Turning toward the street your car seems warm and friendly as you start down the trail through a forest of mocking Joshua trees to Highway 93 again, and the paved road that will lead you back to civilization. After all you met a lot of pleasant ghosts in the remnants of the town that once was White Hills. But daytime is the time to meet them. It's at night that the shooting starts.



Worse than the loss of gold was High Low's certainty that the man child of his sister was a thief.



HIGH LOW'S JACKPOT

BY MOJAVE LLOYD

High Low started to lock up his little Ivory Duck Café for the night, then crouched and glued an anxious eye to the glass in the door. He watched his nephew, Wing Lung, pick his way through the milling mob of carousing miners crowding the plank walk on the far side of the

street and duck into a narrow opening between the Red Dog Bar and Fat Bong's laundry. And as he watched, despair filled High Low's celestial soul.

In the twenty years that he had been operating his Ivory Duck in the lawless mining town of Eureka,

Nevada, the gimlet-eyed little Chinaman had suffered much pain and woe, but nothing like what now threatened him, for this disturbed the very bones of his honorable ancestors. Chaining and barring the door, he scuttled for the kitchen, turned the lamp wick low and hunched on a stool, his mind a prey to bitter thoughts.

Six months before, his beloved sister in faraway Foochow had sent her only man child to him, beseeching him to watch over Wing Lung as if the youth were his own son. This High Low had tried earnestly to do. But the headstrong Wing Lung had proved a disgrace to the blood. High Low's kindly sermons had fallen on deaf ears. Now, as his uncle had just seen, Wing Lung was frequenting the fan-tan dive run by the wicked Fat Bong in the rear of his laundry. High Low wondered where his nephew was getting the money for gambling. That caused another thought to sting him.

Being a man whose strict honesty was as unquestioned as the rising of the sun, High Low had been intrusted by five of his countrymen, who were washing gold on Drunk Squaw Creek, with five buckskin pokes of gold dust worth one thousand dollars each, the same to be concealed by him till the five made the trip to the mint in San Francisco.

At this very instant that gold should be reposing beneath the floor in the far corner of the kitchen. High Low himself had secreted it there, while Wing Lung had watched him. Now a horrible suspicion stung the old Chinaman like a wasp. He jumped up, with fear gripping his kindly heart. Then his wasted body went rigid. A stealthy knock had rattled the kitchen door.

A chill wriggled down High Low's

bent spine. His nerveless fingers toyed with the black bow on the end of his long cue. The knock was repeated.

High Low peered through a tiny hole he had bored in the wall behind a stew kettle. Then he unlocked the door and admitted five of his countrymen clad in the muck-stained red flannel shirts and patched Levis of miners.

The scrawny little café man locked the door again, turned up the wick in the tin wall lamp, then kowtowed to his visitors and exposed shining yellow teeth in a friendly smile. But beneath his worn sateen jacket his heart was thumping.

The leader of the five, a squat Chinaman with a flat pock-marked face, scowled and spoke gutturally. "Go 'long San Francisco now. We takem gold."

Fat Kee, the leader, was brother to Fat Bong, the gambler. The very sight of his evil countenance filled High Low with vague foreboding. Only because Fat Kee had come with four of High Low's good friends had his gold been accepted for safe-keeping.

Kowtowing again, High Low padded over and moved a floor board under the tinware shelves. His gnarled hands trembled till he could scarcely lift the old copper kettle out of the secret hole. When he did get it out and removed the lid, he crouched there on his frayed straw sandals as if he were frozen stiff. Then his mouth fell open. His gentle black eyes became fixed with horror. He shuddered from top to toe.

A GUTTURAL growl ripped from the throat of the squat Fat Kee. Seizing High Low by the cue, he hurled him aside, grabbed the kettle and peered into it, then burst forth with a stream of angry oaths. One

by one, his companions gravely took the kettle in their gravel-bruised hands, then turned and surveyed the fallen High Low with dull, unbelieving eyes.

"Thief!" growled Fat Kee, and rubbed the palms of his lumpy hands up and down on the legs of his filthy Levis.

High Low took hold of the sink and dragged himself upright. While the cuckoo clock above the cracked cast-iron cookstove sang out nine times, he stood there swaying, then spoke in an awed whisper. "Gold gone!" His gimlet eyes searched the blank faces of his countrymen appealingly. "Me no stealem!"

"Who stealem?" growled Fat Kee. His thick lips were writhing. His muddy boots were advancing toward the cowering little caféman. His glassy yellow eyes slitted slyly. "Wing Lung stealem, eh?"

High Low felt a sickening void in the pit of his stomach. If there was one calamity under heaven worse than his own loss of face, it was to have the man child of his sister branded a thief. And although in his heart he was convinced his nephew must be guilty, that was something he couldn't put into words, even to himself.

Peering hopefully at the inscrutable faces lit by the yellow glow of the lamp, he squared his thin shoulders proudly.

"High Low people no steal," he declared. "Always die happy. Velly good!"

He saw in the vicious Fat Kee's slitted eyes that it was coming, but he didn't flinch. He just hung there with one gnarled hand clutching the sink drain board, contemplating with sad eyes the pock-marked face creeping closer.

In his mind's eye he saw again the hovels and mansions of the faraway

Foochow of his childhood. And beneath an almond tree blossoming against a crumbling wall he clearly discerned his beloved sister thanking him with a sweet smile for the care he was taking of her man child. His kindly eyes were smiling when the heavy bronze handle of Fat Kee's dagger smashed against the side of his round head.

Fireworks flamed in his brain. As he fell, he dimly heard Fat Kee's guttural voice coming as if from a vast distance.

"You getem gold by daylight. No getem, me use dagger other end!"

High Low felt the vibration of hob-nailed boots on the creaky floor boards. He vaguely heard a door slam. Then the peace-loving little café proprietor heard, felt, saw and knew nothing.

He swam back to consciousness of a raging headache to find Wing Lung staring fearfully down into his face, kneading his white hands as if they were dough. His nephew's opaque eyes were as guileless as the eyes of a fawn. Could such eyes, reflected High Low dizzily, be the mirrors of an evil heart? That was a question, instinct told him, that no self-respecting man of Foochow could ask his own nephew. But suddenly it dawned upon him that there was a way to find out. He would take that way.

The battered little café man squirmed painfully to a sitting position, and with the aid of Wing Lung got wobbily to his feet. After washing the blood from his face and neck he had his nephew bandage up his head with a clean dish towel, then pointed an unsteady forefinger at the opposite wall. Wing Lung helped him across the kitchen; then, with eyes like saucers watched the disclosure of something he had never even suspected.

At the end of a stack of shelves between the cook stove and the dirty-dish table, High Low inserted his long fingernails in a crack and pulled. The whole stack of shelves swung on a hidden pivot. To Wing Lung's amazement, his uncle slipped through the opening, swung the shelving back in place and was gone.

In the dim glow of a candle flame that High Low lighted, it was revealed that he stood in a tiny cubbyhole of a room that was his holy of holies. Doubling back a reed mat, he lifted a floor plank and from the blackness beneath took a little brass-bound camphorwood casket that was so heavy it made the diminutive Chinaman grunt to slide it out on the floor. Lifting the lid of the casket, he kowtowed three times to an ugly little bronze Buddha, placed it lovingly on a box beside the candle, pushed the shelves outward again and motioned to his dumfounded nephew to come in.

While Wing Lung gazed awestruck at the heap of gleaming gold nuggets filling the little camphorwood chest, High Low stood in painful contemplation of the numbing tragedy that had descended upon his luckless head. With laceration of soul, he thought of what those gleaming nuggets meant to him.

That hoarded wealth represented the savings of twenty long years of heavy labor—labor that had transformed the hopeful boy of Foochow into the weary old man of Eureka. And only that evening it had been shown to High Low how he could employ his precious savings to the eternal glory of his own soul and that of his revered ancestors.

A letter had come that evening from Foochow, telling of terrible floods, of plague and famine and death in the Valley of the Lotus, where dwelt his people. High Low's

decision had been instantaneous. He would, he had decided, send his life's savings to China for the relief of his aged parents and their kin.

But now, he meditated sadly, he would have to use his hoarded nuggets, polished by long handling in loving fingers, to replace the gold dust of his miner friends, thereby preserving his family's good name, but leaving them to starve.

High Low's stooped shoulders shook inside his faded old sateen jacket as he whispered to Wing Lung of these things, and told him of the theft of the miners' gold dust. Then he gazed fondly upon his nephew with pain-filled eyes and squared his wasted shoulders again. Returning the little bronze Buddha to the casket and replacing it and the floor plank, he faced his nephew and spoke softly.

"Wing Lung guard gold. Me go 'long doctor man. By'm by come 'long back. Velly good!"

THE little café man shut his nephew in the cubbyhole, went out the back way and locked the door behind him. As he stood there uncertainly the clumping of boot heels made him glance up. In the eerie light cast by the smelter flames he saw Fat Kee fade from the mouth of the alley. And somehow he knew that Fat Kee had been watching him lock the door.

Never in his life had High Low told a lie. He hadn't told one now. He had said he was going to the doctor's. But he hadn't said he was going straight there. Instead, he pattered up the alley a few steps and squeezed in behind a trash barrel.

His reasoning was that if Wing Lung had stolen the miners' gold, he would also steal the nuggets. And if he stole the nuggets he would go to hide them wherever he had hid-

den the pokes. By following him, High Low would solve everything. He would recover his own cherished hoard, be able to restore the miners' gold to them, and clear his own and Wing Lung's good name. Since Wing Lung had no key to the padlock on the front door, he would have to come out the back way. With sorrowful eyes, High Low watched the kitchen door.

Once he was almost sure he caught a snapping sound from out in front of the café. But when it wasn't repeated, he concluded it was only the devil playing tricks on his ears, a habit it was well known the devil had. He crouched there in the cold darkness and watched the flames from the blast furnaces licking into the star-studded heavens. Time dragged slowly by.

Soon the raging pain from his head wound began to make him weak and dizzy. He was afraid he would die. He must get that wound attended to. If Wing Lung had been going to come out, he would have done so before now. Great joy surged through High Low's aching body as he scuttled away up the alley. Wing Lung was innocent!

It was more than half an hour later that he returned, unlocked the back door and locked it again behind him. He couldn't have told why he stood there with an awful creepiness at the roots of his hair.

With a shaking hand he pressed the doctor's bandage tighter to his head, took the two steps necessary to give him a view of the china shelves, then stopped as though rooted to the floor. He bit his lip till blood dribbled down his quivering chin. His fumbling fingers untied and tied again the ribbon on his cue. The shelves had been swung wide on the pivot.

High Low darted into his cubby-

hole, then stood there gazing down at what he saw in the light of the guttering candle. Every ounce of energy seeped from his frail body. Wing Lung lay face down with High Low's own butcher knife buried between his shoulder blades. The precious hoard of nuggets was gone!

Dropping on his knees, High Low picked up the ugly little bronze Buddha from the floor and pressed it lovingly to his withered cheek, swaying back and forth like a broken reed in the wind, moaning softly.

He had lost the hard-earned gold of his freinds. The nuggets he had toiled so hard to save had vanished. His people in the faraway Valley of the Lotus would starve. His sister's man child was dying. At daybreak he himself would die.

Then some strength seemed to flow from the little Buddha into High Low's tortured soul. Kowtowing to the image, he got hold of himself. A glance into the front room told him that the snapping sound he had heard while hiding behind the trash barrel had been someone breaking into the front window.

Running out to a ramshackle lean-to at the rear of the café, High Low trundled a wheelbarrow to the back door, spread a couple of quilts in it, and with superhuman effort got Wing Lung's inert body on the quilts. Then, as fast as he could stagger, he made off up the dark alley toward the doctor's office.

Once he heard Wing Lung mumble the names of Fat Kee and Fat Bong. And as he cut across the side street, full in the beam of light shining from the window of Graham's Feed Store, he collided with Fat Kee.

It would almost seem as if the vicious brother of Fat Bong had been waiting there for him. With a snarl

of rage at having been run into, he grabbed the wheelbarrow and peered suspiciously down into Wing Lung's pale face, then squinted at High Low with crafty eyes.

"Wing Lung steal gold," he growled malignantly, a mirthless grin distorting his coarse features. "You killem!"

High Low was too frantic to argue, or to plead his innocence. It did look as though Wing Lung was dead, but High Low was determined to get him to the doctor quick. Hunching his thin shoulders, he lunged past Fat Kee and a moment later slid into the doctor's little dobe office with sweat running down from under his head bandage.

BURLY old Doc McPherson was sitting with his sock feet on his untidy desk, winking first one cynical eye and then the other at a square whiskey bottle and wagging his shaggy head sagely, while he played "Auld Lang Syne" so lustily on his mouth organ he threatened to blow the instrument all to pieces. But at sight of the excited High Low, his huge feet struck the floor with a thud, the roaring music stopped, the bleary eyes became instantly keen and affectionate.

"What in tarnation's wrong with you *now*?" he rumbled.

High Low tried to answer, but his tongue froze to the roof of his mouth. He scuttled outside again. Rory McPherson lumbered after him and picked Wing Lung up as though he were a stick of stove wood. Carrying him inside, he stretched him gently on a cot. His frosty blue eyes focused on the handle of the big butcher knife embedded in the unconscious victim's back, then veered to the seamed face of the hunched little café man with an accusing glare.

"You play for keeps, eh?" he growled. "You pig-tailed little meat chopper!"

High Low wrung his work-worn hands in anguish, then tore the ribbon on his cue to shreds. "Fat Kee and Fat Bong!" he squealed.

The crusty old surgeon bent over the prostrate form and deftly removed the blood-stained knife. High Low watched, despair in his heart. Then, through the cobwebbed window, he caught a movement in the beam of light from the feed store and whirled. His hand flew to his throat. Slouching toward the doctor's office was Fat Kee. And on his heels strode the towering figure of Sam Steele, the Eureka marshal.

With a choking cry that stuck in his throat, High Low dodged past the doctor's hairy paw as it grabbed at him, scurried out the back door and vanished among scattered miners' huts.

Scuttling away through the darkness that throbbled with the pulsing of the mighty blast furnaces, High Low strove to find his way through the turmoil of his thoughts. He couldn't fight Fat Kee and Fat Bong. His gentle soul shrank from the mere thought of the violence of fighting men. But the very spirit of his forefathers cried out that he must avenge the wanton stabbing of his nephew. And suddenly, like a ray of light, he clearly divined his way.

He was panting for breath when he slipped stealthily into the Ivory Duck and closed the back door softly behind him. Touching a fizzing sulphur match to a candle stub and shielding the light from the window by putting a cracker box in front of it, he climbed on a stool and hurriedly searched the top shelf of a

cupboard. A cry of satisfaction escaped him.

Hopping down, he held his hand out to the light. In it nestled a tiny glass vial and an empty quinine capsule. With an ear cocked for the first hint of a footfall outside, he filled the little capsule from the vial which he then put back on the shelf. He tucked the capsule carefully into a pocket of his jacket and was climbing down off the stool when creeping footsteps froze him. He blew the candle out, then poised there trembling.

To his straining ears came the sharp jingle of a spur from the boardwalk out in front. That would be Marshal Steele, he decided, and padded toward the back door. But the muffled scuff of a boot stopped him dead. Fat Kee was crouching on the back step.

Hard knuckles rattled against the glass of the front door. "Open up here!" shouted Steele angrily. "It's the law talkin'!"

The gentle High Low covered in the dark kitchen, where he had toiled so many long years. For the first time in his blameless life the iron hand of the law was clutching for him. Hard-bitten old Sam Steele was a customer and a friend. High Low longed to go out and tell the gruff marshal exactly what had happened. But if he did, that serpent of a Fat Kee would swear he was a liar, would swear he had stolen the miners' gold, and then, because Wing Lung knew of his guilt, had murdered his own nephew in cold blood. When dawn came, he would be hung by the neck. The shades of his honorable ancestors would never again know peace.

Steele was using the butt of his gun on the door now. "You hear me?" he bellowed. "Open up this door!"

High Low darted across the kitchen. Noiselessly raising the window above the sink, he wriggled his skinny legs over the sill and dropped into the runway between the Ivory Duck and Scanlon's Barber Shop. Then he stole out to the edge of the boardwalk in front and waited with pounding heart.

"I'm comin' in!" roared Steele.

The full weight of his sorrows enveloped High Low like a stifling cloud. Unless his dangerous scheme succeeded, never would he recover his own or his friends' gold. Never would Wing Lung be avenged. No longer could he prove himself a dutiful son to his parents in the far-off Valley of the Lotus. And now, as if that weren't burden enough for his stooped shoulders, he was being hunted down like a savage beast for the murder of his own blood kin.

A crash of splintering wood and shattering glass told him the marshal had smashed into the café. Like a cottontail with hounds on his heels, High Low scuttled across the street toward the corner of the Red Dog Bar.

Inside a black hallway at the rear of Fat Bong's dilapidated laundry, he felt his way along to a locked door and tapped lightly three times. He heard the slapping of sandals, then a panel in the door slid aside an inch or so and the evil face of Fat Bong peered out.

FOR a fleeting instant the gambler's venomous yellow eyes widened with wonder, then his pasty face resumed its masklike expression. He swung the door open with a ceremonious bow.

High Low slid through and heard an iron bar clang behind him with a tightening of his throat muscles. He knew he might as well have crawled

into a den of wolves. His somber eyes took in the scene.

Around three fan-tan tables hunched groups of tense figures. In the sickly light cast by three hanging lamps, topped with bent tin reflectors, they looked like rigid images. On the edge of the circle of smoky light, on low benches against the walls, crouched a watchful audience of inscrutable Chinamen, cigarettes dangling in stained fingers, spirals of smoke shrouding their impassive faces. Not a sound was made, but High Low could feel the tension that gripped the dive at his entrance.

"Long time no play," purred the oily voice of Fat Bong at his elbow.

Although consumed with anxiety to get his deed done before Marshal Steele caught up with him, High Low turned and greeted Fat Bong without a trace of agitation on his wizened face.

"Long time," he agreed, kowtowing amiably. "Me lucky now!"

Dropping a puffy eyelid, Fat Bong signaled a player at the center table to get up and ceremoniously pushed High Low into the vacated chair.

With a long-nailed finger, High Low traced the figure "3" that was on his side of the tin square in the center of the table, as if to engrave it forever on his memory. Then he kowtowed to the other players and, although chills played tag along his spine, looked up innocently into the cruel face of Fat Bong.

Fat Bong was enough to give anybody chills. Tall and fleshless, as crooked as a dog's hind leg, clad in a long black cloak reaching clear to his ankles, he looked like a corpse endowed with movement. Skin the color of a dirty copper kettle stretched tight over his jutting cheek bones. Wolfish buckteeth bulged his bluish lips out. Set deep in his

flat skull were amber-colored eyes as merciless as a snake's.

Stooping over a basket on a stool, Fat Bong filled both clawlike hands with white beans and placed them on the green baize tablecloth. Then, covering the heap with a wooden bowl, he swept the circle of faces with somber eyes. While he watched the players place their bets in front of the numbers chosen, he sipped rice whiskey from the tumbler that was always beside his elbow.

With an alert ear cocked for the faintest jingle of a spur, High Low slipped thumb and forefinger into a pocket of his shoddy jacket and laid a shining half dollar beside the figure "3." Then he leaned forward and watched closely, as if intent upon nothing but the game.

Fat Bong removed the bowl and picked up a rosewood chopstick. With supple strokes he separated four beans at a time from the heap and whisked them aside. As the heap dwindled, the eyes of the players slitted. Drawn breath hissed between set teeth. And when the last stroke was made, and only three beans remained where the heap had been, breath was expelled with a low sigh. High Low had won!

"Lucky now!" purred Fat Bong with a smirk. He stacked five new half dollars beside the coin the little café man had played, and began all over again. Then he stopped with his hands cupped over another heap of beans. His body stiffened. His head snapped round toward the door. A spur had jingled.

High Low, sitting on Fat Bong's right, was carelessly spinning a half dollar with his right hand. His left hand was in his pocket. At the very instant he heard the spur jingle, his coin went rolling across the cloth. His left hand shot out and retrieved

it. In returning, his hand passed briefly over Fat Bong's whiskey glass. All eyes were on the door.

Three distinct knocks, evenly spaced as they should be, sounded on the door. Fat Bong hesitated, took several leisurely sips of his rice whiskey, then padded over to the door and slid the panel back. When he saw the face outside, he opened the door wide to admit Fat Kee. On his brother's heels crowded the ominous figure of old Sam Steele. Fat Bong barred the door, and all three came over to the big center table.

The marshal fixed the shivering High Low with hostile eyes. "You're comin' with me!" he announced flatly.

High Low bobbed to his feet, kowtowed, then sat right down again. He pointed to the five half dollars he had won.

"Long time no play," he pleaded, smiling his friendly smile. "High Low, him lucky now. You watch little bit. Me no run 'way. Win plenty now. Velly good!"

AMUSEMENT puckered the corners of the grim marshal's level gray eyes. He lit a cigar and took the chair Fat Kee slid forward. "Ride 'im, cowboy!" he grunted, "After tonight you'll be playin' fan-

tan with your slew-footed ancestors."

Fat Bong belched resoundingly and commenced flicking four beans at a stroke with his rosewood chopstick. He was about halfway through the heap when he paused and gave his thin belly an exasperated rub, then went on again. But soon he stopped.

He humped there for a moment, as if meditating upon what he had eaten for supper. Then his venomous eyes sought High Low's face suspiciously. The eyes of High Low remained fixed innocently upon the rosewood chopstick.

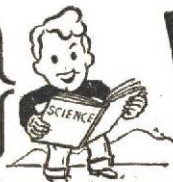
Suddenly Fat Bong bent double like a hairpin. He tried to straighten up, but couldn't. Dropping the chopstick, he sank into a chair and jammed both hands hard against his belly, growling like a wounded animal.

High Low gazed at him sorrowfully, then switched his gaze to Sam Steele. The marshal was the only man in the place whose eyes weren't riveted on the stricken fan-tan boss. High Low found the marshal's eyes were glowing with an unreadable expression, and were fixed unswervingly on him.

Suddenly Fat Bong lunged to his feet, and with a lightning motion

CURTISS Butterfinger

WHAT IS THE
OLDEST SCIENCE
KNOWN TO
MAN?



IS RICH
IN PURE
DEXTROSE
THE SUGAR
YOUR BODY USES
DIRECTLY
FOR ENERGY



ASTRONOMY

CANDY IS DELICIOUS FOOD

... ENJOY SOME EVERY DAY

snatched a dagger from beneath his cloak and hurled it at High Low's head.

But the little café man had been watching for just that. He skidded down off his chair like molasses off a board, bobbed up on the far side of the table and in one jump had his back up against the wall. The whirling dagger plowed a furrow over Fat Kee's cheek and clattered into a far corner. Sam Steele kicked his chair from under him and came up with a gun in his fist.

"Stand hitched!" he roared. "The whole pack of you!"

Fat Bong was retching as though he had swallowed horseshoe nails. His drawn face had turned a greenish hue. Glistening beads of sweat began to pop out on his forehead and roll down his ghastly cheeks. He tried to speak, but only frothed at the mouth. His trembling right arm rose and pointed straight at the crouched High Low.

"Run for Doc McPherson!" barked Steele, bending over the stricken Fat Bong, but keeping an eye on High Low.

A couple of onlookers went pattering out.

Fat Kee bounded into the kitchen and returned with a glass of water and a mustard can. Dumping some of the mustard into the water, he started to stir it violently.

"Bettee not!" squawked High Low sadly. "Makee more sick. High Low know what he give. Only High Low know good medicine. Velly good!"

Fat Kee clutched his brother by the shoulder and fought himself erect. The muscles of his face and neck were twitching hideously. In his dilated eyes was a horrible vision of grim and agonizing death. Still pointing at High Low, he got his words out chokingly.

"What High Low want for good medicine?" he gasped.

The little café man's soft voice cut through the hush. "Fat Bong tell Mistee Steele who kill Wing Lung?"

Sam Steele searched Fat Bong's contorted face with flinty eyes. "So-o-o!" he whistled. "It was *you*, eh!"

Fat Bong's haunted eyes swept the circle of watching faces as if praying for help that wasn't there. Foam flecked his blue lips. He jerked his head sidewise toward his brother. "Fat Kee stab Wing Lung!" he croaked.

Fat Kee hurled him aside. But Fat Bong clamped both hands on the edge of the table and hauled himself up again. He motioned for High Low to give him something to stop the agony that was tearing his vitals. High Low shook his head mournfully.

"No can do," he lamented, "till Fat Bong givee back gold."

With a despairing moan, Fat Bong stuck a palsied hand into a pocket of his cloak, brought out a big brass key and tossed it toward a carved cedar chest in a corner. High Low unlocked the chest and heaved the lid back. Lifting out two cowhide bags, he placed them reverently on the green baize tablecloth, then danced with glee in his scuffed old sandals.

Keeping Fat Kee under his gun, the marshal stepped over, untied the sacks and dumped their contents out. From one fell the five pokes of gold dust the miners had left with High Low. Out of the other rolled the polished nuggets High Low had slaved so long to accumulate and which would insure the salvation of his people. The scrawny little café proprietor fell over them with a broken cry.

DAWN was blotting out the flames of the roaring smelters when Sam Steele came from the hallway leading back to the jail and sank wearily into his office chair. High Low perched on the edge of a bench and watched him, his gnarled fingers fiddling with the bow on the end of his cue. Doc McPherson, with his feet on the marshal's desk, was blaring "Bonnie Lassie" on his mouth organ. He stopped and regarded the lawyer with a roguish eye.

"Get the straight of it, Sam?" he rumbled.

"Between the two of them they've spilled about everything," grumbled the marshal. "When them five fellers left their dust with High Low, Fat Kee tipped his brother off. Wing Lung owed Fat Bong a gambler's debt he was scairt his uncle would get wind of. Usin' that for a club, Fat Bong bulldozed Wing Lung into tellin' him where the dust was hid. Whilst High Low was out takin' an airin', Bong went and stole it." The marshal shot a shrewd glance at High Low's crestfallen face, scratched his bristly chin and continued.

"But Wing Lung made up for that

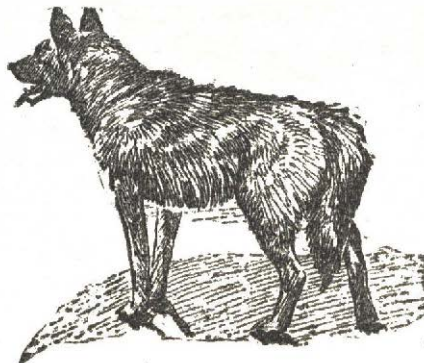
slip, sure 'nough. When Fat Kee busted in to steal High Low's nuggets, Wing Lung went down fightin', even though he had a butcher knife in his back." The marshal leaned back and lit a cigar. "How's Wing Lung makin' out, doc?"

"Knife blade glanced off a rib and missed the lung," rumbled the old surgeon. He watched High Low's eyes light up. "Wing Lung will live to fry many a tough hunk of cow. How come, High Low, you put but one spoonful of Croton oil in Fat Bong's drink, only enough to twist his stomick a little, instead of usin' plenty and saving Sam the trouble of locking him up?"

High Low watched the crusty old doctor absent-mindedly stuffing the marshal's bottle of whiskey in his pocket, then switched his kindly gaze from one to the other. In his melancholy eyes was a reproachful expression. He slid from the bench, shuffled out the door, then stuck his little round head back in and kowtowed.

"High Low allee same peaceable man," he intoned softly. "Velly good!" Then he scurried away.

THE END.





SPAWN of YUMA

BY PETER DAWSON

CHAPTER I

A JAILBIRD TAKES WINGS

THE man who lay belly-down and half covered with snow at the lip of the *rimcon* looked dead but for the

thin fog of vapor that betrayed his breathing. His curly straw-colored hair was powdered with snow, and his outfit—light canvas wind-breaker, brown vest over thin blue cotton shirt, Levis and boots worn

through at the soles—was made a mockery by the below-zero wind. The bronze of his lean, beard-stubbed face showed two colorless spots along his high cheekbones, a clear sign of frostbite. His lips were blue and his long-fingered hands, one clenching a sizable rock, were clawed in a stiffness that suggested death.

But his brown eyes, squinted against the wind-riding particles of snow, were very much alive. They stared unwinkingly into the fading light of dusk, regarding a rider on a roan horse threading his way through a sparse growth of timber seventy yards below. A wariness was in the eyes, the wariness of the hunted animal. Once, when the rider reined in at the near margin of the trees and looked directly above, the hand that held the rock lifted an inch or two out of the snow.

That gesture and that weapon, feebly menacing when compared to the Winchester in the saddle scabbard of the horseman, remained fixed until the rider had disappeared into the snow haze. It gave a small hint of the dogged energy that had driven Bill Ash these last four days and three nights. The fact that he now laboriously thrust his body up to a crawling position and started dragging himself toward the dying coals of a fire at the bottom of the *rincon* was further evidence of it. He knew only that the fire's warmth meant life to him. And he wanted very much to live.

Stark singleness of purpose had brought Bill Ash in four days and three nights the two hundred and twenty-seven miles from Yuma's mild winter to the equally bitter one of these Wild Horse Hills. He had walked off the penitentiary farm and escaped on a bay gelding stolen from the picket line of the fort, regardless of the knowledge that he was un-

armed and that his outfit was too light to warm him against the weather into which he was heading. Last night, when the gelding had thrown him and bolted, the compelling drive that was bringing him back home hadn't weakened. He'd thrown up a windbreak of cedar boughs and built a small fire, gambling his luck against the fierce beginnings of a blizzard.

Somehow he had lived out the night. Today he had crossed the peaks afoot. This was the sixth fire he had built to drive out the pleasant numbness of slow death by freezing.

As he crawled to the fire and held his stiffened hands to within three inches of the coals, Bill Ash knew that it had been worth it. For, three miles below to the south and out of sight in the gathering night and the falling snow, lay the town of Rimrock, his goal. The blizzard that had so nearly claimed his life would in turn work to save it now. The gelding would be found and identified. The snow would blot out his sign. No law officer, even if he were interested, would believe that a man unarmed and afoot had been able to outlive the storm.

It took Bill Ash a quarter of an hour to thaw his hands enough to move his fingers, another thirty minutes before he felt it was safe to take off his boots and snow-rub the circulation back into his frost-bitten feet. The pain in his feet and legs was a torture that dispelled some of the drowsiness brought on by cold and hunger. An hour and ten minutes after crawling back from the edge of the *rincon*, he was walking over it and stumbling down the slope toward the trees where the rider had passed.

The roan's sign wasn't yet quite blotted out, the hoof marks still

showing as faint depressions in the white snow blanket. Bill examined the tracks out of curiosity, remembering something vaguely familiar about the roan, but still puzzled as to who the rider might have been. Well back in the trees, where the wind didn't have its full sweep, he found the sign clearer. And at first sight of it he placed the horse. The indentation of the right rear hoof was split above the shoe mark. The roan had once belonged to his father. He wondered idly, before he went on, who owned the horse now and what errand had brought the owner up here into the hills at dusk to ride into the teeth of the blizzard when any man in his right mind would have been at home hugging a fire.

TWO hours after dark, ten minutes short of seven o'clock, Bill Ash stood in an alley that flanked Rimrock's single street and peered in through the lighted and dusty back window of a small frame building.

The window looked into an office. Two men were in the room. Bill Ash knew both of them. Ed Hoyt, whose law office this was, sat back to the window in a swivel chair behind his roll-top desk, arms upraised and hands locked comfortably behind his head. He was smoking an expensive-looking Havana cigar. The cigar and the glowing fire door of the stove across the room were the two things that made it hardest for Bill to wait patiently, his tall frame trembling against the driving snow and the cold. The other man, old Blaze Leslie, was wizened and stooped, but every inch the man to wear the sheriff's star that hung from a vest pocket beneath his coat.

Neither man had changed much in the last three years. Ed Hoyt was, if anything, more handsome than ever. His dark hair was grayer

at the temples, Bill noticed; a quirk of pigmentation, for Hoyt had barely turned thirty. The lawyer's broadcloth suit and the fancy-stitched boot he cocked across one knee were visible signs of affluence. Ed Hoyt had obviously done well at practicing law. But aside from this new-found prosperity, he was the same man who had defended Bill three years ago and tried to save him a term at Yuma. Blaze Leslie was as unchanged as a slab of hard rimrock, his grizzled old face wearing a familiar harassed and dogmatic look. Bill couldn't hate him, even though it was Blaze who had arrested him on the false charge that sent him to prison.

About twenty minutes after Bill stepped to the window, the sheriff tilted his wide-brimmed hat down over his eyes, turned up the collar of his sheep-lined coat, and went out the door onto the street. Bill waited until Blaze's choppy boot tread had faded down the plank-walk out front before knocking at the office's alley door. He heard the scrape of Ed Hoyt's chair inside and stood a little straighter.

Then the door opened and he was squinting into the glare of an unshaded lamp in Ed Hoyt's hand. He felt a rush of warm air hit him in the face, its promise so welcome that the sigh escaping his wide chest was a near sob.

He said, even-toned, "It's me, Ed—Bill Ash," and heard the lawyer catch his breath.

Hoyt drew back out of the doorway. "I'll be damned!" he muttered in astonishment.

Bill stepped in, pushing the door shut behind him. He did not quite understand the set unfriendliness that had replaced the astonishment in Ed Hoyt's face. Ed was clearly surprised and awed. But there was

no word or sign of welcome from him.

Bill said uncertainly, trying to put an edge of humor in his voice, "Don't get to believin' in ghosts, Ed. It's really me."

Hoyt moved quickly across the room, reaching back to set the lamp on his desk and wheeling in behind it to open the top drawer. His hand rose swiftly into sight again and settled into line with Bill. It was fisting a double-barreled derringer.

"Stay where you are, Ash!" he said tonelessly.

CHAPTER II

CHEATED BY THE LAW

IT took Bill several seconds to realize that this was really the man he had once considered his best friend, the man who had defended him at his trial. His hands were thrust deep in the pockets of his canvas jacket and he clenched them hard, the only betrayal of the bitter disappointment that gripped him.

"I'm cold," he said mildly. "Mind if I soak up some of your heat?" He stepped obliquely across the room, putting his back to the stove's friendly warmth. Only then could he trust himself to add, "I didn't expect this sort of a howdy, Ed."

Ed Hoyt's round and handsome face hardened. "Blaze just left," he said. "He's got the word from Yuma. He never thought you could make it through this storm!"

"I had to," Bill told him. Then, nodding toward the derringer that still centered on his chest: "Do you need that?"

"There's a reward out for you. I'm a law-abiding citizen." The statement came flatly, without a trace of friendliness.

Bill's brows raised in a silent

query. He was able to stand quietly now, to keep his knees and shoulders from shaking against the chill that had a moment ago cut him to the marrow. The stove's heat was warming his back through the thin canvas.



"And you were so sure I was innocent!" he drawled.

"It's been three years," Hoyt reminded him. "I haven't found a shred of proof that you didn't kill that man, that you didn't steal your father's herd."

"You made it convincing enough at the trial. They didn't hang me."

"If I had it to do over again, I'd do it differently! You were guilty, Bill! Guilty as hell!"

Bill's mind was beginning to work with its normal agility. The first thing, of course, was to put Hoyt in his place. All at once he knew how he was going to do it. He said, "Ed, I've got my hand wrapped around a .45!" He nodded down to his right hand thrust deep in pocket.

"Want to shoot it out or will you toss that iron across here?"

The change that came over Ed Hoyt's face was striking. His ruddy skin lost color, the eyes widened a trifle and dropped to regard the bulge of Bill's pocket. Then, after a moment's indecision, his nerve left him and the derringer moved out of line. He dropped it.

Bill, stepping across to kick the weapon out of the lawyer's reach, said dryly, "These ladies' guns are tricky. You're lucky it didn't go off." He stooped to pick the weapon from the floor, reaching with his right hand and smiling thinly at the ready anger that crossed Hoyt's face on seeing his hand emerge from the pocket empty. As he straightened again, he nodded toward the chair behind the desk. "Sit!" he ordered curtly. "I've got to know some things before I leave here."

HOYT lowered himself into the chair, sitting stiffly under the threat of Bill's right hand that was once more in his pocket but now armed. A change rode over him, his anger disappeared and he said ingratiatingly, "I didn't mean it, Bill! Your steppin' in here like that set me on—"

"Forget it!" Bill cut in, irritated at the show of hypocrisy. "Tell me how it happened, how he died!"

"Your father?" Hoyt asked.

Bill nodded. "I read about it in a Tucson paper. That's why I'm here, why I busted out to get here."

"They found him below the rim near your place," Hoyt said, adding, "Or rather, that's where he died. The rim was caved in where he went over. They dug until they found the horse and saddle. The saddle was bloody. That was enough proof."

Bill's lean face had shaped itself

into hard predatory lines. His voice held a thin edge of sarcasm when he next spoke. "Looks like the Ash family travels with hard luck. The paper said the old man and Tom Miles had had an argument and that Miles was missing. Any more evidence that he did it?"

Hoyt showed faint surprise. "I thought you knew. They arrested Miles three days ago. He claims he didn't do it."

Inside Bill there was an instant's constriction of muscle that gradually relaxed to leave him weak and feeling his exhaustion and hunger. The thought that had driven him on through these four bleak and empty days had been the urge to hunt down Tom Miles, his father's killer, the man he suspected of having framed him with murder and rustling three years ago. To find now that the law had cheated him of a meeting with Miles, of the satisfaction of emptying a gun at the man, was a bitter, jolting disappointment.

He leaned against the edge of the desk, his knees all at once refusing to support his weight, as Ed Hoyt went on, "Miles was tried yesterday. They hang him day after tomorrow."

Bill's face shaped a twisted smile. "Saves me the job." There was something more he wanted to know about his father's old enemy. "What evidence did they have against him?" he asked.

"All they needed. He and your father were seen riding toward the hills together that afternoon. They'd had an argument a couple days before. Something about whose job it was to fix a broken fence. I don't believe Miles was guilty. I defended him." He raised his hands, palms outward, in a gesture of helplessness. "I couldn't convince the jury. Your father was a big man in

this country. People wanted to see his murder paid off."

There was a long interval of silence, one in which Bill felt the keen disappointment of not having been able to deal out his own justice. Abruptly, he thought of another thing.

"What about Linda?" he asked.

The mention of that name brought a frown to Ed Hoyt's face, one that reminded Bill of the nearly forgotten rivalry that had existed three years ago between himself and the lawyer. It had been a strange thing that Bill should love the daughter of his enemy, now his father's killer; stranger still that his best friend, Ed Hoyt, should be Tom Miles' choice of a son-in-law and that their rivalry at courtship had never interfered with their high regard for each other.

"Linda's taking it pretty well," the lawyer answered. "We're . . . we're to be married as soon as this is over."

A stab of regret struck through Bill, yet he could speak sincerely, "You'll make her happy, Ed. It's a cinch I couldn't—now."

Linda must have known, then, that waiting for his parole from Yuma was as futile as trying to get her father's permission to marry an ex-convict. He had written her a year ago telling her as much. His letter had been casual, intended to convince her that he no longer loved her, that she wasn't still his one reason for wanting to live. Gradually, through this past year, he had put her from his mind. It had changed him, hardened him, this realization that the one thing in life that really mattered was being denied him. But it had seemed the only fair thing to do, to remove himself from her life when to remain a part of it would have been too great a handicap for her to endure.

"What about Miles' ranch?" he now asked in a new and gruffer voice.

"I'll run it, along with my business." Hoyt leaned forward in his chair. "That brings up another thing, Bill. Have you heard about your father's new will?"

Bill shook his head. The lawyer reached over and thumbed through a stack of papers on his desk, selecting one, a legal form, and handing it across. "That's a copy. Your father had it made up two days before he died. The original's temporarily lost. Blaze Leslie's going to try and find it at your layout once this business is over. It must be somewhere in your father's papers."

BILL read through the two pages, not believing what he saw the first time and going over it again. Here, in black and white, was an indictment that aged him ten years. First came old Bob Ash's blunt statement that he was disowning his son. He gave his reason: In the three years since Bill had been in prison, he'd been convinced that his son had betrayed him by stealing his cattle and killing one of his crew.

In his father's own salty language was written the details of disposing of Brush Ranch in case of his death. A value of five thousand dollars, less than a tenth its worth, was set on the outfit. The buyer was named as Ed Hoyt. The reason, bluntly given, was that Ed Hoyt had performed loyal services in trying to save his, Bob Ash's, son from a deserved death. And for that loyalty Ed Hoyt was to be given title to the ranch on a mere token payment. The five thousand was to be divided equally between three members of the crew who had seen long service on the Brush spread.

The names of these three men wavered before Bill's glance. He realized abruptly that tears of anger and hurt were in his eyes. He crumpled the paper and looked away until he got control of himself.

Ed Hoyt must have detected this emotion in him, for he said, "I'm sorry to break it to you this way. Now you know why I think the way I do, that you were guilty, after all. Your father convinced me."

"But his letters would have said something about it!" Bill argued. Then he saw how futile that protest was. He tossed the wadded sheets onto the desk, giving way to the bitterness that was in him.

"I'm headed out, Ed." He nodded to indicate the alley door. "I'll keep my eye on you through this window for a few minutes, to make sure you don't head up the street to send Blaze out after me."

Hoyt's face blanched. "I wouldn't turn you in now, Bill. You deserve another chance. I won't give you away."

"No?" Bill said dryly, and let it go at that. The one word was eloquent of his distrust and bitterness.

As he stepped to the door leading out to the alley, he paused a moment. "Tell Linda I'm wishing her luck." Then, catching the lawyer's sober nod, he was gone out the door.

He stood for several seconds outside the window, watching that Ed Hoyt didn't move out of his chair. He turned up the collar of his light jacket and put his back to the drive of the wind, feeling the cold settle through him once more in a wave that completed his utter misery. No longer did he have the will to move, to fight, even to live. He knew he should get away from here, put miles between him and Rimrock tonight, for Ed Hoyt couldn't be trusted not to go to the sheriff

once he thought the fugitive gone. Yet it didn't seem to matter now what happened.

The law had cheated him twice now, this time of the one thing that mattered, his chance to exact vengeance on Tom Miles, his father's murdered. In two more days the law would call Tom Miles to answer for his crime at the end of a rope.

Strangely enough, it gave Bill little satisfaction to think that the man was to die this way. Miles and old Bob Ash had been bitter enemies since they had come to this country. First there had been a long feud over the boundary that divided their outfits. Then, after years of fairly peaceful neighborliness, had come the matter of Bill's and Linda's feeling for each other. Bill's father hadn't minded. But Tom Miles had, forbidding his daughter to see the son of his old enemy.

Suddenly, in swift and unalterable succession, had come Bill's arrest on the charge of stealing his own father's cattle and murdering a Brush crewman, the trial and Ed Hoyt's inspired defense that had saved Bill from the hangman's noose and instead sent him to the penitentiary for life. Then the three long years at Yuma. Bill had always suspected Tom Miles of the frame-up as the surest means of keeping his daughter from marrying an Ash. Now that the law had finally caught up with Miles, he was sure of it.

BILL ASH could never afterward quite explain the half-insane impulse that prompted him to turn abruptly away from Ed Hoyt's window and stride along the alley in the direction of the jail. He knew only that a moment before his right hand, reaching into his pocket, had touched the cold steel of the der-



A rock was no match for a rifle, but somehow Bill Ash had to stop that solitary rider.

ringer. He had a weapon, a weapon that could kill a man at short range. He knew that a small window was set in the rear of the jail's single cell and that Tom Miles deserved to die without a chance.

He came abreast the low stone jail. A rain-barrel sat under a downspout within three feet of the high barred window. Faint light showed through the window, which meant that Blaze Leslie was still in his office that occupied the front half of the building's one long room. That didn't matter, nothing mattered but this chance of seeing Tom Miles, defenseless, die by a hand he had betrayed.

Bill climbed onto the barrel, feeling its weight of solid ice hold steady beneath him. He leaned over and

looked in through the glass of the window as he was reaching for the derringer. The bars of the cell's front wall drew a lined pattern half-way up along the narrow room. Beyond the bars sat Blaze Leslie, boots cocked up on his battered desk. He was reading a paper with a lamp at his elbow.

On this side of the bars was outlined a cot and a figure lying on it. Tom Miles was stretched out on his back, knees up, arms folded across his chest. Bill's face took on a sardonic grin as he raised the derringer and swung it down, about to break

out the glass and take his careful aim at Tom Miles.

At the precise instant he caught a whisper of sound behind him. He pushed back from the window and turned his head in time to see a shadow darker than the snow-whipped night moving in toward him. Then, suddenly, a weight drove in at his legs and pushed him off balance.

He was falling. He reached out with both hands to break his fall, dropping the derringer. He lit hard, one shoulder taking up his weight. A figure moved in over him as he tried to roll out of the way. A glancing blow struck him on the head and stunned him for a moment. Then the cold muzzle of a gun was thrust into his face and a low voice said, "Quiet! Or I'll kill you!"

CHAPTER III

LINDA MILES' STORY

BILL recognized the voice instantly. He forgot the gun and the slacking off of tension brought a reaction in him that started every muscle in his body trembling. He was coldly sane once more, and ashamed of the impulse that had guided him here.

He was about to speak when the voice said again: "Get onto your feet!" He obeyed. Then: "Your hands! Keep them up!" He raised his hands to the level of his shoulders.

The figure, a full head shorter than his own, moved around behind him. The thrust of a gun nudged him in the spine in a silent command that started him walking along the alley. When he had taken three strides, the pressure of the gun moved him over toward a slant-roofed woodshed behind the store that adjoined the jail. The voice

said, "Open the door and go in!" and he reached out, loosened the hasp on the door and stepped inside.

It was warm in here. The air was heavy with the reek of burned coal oil. The hard pressure of the gun left this spine and he heard movement behind him. The door hinges squeaked and the cold draft of the wind abruptly died out. The flare of a match behind threw his shadow across a stack of split cedar in the shed's far corner. Then the match's flare steadied and the voice said, "Turn around! Keep your hands up!"

As Bill turned, he had to squint against the glare of a lantern held at a level with his face. But beyond the lantern he saw a face, and a yearning suddenly leaping up in him made him breathe, "Linda!"

He caught the quick changes on her oval, finely chiseled face. Disbelief and wonderment widened her eyes. There was a flash of recognition and then that, too, disappeared. "How do you know my name?" Linda Miles demanded flatly.

He was held speechless a moment, groping for understanding. Finally it came and he laughed uneasily, realizing how Yuma and these past four days must have changed him. His face was gaunt and bearded and his hair, long uncut, gave her no clue to his identity. Three years at hard labor and a diet only sufficient to keep him alive had thinned him down to a wiry toughness that made him a shadow of what he had once been.

Before he could answer, she said again, sharply, "How do you know me?"

"Look again, Linda."

Once again his voice prompted that flash of recognition in her. He could see it come to her eyes, die out and then flare alive again, this

time more strongly. She said in a voice barely audible, "But it can't be!"

"It is, Linda."

THE lantern lowered slowly until it rested on the floor. Now he could see her better. The heavy gun she was holding lowered to her side. Her hazel eyes were wide, tear-filled, as she finally understood what his being out there at the jail window meant. Suddenly, choking back a sob, she cried, "Bill! Bill, he didn't do it!"

He made no answer. She came close to him, her two hands taking a strong grip on his arms. She shook him fiercely. "I know, Bill! You must have faith in me."

Her nearness, the fragrance of her hair, made him want to take her in his arms. He didn't. He was remembering Ed Hoyt, knowing that what had been between himself and this girl could never again come back. But still he couldn't trust himself to speak.

Her look gradually changed to one of alarm. "Bill! You're half frozen! You're thin! You're sick!"

He shook his head and smiled down at her. "Not sick any more. Just a little hungry. Tired, too, maybe."

Her hand came and ran gently over his beard-stubbed face. "I didn't think I could ever be this happy again," she murmured. Then, before he could grasp the depth of emotion that lay behind her words, her hand ran down over his thin jacket and she said, "You've been out in this storm, in this?"

"I'm all right now," he told her.

"You're not!" Abruptly she reached down and moved the lantern to one side, indicating a pile of gunny sacking on the floor closest to the wall that faced the back of

the jail. A board had been pulled loose near the floor.

"I've spent the last two nights here," she explained. "Watching, hoping I'd catch someone sneaking in to the jail. I thought you were the man I was after, the man who framed dad."

When she caught the look of disbelief he couldn't hide, she said, "Never mind. I don't expect you to take it all in. But lie down there and rest and we can talk later, when I get back. The lantern will warm you."

"Where are you going?" he asked as she turned to the door.

"To get you the best meal in town," Linda answered as she went out.

He sat weakly down on the improvised bed. He moved the lantern closer, relishing its warmth. And as he lay back on the gunny sacking he realized how implicitly she must trust him to leave him like this, within striking distance of her father. He closed his eyes. The knowledge of having lived out his dream of seeing this girl once again was a tonic that calmed the riot and confusion in him. He no longer felt alone. He was asleep in less than ten seconds.

An instinctive wariness made him open his eyes at the sound of the door hinges grating against the moaning of the wind that whipped the corners of the shed. Linda came into the light. She knelt alongside him, laying a tray covered with a cloth on the floor.

"I'm thankful to have a friend or two left," she said. "Charley won't talk." She was speaking of Charley Travers, owner of the lunchroom. She added: "You didn't tell me you'd seen Ed. I met him on his way to the jail to tell the sheriff you were in town. I made him promise he

wouldn't." She smiled in a way that showed him a deep hurt that lay within her. "He . . . he told you we were to be married?"

Bill nodded. "He's a good man, Linda."

She shrugged lifelessly. "Good enough, I've decided. Or rather, dad has. I'm going through with it for dad."

Bill knew that much must be left unsaid between them. To hide his own thoughts, he reached down and took the cloth from the tray.

"You never know how good food is until you've gone without it, Linda," he drawled.

She had brought him a bowl of bean soup, steak and potatoes and a generous pot of steaming coffee. He tried to eat slowly, knowing that his stomach would rebel at this full meal after having gone so long on next to nothing—his last meal had been the hindquarters of a tough old jackrabbit scorched over the flames of a fire made of wet wood. He ate the steak first, drank half the soup and then had his first cup of coffee. Pushing the tray back, he said, "The rest can wait."

"I didn't forget this, either," she told him, and took a sack of tobacco from a pocket of her wool jacket.

He had built his first cigarette in four days and was taking in his first satisfying lungful of smoke, before she spoke again: "You came back to kill dad, didn't you, Bill?"

He nodded, reminded once again of the gulf that had widened between them in these three years. "I had a gun," he said, deciding not to tell her how he came to have the derringer and of Ed Hoyt's strange action.

His honest answer brought a look to her hazel eyes that implored him to understand and believe. She said

softly, "I know, I know exactly how you feel. But I know dad didn't kill your father, as surely as I know he didn't frame you three years ago. The reason I know is that I was with dad that afternoon your father died. I had ridden over to the Hansen's, to take their new baby some things. I met dad and your father on the way back, there at the fork in the trails. Dad and I watched your father ride on. Then we came home. Dad wasn't out of my sight that whole afternoon and evening until Blaze Leslie came to arrest him that night."

AS she spoke, Bill's long frame went rigid. He searched her face now, loathing himself for the brief moment he had thought he could read deception in its strong clean lines. No, Linda Miles would never lie to him. Too much lay between them to make that possible.

Suddenly a full understanding came to him. It left him weak and uncertain. For an instant he felt lost, as though blind and groping for a solid footing that had been swept from under him. Linda must have read what lay behind the dogged set of his face, for she went on, "I was going to write, to try and explain. This is better, your hearing me say it. I tried to tell them at the trial, but they wouldn't listen." Her head came up in a proud look of defiance: "Now I'm trying to make you believe."

Bill heard himself saying, "I do believe it, Linda. You'd never lie to me."

A wave of emotion swept over her. Gratitude and tenderness was in the look she gave him. "You do believe me?" she said humbly. Then she choked back a sob and buried her face in her hands. "Nothing else matters now, Bill."

Because this girl had been denied him, because he remembered Ed Hoyt in this moment, Bill didn't reach out to touch her as he longed to. Instead he said flatly, "Then who pushed my father over the rim?"

Her face tilted up to him again. She visibly restrained the tenderness that had been in her a moment ago, seeming to realize the force of will that was guiding him.

"I've tried to find out," she answered. "I've spent a week trying. I've traced down the whereabouts of nearly every man within fifty miles on that afternoon. It wasn't as hard as you'd think. I'm sure of all but three men who matter. And only two of those ever had even an argument with your father. Only one of that pair ever had serious trouble with him."

"Who are the three?"

"Fred Snow, Phil Cable and Jim Rosto."

Bill placed two of the three. Fred Snow was his father's cantakerous old ramrod; he'd always argued bitterly over the management of the outfit with Bob Ash, never meaning half of what he said. He had always stayed on beyond threats of leaving, to do as fine a job as any man could. Bill ruled him out immediately, kowing that behind Snow's truculence lay a sincere and deep regard for Bob Ash.

Phil Cable was president of the bank. Long ago, he and Bob Ash had mutually agreed to have nothing to do with each other. Their trouble came over Cable's refusal to loan Bill's father money when he was making his start. Old Bob Ash had always banked at Pinetop, a town thirty miles farther west.

Bill couldn't place the third man and asked, "Who's Jim Rosto?"

HE'S the one I meant when I mentioned serious trouble. It happened after you'd gone, Bill. That fall your father was short of hands and hired Rosto, a stranger, for roundup. Your father caught him abusing a horse one day and had him thrown off the place. He made him buy the horse and take it with him, saying he'd ruined the animal. Rosto threatened to come after your father with a gun. Nothing came of it, and their feeling died down. Then, the following year, someone talked Blaze Leslie into taking on a deputy. I think it was Ed Hoyt who decided it. He said Blaze was too old to be doing all the work and suggested Rosto for the job. They say he's been a good law officer."

"And you can't place Rosto on the afternoon of the murder?"

Linda shook her head, frowning thoughtfully. At length, she gave an uneasy laugh: "It probably isn't important. Rosto left town the day before your father was killed, so he couldn't have done it. He took a rifle and enough food for two weeks and said he was going over into the Whetstones to hunt deer. They say he had that roan horse of his carrying twice as much as any man—"

Bill stiffened. "A roan? Was that the horse my father made Rosto buy?"

Linda nodded, puzzled at his interruption.

Bill leaned closer to her. "That roan gelding with the split hind hoof?"

The girl thought, a moment then all at once nodded. "Yes, now that I think of it! I've noticed that split hoof. But why is that important?"

"I saw Rosto just before dark, up in the timber. He wasn't pack-

ing anything on his hull and he was headed away from town."

Linda's look showed plainly that she was only puzzled. "Then you think—"

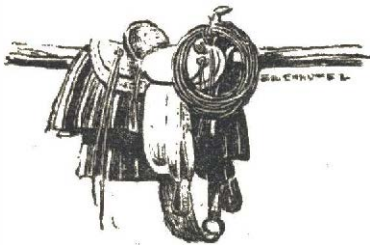
"The first thing is to see Blaze and find out if Rosto's back from his hunt," Bill interrupted. "If he isn't, then we know he's holed up somewhere close to town, don't we?"

"Hiding?"

"You say he had a run-in with the old man. He left here the day before the murder, saying he was headed across into the Whetstones, sixty miles away. He was to be gone two weeks. Yet, with only a week gone, I see him tonight riding a blizzard, heading away from town and with no grub."

She saw what he meant now, and said in an awed voice, "Then he didn't go across into the Whetstones?" Her eyes widened. "Bill! He could have done it!"

"Not so fast," he cautioned her. "He may have a reason for being back. If he does, Blaze will know



about it. That's your job, to find out about Rosto from Blaze without his suspecting that you're after information."

Linda stood up. "I'll do it now."

"Careful," was Bill's last word to her.

Ten minutes later, when Linda returned to the shed, she found Bill asleep. She didn't have the heart to wake him. She knelt beside him and for long minutes looked down

into his face, seeing that sleep had wiped out the bitterness and frustration that was, to her, the most terrible change these three years had made in him. Food and rest would fill out his gaunt strong frame. But she wondered what it would take to rid him of the deeper wound these years had kept open deep within him.

She went across to her room at the hotel and returned with a pair of blankets. She spread them over him. Her last gesture before turning down the lantern was to bend down and gently kiss him, full on the lips. She had to have that to seal the memory of what they had once meant to each other, to help her through the trouble she knew lay ahead.

For Blaze Leslie wasn't expecting Jim Rosto back for another week!

CHAPTER IV

A KILLER'S BACK TRAIL

THE next day seemed endless to Linda. The blizzard was at its height, and the needle-sharp penants of snow that rode the wind and cut at her face as she walked down the alley toward the shed at daylight seemed to fit her mood. She must be cautious in dealing with Bill, in telling him about Jim Rosto. For she understood the unbalanced desire for revenge that was driving him. She could be thankful for only one thing: his hatred was no longer centered on her father.

But when she sat in the shed, talking with him, she saw that she was powerless to head him off from trouble. When he heard that Rosto hadn't been seen in town for better than a week, he said ominously, "That means we've run onto something. I'll want a horse and some

warm clothes and a gun, right away."

"Why, Bill?"

"I'm taking a look at that old Forked Lightning line shack up Snake Canyon. If he's hidin' out near where I saw him yesterday, it'll be there."

"But the storm, Bill!"

He smiled thinly. "It'll help. I won't be seen."

She had to give in to him finally, and an hour later, watched him ride away into the fog of snow. He rode a horse jaw-branded Sloping M, one of Tom Miles' regular string which Linda had taken from the feed barn. He wore a sheep-lined coat and Stetson belonging to Charley Travers, the restaurant owner. Thonged low in a holster at his thigh, was a gun, the one Linda had last night rammed in his back. It was her father's. She had carried it since the night he was arrested.

Seeing him ride out of sight, afraid at the thought she might never see him again, was only the start of a day crowded with disappointments for Linda. By three that afternoon, when she waited at the shed to see Bill's tall figure coming back along the alley, her feeling of defeat was so complete that her thankfulness he was alive and safe couldn't out-balance it.

The first thing she saw as he stepped into the shed and closed the door was the small tear in the left shoulder of his jacket and the stain of blood that ringed it.

"Bill!" she cried. "Your arm!"

He moved his left arm stiffly, his eyes surface-glinted and hard. "He was up there, Linda. Waitin' down the canyon a quarter mile short of the shack. I'll go back again tonight. This time I won't give him as good a chance at me."

"Someone shot you, Bill?"

He nodded. "I was lucky. It's nothin' but a burn."

She insisted on looking at the wound. It was more serious than he had admitted, but the hole through the bunchy muscle that capped his shoulder was clean and he had bandaged it well.

Presently, she was calm enough to tell him, "Bill, I have had news. It wasn't Jim Rosto who shot at you. He rode into town this morning at eight o'clock! He's here now!"

HIS hands reached up to take her by the shoulders. There was a wild light in his eyes. His grip was viselike, so hard she gave an involuntary cry of pain. That brought back his reason. He took his hands away.

"I'm sorry, Linda," he said quietly. He was silent a long moment, then shrugged and gave a long sigh. "Now what? I'd hoped we could take what we know to Blaze Leslie. I'd even give myself up to him if it'd make him wait a few days and look into this."

"We could go to him tonight. He's away today, has been since early morning." She smiled without a trace of amusement in her eyes. "That's something else. People here were all so anxious to see dad tried for the murder. Now their tempers have cooled off. They're remembering that they were his friends once. Blaze can't find anyone to act as hangman tomorrow morning. He's ridden over to San Juan to see if he can pick up a Mexican who'll do the job for ten dollars. He won't have any luck. They're friends of dad's."

Had Bill been conscious of it, the caustic bitter quality of her voice would have shown him how close she was to the breaking point. But

something she had said took his attention so forcibly that he didn't recognize the near hysteria that lay behind her words.

"Blaze left town early this morning?" he said incredulously, turning something over in his mind. "Then he could have done it!"

"Done what?"

"Taken that shot at me up the canyon."

"Bill! Not Blaze!"

"Why not? Rosto was here, so someone else was up there near the line shack."

She said lifelessly, numbed by this new development, "Then we can't count on him for help."

He shot a sudden seemingly irrelevant question: "Does Mart Schefflin still run his freight wagons through here?"

"Yes. But—"

"And today's Thursday, isn't it, the day Schefflin's due?"

She nodded. "But in this weather he—"

"Mart Schefflin never let weather stop him, did he? If he hasn't already come through, this will work!" She saw a new excitement and hope flare into his glance. "Linda, I'm going to get that job Blaze is offering!"

"You . . . you're going to hang dad?" she said incredulously.

"I am! Only I promise you he won't hang."

"But . . . but how, Bill?"

"I don't quite know," he answered truthfully. "But I'm going out the trail beyond town and wait for Schefflin's wagon. I'll hop a ride. I'll be seen coming to town that way. I'll be a stranger. From there on, I'll have to trust to luck."

"And if you're caught?" Her deep concern for him was in her eyes.

He shrugged his wide shoulders.

"I won't be," he drawled and wished he could believe he wouldn't.

CHAPTER V

NEEDED: A HANGMAN!

BLAZE LESLIE stomped into his office at five that evening, his gray longhorn mustache frosty and his narrow hawkish nose blue with the cold. Jim Rosto sat in the chair at the desk back by the cell. His move in coming up out of the chair was catlike and lazy, its smoothness holding an economy of motion that seemed to fit the rest of his make-up, his dark and saturnine face and his black eyes.

"Any luck?" he asked easily.

Blaze was surprised at seeing his deputy. He pulled off his sheepskin, threw it onto a nearby chair and stepped over to the stove to warm his hands. "Not a damned bit!" he growled in disgusted answer to Rosto's question. "How come you're back?"

"Game's all yarded up over in the Whetstones. Then this blow come along. I decided it'd be healthier under roof."

From the cell at the back of the room, Tom Miles' booming voice called, "You should have taken my word for it, Blaze. A hundred dollars couldn't hire a San Juan man to spring the trap under me. What'll you do now?"

Blaze stared back into the half-light of the cell. "I wish to hell I knew, Tom!" he said acidly.

He was a thoroughly beaten old man tonight, worn out, discouraged, hating his job. For thirty years he and Tom Miles had been friends, real friends. Circumstances he still couldn't trust called for him to be the witness to his friend's death at sunup tomorrow morning. All day he had thought of Tom and Linda

and Bob Ash. Things like this just didn't happen. But they had. And, unless he could find another man, he himself would be pulling the trap that started Tom Miles on the ten-foot drop that would break his neck tomorrow morning.

Big, gruff, hearty Tom Miles was taking it the way Blaze had expected he would. When asked, Miles insisted on his innocence. But Blaze had never once detected a trace of fear in him. The rancher's stolid bearing was maddening at times. Blazes would have preferred a cringing, half-mad victim for his hangman's rope.

His dark thoughts were jerked rudely to the matter at hand as Rosto drawled in his toneless voice, "I think I've found your man, Blaze."

The old lawman wheeled on his deputy. "Who?" he demanded.

"A stranger," Rosto told him. "Rode in this afternoon on Scheflin's freight outfit. Tramp lookin' for a handout. He spent a dime for a beer at the Melodian and stuffed his mouth at the free-lunch counter until Barney told him to lay off. Then he had the gall to ask Barney for a job."

Blaze only half heard what Rosto said. He was staring at Tom Miles, catching the smile that slowly came to the rancher's broad and rugged face.

"It looks like this is it, Tom," he said, in apology.

Miles shrugged. "No one's blamin' you, Blaze. Go on over there and hire him."

Blaze sighed and nodded to Rosto. "Get him!"

THE five-minute wait before Rosto came back with the stranger was a trying one for Blaze Leslie. He started to tell Miles how

he'd hoped all along that something would save him. But words right now were pointless, more so because no shred of proof existed beyond Linda's loyal testimony at the trial. Blaze, like everyone else, believed that the girl had committed perjury to try to save her father.

His frowning glance sized up the stranger who came through the door ahead of Rosto. The scrubby beard hid a face that was lean and strong-looking. The man's thinned-out frame looked steely tough. There was a sag in his left shoulder, a tear in that sleeve, high up toward the shoulder. But the beard and the unkempt hair, the red-rimmed brown eyes and the outfit, much the worse for wear, convinced Blaze that he was looking at a saddle bum. No flicker of recognition showed in his eyes as he sized up Bill.

"Did you tell him, Rosto?" he said brusquely, and caught his deputy's negative shake of the head.

He eyed Bill so belligerently that Bill said, "Any law against ridin' a wagon in out of a storm, sheriff? Or have you trumped up a charge against me?"

"No one's arrested you yet, stranger. What are you doin' here?"

Bill jerked his head to indicate Rosto. "Your understrapper said you wanted to see me."

"I don't mean that!" Blaze said curtly. "Why are you in town?"

Bill shrugged. "One town's as good as the next when it comes to lookin' for work."

"Any particular kind of work?"

"No. And I'm not particular."

Bill smiled thinly at his twisting of the sheriff's words.

"I've got a job if you want it. Ten dollars for three minutes of work."

Bill frowned. "That's easy money. What's the catch?"

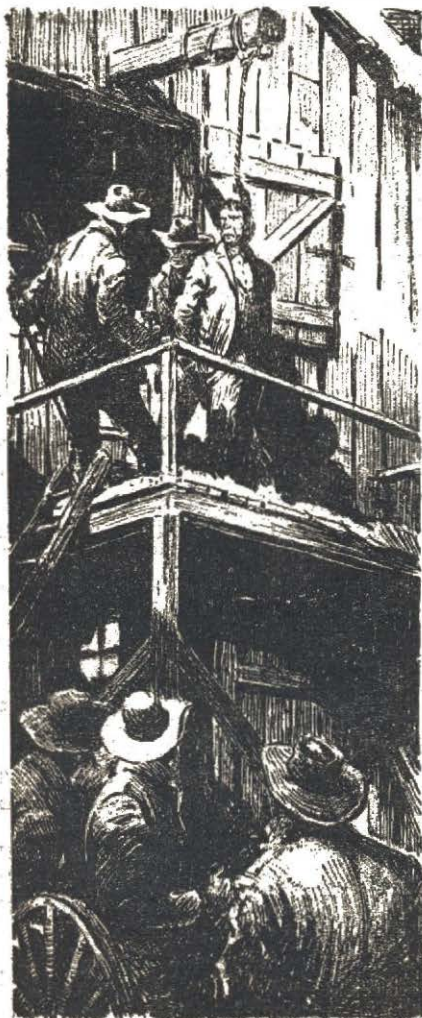
"We're hangin' a man tomorrow morning. We need a hangman."

Bill shook his head. "Huh-uh, mister! Not me!"

"I'll make it fifteen dollars," Blaze said in a grating voice.

A shrewd look came to Bill's eyes. "How about fifty?"

"You go to hell!" Blaze snarled.



Bill's plans to save Miles were suddenly blasted when Rosto snapped, "I'm takin' charge of this hangin'!"

Then he seemed to think better of it. A long gusty sigh escaped his narrow chest, and he said, "Fifty it is. Half now and half afterward." He took out his wallet, thumbed out five bills and handed them across.

As he took the money, Bill looked hesitant. "I once saw a hangin' that turned out to be stranglin'," he declared. "I don't aim to see this one the same kind. I'll take your job if you let me tie the knot myself to make sure it's right."

"Go ahead," Blaze said lifelessly, and stepped over to sit down in his chair. "Be here half an hour early in the mornin', at six."

"A man's fingers can't work in the cold at six in the mornin'," Bill asserted. "Get me the rope now and I'll take it with me tonight and tie it like it ought to be. Where's your gallows?"

Blaze nodded irritably to the street door. "Show him, Rosto. And buy him the rope."

As he and Rosto went out and along the walk, lowering their heads against the knifing wind, Bill said, "Salty old gent, ain't he?"

Rosto laughed softly. "Plenty. You're savin' him some gray hairs, stranger."

They made a stop at the hardware store where Rosto bought a twenty-foot length of new hemp rope. Two doors below, they turned in at the feed barn and walked to the corral out back, where Rosto showed Bill the crude platform of new lumber two carpenters had nailed together that afternoon. The protruding beam that was used to hoist hay into the feed barn's loft was to be the gallows. The platform, twelve feet high and braced by a scaffolding, was nailed to the side of the barn below the loft door and had a crude trap cut through it di-

rectly under the beam. The trap-door was unfastened now, hanging downward on its shiny new hinges. Bill saw that it was sprung by a notched two-by-four pivoted in the platform.

Rosto pointed to the lever. "All you got to do is give it a good kick. Fifty bucks ought to be good pay if you happen to hurt your pet corn." He laughed.

"You act like this was a weddin'," Bill said dryly.

Rosto froze immediately. He held out the rope drawing, "You ain't bein' paid for your talk, stranger. Remember that! Be here at six in the mornin'." With that he turned and walked back up the barn's runway and to the street.

BILL spent forty minutes that night working by the light of a lantern in the loft of the barn. Once he went down to borrow a tallow candle and a knife from the hostler, explaining that the rope would slip through the knot better if it was slick. But anyone watching would have seen that he had an added use for the tallow and that he used the knife for purposes other than trimming the end of the twelve windings of the knot.

At nine o'clock he was satisfied. He had secured the end of the rope to the beam and carefully measured its length so that he judged the loop would fit over Tom Miles' head as he stood on the platform and still leave eight or ten feet of slack. He ate a lieisurely meal at Charley's place and smiled faintly after Charley had spent ten minutes talking to him without recognizing him.

Linda had said that she would be in the shed behind the jail at ten. He went there before the hour and found her waiting. As he en-

tered the shed he had a moment's panic at seeing a tall figure standing behind the girl's. Then he recognized Ed Hoyt.

"Ed wanted to speak to you, Bill," Linda said. "I have his word that he won't give you away."

Ed cleared his throat nervously. "This is a fool idea, Bill," he began. "If I'd been in the office this morning when Linda came to tell me what you were doing, I'd have stopped you. Instead of riding up there into the hills, you should have gone to Blaze—"

"How much have you told him, Linda?" Bill cut in.

"All there was to tell, Bill. He wants to help."

Bill eyed Hoyt bleakly. "He wanted to help last night, too," he drawled.

"I was keyed up last night," Hoyt defended himself. "Didn't realize what I was doing. Linda has convinced me that her father's not guilty—not that I needed convincing," he added as an afterthought. "What I want to know is what you plan for tomorrow morning."

"Why?"

"I'm one of the four men who's to be there. I could help."

"Who are the others?"

"Blaze, Jim Rosto and Judge Morris."

Bill didn't show his relief. He had hoped that the witnesses to the hanging would be few. This meant that there would be, at the most, two men against him, Rosto and Blaze. Ed wouldn't interfere and old Judge Morris was physically harmless. He wished he could be sure of Blaze, but the sheriff's absence from town this morning had undermined the faith he'd always had in the lawman.

As he hesitated, Hoyt said once

more, "How are you going to work it, Bill?"

"I don't know yet," Bill lied. He couldn't bring himself to trust Ed Hoyt completely after last night's reception in the lawyer's office.

"But you must have some idea," Hoyt insisted.

"It all depends on what happens, who brings Miles up to the loft, who stays with him on the platform." Once that last statement was out, Bill immediately regretted it. No one but he and Linda had the right to know exactly what was going to happen.

He was irritated at Ed Hoyt being here, for tonight would see the end of his and Linda's meetings alone. If he succeeded in getting her father away, he might never even see her again. She was promised to another man, and he begrudged sharing any of these last minutes with her.

"Linda, I want you to stay," he said sharply. "See you in the mornin', Ed."

THERE was an awkward moment's silence, one in which Ed Hoyt ignored the blunt invitation to leave. Then Linda said, "I'll go back to the hotel alone, Ed. It was good of you to come."

She and Bill stood silent a long quarter minute after the lawyer had gone out the door. Then Linda said, "You don't like him, do you, Bill?"

"I must've been too busy thinking about this other thing," he told her, neither admitting nor rejecting her accusation. Then, to change the subject, he said, "Here's one more thing for you to do. I'll want two horses on the street, as close to the feed barn as you can leave them. You might have Charley pack up some grub for us to take along."

"Where are you taking dad?" Linda wasn't voicing the possibility that her father's escape might not succeed.

"To that line shack the first thing. After that—" he shrugged.

That seemed to be all there was to say. The minutes dragged for them both. Bill realized that his antagonism toward Ed Hoyt had brought a strained feeling between them. He was sorry to have hurt Linda's feelings yet stubbornly unwilling to admit that he was wrong.

"It's late," she said finally. "I must be getting back." On impulse, she reached out and took Bill's hand. "I . . . some day you may know how grateful I am, Bill."

"I'm doing it for myself as much as for you." He took her hand, clasped it and took his hand away immediately.

"I know. But you are doing it, which is what matters. I wish things could have been different, Bill."

He tried to read a meaning into the words. He was finally sure it wasn't there. There was a tenderness in her glance, but that was gratitude alone.

She turned abruptly to the door, said, "Good-by, Bill," and was gone.

He stayed on another ten minutes in the shed, his thoughts bleak and empty. Beyond seeing Tom Miles free, he had no plans for the future. He might head for the border, or go east to lose himself in one of the cities. He didn't much care.

Later, as he stretched out on the hay in the feed-barn loft, he was an embittered man, alone, without hope, knowing that the last page in this chapter of his life was about to be closed, never to be opened again.

CHAPTER VI

A DEAD MAN TELLS A TALE

IN the hour between six and seven the next morning, while he waited in the loft for Blaze to appear, Bill Ash smoked cigarette after cigarette, telling himself that the tobacco tasted stale because of his own inner staleness. He wasn't hungry, although his stomach felt empty and dry. He was nervous. Three times he examined the six-gun he had thrust through the waist band of his pants. Three times he saw that the cylinder was loaded.

Relief came when he heard the sound of men coming slowly along the runway below. In another ten seconds, Blaze Leslie's doggedly set face was rising into sight up the loft ladder.

Blaze was alone. "Let's get on with it," he said curtly.

They swung the hinged loft door outward and looked down into the feed barn's corral. Three men stood down there. Tom Miles' heavy erect frame topped Ed Hoyt's by half a head, Judge Morris' by a full one. Ed and the judge were standing with their backs to the wind, stomping their feet calf-deep in the heavy blanket of snow, hands thrust deep in overcoat pockets. Tom Miles seemed unaware of the wind or the snow, but more interested in what was going on above.

His steady upward glance must have rubbed raw Blaze Leslie's nerve, for, as Blaze let the rope with its noose fall out to hang from the beam, he grunted savagely, "To hell with this! I'm going down there and stay! I'll send one of the others up with the prisoner!"

It was Jim Rosto who followed Tom Miles up the ladder into the loft half a minute after the sheriff had gone down. Miles' wrists were

bound with a length of rawhide and he no longer wore his flat-crowned Stetson. When Rosto took him by the arm and started leading him across to where Bill stood, alongside the open door, he jerked away. "I can make it alone, Rosto!" he said irritably.

For a moment Bill was afraid that Miles might throw himself from the loft door, preferring to die that way rather than at the end of a rope. But the rancher calmly followed him down the short ladder out of the loft door onto the platform. For about ten seconds they were alone there while Rosto was climbing down.

In that brief interval, Bill stepped close to Miles and said in a low voice: "Miles, I'm Bill Ash! Linda sent me. Don't ask why, but when you fall through that trap stiffen your neck. When you hit the ground, run through the barn for the street! You'll find two horses at the tie rail. Ride east out the street and cut north beyond town. I'll be right behind you!"

"What the hell's this all about!" Rosto's slow drawl said behind Bill.

Bill turned slowly to face the deputy. "I was askin' if he wanted anything over his eyes."

For a long moment Bill thought the suspicion would never leave the glance Rosto had focused on Tom Miles. But finally the deputy's dark face broke into a twisted smile.

"Him cover his eyes!" He laughed softly, callously. "Not Tom Miles!"

He nodded to the noose swaying stiffly in the wind below. "Do your stuff, stranger!" Then, suddenly, his right hand pushed back his coat and dipped to the holster at his thigh. He added ominously, "I'm right here to see that you pull the knot tight behind his ear!"

Bill tripped over the end of the

two-by-four lever as he stepped over to reach for the rope and pull up the noose. The lever held and didn't let the trap down. Rosto pushed Miles over onto the trap and stood close while Bill lowered the noose over the rancher's head, tightening the knot until it hugged Miles' right ear.

AS the knot closed, Rosto reached over Bill's shoulder and ran his hand along the tallowed rope. "What's the idea of this?" he growled, suspiciously.

Bill knew then that Rosto had learned in some way of the part he was playing here. The knowledge settled through him in a wave of dread that finally washed away, to leave him cool and nerveless.

He turned to face Rosto. "That's so it'll tighten faster," he answered easily. "Are you doin' this or am I?"

"By damn, I am!" Rosto snarled. He lifted the heavy .45 from holster and rocked it into line with Bill. "Step back, stranger, and see how it's done!"

From below, Blaze Leslie's voice rang out harshly: "What's goin' on up there?"

Bill glanced down. Blaze stood at the foot of the ladder, looking up. Ed Hoyt and the judge were farther out, their glances also directed above.

Then, before he quite knew what was happening, Rosto was muttering behind him, "You'll damn soon find out!"

Bill wasn't ready for what happened with such startling suddenness. One moment he felt the platform quiver under the thrust of Rosto's boot as the deputy kicked the lever. The next, as he whirled around, he was in time to see Tom Miles shoot downward through the

trap opening as the door banged solidly beneath the platform. The rope came taut, whanged and curled upward loosely. Ed Hoyt's voice sounded in a shout of alarm from below. At that exact instant Rosto stepped over to line his gun down through the trap opening.

Bill lashed out hard, throwing all his weight behind his arm. His fist caught the deputy behind the ear a fraction of a second before the .45 exploded. Rosto sprawled downward to his knees. Bill jumped over him and through the opening. His breath caught as he plummeted down the twelve-foot drop, sweeping his coat aside to snatch the .38 from his belt.

His weight struck hard against the frozen ground. He went to his knees and fell sideways in a quick roll. Two guns exploded simultaneously, one from above, one from beyond the foot of the scaffold. The burn of a bullet scorched his left thigh. As he rolled, he had a quick glimpse of Ed Hoyt standing thirty feet away, a smoking gun in hand. Then his bewildered glance lifted to the trap opening on the scaffold above him. Rosto stood there, rocking his gun down at him.

Bill came to his feet, dodging aside as he threw a snapshot at Rosto. Their guns blended in a prolonged burst of sound. A geyser of snow puffed upward an inch out from Bill's right boot. He whirled in through the barn doorway and ran up along the passageway between the stalls. Halfway, he wheeled in behind a bale of alfalfa and thumbed two swift shots out the maw of the back door. Ed Hoyt, running in through the doorway, stopped suddenly and lunged back out of it.

Bill came into the street in time to see three men running down the steps of the hotel, four doors be-

yond, and Tom Miles, astride a rangy claybank horse, swinging away from the tie rail. He ducked under the tie rail, pulling loose the reins of the other horse, a black. He vaulted into the saddle as three warning shots exploded hollowly from inside the barn. Bending low in the saddle, he wheeled the black out into the street and kicked hard at the animal's flanks with his spurless boots.

As they left the end of the street, swinging immediately north, Bill drew even with Tom Miles. They rode hard, silently, Bill looking back after they had gone on a full minute. He saw that the slanting cloud of wind-racing snow had already hidden the town from sight.

They put two more miles behind them before Bill tightened his reins to slow his black. Tom Miles pulled in and let Bill come alongside.

The rancher's glance surveyed Bill critically an instant before his blunt face broke into a broad smile.

"I wouldn't have given a nickel for my carcass when Rosto kicked open that trap," he said. "But my neck didn't even feel it. How did you work it, Ash?"

"Cut through most of the rope and tallowed it. The cut was hidden by the knot when I had it tight."

"Rosto knew what was up?"

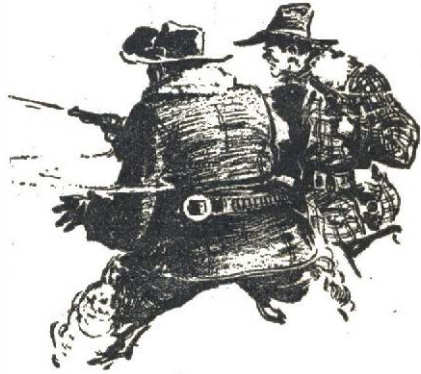
Bill nodded soberly. "And Ed Hoyt gave me this." He ran his hand along his thigh and his palm came away blood-smearred. When he saw the look of concern on Miles' face he added, "I'm glad I got it. It proves a thing or two I've been wanting to know."

"What?"

"Last night Ed Hoyt wanted to help me get you away. Linda was there. This morning he tried to cut me down. You figure it out, Tom." He went on then, started to briefly

tell the rancher what had happened in the last thirty-six hours.

He was interrupted by a muted nearby hoof mutter riding the toneless scream of the wind. He kicked the black into a run as two shad-



owy figures loomed up out of the snow haze behind. A gun spoke once, its explosion whipped away by the rush of wind. The bullet laid a concussion of air along Bill's cheek. He called, "Ride, Miles!" and bent over in the saddle, cutting off to the left.

Linda had made a wise choice of horses, particularly in the claybank. Even with Tom Miles' heavy weight, the claybank more than matched the black's speed. Gradually, those dim shadows behind faded from sight and once more Bill and Miles were riding clear.

BILL purposely made a swing to the west, knowing that the posse—if there were more than two men on their trail—would follow sign. Two more miles brought them to a broad and high shelf of rock. It stretched for a hundred yards to each side of them, its surface swept clean of snow by the wind. Bill right-angled to the north, thinking that the posse would waste perhaps a full minute in picking up the sign.

He rode point for the line shack in the canyon where the rifle had yesterday come so close to taking his life. He paid close attention to the horses now, slowing down out of a run to a stiff trot when the black gave sign of tiring. In these brief intervals he finished telling Tom Miles what had happened.

"We'll have a look at that shack and then go up the canyon and over the peaks," he finished.

"Over the peaks!" Miles blazed. "We're stayin' on here! I'm goin' to finish this thing!"

Bill smiled broadly. "I was hopin' you'd say that."

Today Bill rode straight up the narrow, twisting canyon, unmolested as he crossed the open stretch where the rifle had caught him yesterday. Beyond the widening in the high walls, he caught the smell of burning cedar wood and knew again that his hunch on the line shack had been a shrewd one. A few seconds later he caught a glimpse of the sod-roofed shack through the trees. A thin haze of blue smoke drifted lazily up out of the chimney.

They left their horses there, and approached the shack by working in from tree to tree. When they were close, Bill motioned Miles to wait and made a quarter circle of the cabin before he went any closer. The snow deadened his footfalls as he crept up to the shack's single side window. He took off his Stetson and stood erect, looking in.

He looked squarely across the small room at a blanketed figure lying on a bunk against the far wall. To his left, on the rear wall, was a huge stone fireplace where red coals glowed dully. He left the window, rounded the corner of the log wall to the front and motioned Tom Miles to join him.

As Miles was coming up, Bill

cocked his gun and reached out to pull down the rawhide latch string. He felt the latch raise and threw his weight against the door, wheeling in through it and lining his gun at the bunk.

He stood there for two seconds, three, while Tom Miles came up behind him. The figure on the bunk didn't move. Bill walked over to the bunk and looked down into the gray-bearded face of the man lying there with closed eyes.

Then, as his eyes focused to the light, he gasped and the gun fell from his hands. He went to his knees alongside the bunk and reached out, taking a rough hold on the sleeper's shoulders and shaking him hard. "Dad!" he cried. "Wake up! It's me, Bill! You're all right now!"

Tom Miles stared incredulously at the scene before him, Bill Ash there on his knees beside the bunk, his face drained of all color, calling hoarsely to his father. Finally, when Miles knew he wasn't looking at Bob Ash's ghost, he reached out and laid his hand on Bill's shoulder.

"Can't you see he's sick, Bill?" he said, his voice awed. "Take it easy."

Only then did Bill's reason return to him. He stared up dully at Miles, and tears came to his eyes. He breathed in a voice raised barely above a whisper, "He isn't dead, after all! He's alive!"

IT was Tom Miles who caught the hint of sound at the door. His big frame jerked around, stiffened. Slowly his hands came up to the level of his shoulders.

"Bill, we've got visitors!" he said quietly.

Bill turned away from the bunk and glanced toward the door. Ed Hoyt stood spraddle-legged in the opening, a leveled .45 in each hand.

Jim Rosto's dark face was peering in over Hoyt's shoulder. The lawyer caught Bill's look of utter confusion and laughed softly.

"I thought you'd have a last try at comin' up here!" he drawled. "I won't miss this time, like I did yesterday!"

Comprehension was slowly coming to Bill. He stayed where he was, there by the bunk, looking across at Hoyt for five long seconds. He said in a flat and toneless voice, "You're the one who framed me into Yuma?"

Hoyt nodded. "Linda was worth trying for," he said blandly.

Tom Miles caught his breath. "Damn your guts, Hoyt! You'll never marry her now!"

"No? And what's to stop me?"

"I will."

Hoyt laughed again. "They claim the dead rise up out of their graves! I've never believed it. But you can try, Miles!"

As the rancher's face went slack under the threat of Hoyt's words, Bill said, "Why didn't you finish the job, Ed?" He nodded down to his father's inert shape in the bunk.

"A last detail that wasn't cleared up, Bill. You see, he still refuses to tell me where he put the copy of his will. I'm not even sure he signed it."

"You could have forged his signature to the one you have."

"Blaze saw my copy. He'd know it if he saw it again."

As Ed spoke, Bill had reached out to lay a hand on the top blanket in the bunk. As his hand moved, his father breathed a low moan. "What have you done to him?" Bill said sharply.

"Drugged him. Rosto brings him to once or twice a day and works on him. He's a stubborn man, Bill. We

ripped off one of his thumb nails last night. That nearly did it. The other one comes off tonight. We'll break him in the end."

Ed Hoyt was getting an obvious satisfaction out of telling his story. Bill, staring into the twin muzzles of the pair of .45s, kept a firm check on the riot of hatred that was boiling in him.

"How did you get him here?" he asked.

"Rosto brought him. In fact, it was Rosto who roped him off his horse that day up on the rim and pushed the horse over. I gambled on that, thinking no one was going to take the trouble digging through a hundred tons of rock to prove your father had—"

As Hoyt spoke, Bill's hand suddenly tightened on the blanket. He threw his body in a dive toward the door, swinging the blanket out over his shoulder and rolling into Tom Miles' legs. The blanket flew squarely at the lawyer, opening out. The double explosion of Ed Hoyt's guns beat the air of the room. Tom Miles fell heavily backward across Bill's legs, catching his breath with a groan that told Bill one of Hoyt's bullets had found a mark.

Bill's fury steadied to a cold nervelessness. His right hand streaked out and closed on the gun he had dropped by the bunk two minutes ago. He swung the weapon up into line as the blanket dropped to the floor, two feet short of Hoyt.

The lawyer's guns swiveled down. Bill's rocked into line and he let his thumb slip from the hammer. The gun's solid pound traveled back into his shoulder. He saw Hoyt stagger backward, Rosto wheeling out of the door behind him. Then Hoyt's guns were slashing flame at him. A bullet gouged a splinter of wood from a

floor plank. The splinter scratched Bill's face as he was shooting a second time, looking across the 45s sights.

Ed Hoyt coughed thickly as the bullet pounded into his chest. He went to his knees, his lips flecked with blood. Behind him, Rosto stepped suddenly into the doorway, his guns swinging down.

Bill was all at once aware that Tom Miles no longer lay across his legs. Then, suddenly, from behind him sailed the smoldering end of a cedar log. Rosto saw it coming squarely at him and dodged.

That split-second hesitation of the deputy's was ended as Bill's gun exploded again. His bullet and the log end drove Rosto over backward, screaming. The deputy's body stiffened in a head-back arch. He lit that way in the snow beyond the door, his hands beating the ground wildly in a last convulsion that stiffened suddenly. Then his body went limp and he lay without moving.

IN the next hour much happened that Bill was never to forget. Blaze Leslie and half a dozen others rode up to the shack, their horses badly blown in the ride that had brought them up here following the sign of Hoyt's and Rosto's ponies. Linda came later, in time to hear old Bob Ash tell what little he knew of what had happened during the last week. Strong coffee and a stiff jolt of whiskey had deadened the effects of the drug he had taken.

Bob Ash's glance clung fondly to his son as he told the men gathered around him: "Rosto met me up the trail on the rim that afternoon. Tied me and then drove that bay mare of mine over the drop-off. He brought me here. Hoyt came up

that night and they started work on me. Funny thing about that will he wanted me to sign. It was his idea from the first that you were guilty, Bill. I led him on to thinkin' I didn't have much use for you, just to see how far he'd go."

"But you've been here a week. What's happened?" Bill asked.

His father shrugged and sighed wearily. "Nothin' much that I can remember," he said. "Two days ago I was ready to sign anything they gave me. But the drug was so strong I couldn't talk or even move my head. So it's Hoyt's own fault he didn't get away with this. Whoever gave him those knock-out drops didn't tell him how to use 'em."

It was another hour before Doc Selden rode up from town and took care of the flesh wound in Tom Miles' side and the bullet crease on Bill's thigh. As Selden strapped the bandage about Miles' ample waist, the rancher looked across at Bob Ash and at Bill and Linda sitting at the foot of the bunk.

His face reddened and he said, "Bob, you're a cantakerous old mule but so am I. Suppose we call it quits." He stepped over and thrust out his big hand.

Bill's father tightened his lips to hide a smile. Then he frowned. "What good's shakin' hands? It'll take more'n that to make me forget you're so damn bullheaded!"

Miles muttered a curse under his breath. "Supposin' I say I'll let Linda marry into your family."

"Don't know as I want her," Bob Ash insisted stubbornly.

"As if that mattered," Linda said, looking up at Bill. "Does it, Bill?"

He shook his head. Before he kissed her, he caught the sly wink his father gave Tom Miles.

RANGE SAVVY

by H. FREDRIC YOUNG

Before reading further, decide which you'd rather face at a distance up to fifteen yards, the throwing knife or a six-gun. I venture to predict you have chosen the knife. But I think you have chosen the more deadly of two evils at that distance, considering, of course, that the throwing knife is in the hand of an



expert. Up to fifteen yards the knife is considered as dangerous, if not more so than a revolver. These developed throwing knives are quite different from the regular bowie knife, having a very light handle and extra heavy blade. The knife is not held by the point after the manner used by stage performers, but is seized by the handle and thrown straight, the greater weight of the blade preventing it from turning in the air. As I have said, the knife is doubly dangerous in one respect because it may come from any of several parts of a man's body, whereas a gun usually springs from a man's hip.

Although he did not first conceive the high heel on a boot, the western cowpoke will attest to its value in preventing his foot from going through the stirrup. The American cowboy rides as a rule with his feet jammed to the hilt in the narrow, rounded ox-bow stirrup. And, too, the cowboy claims that his high heels, when dug into the ground, help him hold a horse when he ropes on foot. But if a cowboy needs high heels then why is it the Russian Cossacks, Magyar horsemen, Argentine Gauchos and Mexican vaqueros do not have them?



The first record of high-heel boots is among the Mongol races of the Asiatic steppes. These Mongolian boots had

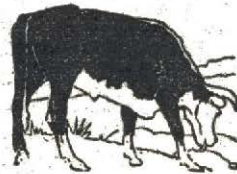
wooden heels which were painted in colors. From the Asiatic Steppes they made their way to the courts of Russia, Spain and other European countries, thence to England, where they became the mark of a gentleman—a cavalier—who did not walk or work.

The courtiers of France, the Stuart cavaliers of Scotland, brought the fashion to America. They settled in the South, and soon the high-heel boot found its way into Texas and from Texas it spread all over the Western range. Purely a horseman's boot it soon became the indispensable part of a cowboy's dress.



Here is an Injun whose luck equals the niche he has carved in American history. Leading the attack against General Custer in the general's "last stand," this young Sioux chieftain was shot seven times and five horses were shot from under him.

Commonly referred to as cow-lick, salt has played its part in the dramas of the West along with rustling, robbery, murder and gambling, and grass and water. Such a simple thing as salt has brewed death for many a range hand.



On any range cattle require salt. Where the rainfall is heavy and the grasses, consequently, extremely juicy, their need for it is so great that they are literally "salt loco." Loco enough to wreck an unguarded camp and chew up clothing, bedding, food or anything else that human sweat or handling has given a salty flavor. More than one slugfest has arisen over the damage done by "chawin" beef, and many a feud has raged over the dispute of salt grounds.

Mr. Young will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a suitable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

NET PROFIT

BY JOSEPH F. HOOK



CRAB CASSON emerged from the shadow of the warehouse and darted across the planking soundlessly. He paused for a second on the string-piece, his abnormally long arms and

legs silhouetted in the dim glow from the wharf lights, then dropped silently to the deck of the *Clam Shell*.

Inside the cabin, Hardtack

Hardy's acute ears caught the almost inaudible sound of those feet tapping the deck. A smile crossed his knife-scarred face as his broad hand closed around the neck of the whiskey bottle on the table.

The cabin door opened an inch, and Crab whispered through the crack, "Douse the glim, Hardtack!"

Hardtack reached over and snapped off the light. The door opened wider and Crab Casson slipped through, closing it hurriedly behind him. Hardtack closed the porthole shutters, switched on the light again, and shoved the bottle and glass over toward his visitor.

Crab poured out a stiff drink and gulped it down. Hardtack's unblinking scrutiny never left his face for a moment. Crab wiped his mouth with a swipe of his hand.

"I'd like to sign up with you for a trip," Crab said, whispering out of the corner of a twisted mouth.

"Yeah, so would a lot of waterfront bums," Hardtack said indifferently. "But I ain't just signin' on no reg'lar troller crew, savvy? I want experienced pirates, men I can rely on to go through with anything and not get sick at the sight of human blood. I want men who've killed and ain't afraid to kill again."

"Sure, sure," Crab croaked hoarsely. "You're talking about salmon-trap watchmen now. Yeah, I get it. Well, watchmen is my meat, feller."

"For instance," Hardtack said, and waited.

"That floating trap job last spring in Lynch Cove. Remember?"

"Sure, I remember. What of it?"

"I croaked that watchman, see? But the brass hats happened along, and we had to beach the boat. We escaped through the brush. Took me a month to work back to Seattle."

"What boat?"

"The *Goeduck*, see? There was five of us, all told." He named them glibly. "The brass hats has been looking for us ever since. Didn't figger I was going to get another chance at the big money till you dropped the hint—"

"What was your job on the boat?" Hardtack interrupted.

"Brailer."

Hardtack's eyes glittered. "You'll do," he said with satisfaction. "Go fetch your duffel aboard. We'll be shovin' off on the midnight tide."

Crab Casson moved to the door, paused with hand on the knob. "Douse the glim," he whispered. The switch clicked, and he was gone into the night.

Hardtack didn't switch on the light again, nor did he bother to close the door. Instead, he sat back, waiting. Waiting for more wharf rats to come in answer to his summons. His appearance in the Seattle underworld had been met with suspicion, which quickly faded when he started throwing his money around and boasting about the salmon traps he had robbed.

And when he had been ready to shove off, he had dropped the hint about his need for men of his own stamp. That hint had gone whispering along the grapevine wires clear down into the water-front dens where certain men were afraid to show their faces by day.

Crab Casson had been the first to answer. Others came at long intervals, slinking, slithering like the rats they were, darting back into their holes when Hardtack was done with them. He chose three more from the lot because he knew that they were telling the ghastly truth and that the rest had lied in an effort to get in on some easy money.

Gurry Gregory, his face a hideous

leer, oiled the Diesel below deck. Monk Towers, blocky, round-faced, and with a pious expression that belied his black heart, stowed his gear away in the galley. Bilge Butler, tall and thin, drooling tobacco juice, dirty and ragged, crawled into a bunk to sleep off a canned-heat jag.

All confessed killers, all ready to kill again. And every last one of the chosen four a master of his nefarious trade—salmon-trap pirating. And every last one a candidate for the noose.

THEY cast off at midnight, the *Clam Shell* slipping away from the wharf with troller poles erect, fishing gear in order, not unlike the rest of the troller fleet bound for the Alaskan banks.

Hardtack was handling the wheel when dawn broke and the others straggled into the pilot house. To starboard and port the Sound was dotted with fishing craft bound for the salmon paradise of the Pacific Coast, anxious to be the first on hand when the coho run started and first with a hold full of silver beauties at the nearest cannery.

Suddenly a long, gray craft shot from the ground fog astern and quickly overhauled the *Clam Shell*. On both sides of her slick hull was painted the large black numerals 102.

"The brass hats!" Crab Casson hissed. "Down out of sight, men!"

Hardtack laughed sneeringly as the men bent low, only their eyes level with the pilot-house windows.

"That's what comes of botchin' a job—your maps become familiar to the brass hats," he said. "Me, they gotta ketch me yet, or get a good look at my mug." His voice hardened suddenly. "You guys make a botch of this trip and the

brass hats won't never need to look for you no more. You just won't exist, see?"

"You're lucky they ain't had a good look at you while you was high-tailing it away from 'em," Bilge Butler said, spitting on the pilot-house floor. "Look at the big brass hat raking us with them glasses from stem to stern!"

Hardtack's boot sent the man sprawling. "Listen, you," he barked, "when you wanna spit, squirt that tobacco juice overboard or else swaller it! I ain't skipperin' no floatin' spittoon. And when that cutter clears off, grab a swab and clean that mess up, savvy?"

The Coastguard cutter swept past with water pluming from her sharp bow. The pirates caught sight of the skipper standing in the pilot house, powerful glasses glued to his eyes. Presently the cutter was hull-deep on the horizon, disappearing into the ground fog. The four pirates straightened with a sigh of relief.

"They pay them cream puffs wages for just sailin' around in a Diesel-powered palace and wearin' gold braid and brass buttons," Hardtack sneered. "Me, I can make a sucker outa any brass hat."

"What they doing, boss, here off Vancouver Island?" Gurry growled. "They dassent have boarded us, anyhow. These is Canadian waters."

"Oh, yeah?" Hardtack said cynically. "They dassent, huh? Well, I notice you was crouched down about as low as the others. What they doin' here? Headin' for Alaska, like the rest of us, and to ketch the likes of us—if they can. Bilge, git that swab."

But they had not seen the last of the cutter. All day long she came fanning out of the light fog, circling

the many fishing craft, sending the crew of the *Clam Shell* scurrying below deck or into the cabin to avoid those powerful field glasses that peered at them from the pilot house.

"Phantoms of the Sound, and armed to the gunwales," Hardtack observed.

"Yeah," Monk observed, "but only good during daylight. When night comes, they can't see us and we can't see them, which makes us even."

"You said it, feller," Hardtack growled. "And I'm the guy that can make monkeys of 'em, night or day."

The *Clam Shell* chugged across Queen Charlotte Sound wallowing in the long swells, sometimes shipping a comber that scoured her deck and filled her scuppers. The crew drank and sang songs and told stories of their ghastly exploits, but none could outdo Hardtack Hardy.

He put into Prince Rupert for oil and liquor and then shoved off without further delay. All that day the *Clam Shell* cruised along within sight of fleets of trollers and purse seiners, some at work, some heading farther north to other waters. Trap after trap was passed, floaters or piling-driven, at which the cut-throat crew gazed covetously. Toward evening their patience gave out.

"What're we waitin' for, boss?" Bilge complained.

"That's what I'd like to know," Monk chimed in. "The cohoes is running strong. That last trap we passed, the webbing was jerking with salmon."

"Listen to me, you swabs," Hardtack growled. "Me and you're all wanted killers. So long as we stay in American waters we're reasonably

safe. And even if the brass hats ketches us red-handed, a mouth-piece could get us off with a life sentence, which would mean fifteen years in clink at the most. But we're in Canadian waters now, and if we get ketches—" He ran a forefinger suggestively across his throat, stopping just under the left ear. "They don't fool around with killers in Canada, Monk."

"Well, where's the first trap we're gonna rob?" Monk temporized. "I wanna listen to something else besides the blatting of this engine."

"The clink of dough, for instance, eh, Monk?" Hardtack grinned.

"You said it!"

"Well, I got all that figured out. We'll make Fair Inlet by midnight, where there's a big pilin' trap. None of your lousy little floater traps for me. And lay off the booze, you mugs. You'll need clear heads for what lays in front of us, savvy?"

THE sun dipped out of sight beyond the horizon, and darkness succeeded twilight with uncanny speed. The red, green and white running lights of fishing craft appeared as if by magic. Hardtack spun the wheel, bringing the *Clam Shell* close in to shore.

The crew gathered in the pilot house, eager to be at their nefarious trade. The only illumination aboard came from the binnacle light which dimly showed the pirates' grim faces. Now and then a metallic click sounded as one of them made sure his gun was in working order.

Five pairs of sharp eyes stabbed into the darkness. Gurry Gregory broke a long silence with a question. "Know anything about the watchman at the trap we're coming to?"

"Watchmen is the least of my worries," Hardtack replied. "They play along with me, or they don't. They can take their choice or leave it. I'm more concerned about company patrol boats than about watchmen. This is a good night for 'em—clear and quiet. A nice thick fog would sure suit me right now."

Silence again settled over the craft as she nosed her way close to the shoreline, the gulches and ravines giving back her engine's exhause in lingering echoes. Suddenly a faint yellow light punctured the darkness. Hardtack instantly closed the throttle to half speed, then to quarter.

"The trap light," he said laconically.

The men slipped silently from the pilot house and presently returned in hip boots and slickers.

"Listen, you mugs," Hardtack began in a low, tense voice, "I'm skipper of this boat, see? I'll give the orders. Gurry, you'll run the winch and Crab, you'll brail. Bilge and Monk, you and me'll take care of the watchman."

"That had oughter be easy," Bilge laughed. "I don't see no light in his shack. What a surprise—"

"Stow it," Hardtack cut in. "Them watchmen ain't saps. Was you expectin' him to light up so's you'd know he savvied we was comin'? Takin' too much for granted, Bilge, is what purty nigh got you ketched the last time."

The yellow point of light was becoming larger and brighter. Then Hardtack closed the throttle. Now the *Clam Shell* was a ghostly thing creeping along the shoreline, the ripple of her bow wave clearly audible in the reigning silence. Gradually she lost headway until even that

faint sound could no longer be heard.

"Overboard with the dinghy," Hardtack ordered in a low voice. "Take the wheel, Gurry, and bring her alongside the trap when I give you the word. Bilge and Monk, come with me."

The three of them stepped over the gunwale into the dinghy and rowed away with muffled oars. When they caught the sound of water slapping against the trap piling, they changed their course, approaching it from the rear. After tying the painter to a pile, they ascended the ladder and stood on the crossboard.

There they paused, listening. Then Hardtack moved off toward the cabin with drawn gun, the other two at his heels, their rubber boots rendering their stealthy approach as silent as cat's paws.

The cabin door stood open. Now the men crouched, moving slowly, cautiously over the crossboards, eyes boring into the darkness. The figure of a man loomed up just ahead. Hardtack thrust a hand behind him, holding the other two back. A curt voice rang out in the stillness.

"Who are you? Hey, out there! You hear me?"

The restraining hand was withdrawn, and the three pirates moved in closer.

"You ain't fooling me none," the watchman shouted. "I heard you, way back yonder. Speak up, or I'll cut loose with this rifle!"

A few feet from the man, Hardtack straightened. "If there's any cuttin' loose done around here," he snapped, "I'll do it—right into your back, feller."

The watchman jerked around with an oath of surprise. Slowly his hands went aloft. Hardtack

stepped closer, tore the rifle from his grasp and tossed it into the trap.

"Pirates!" the watchman gasped.

"You said it," Hardtack snapped. He raised his voice. "Come on in, Gurry, and tie up. We got him."

The Diesel's exhaust answered the summons. The *Clam Shell* bulked big as she came alongside the trap and was made fast by Crab Casson. Then Hardtack spoke to the watchman, at the same time stabbing him in the eyes with the brilliant beam from his flashlight.

"Well, what's it goin' to be, mate—a hundred bucks to play along with us, or a slug o' lead? Talk fast."

"Trap watchmen are our dish," Monk growled. "Mebbe that'll help you make up your mind in a hurry. You wouldn't be the first one we'd knocked off, eh, Hardtack?" "You said it!" Hardtack hissed. "Well? I don't usually wait this long on a lousy watchman."

"It ain't no skin off my nose who gets the salmon," the watchman decided. "Besides, I got a wife and kids in the States. Fork over the hundred bucks."

Hardtack holstered his gun and counted out some bills by the aid of the flashlight. "Mebbe you'd give us some help on the hand winches, raisin' the webbin', huh?" he said, handing over the money.

"When you back that up with a gun, what's a guy got to say about it?" the watchman retorted.

"Nothin'. All right, boys, up with the webbin'!"

Bilge, Monk and the watchman kicked the dogs off the hand-winch ratchets and turned the cranks. Slowly the spiller rose. Hardtack's flashlight darted here and there

over the surface of the trap. It was alive with salmon, whipping the water into froth, luminous with phosphorus.

"If that bunt ain't chuck fulla cohoes," Bilge grunted, straining at the winch, "I'll eat 'em."

Hardtack moved off without saying a word. Although the *Clam Shell* was only a few feet away, the darkness was so intense that he had to use the flashlight to locate her. He climbed down a piling ladder and dropped lightly to the deck, going into the pilot house.

Without a word, Gurry went aft to the brailer winch and shoved in the clutch. He worked the levers, swinging the brailer out over the trap. Slowly the spiller rose until the bunt showed. Thousands of fins and tails in frantic motion appeared.

The three men dropped the ratchet dogs and straightened. Crab Casson scrambled up the trap ladder and took hold of the brailer's long handle. Down into the bunt it went, deep among the salmon.

"Take it away, Gurry!" he sang out, bracing his weight against it. Monk caught the trip line and stood ready. The brailer winch clanked, the boom swung inward, and the brailer was poised over the *Clam Shell's* open hold.

"Let 'er go!" Gurry sang out. Monk jerked the trip line. A cascade of phosphorescent silver dropped from the bottom of the brailer into the hold. Back swung the boom and brailer for another load.

Hardtack paid no attention to the others. He was leaning far out of the pilot-house window, eyes peering into the black wall of night, ears strained to catch the slightest unusual sound. The watchman stood silently by on the trap's

crossboard, an uninterested spectator.

Bilge, who was standing between him and the cabin, edged closer to Monk. His breath reked of tobacco juice as he put his lips close to the man's ear, at the same time jerking a thumb at the watchman.

"Listen, Monk," he whispered hoarsely, "when the last brailer load goes into the hold, I'm gonna stick a knife in this here watchman's ribs. I want that hundred bucks the boss slipped him. Hell, I never saw the watchman yet I'd give that much to. A bullet's cheaper. Me and you could have a good time with that dough in Seattle, Monk."

"Yeah. Hardtack's been blowing off about the watchmen he's croaked, and then he goes and bribes a guy with a hundred bucks!" Monk whispered back. "Hell, he ain't so tough as he lets on."

"After I've stuck him, we'll take the dough and roll him into the spiller. Hardtack won't hear him hit the water and won't know what's become of him. I don't want no watchman remembering what I look like!"

The powerful Diesel rumbled below decks, and the meshing of winch gears echoed out across the water. Back and forth swept the brailer. Slowly the *Clam Shell* settled in the water as the weight of her wriggling cargo increased.

The bunt was half empty when suddenly a light blinked for a second against the canopy of night. Even as Hardtack's hands closed the throttle, his glance shot aft in time to catch the blink of an answering flash. Then followed the sounds of Diesel exhausts.

"Company patrol boats!" Hardtack shouted. "All aboard, you guys! We gotta run for it!"

PARALYZED with fear, Monk and Bilge stood staring at the winking white lights, listening with gaping mouths to the exhausts now mingling with that of the *Clam Shell's* engine. Then Bilge swung around on the crossboard in time to see the figure of the watchman merging with the darkness.

"Mebbe I don't get that hundred bucks," he snarled, "but I'll sure stop him from spending it!"

He fumbled with wet, chilled fingers for his gun. Spurts of yellow flame lanced from the muzzle followed by a loud splash.

"You got him, Bilge," Monk said. "Come on!"

They leaped blindly from the trap and struck hard on the *Clam Shell's* deck. With the engine wide open, the craft strained at her mooring lines. A voice yelled in terror from the direction of the trap.

"Cast off them lines!" Hardtack bawled from the pilot-house.

"Cast hell!" Bilge shouted. He ripped a fire ax loose from its cleats on the side of the pilot house and ran aft. The blade whistled through the air, severing the stern line and biting deep into the oak trimming of the gunwale. Instantly the *Clam Shell* swung against the trap piling with propellor churning, engine rumbling.

Bilge tore the ax loose and rushed to the bow. A lightning-fast stroke and the line parted. Hardtack spun the wheel frantically and the craft came about until her nose pointed seaward.

The cry of terror from the trap was repeated. "Hardtack, wait! I've fell off the crossboard and got ketched in the webbing! Wait!"

"It's Crab!" the men yelled.

"Well, what of it?" Hardtack snapped callously. "If he ain't got

no more sense than to flop into the trap, that's his hard luck. We're shovin' off."

Suddenly the racing propellor slowed. Cursing, Hardtack yanked wildly at the throttle, closing and opening it rapidly. The powerful engine kept slowing, coughed, and then stopped with a chug that jarred the craft. She began losing headway. Hardtack opened the starter valve. Compressed air whistled shrilly, but the Diesel remained motionless.

"The propeller's fouled something!" Hardtack yelled to the men.

"Look!" Monk suddenly exclaimed. "Lights!"

A dull-red eye stared balefully at them from the wall of night. As one man, they turned to look aft. A dull-green eye watched them from that direction. The colored lights were rising and falling and moving ahead in unison.

"They're closing in on us, Hardtack!" Gurry shouted. "You gotta get that engine started!"

"Aft with the ax, you swabs!" Hardtack roared. "It's the propeller, I tell you, not the engine. I—"

A blinding flash of light suddenly flooded the *Clam Shell* from dead ahead. Other lights flared out on the company boats, casting their glow across the water, silhouetting the outlines of a long, gray craft and revealing the numerals on her bow and sides.

"It's the 102, the Coastguard cutter!" Hardtack snarled. The brass hats are wise to us!"

The merciless gleam of the cutter's powerful searchlight raked the *Clam Shell* from stem to stern. A megaphoned voice came booming across the intervening space.

"Ahoy, *Clam Shell*! We're going to board you!"

Flood lights suddenly illuminated the cutter's deck. In the bow, crouched behind the two-pounder, was the gun crew. Bilge shook his fists at them.

"Come ahead, you brass hats, but you won't find me here!" he shouted. "I'm gonna make a swim for it! Come on, Monk!"

"Wait, you fool!" Hardtack growled, pointing over the side. In the searchlight's glare, the men caught sight of a string of cork floats reaching out both ways from under the troller's counter and disappearing into the darkness. The line was singing taut. "A purse seine! That's what's foulin' the propellor. Them company boats has spread a net for us and we've run smack into it!"

The green and red eyes were coming closer. White running lights suddenly twinkled from mastheads. Flood lights illuminated the decks. Winches hissed, keeping the net lines taut, and skippers bawled orders to their men.

"They've netted us neatly," Hardtack said savagely, "and now they're closin' it with us in it! I'll bet we've got fifty yards wound round the propellor shaft!"

Panic seized the men. "I'm going overboard, anyhow!" Bilge declared. Followed by Monk, he rushed to the gunwale and leaped up on it.

"Come back, you idiot!" Hardtack yelled. "You'll get tangled in the net!"

For a moment Bilge stood poised on the gunwale in the glare of the cutter's searchlight. A rifle roared from the deck of a company boat. Bilge screamed, clutched at his throat, then pitched into the water. Monk backed away from the gunwale in terror.

Again the megaphoned voice boomed out from the cutter. "Ahoy, aboard the *Skookum!* Stop that shooting! You're liable to hit the boys on the boat at the other end of the net!"

Now, strangely, the *Clam Shell* was moving steadily forward, though her engine was silent.

"They're towing us in the net right into the arms of the brass hats!" Monk cried. He snatched up the ax that Bilge had dropped and started running aft. "Stand by the engine, Hardtack!" he called back. "I'll cut us loose!"

Gurry raced after him. Leaning far out over the counter, Monk slashed at the netting. The cutter's searchlight swung over, stabbing at them. By its light they looked down and saw the bulge of hard-packed netting wound solidly around the propellor and shaft.

Monk flopped on his stomach. "Hold my feet, Gurry, while I hack it loose!"

He swung wildly with the ax, the blade splashing water in his eyes, obscuring his vision. More often than not he missed the wadded net completely.

A command boomed from the cutter's deck. "Drop that ax, you!"

Monk paid no heed, chopping away more desperately than ever. The cutter's two-pounder roared. A shell struck close to the cutter's counter, throwing up a geyser of water that deluged the pirates. Monk dropped the ax with a yell of fright, and Gurry dragged him back over the counter.

"It's no use!" he croaked. "They'll kill us!"

With exhausts racketing, the company boats were converging on the cutter's stern, drawing the

Clam Shell closer and closer. Uniformed sailors, armed with rifles and boat hooks lined the cutter's rail. The muzzle of the forward gun followed the course of the pirate troller like a threatening forefinger.

Gurry and Monk, drenched and shivering, joined Hardtack in the pilot house.

"If I'd a cannon like that," Hardtack gritted, "I'd take some of them brass hats to hell before they got me. As it is, they've got us whipped."

"We gotta stick together," Monk said, teeth chattering. "If we don't talk they can't pin nothing on us except this one job. That's our only chance."

NOW the *Clam Shell's* bow was almost touching the cutter's hull. With lead and float lines stretched taut, the company boat skippers throttled down their engines. Their part of the work was done. Tangled in the huge net was the greatest haul on record, a boat and her pirate crew and pirated cargo. It was up to the Coastguard now to finish what the other skippers had started.

"Come out of that pilot-house with your hands raised!" the cutter's skipper bellowed.

Boat hooks rattled against the *Clam Shell's* gunwale, the barbed points biting deep into the wood, drawing her alongside. Sailors boarded her in a flying leap, pouncing on the pirates and searching them for arms. Unceremoniously, they were hustled aboard the cutter. Hardtack fought every step of the way, cursing, gouging, kicking and striking whenever he could get a foot or arm loose, not desisting until he was propelled roughly into

the cutter's cabin along with the rest of his cutthroat crew to face the captain.

"Well," the skipper snapped, "what have you birds got to say for yourselves?"

"We ain't talkin', brass hat," Hardtack growled.

"All right, tough guy," the skipper answered levelly. "We'll see about that. You'll be begging for a chance to talk before I'm through with you."

Gurry and Monk blanched. This brass hat was going to work them over with the help of his crew, out there where there wasn't any law or shyster lawyers to interfere in their behalf. They began to imagine the feel of a rope's end cutting strips of hide off their bare backs and the sting of salt being rubbed into the wounds.

"Ahoy, the cutter!" A hail came from without.

"Melton," the cutter's skipper, snapped to one of the crew, "step out there and see who that is."

The sailor was back in a moment. "It's a dinghy from one of the company boats, sir," he reported. "The watchman and the pirate that was left behind on the trap is in it."

"Bring 'em in, Melton," the skipper ordered crisply.

The order was superfluous, in so far as Crab Casson was concerned. With murder in his eyes, he shoved the dripping watchman aside, rushed into the cabin and took a wild swing at Hardtack. Instantly the cabin became a bedlam of fighting, cursing men and flailing fists. At last the crew got the upper hand and separated the combatants.

With blood trickling down his chin, Crab struggled to free him-

self from the restraining hands clutching him.

"Let me at the rat!" he gasped breathlessly. "I'll kill him! Leave me on that trap, will yer? Why, you—"

A smile of satisfaction crossed the skipper's face. "Well, here's one who isn't going to dummy up on us. Men, take all of them below, except the leader and this watchman, and chain them to a stanchion. I'll attend to them later. But, first of all, I'm going to find out just how tough this Hardtack person really is."

The crew dragged the trap pirates out. The cabin door banged shut, leaving the skipper facing Hardtack and the watchman.

"Well?" he demanded, and waited.

Hardtack and the watchman exchanged glances. Then the watchman reached into his pocket and withdrew a soggy roll of bills, which he laid on the skipper's desk.

"When one of them guys started shooting at me," he said, "I dived off the trap and swam to one of the company boats."

The skipper's glance shifted to Hardtack's oil-smearing face. "Well?" he repeated.

Hardtack straightened, looked the skipper square in the eye, and saluted.

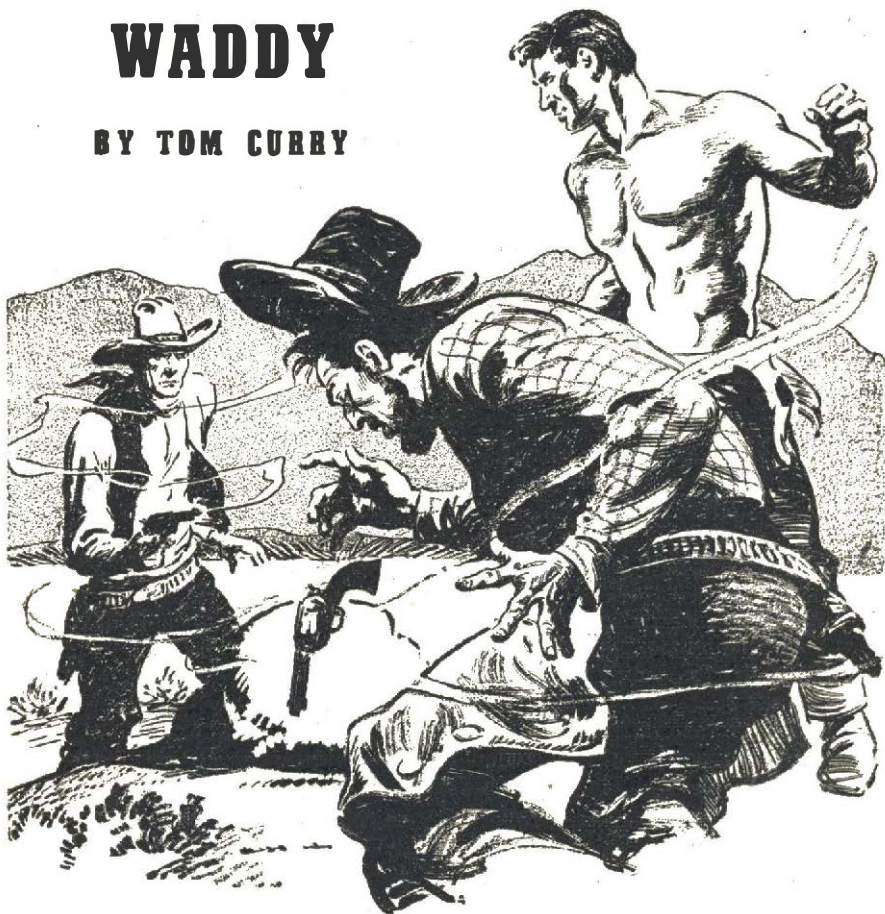
"I'm reporting back for duty, sir—me and Bill, here," he said quietly.

The skipper extended a hand, grinning broadly. "Nice going, boys. That bait brought the rats out of their holes. Killers, Hardtack?"

"All of them, sir," Hardtack replied. "But they've reached the end of their rope, literally and figuratively."

BROKEN WADDY

BY TOM CURRY



JOE HANSON, hiding his eagerness and the hope that he had reached the goal toward which he had worked so hard, dismounted from the sorrel mustang and strolled to the ranch office.

The big boss had made a hurried trip to the Pecos River branch of the Circle 3 to decide who was to have the foreman's job left vacant by the sudden and unexplained death of Horse-face Eagan. Someone had dry-gulched the recent fore-

man as he rode the lonely range near the steep ravine of the Pecos, got him through the head with a rifle bullet. The sheriff had come down and ridden out, hoping to get on the killer's trail, but nothing had been reported.

Yet the ranching had to go on. The huge Circle 3 was a business proposition and George Leech, the company's traveling manager, was there to see it kept rolling.

"Wonder if Duke's in yit," mused

Hanson to himself. He was tall, had hair dark as a crow's wing; his shoulders were wide and constant riding kept him trimmed down to hard fitness. He had the pride of youth, the pride of a man who can take care of himself. An expert bronc-buster and good with cows, Joe Hanson was an up-and-coming waddy, a man who was going somewhere. His chief fault was one of youth—an impatience with any kind of weakness.

Joe swung around the corner of the big ranchhouse and slowed as he saw a big man, cigarette drooling gray smoke around his narrowed eyes, slouched in the shade against a veranda support.

"Howdy, Duke," Hanson said coolly.

Duke Miller nodded. He, too, showed nothing in his straight face. He was wider than Hanson, with the body of a big Texan and the tow hair and pink complexion so common in the Lone Star State. Joe Hanson knew that if any other man at the Pecos Branch beat him out, it would be Duke Miller. Miller was not the rider that Hanson was, but he was clever and knew all there was to know about cattle and running a ranch.

Hanson tried to read in Duke's face whether Miller had or had not been made foreman. But Miller would not give him any satisfaction. "Nice day," Hanson tried again. He felt something of jealousy; Miller and he had joined the spread about the same time and had vied with one another to prove their worth and steadiness. Both were young, ambitious, and proud, men who would get somewhere. Hanson knew that Duke was just as eager to get the foreman's job as he was himself.

Miller sniffed, threw down his

cigarette and ground it slowly under his high-heeled riding boot. "Yeah, I guess it is a nice day, Hanson," he said smoothly.

Though there had been intense rivalry between these two top hands, there had been no open breaks. Hanson was of too serious a turn of mind and was the sort who, if and when he did start on a man, would never stop until the end. He would not pick a scrap, and he wouldn't draw his gun on anybody unless it were a life-and-death matter.

"Is that you, Hanson?" a voice called from inside.

Duke Miller swung away and, without looking again at Hanson, walked toward the bunkhouse. Hanson hurried inside. Leech, the careworn traveling manager of the Circle 3, shook hands with him and said quickly, "You'll take Eagan's place, Hanson. Run the spread the way it's been going, savvy? I'm sorry about Eagan; hope the sheriff catches the rat who dry-gulched him. I can't stay long; I'm in an awful hurry, got to be in Brownsville on an important matter by Thursday." He rose, slammed shut a ledger he had been consulting before Hanson's entrance. "Here're the books. I'll be back again in three weeks and we'll go over everything then. In the meantime, keep the business going and take care of yourself. Tell the wrangler to saddle me up a horse, will you? I'll snatch a cup of coffee and then ride to Girvin and catch the evening train."

Hanson, joy flooding his heart, thanked the manager, then stepped out and called to one of the wranglers who was lounging in the shade of a stable. "Bob, the boss is ready to go. Saddle a horse, will you? And saddle one for me, I'll go a ways with him."

Bob Durham, a few years older

than Hanson, a leather-skinned hombre with cheek perpetually distorted by a tobacco cud, waved his hand and turned to do the new foreman's bidding. Hanson knew Durham as a taciturn fellow who seldom had anything to say; he did his work and seemed to have no ambition beyond chewing tobacco, eating and sleeping.

Everybody seemed to know the instant it was done that Joe Hanson had been made foreman. Waddies sauntered up to shake hands—there were between forty and fifty of them—and even Duke Miller came along and held out his paw to show he held no hard feelings.

A couple of new worry wrinkles marred Hanson's tanned brow; he kept down his pride and self-importance and his orders were given in a quiet voice; he knew how to handle these wild-riding young punchers, for he was one of them. There would be no trouble unless someone asked for it.

Someone did ask for trouble, although it was a long time before Hanson found out just who it was.

RIDING back after accompanying George Leech several miles on the narrow dirt road that led to the town of Girvin, Hanson was thinking of his duties when his mustang snorted and shied as a man rode out from the chaparral fringing the trail. Hanson was immediately on guard, remembering that Horse-face Eagan had been recently dry-gulched.

Deep shadows were upon the trail, winding through thirty-foot high mesquite, white-speckled with waxy blooms. The sun was about ready to drop behind the blue western hills.

"Good evenin'," the hombre on the black said to Hanson.

"Howdy yoreself," Hanson replied. His quick blue eyes took in the rich leather of the saddle, the dark broadcloth suit, the black felt hat pulled low over the stranger's eyes. Hanson recalled having glimpsed this man once in town and once at a distance riding across Circle 3 range, but he wasn't acquainted with him. The man had a dark, clipped beard inclined to curl; he wore a silk bandanna that came up around his jowls; the hat shadowed his deep-set eyes. He wore no gun in sight, but there could be one under his coat.

"You're Joe Hanson, aren't you?" the hombre inquired, voice even and deep in tone. "They say you're the new foreman over there."

"That's right."

"How d'you like workin' for a big outfit like the Circle 3? They've got half a dozen spreads in the West, you know."

Hanson wondered what it was all about. He said, "I know. I like it mighty well, mister."

"The name's Granville—Art Granville, Hanson." He rode a trifle behind Hanson so the young foreman had to turn his head to look at him. "I do some dealin' in horses. Perhaps I could do business with you."

Joe Hanson relaxed—this man was evidently a horse trader who hoped to sell the Circle 3 some mounts. "We're bought up on mustangs right now," he said. "But mebber later on, Granville."

"These big outfits," Granville mused aloud, "are purty heartless, Hanson. As long as you're up and comin', you're aces with 'em, but if anything goes wrong, you git sick or hurt, why, you're done for."

Hanson shrugged. He had youth's superb confidence in the indestructibility of his own body. He began

to wonder again what Granville wanted of him.

"There's ways," Granville said cautiously, "for a smart foreman to pick up a little money for himself here and there."

Hanson's only reaction to this was a twitching of his jaw, as he understood the significance of Granville's words. "What's yore proposition?" he drawled.

"There's a big market," Granville said, "for horses and beef up north jist now, Hanson. You know very well that an outfit as big as the Circle 3 can't keep real track of their stock."

Joe Hanson felt hot blood pumping through his body. He hadn't been foreman twenty-four hours and here was a sidewinder suggesting he cheat the company. He jerked his mustang around, roughly shoved the bearded man's horse against the thorny bush, and grasped the other's reins.

He stuck out his jaw and snapped, "Get the hell outta here. If you ever so much as show yore ugly face in these parts again, I'll shoot you on sight, Granville."

Granville was afraid; he blinked, and his hand started inside his black coat. But he stopped as Hanson's six-shooter leaped from its holster.

"Ride," snapped Hanson. "Remember, if you show ag'in, you'll get it on sight."

He kicked a spur contemptuously into the other man's mustang to send it flying back toward Girvin.

Joe waited, watching until Granville disappeared around the bend. As he started his mustang on to the Circle 3, the report of a shot spanked the dry Texas air and a bullet cut the bushes beside him. Hanson, gun up, galloped back toward the spot where Granville had last been seen, but the man on the black was gone.

He had taken to the mesquite, and Hanson, after a short run, turned toward home.

He was up at dawn, anxious to tackle the new job. It was up to him to tabulate and keep track of the thousands of steers and horses the Pecos Branch ran; to see to supplies, to repairs, to dozens of other matters. For several days it seemed almost impossible to get everything done. Hanson got about six hours' sleep a night, and he was totaling up figures in his dreams.

Duke Miller made him no trouble. He took his orders with the rest and carried them out. Miller had a cold way about him that would have prevented him and Hanson from ever being close friends, but Joe would have been the first to admit that Duke was a top hand.

On his third day Hanson started out after lunch, meaning to head over to a point north where some of the boys were sorting out a herd. He picked out a long-legged, hammer-headed roan that he was breaking, intending to combine business with pleasure on the ride. He saddled up, but when somebody called him from inside the bunkhouse to ask about something, he went over. His mount was standing patiently when he returned, but he hadn't gone more than a hundred yards from the corral when the hammer-head went insane.

For a moment Hanson thought the roan was going over all the way and he was ready to jump for it, but he slammed the horse between the laid-back ears. The roan's forelegs came down and, squealing as though in pain, he ran like a bullet for fifty yards. Then he leaped all four feet clear, stuck down his head, and really went to bucking.

Hanson effortlessly kept his seat and spoke soothing words to the

roan—useless words, for the horse tried every trick there was to throw Hanson, biting, kicking, shaking, crow-hopping. But Hanson was enjoying it, and as the roan reared straight up again, he stayed against the beast's neck.

Suddenly the cinches let loose! The straps snapped and Hanson shot off the roan's rump as the horse fell back on top of him!

BLINDING pain seized Joe Hanson; the heavy weight of the hammer-headed roan came full on his thigh and he knew that his right leg was broken. The mustang rolled off him, kicking him in the shoulder as he did. Through the red mist of anguish, Hanson fought to keep his hold on consciousness, but the pain from his smashed leg and shoulder were too much for him.

Nightmarish impressions were all Hanson recalled of the trip to Girvin where old Rough-and-ready, the local doctor, patched him up. He was in bed, his leg heavily splinted and aching terribly, when he regained his full senses.

"You'll be in bed three months, Joe," growled doc. "I ain't never seen a leg so smashed."

Hanson stayed there. He couldn't do anything else. He went through agonies with his broken leg—it didn't seem to heal very fast. When doc finally let him get up to try it, a moment Hanson had so eagerly awaited, he was crushed when he discovered that the injured member was some three inches shorter than the good leg.

"You'll have to use a cane," growled old Rough-and-ready.

Hanson didn't say anything. What he had gone through had taken thirty pounds off him, leaving him trembly and weak and with a sickly yellowish tinge to his once bronzed

face. He took the cane and learned to get around somehow. But what he wanted most was to try out a horse; he sneaked away from the doctor and borrowed one from the livery stable.

He knew the instant he mounted that he could never ride anything but a piano bench again. He had no power in his thigh, and every jolt brought fiendish pain to his leg.

George Leech had been to see him a short time after the accident, had spoken comforting words and told him he would always be welcome back at the spread. Hanson knew that Duke Miller had been made foreman in his place.

The Joe Hanson who rode with teeth gritted in pain into the yard of the Circle 3 on an old livery-stable plug was not the same man who had left there. Bob Durham, getting up from his seat in the shade as Hanson slid off the plug, stared at Hanson for several moments.

"Afternoon, Bob," Hanson said.

Sweat covered his chalky, drawn face. His right shoulder drooped from the shortening of the injured leg, he was thin as a rail and in his dark eyes was written much of what he had been through.

Durham actually stopped the rhythmic motion of his jaw. Finally he spat and said, "Hello, Hanson. So you're back." He kept staring at Hanson as though he couldn't believe his eyes.

"Yeah, I'm back. Is Duke here?"

"Nope, the boss is out. They're all out workin'. I expect 'em back for supper, though."

Hanson lurched over to the long veranda and went up to sit in a chair on the porch, while Bob Durham sauntered back to his nap. Hanson looked around the familiar place; his triumph had been short-lived and there would not be another

chance. He was not fit to boss men when he couldn't even ride.

Duke Miller rode in at sundown with the punchers. The new foreman nodded but didn't seem too pleased to see his former rival. "How you feelin', Joe?" he asked. There was a patronizing tone in Duke's voice, but Hanson was glad there was no real pity.

"So-so," answered Hanson.

Other men gathered about to look him over, shake hands, slap him on the back, and tell him he'd soon be back in the saddle. But Hanson knew they were just being kind.

Miller came back out. "There's a bunk and grub here for you, Hanson," he said. "Leech left word you was to be took care of. The company don't let its employees down."

"Thanks."

Something hot burned in Hanson's breast; it was, he realized with a shock of recognition, his pride. He had forgotten about it while he lay injured. But it was still there. The cowboys were sorry for him and showed it. One man would see to it that Hanson didn't have to walk over to fill his plate and cup at supper; another would make sure he had tobacco and cigarette papers.

For a week Joe Hanson hung around the spread. He kept trying to ride, but his leg wouldn't ease up on him—it seemed worse, if anything. Hanson, cursing his helplessness, would sometimes turn to see Bob Durham, the wrangler, slouched against the stable side, staring at him. Duke Miller never did more than nod in his cold way, but once, when Miller didn't think Hanson was looking, the broken waddy caught a gleam of amusement in the foreman's light-blue eyes.

At the end of the week Hanson waited until the boys had ridden out to the morning's work, then he

lurched to the corrals and threw his saddle on the old plug he had brought from Girvin.

"Where you goin'?" asked Durham casually, suddenly appearing around the stable.

"Reckon I'll head back to town," lied Hanson.

"Huh." The wrangler retired into his taciturn shell, didn't even offer to help as Hanson tightened the cinches of his double-fire rig.

Joe Hanson nodded to Bob Durham and set off south—which was the way to Girvin—but he had no intention of returning to town. His pride had tortured him to the extent that he could no longer bear to be an object of charity before Duke Miller, the men, or any other people who knew him.

Slow as was the gray's plodding pace, it hurt Hanson, but he clamped his jaw and kept going. When he was beyond the dip and concealed from the ranch by high mesquite he swung west for the Pecos.

The Pecos ran southeast through a deep canyon, its water clear enough at normal flow, but in flood time filling the rock banks with swirling dark currents. There were only a few places where horses and stock could be crossed. Hanson headed toward a ford northwest of the ranch and, sleeping in the bush that night, next noon descended the crumbling trail, swam the gray through the river and shoved up to the plateau on the west bank.

The land grew wilder as he slowly rode on west. There were no settlements for hundreds of miles in these vast, arid spaces. Bizarre rock formations and every variety of cactus grew across the Pecos and far to the west the Guadeloupe Mountains rose purple in the brassy sky. In spots the chaparral was thick, although the dry soil would not sup-

port large areas of water-requiring plants.

Alone with the pain which shamed him before other men, Hanson shoved on. He ate from the scant store in his saddlebags, drank lukewarm water from a canteen, never intending to go back among his kind. In his crippled condition he was doing a dangerous thing, but it didn't particularly matter. He did not turn back.

His food lasted five days, the gray plug six. The animal had been old and weary to start with and something went wrong with her foreleg so that she could no longer carry Hanson. He turned her loose to forage for herself. She wasn't in enough pain to shoot and he figured he would let her have what short time remained as a free creature.

"I'm just as glad," he muttered, "not to have to ride any more."

He settled down in the bush, lying on his blanket, staring up at the intensely blue sky of the Trans-Pecos. He moved very little for the next two days. He drank his water sparingly; food did not seem important, and he felt a weakness settling over him.

Hanson slept a great deal in the warmth, when the sun was high. He started awake from one of these dozes to find a man standing over him.

The broken cowboy sat up slowly; for a moment he didn't recognize who it was. "How did you get here?" he said at last.

"Howdy, Hanson."

IT was Bob Durham, the wrangler from the Circle 3. Durham had discarded his old jumpers and had on leather-reinforced garments suitable to the thorny growth of the region. He wore a wide mustard-colored Stetson that looked fairly

new, had on twin six-shooters, and expensive boots with shining spurs. He was still chewing tobacco, however.

Durham's seamed, hard eyes drilled Hanson for a moment; then the wrangler growled, "C'mon, git up." He stooped and easily lifted Hanson whose injured leg was stiff as a board and he was wasted and weak from lack of nourishment.

Durham looked around the camp, and quickly noted the absence of food; he lowered Hanson again to the blanket, turned and went back to the faint trail Hanson had left coming in here. He returned with two horses and a mule which had a pack strapped to its back.

"I'll rustle you some grub," the wrangler said.

He fixed food for Hanson, sat by him while he ate it. Hanson found that he was hungry; he finished off two plates of rough fare, took a drink and smoke Durham offered.

"How come you to be so far off from home, Durham?" asked Hanson after a while.

"Well, I quit my job."

"Quit?"

"Yeah. Sick of it."

There was something comforting in Bob Durham; he didn't say anything unless he had something to talk about. His eyes were steely in color and he was not the sentimental sort who would feel condescending pity for anybody or anything.

Joe Hanson understood the wanderlust that came upon the Texan; a man would leave a good job for no more reason than just to shake the dust of a vicinity from his feet and have a look at new surroundings. The pack on the mule contained a short-handled pick and a shovel, and Durham looked like a prospector on his way to the mountains.

Next morning they moved on. It was tough going for Hanson; the horse Durham had brought was tame enough, extraordinarily tame for a ranch mount, but even so the riding was difficult and painful to the injured man. He had to grit his teeth to maintain the slow pace as they wound through the thorny chaparral and headed into the foothills.

But there comes an end to everything. Bob Durham reached his goal, a tumble-down brush-and-stone shack built up a narrow wooded barranco, out of which flowed a tiny clear brook. Here they had water and wood, and game was thick enough.

Durham fixed up two bunks of branches and dry grass; he took one and, across the single-room cabin, Hanson had the other. "You kin shake up some grub while I unpack, Hanson," Durham ordered.

Joe Hanson nodded, opened a can of beans and lunched out to cut a strip of beef from the flank they had fetched with them. He could get down to the brook and dip out a pail of water, and make coffee. He finished up the cooking while Durham was unloading the mule and unsaddling the horses.

Both were tired out that night, so went to sleep early. In the morning Durham woke to find Joe Hanson had coffee cooking and breakfast about ready.

"We're stayin' here," Durham announced. "For a while, anyway."

After breakfast, as the sun rose golden over the wilderness, Durham silently shouldered his pick and shovel, hung a gold-washing pan at his thick-leather belt, and started up the stream.

He returned late in the afternoon to find that Hanson had the camp in order and supper going. They lay around the fire smoking as night

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thickened about them. After a while Hanson said, "I can't do much, Durham. I don't see why you should bother with me."

"I need a friend and a cook out here, Hanson. You're doin' me a big favor, savvy?"

For a week nothing happened at the tiny hut. Bob Durham went out prospecting every day and came back at sundown. Hanson was aware that Durham had saved his life, picking him up as he had, and he knew too much about the tremendous expanses of the Trans-Pecos to believe that Durham had come on him by chance. Thinking it all over, he decided Durham must surely have followed him after he left the Circle 3. Why Durham should do this he could not guess. He also realized that by giving him some sort of occupation in which he could prove himself useful, Bob Durham had done him a big favor. He did not mind the pain in his leg so much now. He began to watch for his friend's return at the end of day and would be pleased when, now and then, Durham would show him a tiny nugget or flake of gold which he had found in the rocks above.

One day Hanson went some distance from the hut, hunting dry wood to use as tinder in the mornings. He climbed up above the camp, pulling himself up with his arms to a shelf of rock where wood had collected for a long time. Suddenly he caught the scintillating flash the sun makes when it touches bare metal. He whirled to look down at the entrance to their narrow ravine. There was a man there, dismounted, and bent low over the earth as though hunting sign.

Hanson opened his mouth to hail the stranger, then thought better of it. What had caught his eyes was the light on a pistol barrel the hom-

bre had in one hand. Joe crouched down, waiting to see what happened. As the stranger straightened up and faced toward their cabin, concealed within the barranco, Hanson recognized him. It was the bearded man, Art Granville, who had offered to bribe him during his brief days as the Circle 3 foreman.

Granville wore leather over his clothing, but he had on his black Stetson. He moved stealthily on foot up the barranco, apparently following tracks Hanson had made the day before. Gun up, Granville went to the cabin, looking carefully around, while Hanson, who had left his weapons inside the shack, stayed low on his ledge above.

Granville came out of the hut after a while, and picked up Durham's fresh tracks heading up the ravine. When he was out of sight, Joe Hanson hastened back to the shack to get his guns. He knew Granville to be a rascal and he was possibly a criminal. Since the bearded man was obviously tracking Durham, Hanson strapped on his pistols and lurched along as fast as he could to save his partner.

For half a mile Hanson went carefully along, then he saw Granville ahead of him. The bearded hombre had stopped and was crouching in thick bush at the side of the trail. As Hanson sought to work up to covering range, Bob Durham came into sight, carrying his tools and gold pan.

Granville jumped out at Durham and lined the gun at his chest. Granville's voice, hot and deep, crackled on the dry air: "Reach, you double-crossin' skunk!"

The tools and pan rattled on the shale at Durham's spread boots; his hands went over his head as he said, "What's wrong, Art?"

"Don't try to pull wool over my

eyes!" shouted Granville. "Nobody ever cheated me and got away with it. Where's that money you took from the cache?"

"Me? I didn't take nuthin'."

"Liar! Duke told me you'd been seen sneakin' round the place. There was thirty thousand in that pile and half of it belongs to me—all of it now. You dirty, cheatin' side-winder!" He cursed Durham till his wind ran out.

"I didn't take it," insisted Durham. "I got sick of the dirty plays you planned, Art, and pulled out, that's all. I only brought what's mine."

"Went soft, didn't you?" Granville sneered. "Duke says you foltered that limpy-leg waddy, Hanson. After you cut his cinches and crippled him, you lost yore nerve!"

"That was yore idea," growled Durham, "so Duke would git the foreman job, after he agreed to throw in with you."

Icy fury stabbed through the listening Hanson, blind rage took hold of him. He knew a lot now, and could fill in the gaps: Duke Miller had made a deal with Granville after Hanson had refused. The wrangler had watched his chance, and cut the saddle cinches so that Hanson had been thrown. It had been a lot safer than the way they had disposed of Foreman Horse-face Eagan, who doubtless had been shot from ambush by Granville himself. After a wholesale raid which Duke Miller in the foreman's position could easily allow and abet, they had had some trouble over division of the loot. And because of their callous thievery Joe Hanson was crippled for life.

"I ain't touched that money," said Durham, hands still elevated. "When Hanson come back I figgered I was through, that's all. So I pulled out."

Granville hit him a vicious smack in the face. "Take off yore shirt, let's see yore belts." He forced Durham to strip to the waist. "You've hid it somewhere then. Only Duke, you and me knowed where that cache was, Durham. I'll count ten, and if yuh don't tell me where it's hid by then, I'll kill you. I can't fool around much longer. Reckon I kin take care of that limpy-leg easy enough."

He began to count. Granville wanted that money; he had taken the trouble to track Durham down and he meant to kill if only in revenge. Durham kept insisting he didn't know anything, and they were so busy with one another they did not see or hear Joe Hanson until the lame waddy was upon them.

Durham saw him first and hope flashed into his eyes. Granville caught the change in Durham's expression, guessed what it might be. He started to turn, but Hanson said between gritted teeth, "Stand as you are!"

"Good boy," Durham exploded. "You got him, Joe."

"Shut up," snarled Hanson.

Durham realized then that Hanson must know, must have overheard what they'd said. He shrugged, facing his erstwhile partner without any effort to make excuses.

"You crippled me," Hanson said, "for money. I'm goin' to kill both of you."

GRANVILLE was afraid. Yellow lights played in his eyes and his bearded mouth quivered. "Naw—don't shoot," he begged. "Why, hell, Hanson, it wasn't me cut yore cinches that day. It was Durham who—"

"You told him to do it, so as to put Miller in my place."

Granville knew his finish had

come. With the desperation of a cornered beast he made his last play—he lunged to his knees, firing as he moved. Hanson's first slug went through the black Stetson; at the same instant he felt Granville's bullet strike him in the injured leg and he almost went down from the impact. Then he steadied, hit Granville between the eyes with his second slug. The bearded hombre's arm dropped, gun clattering to the rocky path. Slowly Hanson sank to the earth, lights flashing across his vision, but he was used to fighting pain.

Bob Durham took a step toward him. "Stay where you are," Hanson gasped, gun lifting to cover Durham.

Durham paused, and after a second said, "Go on and shoot. I deserve it, Hanson."

Weakness was overpowering the crippled man. He could hardly see the figure that seemed to dance before him. He knew he had but a moment in which to act before he fainted. Durham folded his arms and waited. He didn't look afraid or angry—just sorry.

Hanson cursed, cursed himself. He dropped the Colt; the sweat poured from his face and he licked his drying lips; then the blackness overpowered him.

Save for a brief interval on the freight train which Durham had flagged after carrying him to the railroad line, Hanson didn't come back to life until after the operation. He was weak, weaker than he had ever been before. And yet a peace had come to him.

The doctor was there; a young, efficient man in a medical officer's uniform. "Where the hell am I?" whispered Hanson.

"You're at the Fort hospital," the

surgeon said. "You're going to be fine now. You went through it well. I extracted the bullet, and while I was at it I re-broke your leg and straightened it out. You'll be as good as new in a couple of months."

"You . . . you mean that?" Hanson gasped.

"Of course I mean it. Your leg set wrong before. It was in bad condition, never would have got well. But now it will." He patted Hanson's shoulder, smiled and turned away.

An orderly at the Fort hospital came over. "Your friend's waitin' outside to see you."

Bob Durham came in. He stood beside Joe Hanson's cot and looked down at him. "They say you can ride ag'in 'fore long, Joe."

"That's right. Old Doc Rough-and-ready didn't do so well, but I'm all right this trip."

Durham pulled up a chair. "They arrested Duke Miller. Leech got leery and put a couple of range detectives on Duke. They caught him when he run for it with the cash he'd held out on Granville."

"How'd you find that out?"

"I got a letter here from Leech. Read it." Durham handed over the epistle from the big boss of the Circle 3. It read:

Tell Joe Hanson that whenever he can get back, his foreman's job is waiting for him at the Pecos Ranch. Use the inclosed money for expenses and wire for more if you need it. You have done all you could to make up for what happened and I guess if Hanson can forgive you, we can.

Joe Hanson looked into the eyes of the man who had first crippled, then saved him. He held out his hand. "It's all right, Bob," he said sincerely. "When I'm back as foreman, I can hire anybody I've a mind to. And I reckon I know who my chief wrangler's goin' to be."



Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

IN the editor's Roundup department of February 10th, there was a mighty interesting argument concerning the birth of the revolver.

Here are a few interesting historical facts on the Colt Co. Unfortunately, Colt factory records were destroyed by a large fire shortly after the Civil War.

Sam Colt was born in 1814. He was always experimenting with one thing or another, much to the disgust of adults in the vicinity. When he was but seven years old, someone presented him with an ancient horse pistol. He played with this old flintlock, and due to a scarcity of lead, he filled the old smooth bore with stones obtained from gravel pits. The gun was extremely effective at short ranges.

With childhood past, Sam's father shipped him off to sea on the Boston brig *Corlo*. The *Corlo* with a load of supplies and missionaries for the Orient was not long out of Boston when Sam's imagination went to work, and in that summer of 1830, his idea of the revolver was born.

With a pocketknife the youngster carved a model out of a discarded tackle block. This is believed to be the first repeating pistol. It had a revolving cylinder capable of be-

ing fired six times rapidly without stopping to reload. Percussion caps were at that time coming into use and this new development interested Sam tremendously.

Returning to Boston, he showed the completed model to his father. The elder Colt became interested and agreed to let his son give up his sea career. He offered to finance the proposed business, but success was not easy. The gunsmiths of the day looked the model over, distrusted it, and the prices they quoted were far beyond reach. A gunsmith finally made one, but the cheap materials and cheaper workmanship caused it to blow up on the first shot. Historical records fail to reveal the exact date of this, but it is believed to have been in 1834.

By 1835, Sam had accumulated enough money to take care of his initial needs. He set out for Washington to apply for a patent. This was granted on February 25, 1836, as U. S. Patent No. 9430X. Patent records of those days were not as complete as they are today and the author's files show the official record as follows:

"No details or description recorded. Folding trigger hammer revolver, and hammerless rifle with ring trigger to revolve cylinder and regular trigger to trip hammer. Powder, ball, and percussion-cap ignition."

Shortly thereafter a Baltimore gunsmith manufactured the first Colt. Sam borrowed money and went to England where he applied for British patent protection. Returning to America, he organized the Paterson Colt Manufacturing Co. in Paterson, New Jersey.

The gun was a failure at first. The public refused to acknowledge the new development and army officers condemned it as too complicated. As a result, the Paterson firm failed.

From the wreck of this organization, Sam salvaged fifty of his now famous Paterson Colt repeating rifles. This was the earliest form of repeating rifle believed to be on record (note final mention later.) It had a revolving cylinder similar to that of the hand gun. In Florida Colt sold these to Colonel William S. Harney for use in the Seminole Indian War at the price of one hundred and twenty-five dollars each.

On the way home, Sam was shipwrecked and lost the six thousand two hundred and fifty dollars he had in his pocket. Thus crashed his plans for reorganizing.

The Mexican War and the settlement of the West really started Sam

in business. The first practical use by Western pioneers was recorded in 1842 when Lieutenant John C. Frémont with twenty-one men went over the Oregon Trail with Kit Carson as a guide surveying a practical route to the Pacific coast. In 1847, Frémont again made the trip with sixty plainsmen. They carried Colt revolvers.

And now for an interesting and rather disconcerting piece of news.

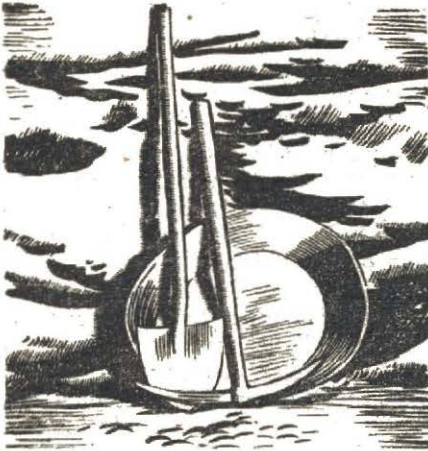
Research in the United States Patent Records clearly reveals that on June 29, 1833—three years before Colt received his patent and two years before he applied for it—one David G. Colburn, address unknown, was granted United States Patent No. 7620X on a *revolving rifle!* The description in the United States records is rather incomplete. It runs as follows:

"No description in detail. Top hammer revolving rifle with two triggers, one to revolve the cylinder and one to trip the hammer. Instead of ratchets being cut into the rear of the cylinder, studs project from the rear being successively engaged by the operating hand in the mechanism. This was a powder and ball percussion gun."

Did Samuel Colt get his idea from Colburn, or was it the other way round? My records fail to reveal that Colburn ever cashed in on this patent. Perhaps other collectors can offer added comment on this.

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

"HELP, help!" writes J. F. "Black sands are getting me down."

The letter came from Los Angeles, California, but J. F. placer-mines in the northern part of the State during the open season. His problem is a familiar one. Black sands, those heavy particles that are mainly tiny fragments of iron ore and tend to lag back with the gold behind the riffles in a sluice box, have probably caused more heart-felt cussing among small-scale placer prospectors than any other single item.

Here's the rest of J. F.'s letter: "Any information you can give me on handling these black sands will sure be appreciated. The sands contain appreciable values in intermixed gold. But the gold is very fine and doesn't separate easily. Hand-panning these black-sand concentrates helps, but it is slow and laborious, and even so does not give an altogether clean gold residue."

WS-7C

Well, J. F., rewashing the sands using a corduroy, burlap or Brussels carpet-floored sluice and an ordinary fifty-cent, six-inch horseshoe magnet to remove most of the magnetic iron particles, you can get rid of much of the worthless material and will have left a high-grade concentrate ready for special treatment. By the way, watch that magnet because if some of the gold particles are coated with, or adhering to small bits of iron, they will be pulled out along with the real iron minerals and lost. So check your magnetic iron discards before tossing them away.

About the most successful way of treating those gold-bearing black sands, provided always they are rich enough in fine gold to warrant it, is by a combination process of grinding to free all the gold from any foreign mineral that may coat it, and amalgamating with mercury to pick up the tiny gold particles themselves. Regular amalgamation barrels of several types are available from mine supply houses for this purpose. One we know of has a twenty-four-inch-diameter barrel, takes a charge of roughly three hundred pounds of concentrates, turns at from fifteen to twenty-five revolutions per minute and requires about a three horse-power engine to run it.

If that is a little big for your needs a smaller, belt-driven, three-quarter horsepower job, taking a charge of up to fifty pounds of concentrates might be better. Or you can even make your own barrel from a five-gallon oil drum. By fixing paddles to the drum and trunnions at each end, you can let the stream current right where you are placering do the work of revolving it. A bigger homemade barrel can be constructed out of an empty fifty-five-

gallon gasoline drum, and operated by a water wheel or gas engine. Small lengths of steel, several about ten inches or a foot long of two or three-inch rod, can be used very satisfactorily as the grinding medium in these barrel-type amalgamators.

In operation, these barrels all work about the same. They are first charged with enough of the black-sand concentrate and water to make a fairly thick pulp. Mercury is added to collect the gold. A little lye will aid in cleaning the gold and will hasten and improve amalgamation. With the charge in, the barrel is closed tight and run overnight, or all day, sometimes twenty-four hours, if necessary. In cleaning up after a run, the ground pulp is collected in a box, the barrel washed thoroughly, and the pulp washed free of sand. Pick out pieces of iron and steel with the magnet. Then scoop out the hard mercury amalgam which contains the gold. Later the amalgam can be retorted, or distilled to free the gold.

Amalgam barrels properly handled and in test runs have been known to capture upward of ninety percent of all the gold otherwise lost in the black-sand concentrates.

For small lots of black-sand concentrates, test lots virtually, grind the black sand with a little mercury and water in an ordinary cast-iron mortar with the regular iron pestle used for hand-grinding rock. In this case and with the smaller home-

made barrel amalgamators, the best procedure after grinding is to pan the amalgamated concentrate to recover the mercury.

And finally there is a last method if your concentrates are rich enough in gold values after thinning them down to the smallest possible bulk. That is to ship them to one of the reliable firms that regularly buy and handle black sands and black-sand concentrates for the gold, and sometimes the platinum as well as values in other rare metals that they may contain. Remember, however, that such concentrates will have to be rich enough at the start to stand not only transportation charges, but treatment costs as well.

Incidentally, if you try making a homemade barrel amalgamator out of a gasoline or oil barrel, be sure the drum is absolutely clean of all oil. Otherwise it may foul the mercury. And watch matches around the openings in an empty gasoline barrel. The fumes in it may ignite.

To H. M., Albuquerque, New Mexico: The heavy, tin-white, malleable grains of so-called placer platinum sometimes found in regular gold-placer operations are not really pure platinum. As a rule, they only contain a little more than half to three quarters pure platinum metal. That is why the pay-off on such platinum, and platinum concentrates is often disappointing to the prospector. Quoted marked prices are for the pure metal.

● 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

The long, cold, wintry nights when you had only friendly letters from Pen Pals to keep you company probably seem far in the dim past these balmy spring days, and, being only human, you find yourselves writing fewer and fewer letters as outdoor pursuits claim your attention. There are some letters, though, that should not go unanswered, no matter what—the ones from those members of the Hollow Tree who can't take advantage of the changing seasons. For them, receiving your letters still remains the most important thing in their limited worlds, and we ask you to add the name of this World War veteran whose appeal appears below to that list of "must be answered." Here's what he has to say:

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a World War veteran confined to a hospital for a year or two, but hope to be well again some day. Now there's nothing us guys in the hospital like better than receiving mail and, as I don't get many letters, I would like to have letters from anybody who would be kind enough to take the time to write me. I came out here from the East and like this Southwest country very much. If anyone wants a swell place to live they should come to New Mexico. Please, everyone, write me letters and post cards.—Frank Musgrave, Veterans Hospital, Albuquerque, New Mexico

India is an open book to Mrs. Varadanam—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Will you please print my letter in the Hollow Tree section of your magazine? I would like to have a large number of Pen Pals from New York, Canada, Australia and England. I was born in India and, although I have traveled extensively throughout this vast country, I have never been outside it. I am married and have three children and am the head-mistress in a girls' school of about two hundred and fifty students. My hobbies are corresponded and

collecting stamps. I will answer all letters, so come on, Pen Pals, and fill up my mailbox.—Mrs. M. Varadanam, Board Town Girls' School, Amalapuram, (E. Godavary), India

Tom sounds full of pep and dash—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to hear from red-blooded Americans who like to do things American, and I'll welcome all letters from sick and poor as well as others. Whatever your hobbies or the adventures you have had, let me hear from you. I am an American and much of my life has been spent as a cowboy. I've also worked in the silver and copper mines in Arizona. In fact I lived in Arizona for twenty-four years, living the hard life and having plenty of experiences. I am thirty years old, interested in writing letters, like to draw, hunt, and I've cooked many a meal over the campfire. I'm ready to ride, folks, so uncoil your rattas and let's go!—Tom Lycher, 1510 Crank Avenue, Flint, Michigan

Myrtle has lots of interests—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a regular reader of the Hollow Tree and would like to have some Pen Pals from all over the United States and foreign countries. I like to sew, crochet, embroider and read. I enjoy the movies and my favorite sports are basketball, football and skating. I collect handkerchiefs, small cedar chests, post cards and lots of other souvenirs, and I promise to help others with their hobbies if they will help me with mine. Here's hoping I receive lots of mail and I promise to answer all letters. Will also exchange snapshots.—Myrtle Nugent, 701-a High Street, Petersburg, Virginia

Joe needs lots of mail—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Only a sailor in Asiatic waters can tell you how lonesome one can become in the Far East, especially after spending two years seeing Asia through a porthole. I know that there must be some among your readers who would like to know how a radieman keeps from going batty out here, and I would like to hear from both

boys and girls around my own age, twenty-six. My hobbies are numerous and for further information about me and the Far East just write to:—Joe Blanchard, RM2/C, U. S. S. *Napa*, c/o Postmaster, Cavite, Philippine Islands

Lonely folks, write to Doris—

Dear Miss Rivers:

This is a call for Pen Pals from a lonely girl of eighteen. I like to dance, swim and play tennis. In spite of having outside interests, I am still lonely, so if there are any others who feel that way, please write to me. I will be glad to answer all letters.—Doris Loper, 1623 Carnation Street, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

William's hobby is flower gardening—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like very much to join in the fun of the Hollow Tree and hear from people all over the world. Although my hobby is flower gardening, it may be different from others in that I collect mainly the bulb flowers and have quite a collection of them. I would very much like to hear from other folks who are interested in this hobby. I will gladly exchange bulbs or flower seeds. Here's hoping I'll hear from lots of flower lovers. I'll be waiting to answer your letters.—William White, 5266 Fountain Avenue, Hollywood, California

Here's a plea from a junior member—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Have you room in the Hollow Tree for a fifteen-year-old Chicago girl? I enjoy writing and receiving letters and my favorite pastimes are swimming, reading, the movies, dancing and dramatic work. I would like to hear from Pen Pals of any age, so here's hoping I receive lots of letters.—Inez Sholin, 2307 Devon Avenue, Chicago, Illinois

Corporal Morrisson has plenty to tell you—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-two years old and a soldier in the United States army. I would like to hear from anyone in the United States, and I assure you that all letters received will be answered without delay. I have plenty to tell anyone who is interested, so here's hoping I get some replies.—Corporal Charles Morrisson, 15th Signal Service Co., Fort Monmouth, New Jersey

Fill Elmira's mailbox to overflowing—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a Canadian girl seventeen years old and I would love to hear from cowboys and cowgirls. In fact, I want to hear from people all over the world. I collect stamps and would like to exchange with some of you. I play the Spanish and Hawaiian guitar and sing cowboy songs, of which I have a large collection. I live in the country and my favorite pastimes are skating, reading, dancing, bicycling and writing letters. Come on, pals, everywhere and fill my mailbox. I'll answer all letters and exchange snapshots.—Elmira Atwater, Wilmot Station, Annapolis County, Nova Scotia

Charles wants to hear from folks all over the world—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely boy nineteen years old and would like very much to correspond with boys and girls my age from all corners of the world. I am interested in all water sports and photography. I will answer all letters and exchange snapshots. Here's hoping I find some swell Pen Pals.—Charles Vaughn, Camp Dixie, Stevens Pottery, Georgia

Hervey will answer you in French or English—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young man twenty-one years old with the urge to travel and see the forty-eight States. I would like to correspond with folks from all parts of the United States as well as foreign countries. I can answer in French or English and will tell you about the New England States and the Province of Quebec. I will exchange snapshots.—Hervey Bludeau, 2 Kempton Court, Lawrence, Massachusetts

This widow should get lots of mail—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a widow thirty-eight years old living in a small town among strangers and I get rather lonely, so I am sending you this S O S. I have lots of time on my hands and would like very much to receive letters from anyone from any part of the world. I promise to answer all letters. I am very fond of outdoor life and enjoy camping trips. I also like to read and dance and I'm very fond of music and good movies. Here's hoping my S O S is answered in the near future.—Mrs. Corda Reynolds, 319 Miramonte Avenue, Ontario, California

Here's your chance to learn about South Africa—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Here's a plea from a lonely South African who would like some Pen Pals from all over the world. I will answer all letters promptly, so please sling some ink my way and hear all about the wilds of South Africa.—P. J. Botes, P. O. Minnaar, Transvaal, South Africa

Barbara hails from British Honduras—

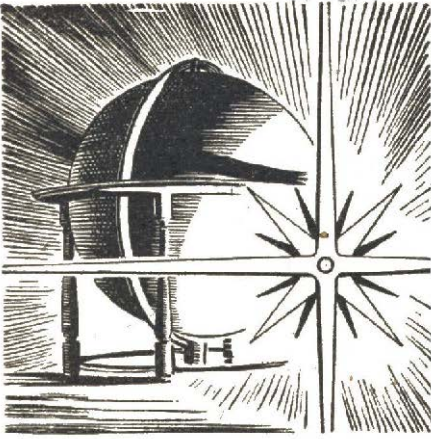
Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a fifteen-year-old girl and am anxious to get in touch with a few Pen Pals. My favorite sports are swimming and horseback riding. All you who would like to hear about British Honduras, just write to me.—Barbara Avery, Box 103, Belize, British Honduras

Song collectors, here's a pal for you—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Will you please publish this letter from a woman who lives in the Lone Star State? My hobby for many years has been collecting old songs, and I would like to hear from young or old who are interested in exchanging them with me.—Mrs. Oda Smith, Rt. No. 2, Box 534, Dallas, Texas



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

B. K., of Bar Harbor, a fishing enthusiast, asks about a certain practically hidden lake which lies up in Quebec, far away from motor roads and the sounds of civilization. He says it has a French name, is practically bottomless, and is tops for trout fishing.

Well, B. K., from your vivid description of the angler's paradise, I have a hunch you are referring to a group of lakes of which Lac des Isles is the most famous. These waters are so prized that regular visitors don't like the word to get about too much, for fear of attracting too many fishermen.

To get to these lakes, you go up to Montreal. Then you take a train

to a village called Barrette Station, a six-hour ride from Montreal. There you get off the train and, if you are wise, hire a guide to get you to your destination.

Your guide will probably take you to a place called Kiamika, where you enter the real woods. From there on you are beyond civilization. You will have to make your way the rest of the trip by canoe and packing.

You will hit the first of the waters when you come to Grand Lac du Cerf. After fishing this lake, you will then go on by canoe through a portage into Lake McPhee, where you will get plenty of brook trout. You then go on still farther, lugging your gear across another portage, and you are in Crooked Lake. Still farther on is Small Trout Lake. From there you have a two-mile portage and you find yourself in the above-mentioned paradise—Lac des Isles.

This is not an especially big lake. It is about two miles long, and the whole shoreline around it probably doesn't exceed eight miles. But deep! In that small lake you will find water a hundred feet deep, and cold as ice.

As for trout, Lac des Isles teems with them. In the spring they fight for the bait along the surface, and almost any good fly will take them.

Then after the first good spring fishing, the fishing gets better along the surface until the middle of June. When it gets too warm along the surface in midsummer they all go down a bit to cool off. Then you have to use deep tackle, such as sinker plugs to reach them.

Those contemplating fishing in Canada or Florida, or anywhere else on the North American Continent, can obtain further information by writing to John North, inclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope for his reply.

But when things start cooling off along about the latter part of August, the fish start rising again, and once more it is a holiday for the fisherman with surface tackle.

You'll enjoy your trip up here more if you make proper arrangements beforehand, and allow yourself a week or more in the waters. Also, you should take a guide who knows the country well.

When you say Florida most people automatically think of Miami, or of the east or west coast of the peninsula, and they think of going there in January or February to escape the cold up North. But there is more to Florida than the winter resorts.

Here comes F. J. of Mobile, who asks about fishing in a part of Florida which isn't so well known in other parts of the country. He writes, "I'm being bombarded by my piscatorial-minded friends with wild tales of fishing in the waters, both inland and salt, around that part of Florida about a hundred miles east of here, Panama City and Port St. Joe. Is this really something special? What could a fellow find there who knew his way around with a fishing rod?"

Plenty! Let's begin at the beginning, so others can get the picture. Those towns are on the Florida coast just south of Alabama, about a hundred miles east of Mobile. They were mere villages, so to speak until the recent boom in Southern wood pulp paper manufacturing.

The black bass are always good around those waters, summer and winter. Back from the salt water around there you will find two lakes which are well known locally. They are Wimico and Dead Lakes. There are also numerous fresh-water streams feeding into them, and they all have plenty of local fish, bass, croppie, et cetera.

A lot of sport fishermen go to St. Joe, where boats for fishing for tarpon and other bigger stuff can be had, and for those, there will be good catches after May first, when the fish come up from farther down the peninsula.

St. Joe also holds plenty of excitement for the less exacting fisherman. You can rent small boats to fish the bay, and this won't take a year's wages. You can find plenty of bluefish, speckled trout, channel bass, and flounders. You can get the bluefish and trout all summer, and if you wish, you can follow them upstream into fresh water in the winter.

Panama City, about thirty miles west of St. Joe, is a nice place to loaf and fish the year round. Around here they go in for smaller fish, such as are thick in the bay at various seasons. You can fish from docks and breakwaters and get a lot of fish, or you can take a small kacker out into the bay and get red snapper and king mackerel. You can also fish from the piers and pick up pampano, whiting, trout and other fish and during the spring run of king mackerel you can pull them out by the barrelful.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



Missing Department

MCCOO, ARCHIBALD—He is my brother and was last heard of in 1928. He was last seen in the New York Central Y. M. C. A. and the Brewery Mission in New York City. Through an injury suffered in childhood his stature was impaired. He is sixty-six years old, five feet four inches tall, his face was quite heavily lined when last seen, and he has a scar on his upper lip, blue eyes and gray hair. He was a bookkeeper at one time and was employed for ten years at Graymoor, Garrison, New York, by the Franciscan Brothers on a religious magazine published by them. Please request him to get in touch with his youngest brother, Thomas.—Thomas McCoo, 175 Pearl Street, East, Brockville, Ontario, Canada.

KRUSE, JOSEPH—He is my son and has been missing since 1926. He is thirty-one years old, five feet eight inches tall, has a dark complexion, black hair and blue eyes. When last heard from he was headed for Sterling, Illinois. His mother, brother and sister are waiting for him to come home. If anyone knows his whereabouts, write to his mother.—Mrs. Susie Kruse, 905—10th Avenue, South, Clinton, Iowa.

NOTICE—Anyone knowing the whereabouts of Roy C. Polston, formerly of 8406 Washington Avenue, Astoria, Long Island, New York, please contact the American Service Institute, Huguenot, Staten Island, New York.

BELL, LULU, ELLA and ANNA—These girls are my cousins and when last heard from were living in Bloomington and Baros, Illinois. They have since married and I haven't heard from them. I am a patient in Pinecrest Sanatorium and would appreciate hearing from them, so if anyone knows their whereabouts, please write to me.—George Awrey, Pinecrest Sanatorium, Powers, Michigan.

FRIED, CHARLES THOMAS—He is my brother and I would like any information concerning his whereabouts. He is thirty-six years old and left his home in Taney County, Missouri, when he was eighteen years old.—Mrs. Margarete Cook, Brighton, Oregon.

NASH, MARY—She is my aunt and was born in County Limerick, Ireland, about 1834. She came to America in the early '50s with her mother and sister and they settled in Detroit, Michigan. In 1857, her mother and sister moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan, and we never heard from her after that. She is supposed to have married and moved to Iowa. If she has any descendants I would like to hear from them.—P. J. Mulvihill, 859 Hogan Street, S. W., Grand Rapids, Michigan.

● There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

While it will be better to use your name in the notices, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" postoffice address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to anyone who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



Part Six

BY WILLIAM COLT MacDONALD

The Story So Far:

An ad in an El Paso newspaper brings Johnny Donne, an ex-Border Ranger, to the hotel room of George Aldrich who explains that he needs a man for a dangerous enterprise. Before Johnny can learn any more about the job, someone sticks a gun through the door transom and kills Aldrich.

Johnny, wearing a black sombrero he had picked up by mistake in Aldrich's room, heads for Spearhead Wells, the town from which Aldrich had come. In a sa-

loon he is accosted by Ogallala Mitchell who claims that the black sombrero is his. Johnny's refusal to turn it over earns him the enmity of Ogallala and his two brothers, Vink and Kane.

To Johnny's mystification, the Mitchells try in every possible way to get him to give up the sombrero. One day he is way-laid by Vink and Ogallala who try to force him to hand over the disputed hat. Johnny resists and in the fight that follows, kills Ogallala and wounds Vink.

Meanwhile, Johnny, under the name of Donshawnee, has gone to work for Susan Aldrich who is having difficulty running the ranch her father left her. From Susan Johnny learns what had prompted her father to put his ad in the El Paso paper. Several years before, Aldrich's brother, Tony, aided by Ogallala Mitchell, had stolen a thirty-thousand-dollar mine payroll. Ogallala was apprehended, but Tony escaped after caching the stolen money somewhere on his brother's land. George Aldrich had made good the stolen money and, having been contacted recently by his brother, decided to try to locate the cached treasure. His murder had followed.

Returning to the ranch late one night, Johnny learns that the sheriff in Spearhead Wells had received an anonymous note informing him that George Aldrich had the black sombrero before he was killed.

Johnny confesses his identity to Susan Aldrich, and she assures him that she is convinced of his innocence. Meanwhile, Humdrum Hartigan, a friend of Johnny's, makes a secret trip to the Spur Bar, the Mitchells' outfit. When he returns he visits Sheriff Nick Pritchard and turns over a notebook belonging to Kane Mitchell. It is obvious that the anonymous note about the black sombrero was written on a page from the book, but Humdrum points out something even more astounding: Kane Mitchell had kept the numbers of guns he owned. One of these is the number of the gun found in George Aldrich's hotel room after his death!

CHAPTER XXIII

MURDER!

HUMDRUM'S announcement that a gun owned by Kane Mitchell had been found in George Aldrich's hotel room seemed to have left Sheriff Pritchard momentarily speechless. For several seconds the ticking of the alarm clock on the desk was the only sound in the room. Then Pritchard's voice seemed to explode from his heavy body.

"Sufferin' sassafras!" he yelled. "Humdrum, we've got the goods on Mitchell!"

"I reckon." Humdrum had again settled back in his chair. "With that gun number and the anonymous note

we've got real evidence. You see, I happen to know that Aldrich did once own that black sombrero of Johnny's. We'll show this notebook evidence to Kane Mitchell and ask him how he happened to know about the hat. He can't very well deny he wrote the note."

"Humdrum, you've sure done a good afternoon's work," Pritchard declared.

"I had to do a lot of drinking, too," Humdrum remarked casually.

"Drinkin'?"

Humdrum nodded drowsily. "Yeah. You told me the Spur Bar would be deserted, but the cook was still there. A little bit of a scrawny hombre with a red nose."

"Oh, you saw him, eh? That's Snuffy Ben."

"So I learned. Well, Snuffy Ben was right peeved because Pat Scudder wouldn't let him come to town with the rest of the crew. Howsom-ever, he was prepared for such difficulties. He had himself a jug of corn likker there, and was half drunk by the time I came. He didn't know who I was and didn't care. He'd got to where what he wanted most was somebody to talk to. So I had to spend the afternoon drinking with him until such time as he passed out, leaving me free to do my snooping around."

"Holy mackerel, you must have the constitution of a horse if you drank Snuffy Ben under the table."

"I'm beginning to think so myself," Humdrum admitted. "We both took a powerful lot of punishment. The more Snuffy Ben drank, the talkier he got. He doesn't know much that's going on at the Spur Bar, but he does know the Mitchells have been stealing stock from both the Wagon Wheel and the Rocking A. Snuffy Ben is getting scared for fear he'll be pulled in if anything happens.

He's been thinkin' about quittin' his job—"

Sheriff Pritchard looked astounded. "Rustling, eh? Well, I'll be jiggered!"

"You probably will," Humdrum yawned. "Anyway, it looks like we have got enough evidence to stop the Mitchells now."

"It sure does. Say," Pritchard said hesitantly, "I suppose you being a Border Ranger, you'll want to make the arrests."

Humdrum shook his head emphatically. "I've been figuring to let you do it, Nick. After all, you're sheriff here and it might help you, come election time."

"That's mighty decent of you." Pritchard looked pleased.

"It's nothing," Humdrum assured him. "Us Rangers don't like too much publicity. I would like you to hold off making the arrests, though, until Johnny can be with us. He might want to tell you a few things you don't know yet. Suppose we plan to put the bee on the Mitchells tomorrow morning?"

"That suits me fine."

Humdrum lumbered up out of his chair and gathered the notebook and other papers. "I'll take these along to show Johnny. We'll be seeing you in the morning."

"Good. I'll be waiting for you. So long!"

"Adios!" Humdrum turned and left the office. The sheriff rose and followed him to the door. He watched Humdrum mount and ride off down the street.

"By heck!" Pritchard muttered. "That hombre ain't so sleepy as he looks. He's plenty smart." He stood there until the hoofbeats of Humdrum's horse faded in the distance, then closed the door and went back to his desk. His eyes fell on the vexatious expense account on his

desk; he sighed heavily and got to work again.

A QUARTER of an hour passed, with the sheriff still struggling over his accounts. Once he glanced at the old clock ticking monotonously on one wall. "Only ten after seven," he grunted. "By dang, so much has happened today, it seems like it should be midnight."

A few minutes later the door of his office opened and Kane Mitchell stepped in, closing the door behind him.

"Howdy, Nick," he said. He wore a thin, unpleasant smile.

Pritchard glanced up at his visitor, stiffening a trifle. "Didn't anybody ever tell you it was polite to knock?" he asked sourly.

"Didn't think it was necessary, Nick."

"Well, what do you want?" The sheriff's attitude was cold, unpromising.

Mitchell's eyes were flinty. "Nick, I've come to demand that you arrest Donshawnee for murder."

"Arrest Johnny? You're crazy! He killed Blackie Falcon in a fair fight."

"I'm not denying that, though I think he was lucky."

"Sure, he was," Pritchard admitted dryly, "if having brains is lucky."

"I didn't come here to argue that, Nick, I'll make a bargain with you." Mitchell came across the office and stood near the desk.

"I doubt I want any truck with you," Pritchard declared, "but what's on your mind?"

Mitchell spoke slowly, choosing his words with care: "I've just learned that Donshawnee is really named Donne—the same Donne who's wanted for the murder of George Aldrich."

"T' hell you say! Do you expect me to believe that?" Pritchard said contemptuously. "Mitchell, you're just trying to make trouble for Johnny—"

"I'm giving it to you straight," Mitchell said earnestly. "There's a reward to be collected on Aldrich's murderer. I could turn Donne over to the authorities myself and claim all the reward, but I'm willing to split it with you, on one condition."

In spite of his distrust of Mitchell, the sheriff was curious. "What's your condition?" he asked warily.

"When you arrest Donne, I want to make sure of getting that black sombrero he wears."

Pritchard frowned. "What in hell do you want that hat so bad for?"

Mitchell smiled a bit sheepishly. "I know you'll think it's funny, but I'm sort of sentimental about that hat. You see, Ogallala wanted it, and I thought a heap of my brother."

"Hogwash!" Pritchard snorted. "You can't get me to swallow that. I don't trust you, Mitchell."

"You've got me wrong. I'm trying to do my duty as a citizen in bringing George Aldrich's murderer to justice. Are you goin' to ride out and arrest Donshawnee—I mean Donne—or aren't you?"

"I certainly won't," Pritchard said forcefully. "And when you claim Johnny killed Aldrich, you're crazy!" For a moment, he was tempted to tell Mitchell what Humdrum had discovered that day, but he decided against it. "I don't believe a word you say."

"Why don't you?" demanded Mitchell.

"My reasons," Pritchard said coldly, "are my own business."

Mitchell's eyes gleamed. He had hoped Pritchard would refuse to take action. "I figured you might act this way, Nick," he said coldly. "Will

you deputize me to arrest him?"

The sheriff laughed contemptuously. "You know better than to ask me that."

Mitchell nodded, shrugged his shoulders. "I've been fair with you.



Now you leave me just one course of action."

"Meaning just what?" asked Pritchard, rising from the desk.

"Nick, it's the duty of every honest citizen to make an arrest when the legally empowered authorities refuse to act. It's not only the duty, but the right—"

"Do you mean you'd go over my head?" Pritchard interrupted.

"You're forcing it on me. I've given you your chance to arrest a murderer and you've refused. I'll take a couple of my men out and apprehend Donne, and when the authorities of this State learn how you've shirked your duty—"

"You fool!" Pritchard said hotly. "You can't do a thing like this. I won't let you. I'm the law here. I'd like to see you try arresting Johnny. I thought you had more sense than that."

"You can't stop me!"

"I'll show you whether I can stop you or not," Pritchard declared. "Mitchell, I intended to hold off un-

til tomorrow, but you've forced my hand. I'm arresting you right now, for the murder of George Aldrich! You owned the gun that killed him. It was you left that note on my desk telling me to investigate that hat of Johnny's. You've rustled cattle right and left. Kane Mitchell, you're under arrest. We've got that notebook of yours and—"

"You're insane." Suddenly pale, Mitchell backed away. One hand went quickly to his breast, then he realized he had left his vest and the notebook at home. He was still backing toward the door, trying to collect his scattered wits and overcome the shock Pritchard's words had given him. His lips moved to form swift denials, but words would not come.

"You going to come quiet," Pritchard snapped, "or have I got to put the cuffs on you? Stop! Stand where you are!"

MITCHELL had started to reach for the doorknob when he saw Pritchard leap across the room to get his holstered gun hanging on a peg on the wall. For an instant, Mitchell was completely panic-stricken. He was cornered and couldn't think. The sheriff was drawing out his gun, now. Involuntarily, Mitchell's right hand darted to his own six-shooter and came up spitting fire.

Powder smoke spread hazily through the room, as the noise of the explosion brought Mitchell to his senses. He saw a strange baffled expression slowly come over the sheriff's features. Pritchard's mouth dropped open. His hands scratched futilely at the wall as he tried to prevent himself from falling. Then, quite suddenly, his body jackknifed and he struck the floor, face down.

"Damn it all," Kane whispered

hoarsely, "I didn't mean to do that! I don't know what came over me!"

His trembling hand replaced the six-shooter in his holster and he knelt by the silent form of the old sheriff. Mitchell was trembling as he turned the body on its back. It wasn't any use. Nick Pritchard was already dead.

The door at Mitchell's back opened suddenly and Deputy Ed Hunter appeared. For just an instant Hunter paused there in the doorway, while surprise turned to horrified comprehension on his features. Then, like a flash, his gun leaped from its holster.

"Damn you, Mitchell, you've killed Nick!" he burst out. "Put 'em up, you devil, before I blast you clean to hell!"

"I didn't! I swear I didn't!" Mitchell got to his feet, hands high in the air. "I come here to see Nick an' I . . . I found him here—like this. I was trying to revive him and—"

"Don't lie to me, you dirty, murderin' skunk!" Hunter rasped savagely. "I'm going to shoot you down like a dog!"

"Don't!" Mitchell stumbled back against the wall, one arm shielding his fright-contorted features, all courage driven from his body by the terrible anger burning in Ed Hunter's blazing eyes. "You . . . you wouldn't kill me like this—"

"I'll take pleasure in doing it," Hunter snarled.

HE had no time to say more, for at that moment Vink Mitchell came slipping through the doorway behind him with an upraised gun in his fist. The gun descended, the heavy steel barrel striking with crushing force on Hunter's head. Hunter groaned once as he slumped to the floor, the six-shooter clattering from his senseless grasp. Vink

leaped inside the office, pulling the door closed behind him. Slowly color flowed back into Kane's ashen face.

"You . . . you came just in time, Vink," he said weakly.

Vink was staring around the room with amazed eyes. "What the hell happened here, anyway?"

Kane jerked one trembling hand toward the sheriff. "He was stubborn. I had to kill him. The jig's up, Vink. We're in a bad spot. Hunter was going to kill me when you hit him."

"What do you mean, the jig's up?" Vink demanded swiftly.

"I'll tell you later. Now we've got to think fast. I wonder if anybody heard my shot."

"I doubt it. If they did, they wouldn't pay any attention, there's so much noise in town. Our crew has started to whoop things up. I reckon it's a good thing I came down here to see what was keeping you. I saw Hunter enter, just ahead of me. When I see him covering you, I let him have it. What happened before that?"

"I'll tell you later. We've got to act fast while there's still time." Kane jerked a coiled rope from a peg on one wall, then crossed to the desk and extinguished the lamp, plunging the office into total darkness. "No use taking chances on some passerby glancing in the window. This damn Hunter will probably be out for awhile, but we can't risk too much. I'm going to tie him up—tight. While I'm doing that, you slope out and round up our crew. Get 'em back here *pronto!* I'll be waiting."

"What you aiming to do, Kane?"

"I can't go into details, now," his brother said impatiently. "We've got to clear out and lay low for a spell until this blows over. We'll get out of this jam, but we've got to have time to work. First, we're going to ride to the Rocking A and get that black sombrero—one way or an-



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other. If they want to give it up peaceful, well and good. But I'm going to have that hat if I have to wipe out everybody on the Rocking A outfit. There's only four men and two women there. We'll be eleven strong. I figure our hands have drunk enough by this time to be ready for anything. Now, get going. Get the boys mounted and back here. Hurry!"

"You sound desperate." Vink's voice shook a trifle in the darkness.

"I am desperate! You'd be, too, if you knew what I know. Dammit! You turning yellow? Get started, for Pete's sake!"

"I'm on my way." Cautiously, Vink opened the door and glanced both ways along the street. There was no one in the immediate vicinity. He slipped stealthily outside and started at a swift run toward the center of town. By this time most of the boys would be at the Mecca Bar. It wouldn't take long to get them into saddles.

Back in the office, Kane Mitchell was fumbling at rope knots over Deputy Hunter's unconscious form. Mitchell's hands still trembled at the thought of his narrow escape. Perspiration stood out on his forehead. Hunter had certainly been ready to blast when Vink arrived.

"I was a damn fool to lose my head thataway," Mitchell muttered, "but maybe this way is best. We've put off things long enough, as it is. Now we'll get some action!"

CHAPTER XXIV

NIGHT RAIDERS

SO you see," Humdrum was saying, "it looks like we've finally got the Mitchells on the run. With the evidence we've got, they're licked to a thin frazzle."

They were all sitting before the

blazing fireplace in the Rocking A ranchhouse—Susan, Johnny, Mecate, Humdrum and Dave Franklin. Guadaloopa was out in the kitchen, washing the supper dishes. The light on the table shone on the small leather-covered notebook from which Humdrum had secured so much information.

"You've done a neat piece of work, Humdrum," Johnny said. He heaved a long sigh of relief. "It's sure good to know that two murder charges have been lifted off my shoulders. At last, I can breathe easy again." He glanced at Susan, who smiled at him.

"Oh, I'm so glad, Johnny," she said happily. "Things are clearing up, aren't they? For me as well as for you."

"I reckon," Mecate observed, "that if Mitchell is pulled into court on a charge of killing your pa, Susan, it won't be very hard to get him to confess to rustling our cows. We can throw an attachment on his ranch and one way or t'other we'll get the value of them critters out of him. Now, if we could only find that gold, the Rocking A would be on easy street."

"Somehow I've got a hunch we'll find that, too," Johnny said.

"I figure," Humdrum remarked, "that you'll want to be reinstated in the Border Rangers, Johnny, as soon as possible."

Johnny nodded. "It'll be good to have that disgrace wiped out. I owe that much to my old boss, Steve Sharples, for his faith in me."

"Danged if this all didn't work out just like a book," Dave Franklin put in. "It's nigh as interestin' as that story, 'Hamlet,' that I've been reading."

"Johnny," Susan said slowly, "if you were reinstated in the Border Rangers, that would mean you'd be

leaving this part of the country, wouldn't it?"

Johnny looked at the girl and saw a slow warm flush creep into her cheeks. His own color deepened as he realized the significance of her question. "I reckon it would," he answered reluctantly. "Of course, I might be sent over this way on Ranger business, sometime."

"We'd want to see you—all of us would—as often as possible—" Susan began, then she broke off short.

Outside the house there was a sudden rush of hoofs and the creaking of saddle leather. Johnny leaped to his feet. "Who's that?" he exclaimed sharply. A startling chorus of wild yells shattered the night silence of the ranch yard.

"Who'd be riding here this time of night?" Susan frowned.

A six-shooter roared outside shattering the glass in a window frame across the room. A bullet thudded into the wall.

"What the devil!" Mecate leaped to his feet.

Johnny threw himself halfway across the room and extinguished the lamplight. He heard a scream of fright from the kitchen as Guadalupe came running into the room. Johnny yelled orders through the din of voices that rose outside.

"Guadalupe, get some water and put out the fire in the fireplace. We can't have light in here. It looks like a raid! I think I heard Mitchell's voice a minute ago. Move fast, fellows!"

THE men hurried to do Johnny's bidding as he snapped orders. There was still a lot of shooting going on outside, though no more shots had been directed at the house. The doors of the ranchhouse were slammed and bolted. Johnny and Humdrum raced to the kitchen to

get the guns they'd left hanging there then rushed back to the main room, which by now was dark save for the sporadic flashes of gunfire from outside which threw momentary glimpses of light into the room.

A wild yelling lifted in the ranch yard, then Kane Mitchell could be heard ordering his men to be silent. He was bawling out one man for firing that first shot that had entered the window.

Mecate and Dave Franklin were both cursing their luck. "Our guns are down in the bunkhouse," Mecate explained. "I never figured we might need 'em."

"My gun is here," Susan said swiftly. "And there's three or four guns of dad's around some place. I'll find them."

"Take one of my guns." Johnny pressed a six-shooter into Mecate's hand.

Kane Mitchell's voice was heard from outside: "You there, Donne?"

Johnny lifted one window but



kept well back out of gun range. "What do you want, Mitchell?" he demanded angrily.

"We've come for that black sombrero. Are you willing to surrender it peaceful—or have we got to take it?"

"You can't have it!" Johnny yelled back.

"You don't know what you're saying, Donne—you see, I know your

real name. You're in a tight. You can't stop us. My boys are r'arin' to go. It would be best if you'd listen to reason."

Johnny was beginning to think so himself. Rather than see Susan and the others killed it might be best to give up the black sombrero.

Susan had come back into the room, bearing some six-shooters, a Winchester rifle and a shotgun. "Don't give it to him, Johnny," she said swiftly. "What guarantee have we that he'd leave peacefully, even if he had that hat?"

"You're right," Johnny agreed. "We couldn't trust him." He raised his voice again: "Nothing doing, Mitchell!"

Mitchell shouted angry orders to his men. Johnny swung around and motioned Susan to the floor.

"Keep down, everybody!" he called.

From the Spur Bar men, spread out around the ranchhouse, came a sudden volley of fire. Windowpanes shattered to the floor, bullets thudded into walls and woodwork, the crazy whine of flying lead sounded through the air. The ranch yard was ablaze with the light from flaming weapons.

Johnny quickly deployed his men near the windows, now totally devoid of glass. "Keep back," he gave swift orders. "Those skunks out there are keeping well back, but shoot at a flash every time you get an opportunity."

He lifted his six-shooter, pointed the barrel around the edge of a windowpane and pulled trigger. His ear caught a loud yelp of pain and he judged he had at least drawn blood. Mecate, Franklin and Humdrum were now firing as fast as they saw something to aim at. Some of the raiders were hidden in brush, at the edge of the ranch yard; others

had remained in their saddles, and from time to time would go charging past the house, firing their guns as they rode.

Guadalupe had begun to recover from her first fright, and was helping Susan reload the guns as fast as Johnny and the others emptied them. The acrid odor of powder smoke filled the room and stung Johnny's eyes and throat and nostrils. Out in the ranch yard a man screamed in pain.

"Got him!" Mecate said triumphantly.

"Let me have that scattergun and some buckshot," Dave Franklin said. "We'll create some real damage the next time a rider drifts past—" His words ended in a groan and he sank down, as a bullet screamed wildly through the room, ricocheted and found its mark.

"You hurt, Dave?" Johnny asked quickly.

"Got me in the leg," Franklin said. "I don't think it's bad, but I can't stand up. Keep firing; don't worry about me."

Susan made her way across the room. In a few minutes she was at Franklin's side with water and some freshly torn bed sheets. She made her examination in the dark, her voice coming steadily to the others through the gloom. "The bullet got Dave through the fleshy part of his thigh. I can bind it up."

The fight continued, flashes of orange fire crisscrossing the ranch yard like angry hornets. Johnny and Humdrum stood at either side of the same window frame, firing and reloading, firing and reloading.

"My loads are getting plumb low," Humdrum said suddenly.

"Mine, too," Johnny replied grimly. "I was just going to ask you for some." He called to Mecate:

"How's your ammunition holding out?"

"Ain't got more than a dozen shells left. Susan, you got any more cartridges in the house?"

"Not that I know of." By this time the girl had finished bandaging Franklin's leg and had moved him against the wall, out of danger, despite his insistence on continuing the fight. She seized his gun and remaining shells and brought them to Johnny and Humdrum, then hurried back to Mecate's side, where she crouched low and began loading the shotgun.

"It looks like I'll have to make a run for the bunkhouse and get more ammunition," Humdrum drawled.

"You will?" Johnny demanded.

"What's wrong with me doing it?"

"You'd never get through that Spur Bar fire."

"And you couldn't, either."

HUMDRUM calmly triggered a shot from the window and swore when he missed. "I wonder," he said, cocking his gun again, "if I could make those coyotes clear out by showing 'em my badge."

Johnny laughed grimly. "That tin badge of yours might fool Pritchard, but it's too late to have any effect on Mitchell and his wolves."

"I mean my real badge—my Border Ranger badge—the badge I showed Pritchard," Humdrum said quietly. "You didn't know, Johnny."

"Humdrum, are you really a Border Ranger?" Johnny gasped in the darkness.

"Surest thing you know, cowboy. Steve Sharples had me working on that Domergue case after you resigned from the force. He wanted you cleared. I never did find out anything about that, but I happened to be in El Paso the night George Aldrich was killed. I wired Sharples what had happened. He telegraphed back for me to get on the job and

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see that you received full protection in anything that came up. That's how come I met up with you. I didn't know anything about you, of course, and that's why I staged that clown stunt about being a mail-order detective."

"Well, I'll be damned! Humdrum, you old sun of a gun, it's good to know—" Johnny broke off suddenly as a lead slug whined past his ear. He continued a minute later: "Nope, I don't reckon the Mitchells would pay any attention now to a whole load of badges—"

A scream from Guadalopa sounded suddenly in the vicinity of the kitchen. Johnny whirled away from the window. Dashing from the room, he headed for the kitchen. He found the Mexican woman unharmed, heard what she had to say, then hurried back to the others.

"It's going to be tougher in a few minutes," he said grimly. "Guadalopa has been watching from the rear window. Those skunks out there have pulled up a couple of corral posts and made a battering-ram. They're getting ready to charge the back door. C'mon, we'll have to fight 'em off."

He dashed back to the kitchen, followed by the others. There was a dark group of men forming about the hastily constructed battering-ram, some distance back from the door. Johnny raised one gun—then suddenly hesitated. The others stood tense, listening, too.

A fresh group of riders were just entering the ranch yard. Already their guns were commencing to bark. There came sudden frantic yells from the Mitchell faction. The gunfire was redoubled. Then came a long, high-pitched call: "Hold tight, Rocking A. We're here to help!"

"That was Deputy Ed Hunter!" Johnny exclaimed. He listened while

excitement rose to fever pitch in the ranchhouse. "There! I heard Henry Linbauer's voice, too. It looks like the Wagon Wheel has come to our rescue!"

"What are we waiting for?" Humdrum said. "Let's get in on the fun. I'd like to make sure I get me one polecat!"

The back door was flung open and Johnny and Humdrum dashed out, followed by Mecate Bowen. For a brief moment there was a vicious exchange of gunfire, then suddenly the Spur Bar men began to send up cries for mercy. Within a few minutes it was all over. The fight was ended.

JOHNNY turned back into the house to tell Susan. He was halfway through the darkened kitchen when he bumped into her. For a moment she clung to him. "Johnny," she said breathlessly, "are you all right?"

"Right as rain," Johnny answered unsteadily. Involuntarily his arms went about her slim body and he held her close. He felt her warm lips close on his own. For the next several minutes neither was quite conscious of anything but each other. They murmured sweet words that were almost unintelligible to the ear, but spoke volumes to the heart. Susan's arms tightened about Johnny's neck.

Eventually, they drew apart in the gloom, as the voices outside reminded them of the fight that had just ended.

"And I only came back to light a lamp," Johnny said shakily.

"Instead, darling, you seem to have struck a spark," Susan laughed softly. "Go back outside. They'll be waiting for you. I'll light up. Guadalopa is in the other room with Dave Franklin. Hurry back to me, Johnny."

"You bet I will," Johnny replied, turning toward the ranch yard again.

He had been gone longer than he thought. Lights burned in the bunkhouse now. A number of grim cowhands sat their ponies not far away from the building, and there were a large number of riderless horses near. Three men came hurrying toward Johnny—Humdrum, Ed Hunter and Henry Linbauer. Hunter was carrying a lantern.

"I was beginning to wonder what had become of you," Humdrum greeted Johnny.

"I had important business in the house," Johnny said, and turned to say hello to Linbauer and Hunter. "You fellows just got here in the nick of time. We sure owe you plenty. Say, Mecate isn't hurt, is he?"

"Got a scratch across the back of one hand," Hunter said. "He's fixing it, himself, in the bunkhouse."

"Johnny," Humdrum said soberly, "Sheriff Pritchard is dead—killed by Kane Mitchell."

"No!" Johnny said unbelievably.

Hunter nodded. "I came on him right after he'd killed Nick. I was about to do some blasting myself when I got a gun barrel wrapped over my konk," he said grimly. "I just learned a few minutes ago it was Vink Mitchell did that. He's confessed—"

"Did we get Kane Mitchell?" Johnny interrupted eagerly.

Hunter shook his head. "I reckon he sloped when the firing got too hot. He made a clean escape."

"That's tough luck," Johnny said grimly.

"He's the only one to escape, though," Henry Linbauer said, with satisfaction. "Only two prisoners have we taken. Pat Scudder is dead, Vink Mitchell is dead, the rest of the Spur Bar hands are finished."

"Vink made a complete confession

before he passed off," Hunter continued. "He told us that Kane had killed the sheriff, but he didn't know why. Kane went hawgwild apparently and lost his head. It wasn't quite clear to Vink. Oh, yes, Vink told us it was Ogallala who killed George Aldrich, over in El Paso. He killed Tony Aldrich, too, about the same time. I didn't get details on that. And the Spur Bar has been rustling both Wagon Wheel and Rocking A cows for a long time. They even blotted Wagon Wheels on the Rocking A, in the hope of starting a fight between the two outfits—"

"You know, Johnny," Linbauer interrupted excitedly, "hōw those low-life thieves made a Wagon Wheel out of the Rocking A brand? Some more of those brands we find. After you tell me, I send my men riding in all directions. Sixteen cows they picked up with that clumsy brand work. I was not sure if Miss Aldrich would believe me when I tell her we are innocent, so I decide to come to town and tell first the sheriff. I bring all my men, so the sheriff can hear their stories first hand. But when we get to town, the office is dark. We hear someone groan. We open the door and find Nick dead and Deputy Hunter tied with ropes on the floor. The deputy is just coming to life—"

"Once they got me untied, though," Hunter broke in, "I got busy and rounded up some riders to add to the Wagon Wheel hands. Someone had seen the Spur Bars leaving town on the trail that leads here. We followed, pushing our broncs as fast as they'd come and— Well, you know the rest, Johnny."

"I know we'd've been wiped out if you hadn't got here, you and Henry," Johnny said soberly. "We owe you a heap."

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"You don't owe us a thing," Hunter assured him. "There wa'n't a man of us who didn't relish the thought of a chance at the Spur Bars, particularly Kane Mitchell. My only regret is that he escaped. Well, there's work to be done around here. Miss Susan wouldn't relish seeing this mess. We'll pick up the dead, take our prisoners, and head back for town."

"Some day," Johnny said, half to himself, "Kane Mitchell is due to pay for the deviltry he's done. I aim to square accounts with that skunk, if I have to trail him from here to hell!"

CHAPTER XXV HIDDEN INSTRUCTIONS

IT wasn't yet nine thirty the following morning, though all signs of the previous evening's battle had been cleared away, even to the throwing of loose sand on certain dark stains about the ranch yard. Practically the only sign to show that there had been trouble was found in the shattered window frames and certain bullet-pocked spots about the house walls.

An hour before, Mecate Bowen had driven the buckboard to town, to carry Dave Franklin to the doctor to have his wound dressed. The wound wasn't serious, but Susan had insisted on Dr. Pickett seeing it. Humdrum had saddled up and gone along with the wagon, with the intention of telegraphing Steve Sharples, head of the Border Rangers, regarding the recent discoveries that had been uncovered.

Morning sun shone brightly over the range. There wasn't the trace of a cloud in the sky. In the clear air, the Sangre de Santos seemed nearer than ever, with Superstition Peak cutting a sharp triangle, above its fellows, against the turquoise heavens. Johnny came walking slowly

from the corral where he had just finished replacing the posts pulled up by the Spur Bar men the previous evening. He reached the bunkhouse and dropped down on the long bench that fronted the building. Removing the black sombrero, he mopped perspiration from his face with a blue bandanna.

From the kitchen of the ranchhouse came Susan's throaty contralto singing a song of the old West. Something about rain on the prairies making flowers grow; Johnny didn't know the words, but he thought the song pretty. After a time her voice fell silent and he guessed she was helping Guadalupe with the breakfast dishes. His gaze strayed to the black sombrero on the bench at his side.

"Hat," he muttered, "you've sure made plenty trouble. I wonder why? What's the connection?"

He wondered, too, where Kane Mitchell had escaped to. "I'd like one more chance at that coyote," Johnny mused, frowning. "Just to line my sights on him once would be worth a heap to me. The dirty, murdering skunk!"

"Johnny, what are you frowning about?" Susan had suddenly rounded the corner of the bunkhouse. Her eyes sparkled as Johnny rose and took her in his arms.

"You drive all the frowns away," he told her.

"But I want to know," Susan insisted.

"Well," Johnny admitted, "I was thinking about Kane Mitchell and what I'd like to do to him—"

"Johnny! You're downright blood-thirsty. Forget Kane Mitchell. I think we've seen the last of him. He won't dare ride on this range again. It's been made too hot for him."

"And," Johnny went on, "I've

been thinking about that gold and wondering where it could be buried."

"I've sort of given up thinking about it," Susan said rather sadly. "Sometimes I wonder if it wasn't discovered and taken away long ago. So many people knew about it. Somebody must have dug it up."

"Maybe so, but I'm not going to give up trying to find it. I only wish I could have been in that old adobe house the night that Ogallala Mitchell and Tony Aldrich rode in with that gold."

"You weren't, so you'd better forget it for the time being. There were only two people there at the time—Guadalupe and her son, Ramon. And Ramon was just a youngster—"

"Susan, come up to the house with me," Johnny said suddenly. "I'm going to talk to Guadalupe. Maybe if I question her again, she'll reveal some detail she's forgotten to tell other people."

"Well, we can try it," Susan said. She slipped one hand through Johnny's arm. Johnny picked up his hat and together they made their way to the ranchhouse.

THEY found Guadalupe in the kitchen, vigorously plying a broom. Susan made her sit down and explained what they wanted. Guadalupe looked questioningly at Johnny.

"I'm tell you everyt'ing I'm remember, señor," the old Mexican woman said.

Johnny nodded. "Miss Aldrich told me you saw Ogallala and Tony Aldrich ride in that night the posse was after them. What did they say?"

"Ogallala, he say nothing," Guadalupe declared. "He's mighty near dead. The bad wound in his side. Tony, he tell me they have to hide out. He don' say why, but I make

the guess. I'm see the pack horse with the box lashed to hees back."

"You're sure you *saw* that?" Johnny persisted.

Guadalopa's head bobbed. "Is very bright moon that night, almost like daytime. I look out the door and see the three horses. One have the box lashed to hees back. Tony carry Ogallala in the house and put him on bed. Then hees tell me and Ramon we should go to other room. Ogallala, he is not talk, only make the groaning. It was ver' bad. Tony give him water, then he step outside, he say to take care of horses—"

"How long was Tony gone?" Johnny interrupted.

"Ver', ver' long time. Maybe two hour, maybe more. I'm know that when he takes care of horses he does something else, because I see him, t'rough a window, with a shovel and pick which I have to make the small garden."

"And he was gone for two hours or more," Johnny mused. "Look, Guadalopa, what did he do when he returned to your house?"

Guadalopa considered a moment, casting her memory back over the years. "He comes in the house and goes to see how is Ogallala. He asks for water for Ogallala. I give it to him and go away. Pretty soon I can hear Ogallala talk, ver', ver' feeble. Is hurt ver' bad. They talk some more. After while, Tony he come to my room with a pencil in hees hand and ask me for some writing paper and—"

"Guadalopa!" Susan exclaimed, "you never told us that before."

The Mexican woman shrugged her shoulders. "I'm not think eet is ver' important. I didn't have of the paper so I couldn't give to him."

"Gosh," Johnny exclaimed, "I'll bet Tony was going to make a map showing where he'd buried the gold."

"No paper, no map," Susan said hopelessly. "That idea is all shot."

"What did Tony do next?" Johnny persisted.

"He say 'dammit!' and go back to room where Ogallala is. I hear them talk ver' low for long time. Then they are quiet. Pret' soon, Tony come to my room again and ask for needle to sew up bad hole in Ogallala's side—"

"Wait a minute," Johnny interrupted. He looked at Susan. "Somehow that doesn't seem logical. Tony was no surgeon." He turned to Guadalopa again. "Did he say he was going to sew up the wound in Ogallala's side?"

Guadalopa shook her head. "No, he deed not say theese, but"—indig- nantly—"for why would he want the needle?"

"I'm danged if I know," Johnny frowned, "but I'm afraid you've let your imagination run away with you, Guadalopa. You gave him a needle and thread, though, eh?"

Guadalopa nodded vigorously. "I'm give him. He had a bullet hole in hees hat. Maybe he wants to sew eet up, no?" she added hopefully.

"I'm afraid not," Johnny said slowly. "Then what happened?"

"Nothing is happen for maybe one hour. Then we hear riders coming near. I hear Tony say good-by to Ogallala, then Tony, he's go out the window and ride his horse like hell—"

"Guadalopa!" Susan said reprov- ingly.

"Is true," insisted Guadalopa stubbornly. "Nevair do the law offi- cers catch him. But they take Ogal- lala away to the jailhouse and for many years he does not come back here."

"And that's all that happened?" Johnny asked.

Continued on page 122

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Continued from page 120

"Is all," Guadalupe nodded. She sat patiently waiting while Johnny considered the information.

"It looks like a brick wall."

"Maybe," Johnny frowned. "I'm still wondering about the needle."

"Maybe he was going to do some embroidering to pass the time," Susan said humorously. "Especially if that ever was Ogallala's sombrero you're wearing. He might have wanted to cheer Ogallala up by adding some fancy needlework to the decorations on the hat—"

WAIT!" Johnny interrupted. "I've got an idea!" He swung around to the Mexican woman. "Guadalupe, did Ogallala have on a hat like mine that night?"

Guadalupe nodded. "Ver' much like your sombrero. Maybe cet is same sombrero, no?"

"Maybe. Now remember carefully. What kind of hat did Tony have?"

"Just common gray hat, what you call Stetson, with bullet hole in heem like I tell you. The Stetson is what you call ruin'. I teenk maybe that is why Tony leave the ruin' hat for Ogallala and take Ogallala's hat when he makes the getaway and—"

"Wait, wait, wait!" Johnny said excitedly. "You say Tony took Ogallala's black sombrero, the hat like this?"

"Si, señor." Guadalupe looked surprised. "Why not? Ogallala he's go to jail. Is not right that Tony should leave the so-beautiful black sombrero to go to the jail too—"

"Guadalupe!" Susan said. "You never told us that before."

"No one have ever ask' me."

"We've got it, we've got it, I think," Johnny said swiftly. "Listen, Susan. Tony buries the gold. He has a pencil but no paper to make a map.

Now, why does he need a needle?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"You'll get the idea in a minute. There's no lining in his own Stetson, but there's a white silk lining in Ogallala's sombrero. Tony makes his map on the white silk lining, then has to have a needle to sew it back in."

"Johnny! Do you suppose—"

"We'll find out in a minute."

Seizing the black sombrero, he studied the lining inside the crown, then whipped out his pocketknife. Turning back the sweatband he began cutting the stitches that held the lining in place. The knife blade moved swiftly around the circular crown and an instant later Johnny had removed the round piece of sweat-stained silk. For a moment he hesitated, scarcely daring to turn it over, then he turned it.

"Johnny!" Susan shrieked. "There is writing on it!"

Johnny's hands, holding the piece of silk, trembled. "Yes, there is, but it's not a map like I expected."

They spread the hat lining out on the table. "It's Tony's writing," Susan exclaimed. "And I'll bet it's instructions showing where the gold is buried."

The pencil writing had become somewhat blurred from rubbing over the period of years, but it was still decipherable. Susan read slowly:

"Face west from crack in Ghost Rock. Row of three cottonwoods in line with Superstition Peak. From center tree ten paces west. Five paces south."

The girl's voice shook as she looked doubtfully up at Johnny. "It doesn't say anything about gold being buried and Tony's name isn't signed to it."

Johnny was laughing crazily. He seized Susan's arms and whirled her around the kitchen. "It's instructions, though," he cried. "We can't

ask for everything." He whirled Susan until she was breathless.

Guadalopa beamed up at the two. "Is good news, no?" she asked uncertainly.

"Is good news, yes!" Johnny exclaimed. "We're getting some place at last. And you have helped us, Guadalopa!"

"That's right, Guadalopa," Susan declared. "And if we find the gold, you're going to have a share."

The Mexican woman looked pleased, then her face saddened and she shrugged. "I'm no need gold, señorita. One theeng only I need—for my Ramon to be good boy. Maybe w'en he is better, you will geeve him job?" Her eyes were pleading.

"Why, of course, Guadalopa," Susan said quickly. "Ramon isn't a bad boy. And now that the Mitchells are . . . are gone, I know he won't be wild any more. We'll take care of him, won't we, Johnny?"

Johnny nodded. "Of course we will! You have nothing more to worry about, Guadalopa."

Guadalopa beamed and thanked them again and again. Then she waddled back to the kitchen. Susan had picked up the piece of silk from the hat. Her eyes were shining.

"Johnny, isn't it time we got started?"

Johnny stared at her. "Got started where?"

"Over to Ghost Rock, of course. I want to see if that gold is there."

"Today?" Johnny asked. "Right now?"

"Right now," Susan nodded emphatically. "I'm not going to take a chance on anyone getting there first."

"It's a good idea, at that," Johnny agreed suddenly. "Now I know why Ogallala wanted this hat. It was his hat, all right. He knew Tony had

written directions in it, but he didn't know what they were. I suppose Tony always expected to get in touch with him again, but never did—"

"Johnny," Susan protested, "must you stand talking all day? Please saddle our horses while I change my clothes."

"At once, lady! I'm on my way to the corral now!"

CHAPTER XXVI

POWDER SMOKE!

THE sun had passed meridian by the time Susan and Johnny pulled their ponies to a halt near the foot of Ghost Rock. Johnny slipped down from the saddle, then helped Susan to the ground.

"Well, we're here, darling," Susan said breathlessly. "Will it prove to be a wild-goose chase, do you think?"

"I've quit thinking," Johnny laughed. "Now, I'm just hoping."

"I feel shaky," Susan confessed. "Here's Ghost Rock and way over yonder is Superstition Peak. And the sky's so blue. Oh, Johnny! On such a glorious day we surely can't be disappointed. Honestly, if we were, I'd feel just like going in that old adobe house, there, and never coming out."

"Don't get your hopes up too high," Johnny warned. "We can't tell what we've got ahead of us." Now that they had arrived, he seemed reluctant to make the start. He didn't know why he first walked over near the old adobe house and cast his eyes around. Somehow he couldn't get over the impression that someone was watching him and Susan. He and the girl circled the old adobe. There were still the signs of the Spur Bar men about. Picks and shovels lay where they had dropped them. Under the trees near the adobe were hoofprints, two days old.

"Johnny," Susan said, "what are we waiting for?" She looked curiously at him.

"Not a thing," Johnny answered. He still looked undecided. "I reckon I'm afraid to start this search for fear we'll find our hopes dashed. But, come on, we've got to start some time." They made their way back to the foot of Ghost Rock and glanced up at its high, uneven sides.

"Think we can make to get up there?" Susan smiled.

"We? There's no use both of us climbing up there."

"Cowboy, when I'm wearing overalls I climb any place you do," Susan declared. "You're not going to leave me out of one bit of this expedition. Come on, I'll beat you to the top!"

It wasn't difficult climbing. There were natural footholds worn in the great gray granite ridge, and protruding knobs of rock for their hands to grasp were plentiful. Now and then, bits of rock worked loose and went clattering and tumbling to the earth below, but there was never any danger of either Susan or Johnny falling. Within six or seven minutes their vigorous muscles had carried them, panting and laughing, to the top. They straightened up and glanced about.

Fifty feet below them they could see the roof of the adobe house, and standing near the house were their ponies, looking somewhat smaller from this distance. Johnny glanced along the top of the ridge on which they were standing and judged it to be seventy-five or eighty feet in length, running east and west, and about twelve or fifteen feet wide.

"You ever been up here before?" he asked the girl.

Susan nodded. "Dad and I climbed up once, a good many years ago. Come on, I'll show you where that

crack is. You know, where the soul of the Great Spirit emerged."

"I'm interested in that crack for other reasons," Johnny said. He followed the girl for about thirty paces until they stopped at a great crack in the granite, probably four inches wide, that opened horizontally across the ridge and ran clear through to the bottom. "From here on, cowboy," Susan said softly, "we follow Tony's directions."

Johnny pulled from his pocket the circular piece of lining he had removed from the black sombrero and slowly perused the writing.

"Face west from crack in Ghost Rock," he read. "Row of three cottonwoods in line with Superstition Peak—" He broke off and glanced toward Superstition Peak.

Looking west, the earth sloped away to a great hollow filled with brush and cactus. But, standing out above the lower growth, three cottonwood trees lifted their leafy branches toward the sky. Undoubtedly those were the trees Tony Aldrich meant.

"I see the trees," Susan said in a half whisper. "Do you?"

"They'd be hard to miss," Johnny replied. "Gosh, those trees must be nearly an eighth of a mile from here. I don't wonder nobody ever found that gold by digging near the adobe house. Tony was wise enough to bury it some distance away. All right, pick out that center tree and don't forget where it stands after we climb down from here. That tree gives us our directions."

"Come on. I won't forget it!"

QUICKLY they turned and ran back along the ridge, then started to climb down. They reached earth, slipping and sliding, in a shower of dust and gravel. Susan brushed her overalls, while Johnny

went to the adobe house to secure a pick and shovel. In a minute he was back, the tools slung over one shoulder. They started out, skirting the bottom of Ghost Rock.

"Maybe we should take the horses to bring the gold back," Susan suggested.

"We'll worry about packing the gold when we find it," Johnny said, laughing. "Shucks!"—lengthening his stride—"I'm in no state of mind to be held back by a horse now. I want to move!"

Side by side, they hiked down a long incline toward the brush-grown hollow. They couldn't see the cottonwood trees now, but Johnny had the direction pretty well established in his mind. The growth became thicker as they proceeded. Broken slabs of granite impeded their progress. Almost before they realized it they were pushing their way through a veritable jungle of growth—cactus, mesquite, manzanita. There were also sage, stunted scrub oak, cottonwood seedlings and other flora common to the Southwest.

And then, quite suddenly, they emerged from the thicket into a small clearing where three cottonwood trees, standing in a row, filtered the sunlight from overhead.

"There're our trees!" Johnny exclaimed. Again he produced the written directions on the hat lining and studied them. "From center tree ten paces west. Five paces south," he read. "There you are, Lady Susan. Do you care to pace them off with me?"

"You can't stop me," Susan retorted. "Providing you tell me which way west is. I've lost all sense of direction since we entered this section of growth. All I can see is that center tree."

Johnny glanced up through leafy boughs at the sun, then marched directly to the center tree's trunk and stood on the other side. "I've got the direction. Come on."

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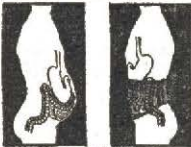
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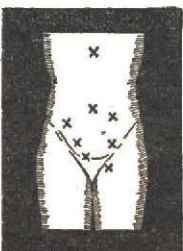
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Side by side, they paced off ten paces toward the west, then made a left turn and moved five paces to the south. The final step brought them to a small pile of loosely heaped broken rock. "I guess this is it," Johnny said.

"But, Johnny," Susan said dubiously. "All that rock?"

"I figure Tony put it there to sort of hold things in place, in case a cloudburst ever flooded down in this hollow."

He tossed down the pick and shovel and began clearing away the rock. Susan helped, and before long they had the earth cleared. Johnny lifted his pick and swung it hard. After a time he changed to the shovel and excavated the loosened dirt.

"Wouldn't it be easier working if you took off your gunbelts?" Susan asked, when he stopped once to mop his brow.

"Who said this is hard work?" Johnny grinned. "This is the most enjoyable labor I ever undertook."

Again he started work with the pick, changing to the shovel after awhile. In time, quite a sizable excavation was made, but nothing that in the least resembled buried treasure was to be seen.

"Johnny!" Susan said worriedly, "I'm afraid something is wrong—"

SHE stopped suddenly. Johnny had been swinging the pick again, when abruptly the ringing sound of steel against stone and gravel changed to a dull, hollow thudding sound. Johnny noticed the difference, too. He redoubled his efforts. Then, the point of the pick unexpectedly sank out of sight. Slowly Johnny withdrew it and straightened up. He tried to hold his voice steady.

"I think we've found something, Susan," he said in a voice of repressed excitement. He grabbed the shovel.

Only a minute more was required

to clear the dirt and gravel from an old oaken strong box. The wood had begun to rot. There was a great hole in the cover where the pick had penetrated. The hinges and metal-reinforced corners were nearly rusted through. There was no padlock on the rusty staple and hasp; that had been removed long since by the men who had robbed the Little Bonanza pay roll.

Johnny dropped down on his knees beside the box and, with the aid of the pick point, pried back the cover.

Susan caught her breath, then gave a sudden gasp. "We've found it, Johnny!" A dull glinting of yellow metal met her gaze.

"I reckon you're right," Johnny said unsteadily, as the girl dropped on her knees beside him.

Within the box were several cloth money sacks moldy with damp and ready to split apart from the weight of their heavy golden burden. One sack had been already opened and a number of yellow double-eagles had spilled out over the other sacks.

"Oh, Johnny, it's really true. We've found it—"

Abruptly Johnny swung away from the box and pressed his hand against Susan's mouth. "Sh-h-h!" he whispered swiftly.

Again he listened, noticing now that all around there was a strange silence. There must be someone moving through the thicket when birds, that had been chirping but an instant before, suddenly fell silent. Johnny strained his ears. Then, off to the left there came the sharp crackling of a broken stick in the undergrowth.

Johnny motioned Susan to silence, then removed his hand from her mouth. He glanced quickly toward the girl's side to make certain she had her gun. Then he raised himself out of the excavation, while

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still retaining a stooping position. Taking the girl's arm, he silently drew her back and pushed her into the brush.

"Don't make a move," he said calmly "Keep low. I'll be back in a minute."

"But, Johnny, what is it," Susan whispered. "What's wrong? Where are you going?"

He still held his voice low. "There's someone moving through the brush over there. Maybe it's Kane Mitchell. He might have planned to hide out around here, figuring there was a chance of us leading him to the gold." His hand went again to Susan's mouth to stifle her involuntary exclamation. "Now, keep down. I'll be back in a minute."

Moving with the stealth of an Apache, he faded noiselessly into the brush. Susan sank down, her heart beating madly. She strained her ears, but could hear nothing. The minutes ticked slowly away. She lost all sense of time in the mounting fear that had taken possession of her. She could feel a scream rising in her throat and her trembling fingers strove to stifle the noise before it emerged. Now and then, a twig snapped in the silence.

Then, off to the north some distance, there came the sudden roaring of heavy guns. Susan stumbled up, clutching her six-shooter, and fought her way wildly through the brush in the direction of the sound.

AFTER leaving Susan, Johnny had pushed swiftly through the undergrowth, working away from the girl as soon as possible. Then he had frozen to silence again, straining his ears for the first sound. Some distance off to his right a heavy boot scuffed dry leaves.

Johnny nodded and brushed quickly through the thicket. Prickly pines and thorns tore at his shirt now as he moved, but he was no longer trying to travel silently. He was being hunted and he wanted to lure the hunter as far away as possible from the spot at which he'd left Susan.

Loose branches slapped at his face as he made his way through the dense growth, circling wide the spot where the gold lay. Now he turned once more, this time toward the north, and forced his way through a tangled mesquite thicket. He swung wide around a huge clump of prickly pear and came to a stop, again straining his ears.

After a moment he nodded and a grim smile crossed his face. The hunter was closer now. Johnny plunged on for another hundred yards, wended his way through a scattering of Spanish dagger plants, crossed a small clearing and took up a position behind a small chaparral tree. The brush grew high at his back and overhead, giving the light a greenish cast as the sun's rays worked down through the thick vegetation.

Johnny stood like a statue, waiting. His drab clothes blended with his surroundings so that he could not have been distinguished from any distance. The snapping of twigs and branches reached him now, as the hunter came nearer. Then there was a sudden silence. Johnny knew his pursuer had stopped to listen. Stooping, Johnny found a small bit of rock. He tossed it, and it crashed through branches a few yards away. Then he strained his ears again. The snapping of twigs, and boots on dry leaves, was resumed.

The sounds came nearer, then sud-

denly Kane Mitchell burst from the brush into the small clearing and stood gazing insanely around. The man's eyes were wild and bloodshot. His clothing was torn and he had lost his hat. His hair was a tangled mass and unshaven whiskers gave his face a smudged, evil appearance. In either hand he clutched a .45 six-shooter. His head sank down between his shoulders as he peered about, muttering madly to himself.

So well did Johnny blend with his surroundings that Mitchell failed to see him at first. The man cursed in a savage undertone and had started to turn away when Johnny spoke:

"You looking for somebody, Mitchell?" Johnny said quietly.

Mitchell whirled. "Damn you, Donne!" he snarled, as his eyes took in Johnny's silently waiting form. The guns in his hands swept up, belching flame and smoke.

Johnny flung himself swiftly to one side, hands stabbing to the holsters at his thighs. A stream of white-hot fire sputtered from the vicinity of his hips.

Mitchell cursed again and staggered back, one hand hanging limply at his side. He swung a gun to bear on Johnny. A bullet slashed through the bandanna at Johnny's neck.

Again Johnny shifted position. He felt the heavy Colt gun jump in his grip. Powder smoke made a thick haze before his eyes. Mitchell's shots

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went wild as he slumped to his knees. The gun dropped from his hand, and his fingers tore frantically at his throat.

"Got enough, Mitchell?" Johnny asked grimly.

There was no need to ask. A gurgling cough left Mitchell's lips. His eyes widened, staring wildly at Johnny for a moment, long fingers still tearing at his throat. Then, abruptly, he pitched on his face and died.

Johnny stood over the man a moment. "That squares Nick Pritchard," he said softly. He blew the smoke from his muzzles, reloaded his guns and started back through the thicket.

He hadn't gone far when he heard Susan's frantic cries.

"Take it easy, girl," Johnny called. "I'm coming as fast as possible. It's all right."

He moved more swiftly through the brush now. "Wait where you are," he raised his voice again. "I'm coming!"

"Oh, Johnny, where are you?" Susan wailed.

He changed direction through the dense undergrowth, then through the leafy fronds of a mesquite branch saw the girl's tear-stained face. An instant later, she was sobbing in his arms.

"I . . . I was so afraid for you, Johnny, afraid that it was Kane Mitchell—and that he'd kill you—"

"It was Kane Mitchell," Johnny said quietly. "He won't bother us any more." He silenced her sobs with his lips, held her close while a long sigh ran through her slender form. Her arms tightened about his neck. They were in a world of their own making now, with the sun's warm light making lacy shadows all about them, and the songs of a thousand birds joining the joyous singing in their hearts.

THE END.

Is BALDNESS Necessary ? ? ? ?

"NO" In many cases, is the opinion of many leading scalp specialists and dermatologists. More surprising still is the ease with which aid can be obtained and baldness often can be prevented. All you have to do is practice elementary health rules which include cleanliness and exercise. Just as improper exercise will do more harm than good for other parts of your body, so will improper massage fail to sufficiently benefit hair growing on the scalp.

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STOP BALDNESS At Danger Areas . . .

Remove foreign substances that clog the pores and choke the hair roots. When there is no crusty, scaly coating to interfere with circulation, hair has a chance to grow. Check up your own hair condition. Is your scalp itchy? Are you troubled with excessive dandruff? Is your hair dull, lifeless and brittle? Is your hair getting thin? Is your hair coming out excessively? These are generally healthy hair trouble makers. Use VIDEK'S Hair Treatment to help create and maintain a healthy scalp condition that will encourage healthy hair growth.

THERE IS HOPE FOR YOU

Don't despair because of excessive loss of hair . . . don't resign yourself to baldness, because there is hope for you. If your condition is caused by excessive dandruff or some other local disorder, VIDEK Treatment will pave the way to keep your hair growing. Hundreds of unsolicited and enthusiastic letters received from users proves that VIDEK is good . . . order today and start to correct your hair troubles right away.

● MONEY BACK GUARANTEE ●

You do not risk a cent using VIDEK. You must be satisfied or your money will be refunded in full after ten days trial. Order TODAY . . . it does so much and costs so little.

● IMPORTANT NOTICE ●

If you live in New York, or expect to visit here, you are invited to visit our Fifth Avenue Salon. See convincing proof of the results achieved, giving personal scalp and hair treatments.



VIDEK'S Treatment Helps Three Important Benefits

1. Stimulates growth areas: After applying VIDEK you will note a pleasant tingling or "drawing" sensation. Evidence of how effectively your scalp is being stimulated in the areas where blood must nourish the hair roots.
2. Helps dispel excessive dandruff, stops itching. Effective in dissolving accumulated waste matter that strangles the hair and causes irritation by clogging up the follicle "funnels."
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