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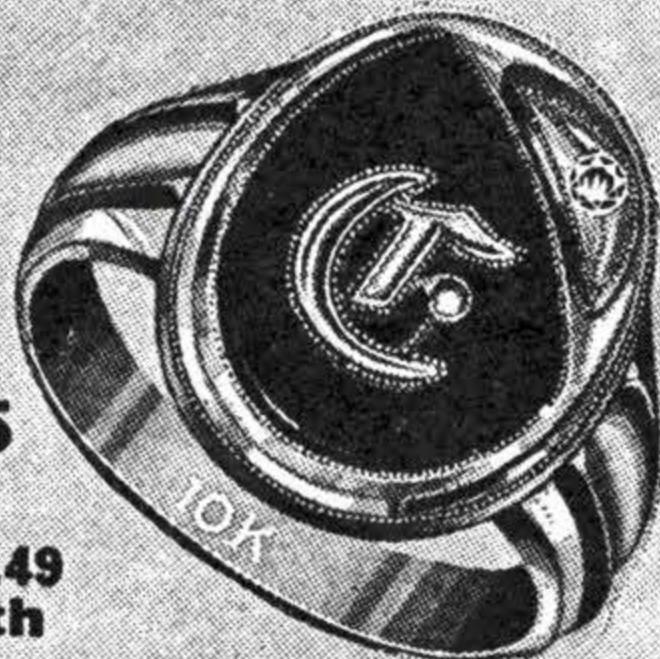
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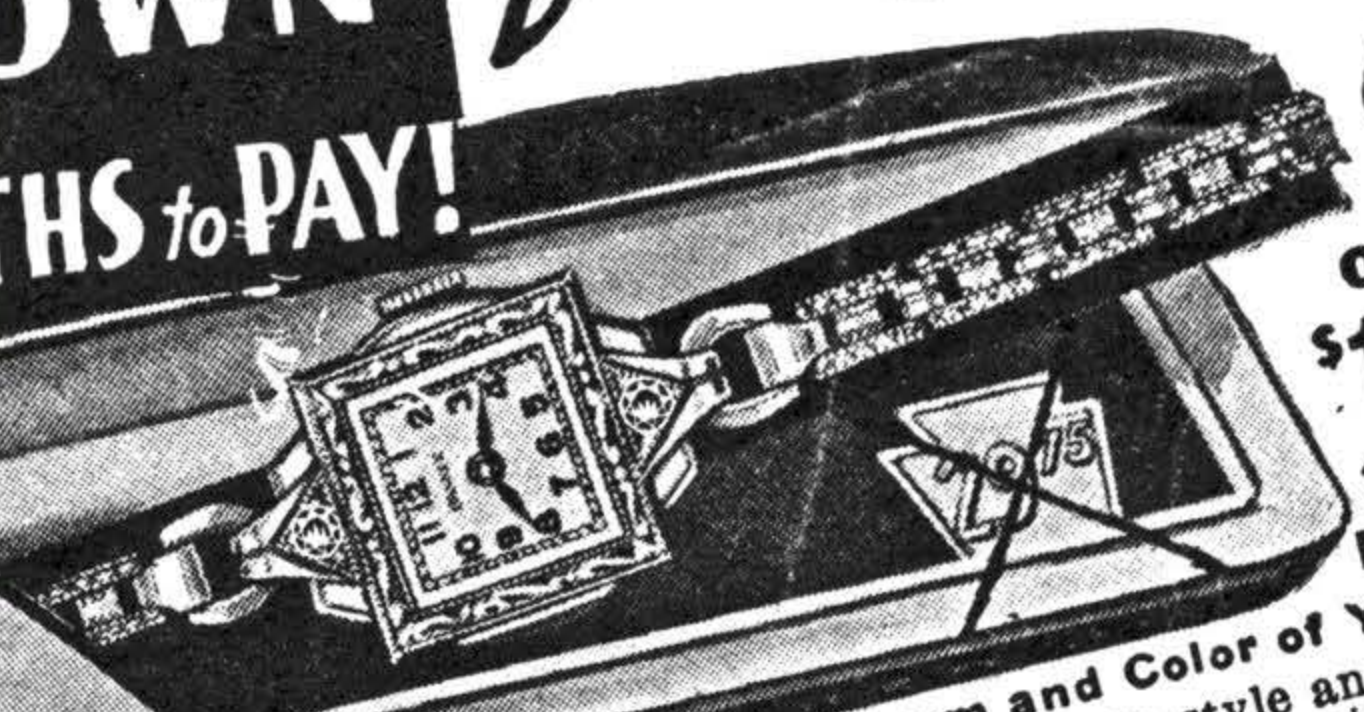
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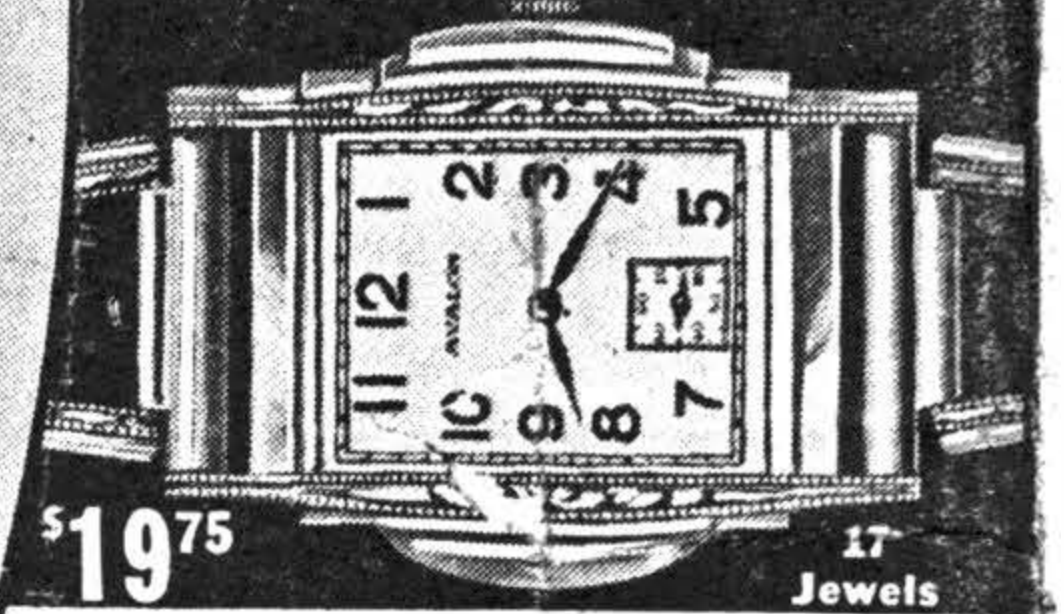
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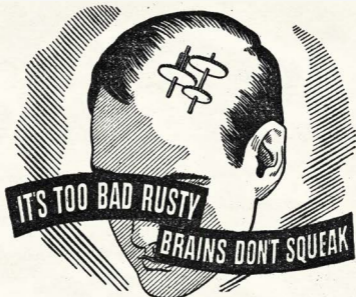
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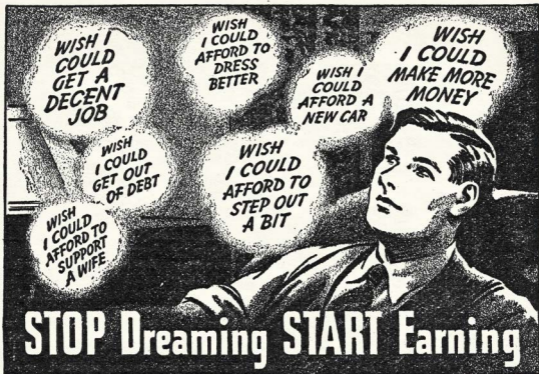
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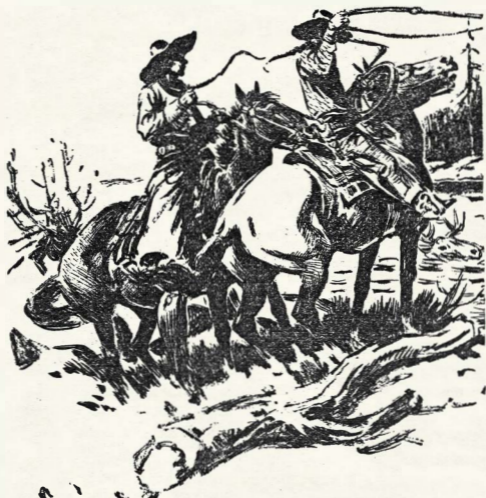
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THE UNHOLY OF JACKSON'S HOLE

CHAPTER I.

HIDE-OUT.

THE lonely little cabin on the side of Moose Mountain was chill after dark and smelled of pack rats and damp earth. It was a grim place, with only packed dirt for a floor—a bare, one-room hovel

of worm-eaten logs that had in it for furniture only a crude bunk of peeled saplings, a box, and a rusted stove.

Yet to Grieg Keller, the tall, well-bred young man with the proud head and the haunted eyes, it had been a refuge for a month; a safe place to slip away from Bruno Wolfram's



By M. McCLUER BROWN

Author of "Wise Old Own," etc.

mock justice; a secret cubby-hole, surrounded with timber, where he had hoped Bruno's corrupted law would never find him. But—

To-night there were two men in the cabin, Grieg Keller and another—a stranger who sat groggily on the bunk, holding one bandaged hand and staring across the dimly lighted room at Grieg.

Grieg Keller stood warily at the door and returned the stranger's stare with fierce eyes while the pounding of his heart was like drums in his ears. Grieg was twenty-one, massively built, and looked the gentleman he was in spite of his rum-

pled riding breeches, soiled shirt, and faded blue jacket. His eyes and hair were a deep chestnut brown, as was the growth of new beard on his chin; and the expression on his handsome face was guarded—startled.

He had not expected a visitor, and was overcautious. He believed that his unwelcome guest was one of Bruno Wolfham's bloodhounds, sent out to drag him back as a murderer, to a penitentiary sentence he did not deserve. Therefore, he stood stiffly at the door, his eyes glittering with anger in the pale light, and boring with suspicion into those of the man across the room.

The stranger's penetrating look had surprise in it, plus a shrewd curiosity and a masked eagerness. He was older than Grieg by twenty years; a clean-shaven man with graying hair and a grave face that had a strange tenderness about the lips, belying the resolute cut of his chin.

Silently, observantly, the two glared at each other, and the silence was electrified by something ugly and aloof, while the candle sputtered on the box between them, its pale light glinting on the metal buttons of the stranger's uniform, showing him to be a forest ranger—a man of the law!

Outside, in the night, the creaking of trees was loud against the death-like hush in the cabin. Grieg could hear the nearest pines scraping the walls, and their noise was sharp compared to that of the wind and the croaking of frogs down in the spring. Above, on the mountain ridge, a hungry coyote kept up an intermittent yapping that set the hunted man's frayed nerves on edge; and, from half a mile below the cabin, there came to him the muffled thunder of the Snake River as it spumed out of the narrow canyon into a rushing torrent full of swirling eddies.

Grieg shivered at the dull sound of it and began to perspire heavily, the clammy drops oozing down his spine. The river was a dangerous thing, like Bruno Wolfham's merciless brain—ravaging, forever treacherous—doubtless, too, like Bruno's bought ranger who sat leering—

Oh, yes! Grieg knew that the forest rangers in Jackson's Hole were deputy sheriffs. This ranger had all the power—

"You're a stranger here," said Grieg's visitor, his low voice breaking the stillness like the sharp crack

of ice. "Outsider, by your clothes. I didn't know any one was living in Craik's old cabin."

GRIEG jumped back, his eyes widening. The sound of the man's voice paralyzed him with a chill of astonishment. That voice! He stared at the ranger, his thoughts leaping back—until—

It was an utterance out of the grave! It had a mellow quality, like that of a man who was dead. And Grieg had seen Colonel Beckett die—had seen his life's blood seeping out upon the flagstone while Bruno Wolfham sneered and tossed the bloody knife at Grieg's feet.

He came back to himself with a jerk. The man of the law was watching him curiously. The fellow was not Colonel Beckett. He was years younger, as tall, perhaps, but rougher in appearance. That voice had been a ghostly sound, coming from nowhere, like those eyes that haunted—

"I'd give a lot to know what happened to Craik!" The ranger was scrutinizing Grieg narrowly, his eyes gleaming like steel in the candlelight. "He was my best friend. Perhaps the moaning of the river down there in the canyon turned his brain; it would mine. Does it bother you, stranger?" There was more than a casual interest in his query. He was leaning forward now, his face tense.

Slowly, Grieg clenched his fists at his sides and began walking toward the other. That familiar voice—it didn't belong to a man of the law. It belonged to the colonel, who was dead.

"No!" he grated bitterly. "I like the sound of it!"

The ranger's eyelids fluttered. "You probably haven't been here long enough," he returned, shrugging and settling back against the end of

the bunk. "This shack, alone, has a bloody past that gives me goose pimples. It was built by a fellow who called himself 'Arctic'—one of the blackest sheep Jackson's Hole has ever seen, and that's going some.

"He was a killer—did it, seemingly, for the lust of killing. He disappeared two years ago when the rangers came in here; then Craik took his place. Three months back Craik disappeared. Every time I come near this place, now, I have the creepy feeling there's something coiled in here, waiting for another victim. Believe me, I had a ticklish sensation down my spine a while ago when I tried the door and found it locked. I didn't feel any better, either, when I heard you move inside and ease the latch back. I was expecting cold hands on my throat and a knife in my ribs any minute. My heart was pounding so hard when I crossed that sill—"

He checked himself and looked up in quick bewilderment. "Say, that's all I remember!" he cried. "Crossing the sill—"

Grieg sucked a quick breath through his clamped teeth and stood there clenching and unclenching his hands.

"I knocked you out!" He dared the ranger, finally, with a stiff lift of his chin. "You hit your head as you fell. I lit a candle. You were all right. I washed your injured hand, bandaged it. I'd do as much for my worst enemy! Then I'd—" He choked and stopped, his young face grim and uncompromising in the wan light. "What do you want here?" he demanded suddenly.

The ranger's eyes widened and his expression took on a blank, concentrated look that showed that he was thinking fast.

"You probably won't believe me," he began at last, his sharp glance on

Grieg's stony countenance, "but this is exactly what happened. I'm the ranger down at Snake River Station, and I was up this way, trailing some ratty-looking fellows on horseback who'd just come in over the Conard Pass elk trail. I'd been warned they were tough—careless with their bullets. We rangers are trying to clean up this hole, get the killers or scare them out. They're not welcome here any more.

"Well, I followed them—about four there were—but never caught sight of them. They were so far ahead of me by the time I was a mile above this cabin, that I turned back. I was climbing over some rocks, when—*wham!*—a bullet took me right in the hand. I wasn't carrying a rifle, so I scrooged down on my heels and waited for more fireworks, but they didn't come. After a time I gouged the bullet out and came on downstream. It was dark by then, so when I thought of this place and the ten miles I still had to go to get home, I decided to stay here to-night. Say, have you seen those four men?"

Grieg was leaning eagerly forward as the other finished. He dared not believe the ranger, dared not for his own safety! Yet, the deep groove he had bandaged in the back of the other's hand could easily have been caused by a bullet.

"No," he returned guardedly, hiding his interest under a stern countenance. "Who shot you?"

THE ranger shrugged, a twisted smile on his lips. "Hard to tell," he admitted. "Lots of customers in here don't like the looks of a ranger's uniform."

He turned his head suddenly to look Grieg straight in the eyes. His expression hardened as he stared, his lips tightening. "I'd like to see one

of those four fellows!" he said in a quick voice, his glance narrowed on Grieg. "Maybe you've heard of him, being an outsider. Calls himself Bruno Wolfham—a frosty-hearted devil with fishy eyes."

Grieg made a leap that landed him over the other with one hand clutching the ranger's coat front. "Who did you say?" he demanded fiercely.

The other's eyes glinted up cornerwise, speculatively.

"Wolfham!" he stated coldly. "Know him?"

Grieg let go of the ranger and stepped back, his body quivering because of the rigidity of his muscles and his stifled breathing. Slowly, heavily, he began to gulp in air, and suddenly he laughed—a bitter, reckless laugh that made the man watching him shiver and open his eyes in astonishment.

For answer, Grieg wheeled. Removing his coat and stalking to the window, he hung the garment over the glass and fastened it down tightly. When he was through there, he went to the doorway and picked up his rifle where he had dropped it on the box as he had leaped to attack his unseen visitor a few moments ago. He was not afraid of Bruno, no, nor of this ranger who eyed him so boldly. It was the law behind Bruno that made Grieg wary. Bruno had lied, and the law had believed him. Grieg was positive that the ranger knew his identity—knew, and had come to-night to take Grieg Keller prisoner! Grieg's lips hardened. He was innocent of the crime of which he had been pronounced guilty. He had a right to live—wanted to live, even if he had to fight for his life.

The ranger broke in on his thoughts. "We government men don't mix in a man's affairs unless it's important to us," he said. "Un-

less a man openly declares himself, we never even ask his name. But I ask you as one man to another—do you know Bruno?" There was too much eagerness in his voice, too much tension.

Grieg sat stiffly down on one corner of the box. "I might ask you the same question," he said sharply. "But I don't need to. I know why you're here, so I'm simply going to inform you that you're my prisoner. As long as you obey orders, you'll be all right. If you try to get away, or communicate with the man who sent you here, I'll—" He halted, his solemn gaze on the other man. "Better lie down and behave yourself, ranger!" he said in a new voice. "Rest—a long time. I'll be here to see that you do!"

The other man blinked and eased himself slowly back on the bunk. "I can't figure what's on your mind," he said after a long pause. "We're used to touchy fellows in here, but not your caliber." He sighed and closed his eyes. "I'll take your advice, though. May not rest as long as you suggested, but—"

Grieg did not hear him. Grieg was hearing other things, voices out of the past, and they were so grim that his breathing was labored and his eyes grew dark and brooding.

For a long time he sat, staring into space and gripping his rifle. When at last he got up and went to the bunk he found the ranger asleep, and he studied the other's face before going back to sit down.

He believed that the ranger had not lied about Bruno being in Jackson's Hole. He had known that the law behind Bruno would find him some day. He'd known it, yes—but he hadn't believed that Bruno had the courage to hunt the man he'd crucified, himself. It looked as if Bruno was not sure of his power,

wanted to put Grieg Keller where he couldn't talk. Grieg trembled with a feeling deeper and more terrible than fear. He had a right to live! He'd fight Bruno for that right, too, in spite of the eyes that watched him day and night and recorded his every move.

He shrugged slowly. Those eyes, he knew, were imaginary, but they had grown so fixed in his mind that they didn't seem so. Why, even the forest here had eyes that haunted him, secrets that unnerved him.

TO-DAY the eyes had watched him from beyond the first rim of pines. To-day? No, for weeks! Ever since he had outwitted the law and fled here and hidden in this little deserted cabin, ever since Bruno had killed Colonel Beckett!

Grieg ground his teeth. What accursed quirk of fate had sent him to Colonel Beckett's house on the night Bruno had murdered the colonel? It had been awful, seeing his old friend dying there on the stone floor, and watching Bruno's venomous lips uttering fierce lies. Grieg laughed bitterly and then shivered at the rough sound of his voice jarring the room. He didn't know why Bruno had killed the colonel. But he knew that Bruno, with all his money to back him, had decreed that Grieg Keller should die because he had seen too much, and, further, had decreed that he should go with Colonel Beckett's blood dripping from his hands. Well, he hadn't died—not yet!

Grieg looked quickly at the man on the bunk. What a fool he was! If he went on like this, swayed by some fancied horror that was always staring at him, he'd go mad. Why, real danger was staring him in the face, and he hadn't sense enough to be afraid. Over there on the bunk

was a representative of the law he'd been hiding from. And Bruno could be in Jackson's Hole for only one reason—to get Grieg Keller!

Grieg knew that if their positions had been reversed, Bruno would have killed the ranger where he lay to make sure the latter didn't slip away from him and go back to his superior, bearing tales. But Grieg was not a killer. If Bruno's money had bought false witnesses and forced Grieg to go to desperate lengths, it still had not altered him morally. He could not murder to protect himself. He didn't want to kill. He wanted to be left alone, to be free.

He drooped wearily in the flickering candlelight. Of what good had been his hiding and his ceaseless vigil, day and night, for a month? Bruno and the law were here! Grieg suddenly felt very, very tired. He sighed. His eyes were full of sand, felt as if they were afire. He closed them a minute to relieve the pain. Only a minute. He'd be ready when Bruno came, but he'd have to close them a minute. Only—a—

He awakened with a start to find his body chilled and his muscles cramped. Slowly he blinked; then, with a cry, sprang to his feet and looked wildly around. The candle he had last seen glowing at his elbow had burned out, yet there was a light in the room, a cold, gray light. His stupefied glance followed its direction to the window. The jacket he had hung over the glass was on the floor, and the gray light sifting through the window was—daylight! He had been asleep!

Giddily he rotated on his heels to look at the man on the bunk. The bunk was empty!

Grieg flung himself at the door, tore it open, leaped out. Only the cold wind of early morning and the

damp silence of the forest greeted him, and he looked about amazed, as if he could not believe his eyes, staring at the dripping trees and the blanket of fog on the mountains, with the sunlight barely sifting through.

At last he stooped and examined the ground in front of him and ran his hands over the sweet fennel by the door. His fingers came back wet with dew, and his lips tightened with repressed excitement. The ranger had left before daylight—left before the fog had lifted—and he had not disturbed the sleeping man he could have taken prisoner, Grieg Keller, who was wanted for murder.

Puzzled, Grieg went back into the cabin and closed the door. Why had the ranger gone like that? He threw up his head, then, and stiffened. The ranger had gone to tell Bruno! Grieg's even teeth clicked together savagely. Bruno Wolfham was no longer in his own element. What would happen if Grieg Keller found him alone in the forest, where his money and the law he had tricked would be of no protection? Suppose Grieg went hunting Bruno! Grieg's eyes brightened. The idea quickened his blood, thrilled him. There had been a time, before Bruno had killed the colonel, when Grieg had been called, "Grieg, the lion," because of his courage. He laughed softly. Bruno would be looking for a man who trembled and cringed in dark corners. He wouldn't be prepared for—"Grieg, the lion!"

INSTANTLY Grieg sprang to action. It would be well to leave the cabin now and waylay Bruno before he set his trap. Grieg looked quickly around the room. He must take his rifle and his cartridge belt, of course; also some canned goods, and the box of matches on

the shelf over the bunk. Eagerly he began preparing a small pack.

He was reaching for the matches when his glance dropped to the bunk, and, frowning, he picked up a bright object out of the musty straw instead. Putting it in one palm, he examined it closely, discovering that it was the mashed lead of a bullet, and on the bullet was a dried spot of blood. His eyes narrowed as he wrapped it in a handkerchief and shoved it into his pocket. Obviously, the ranger hadn't lied about that. But had everything he'd said been true?

Grieg immediately began digging around in the rank hay. Something else might have fallen out of the ranger's pocket, something personal. He found it at once, a flat, oblong object half buried in the straw, and, with an impulsive shout, he jerked it out and dusted it off.

What he had discovered was a book about four by six inches square, with an outer covering of dull green. The lettering on it was conservative, printed in gold, and read simply:

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Grieg turned the book over and over in his hands and then began to thumb through it hurriedly. Just a list of regulations for forest rangers, laws, special duties—statutes and new laws in the back—Abruptly he stopped turning the pages, and, with an exclamation, pressed the book open. On a plain leaf some one had penciled a message in a heavy, even hand. He bent over it quickly, his eager glance jumping to the first line.

To the stranger in Craik's cabin.

Sorry I have to leave you this way, but I have a job that keeps me in harness, and

a horse to water. I'm coming back to talk to you, though, because, in spite of your tight lips, I believe we have something in common.

In the meantime, keep an eye out for those four toughs I'm after. They're plenty bad. One of them rides a pinto—

Slowly, Grieg bent closer and stared—stared, while the color drained from his face and his eyes bulged. He couldn't believe what he saw, and yet, there it was in bold writing! The ranger had signed his name—*Anthony T. Beckett*.

Grieg sat down on the bunk with a suddenness that jarred his teeth. Anthony Beckett? Why, Anthony was Colonel Beckett's son! No wonder the ranger's voice had sounded like that of the old colonel! Many, many nights Grieg had sat on a bench in the colonel's garden, while the whippoorwills had called plaintively, and had listened to Colonel Beckett talk proudly of his homespun boy who loved the woods and the simplicities of nature more than the fortune that awaited him at home. The last Grieg had heard, Anthony had been somewhere in Colorado, superintending the construction of a great bridge, or was it fighting horse thieves in Montana? The old colonel had been more effusive over Anthony's accomplishments than accurate about details, so much so that to Grieg, who had never seen Anthony, the colonel's son was a mythical hero propagated by the old man's restless brain.

With pounding heart, Grieg read the message over several times. Well, the man who had written this was no figment of the imagination. He was solid flesh and brawn, and, like Bruno, he would have only one motive for being here—to get Grieg Keller!

Grieg stumbled to his feet and, with trembling fingers, hurriedly

packed the articles he must take with him. He couldn't blame Anthony Beckett for hunting down the man who had been declared guilty of killing his father; Anthony had been more than fair. He had warned the man he must hate of Bruno's vulturelike presence. Then he had gone further and warned him of his own intentions. He'd said, "I'm coming back to talk to you because I believe we have something in common." Grieg read a sinister meaning in that passage, but he admired Anthony for it. Anthony was giving him an even break for his life. And Grieg knew he would have to take the loophole offered him, because he could never lift a hand against Colonel Beckett's son.

So deep were his thoughts that he did not hear the light step at the door, nor the steady easing back of the latch. His first inkling of danger came as the hinges squeaked, and as he spun around, gaping, the snout of a rifle appeared through the crack in the door and a soft voice said menacingly, "I wouldn't move if I were you!"

Grieg became motionless, his eyes on the gun, and immediately the door was kicked open and his threatening visitor advanced into the room.

CHAPTER II.

A SURPRISE VISITOR.

GRIEG gasped with astonishment and drew back. His challenging guest was a girl, a tall, tawny-haired girl with eyes the alluring shade of bluebells, and an oval face the pale tint of old ivory. She was hatless, and her hair was rolled in a great, shining coil at the back of her neck, in burnished contrast to her dull-blue blouse and her leather riding skirt.

With her gun leveled on him, she crossed the dirt floor toward him erectly, her pretty face immobile and the swish of her leather skirt against her boot tops making the only sound. When she was within a few feet of him, she halted and regarded him with an open stare that made him flush and wonder at her lack of reserve.

"I am Marie Craik!" she said suddenly, as if the voicing of her name should have some threatening significance to him.

He looked puzzled, but smiled politely. "A very appropriate name," he said with deference. "I knew a lady once named Marie. She was beautiful, also."

The girl looked surprised at the sound of his cultured voice. She stared at him for a second, then looked away quickly, her cheeks suffused with bright color and her embarrassed glance half averted.

Wondering, Grieg looked at her face and saw that it was wistful and girlishly unaffected when not chilled by some fierce resolve.

"Did I say anything wrong?" he asked, trying to mitigate her confusion and get her to talk.

She looked up at this, the flush leaving her cheeks and her determination returning.

"How long have you been in this cabin?" she demanded, after taking a deep breath.

It was Grieg's turn to be confused, but he covered his disquiet by a proud lift of his chin.

"Is it your privilege to cross-examine strangers, Miss Craik?" he defended. "That is a very personal question."

She stared at him, her lips parted in surprise, but when she spoke, her words were decisive and to the point.

"Three months ago my father was mysteriously murdered at this

cabin," she said. "Does that mean anything to you? People said he committed suicide, but I know differently. It took two months of waiting before I could get in over the snow-blocked pass to prove it, though. I was going to school outside. When I finally got here, I found that you were living in my father's cabin, so I went upriver to live with my aunt. I did that so I could watch you and find out what you were up to. But I didn't believe that the man who'd killed my father had the nerve to remain at the scene of his crime. You are very brave, and I am very—lucky!"

Grieg stiffened and blinked. "Look here, girl!" he gasped. "You don't think that I killed your father? Why, that's impossible! I—"

She threw her head back and drew her lips down scornfully.

"Oh, is it?" she flashed. "I've been watching you every day for three weeks. You never go anywhere, except to the spring after water, and then you go stealthily. You never chop wood! You never build a fire! You never light a lamp in the cabin after dark! Why do you skulk as if you were afraid of your life if you've done nothing wrong? Why are you in my father's—!" She halted and stepped back, suddenly alarmed because Grieg had started walking toward her. "Stay where you are!" she cried tremulously, leveling her gun.

Grieg's face was red with embarrassment and indignation. His eyes had hurt in them, too, and a glassy look that was fired by the bitterness in his heart.

"Miss Craik," he said in a voice so low and frightening that she continued to draw back, "I know you don't realize what you're saying, so I forgive you. But when you accuse

me of being a murderer you're touching a sore that's mighty raw. I don't want to frighten you, but to be accused of ano——" He gasped and stopped, appalled at what he had nearly said. He had almost given himself away completely, for he had started to say, "to be accused of another murder."

THE girl stared at him, her expression incredulous, as she shrank away. Suddenly she gave a faint cry and tottered backward as one heel caught on the corner of the box and threw her off balance.

Grieg leaped to catch her, his intention being to keep her from falling, but she gave another cry and thrust her rifle at him. Then, suddenly, she collapsed, and the gun fell from her fingers.

"All right," she moaned. "You win."

He caught the gun, steadied her on her feet, and after silently passing the rifle back to her, walked away.

She took the weapon hesitatingly, and when he turned to speak to her, she was holding it feebly in the crook of one arm, her bewildered gaze on him.

"Well," he asked, a wry pucker in one corner of his mouth, "what do you intend to do with me? We can't stay here——"

She flinched at his words, her head drooping.

"I don't know," she murmured finally. "I was sure you were the man I was after. But now—I——"

He tried not to torture her by letting her know that he saw her distress, but he could not look away. It was as if she were revealing her true character for the first time. Grieg liked the revelation, yet it saddened him a little. Marie's face had

a wistfulness and bewilderment in it that reminded him of a lonely hearted little child. There were shadows in her eyes, shadows of hurt and broken dreams; things he readily understood. And he suddenly wished that he knew the man who had killed her father—knew, and could avenge her loss. Quietly, however, he came to her rescue with a hurried suggestion.

"If I were you," he proposed, "I'd go home right away. This isn't going to be a healthy place for any one, if you wait around."

She looked up quickly. "Why?"

He ignored her question with a polite smile and picked up his pack and rifle. "Come on, Miss Craik," he said evenly.

She jerked her gun to her shoulder, drawing a bead on the top button of his shirt. "Tell me why!" she commanded.

He frowned and hesitated. How best could he make her understand the importance of leaving quickly, without telling her the truth? If Bruno Wolfham should spring his trap and find a girl in the cabin with Grieg Keller—— Grieg's lips tightened. Bruno wouldn't care how innocent the girl might be of any complicity in Grieg's misfortunes. He would know that the more suspects he found with which to confuse the high-minded men in power, the better off he would be.

"I was warned that four vicious outlaws were in the vicinity," he said at last, hoping that his meager explanation would serve. "They are not to be tampered with, except from the bush, and the man who warned me about them is no weakling. He has plenty of stamina and physical strength, but he's no fool. I'd pay attention to what he said any time."

Marie made no move, except to

blink her eyes slowly. "Who told you?" she demanded.

Grieg took a deep breath. "The ranger from Snake River Station," he returned. "Anthony Beckett," he finished, his throat tightening. It was hard to speak that name.

MARIE lowered her gun suddenly, her expression changing. She was instantly smiling now, beaming on him, her dazzling smile making his head feel light.

"Oh, you're a friend of Mr. Beckett's!" she cried with pleasure. "I'm ashamed and terribly sorry about the way I've behaved! Why didn't you tell me before? I——"

Grieg looked away, wondering, with an unaccountable feeling of irritation, if Anthony Beckett knew how her face lighted up and how her eyes sparkled at the mention of his name. Well, Grieg Keller couldn't give Anthony Beckett's girl a false impression of his relationship with the ranger.

"Beckett and I do not know each other," he explained. "We have met only once, and he warned me about these men. That's all."

The girl continued to smile. "If Mr. Beckett warned you of danger," she declared, "he meant just that—danger! We'd better go, Mr.——"

He walked past her to the door and held it wide. "Trust me to tell you my name sometime," he said grimly.

She shrugged as she hurried by into the daylight. "If you don't like your name, why don't you change it?" she queried significantly. "Lots of men change their names when they come in here. They call themselves by sinister names, like Arctic, and Black-heart, and things like that." Her tone had a cynical note in it now. "But maybe you'd like

to have a name that didn't sound so deadly." She halted, and when Grieg glanced at her swiftly, she was looking at him with a searching stare that made him wince and hurry on ahead down the trail.

About a third of the distance downhill toward the river was the spring. He jumped across it and stretched a helping hand back to Marie. She accepted his aid solemnly, her eyes no longer studying him, and as she sprang to the spongy ground beside him she said:

"I suppose we shouldn't stop, but I'm thirsty."

He nodded grimly and led her uphill a few yards to the head of the spring, a bowl-shaped hollow that was covered with undergrowth where the stream came bubbling out of the ground accompanied by gray sand. He had to get down on his knees to reach the water, and had just handed her a drink in an empty bean can when he stiffened suddenly, and sat back on his heels with his head up, listening. The next minute he threw himself flat beside the spring and lay one ear tight to the ground, his lips parted.

"What is it?" Marie bent excitedly over him.

Grieg leaped to his feet. "Sounds like horses coming up the trail!" he exclaimed. "Beckett said those fellows he was after were on horseback. We better get out of sight until we're sure. Here!" He caught her arm and drew her behind a berry bush.

She whispered: "I see you've learned your first lesson about this country. It pays to always see the other man first, here. Usually, it's best not to let him see you at all. Too many rough men come in secretly over the pass in spite of the watchfulness of the rangers."

"I believe you," he breathed, frowning. "But no more now——"

IT was several long minutes, however, before a horseman appeared down the trail. Grieg bent forward attentively, parting the bush, but the trees between himself and the man were too close together, and their shadows too long. Eagerly he leaned farther out, craning his neck, then jerked back with such haste that the girl beside him gasped with alarm. Another horseman had appeared on the trail, and then another, and another—four, in all! And the lead horse, the one coming out into full view where the spring gurgled across the trail, was a brown-and-white pinto.

To Grieg's surprise, the man on the pinto was a stranger; a bulky fellow with a mouse-colored beard and tight, ruthless lips. He was wearing batwing chaps, a dark leather jacket, and an old beaver Stetson, the hat being pulled so low over his shaggy brows that it nearly hid his deep-set eyes from view. He halted his horse at the spring, and when the animal began to drink lustily of the clear water, he turned in the saddle and grunted to the man behind him.

"Yeah, this is the place, all right," he growled. "Told you I'd find it in the daylight. Ain't no place I've ever been I can't find again."

The second man rode up at once on a tall bay. He was long-limbed, like his horse, and his eyes were bulging and quick, darting everywhere. He had a dark, expressionless face with drooping lips, and clothing that resembled his comrade's, except in color. His brightly mottled blazer showed that he had a flair for gay hues.

"Yeah," he returned tonelessly.

Marie suddenly started, and a gasp escaped her lips before she could cover them with her open

palms. The third horseman had ridden into view.

Grieg jumped also, his blood leaping wildly through his body and suddenly becoming chill. The third rider was Anthony Beckett!

The ranger, however, seemed to be sitting his saddle only by sheer force of will, for his body swayed weakly with every motion it made. His hands were bound behind him, and his head hung limply on his chest. His face looked pale and was spotted with blood.

Marie's hands fluttered from her lips to her throat as if to shut off any distressed sound that might come against her will. It was then that the fourth horseman rode up behind Anthony Beckett, and the girl gave a start and began to tremble.

To Grieg's disappointed glance, the fellow was the most unimpressive of the lot, being undersized and wiry. His head was round and comically too large for his Stetson; his pink moonface and his loose lips were pouting, like a child's. He crowded his horse hurriedly past Beckett's black one and shoved against the two ahead in a greedy attempt to get his horse to the water first.

The lean, dark-faced man whirled quickly at this, his face becoming an angry liver color.

"Look out what you're doin' there, Purdy!" he warned.

"Aw, close your trap!" retorted the cocky Purdy.

The dark man's eyelids narrowed ominously. "I ain't likin' such talk from you, wart!" he snarled. "I put up with your lip and struttin' because of Arctic, but I ain't likin' your windbag nor the brayin' noise that comes from it. Some of these days, I'll use you for a strapjack!"

THE little man sneered. "Gettin' kinda high-handed, ain't you, Lobo?" he chirped. "Course, you ain't forgettin' certain privileges I have on account of me bein' the brains of this outfit, are you? Maybe the boss could remind you some—"

"Lobo" made a grab for his hip. "You brass-faced little skunk," he began harshly, "if you blatter a word—"

The big man on the pinto, who had been sitting idly watching his horse drink, suddenly came to life and caught Lobo's arm.

"Shut up, both of you!" he growled in a throaty voice. "Lobo, you take your hand back and leave Purdy alone. They ain't neither of you parasites a windfall, if you ask me. Why Arctic ever fools with you is more'n I can understand. Now keep your mouths shut, and bring that ranger on up to the cabin. I got an idea Arctic'll be glad to see him!" He grinned evilly, showing tobacco-stained teeth. "Seems like I seen this feller before. I never forgets nothin' once I've seen it."

Purdy chuckled dryly in chorus, showing relief at having the other intervene in the quarrel.

Lobo's hand slid heavily away from his hip, but his black eyes were still on Purdy.

"That danged runt talks too much," he mouthed. "How do we know, Hiller, that all his gassin' is done when we're around? Maybe they's others he talks to."

Hiller shrugged. "That's Arctic's lookout," he growled, and urged his horse across the spring and up the trail.

When they had gone out of sight, Grieg scowled darkly. Why, Beckett had made him believe that Bruno was the one of these four men who had the pinto horse. But Hiller and

Lobo talked of "Arctic," and Purdy had said, "The boss." Grieg stared, open-mouthed, over Marie's head. Had Beckett merely mentioned Bruno to see what the reaction would be on Grieg—to make sure the man in the cabin was Grieg Keller?

Marie was staring fixedly at the spot where Purdy's back had disappeared. Grieg eyed her, his scowl darkening.

"Who is this Purdy?" he rapped. She whirled. "I—I—don't know!" she exclaimed. "Stop looking at me like that! I tell you I—well, I can't tell you!"

His face softened. What right did he have to ask questions? None at all. He, Grieg Keller, who had been convicted—

The girl's face was clouded with misery. "How are you going to save Mr. Beckett?" she breathed. "Did you see his face? I caught a glimpse of the other side—blood, blood running down his cheek! They've attacked him, those men, beat him. Now he's their prisoner."

She shivered and her lips paled. "Arctic—he's a devil—an ugly demon! My father lived in constant fear that he'd come back. Mr. Beckett is in great danger. He warned you about Arctic and these men. Now you—" Her voice faltered and trailed off.

Grieg's eyes bored into hers relentlessly. He wished he knew why Beckett was of such great importance to Arctic and his cohorts that they took him prisoner. He wished he knew why Marie's father had been afraid, and what had happened to him. Yet he didn't have time to question the girl now. Anthony had saved him from being caught alone in the cabin by these men. He must—

Swiftly, he threw off his pack and

turned to the girl. "Miss Craik," he said, "you'd better go back to your aunt, quickly. You have my word of honor that I'll do everything in my power to save—you—Mr. Beckett." He whirled then, leaped the spring, and started off toward the cabin, leaving the girl staring after him, her hands clasped over her trembling lips.

CHAPTER III.

FIRST SKIRMISH.

THE three men had taken their prisoner into the cabin by the time Grieg slipped up to the back of it under cover of the dense woods and undergrowth. Quietly he crept to the log wall and began to work out the daubing between two logs about three feet up. The cracks in the cabin were smeared with gray-blue clay, which was so powdery with age that a long chunk fell out into his hands, and he quickly put his eyes to the chink, eager to see what was going on inside.

The room was so dark, however, that for a time he could observe nothing, but the unrestrained voices of the men within were easily distinguishable. Lobo and Purdy were quarreling again, and the altercation was bitter. Lobo had the floor, and was snarling at the little man.

"Naw, you ain't goin' out to meet Arctic, you mongrel!" he shouted. "If I stay in this here shebang, I'm goin' to get my share of what Arctic promised to pay me, and no spavined upstart is goin' to do me out of it with his polluted tongue!"

"Then leave the prisoner alone," shrilled Purdy. "He ain't yours!"

"Oh, he ain't, eh?" grated Lobo. "What smart guy give him the side-winder to the head and knocked him out? Not you, nor Hiller, nor Arctic, either. Looks like I'm the only

guy with a right to say what's to do with him. Arctic wanted to get rid of him, anyway; you know that! He's too dangerous to Arctic's business. Besides, I don't want to be kissin' no ranger bullets, and that's what'll happen if this one gets away."

"I ain't quarrelin' with rangers!" The little man's voice was raised in an angry treble. "The boss better not mix with the government," he croaked. "You and Hiller are fools, too, to run amuck of it. Suppose this here ranger and the boss have tangled before. Give the ranger a fair chance. Let them drive their own lead. I won't be drug in!"

Grieg could see him now, standing, diminutive but insolent, in the center of the room, facing Lobo. Hiller was farther back, sitting on the box near the door and oiling his guns with as much gravity and unconcern as though the angry men were not present.

Grieg searched the cabin for Beckett and found him, at last, on the bunk directly under his eyes. The ranger was lying bound with his face toward the wall and his eyes closed; but, as Grieg watched, Beckett's lids fluttered and his expression was alert, showing that he was listening to the men, also.

The argument between Lobo and Purdy was growing fiercer. Purdy was insisting now that the government man should be set free before the boss arrived.

Lobo's face grew liver-colored with wrath. He snarled and glared, his fury mounting as Purdy continued to oppose him. Several times he reached for his gun, and then slowly withdrew his hand, his restless eyes darting sidewise at Hiller.

Grieg plucked a long blade of grass, poked one end of it through the crack, and tickled Beckett's nose with it. The ranger screwed up his

face and opened his eyes, staring. For a second his narrowed gaze met Grieg's; then he brightened, showing that he realized that the man outside was a friend.

Grieg felt a swift, cold chill dance down his spine. Would Anthony Beckett be so pleased if he knew that his ally was Grieg Keller? Wouldn't he rather be met with Lobo's anger, and Arctic's cruelty, than to be obligated to the man he thought had killed his father? Grieg knew he would. Yet he felt indebted to the ranger for his warning, and he had promised Marie Craik— Grieg scowled. He hadn't wanted this.

BECKETT shoved himself up against the wall until one ear was against the crack. Purdy and Lobo paid no heed, being too angrily intent upon each other. Hiller continued to oil his guns, apparently oblivious to all else.

Grieg put his mouth to the chink. "I'm going to try to draw them outside," he breathed. "Don't do anything to attract their attention to you. Do you hear me?"

The ranger gave a barely perceptible nod. "Yes," he whispered, looking sidewise at the three men. "But don't risk it. They're killers and they're well armed."

Grieg shrugged. "Lie down and keep quiet," he advised, and got to his feet and began slipping along the house toward the front.

The only window in the cabin, a little square with four panes, was in the north wall, facing the river trail. Grieg scrupulously avoided that side of the house and moved noiselessly toward the point where the four horses were tied to a dead cottonwood tree.

Moving with feverish haste, he hurried to the animals, and began untying them, throwing their bridle

reins over the saddle horns. The pinto jumped back and rolled its eyes as he neared it, and when he had let it loose, he picked up a stick and hit the animal a sharp crack on the rump. The horse snorted with fright and sprang away, plunging down the river trail with its wall eyes rolling at every bound. Excitedly the other horses followed, their hoofs thundering a brisk tattoo and their saddle stirrups clattering.

Grieg leaped toward the near corner of the cabin almost as quickly as the pinto plunged away. He had just swung around the side when the cabin door was flung open and Lobo and Purdy sprang out, shouting angrily.

"What in the devil's name!" blustered Purdy, his round face wrinkled with surprise. "What the——" He glanced suddenly around at Lobo, his stunned look changing swiftly to sharp cunning. The next minute he was springing after the horses at top speed, his short legs covering the ground with astonishing agility.

Lobo mouthed a vile oath and started after the little man, his face black with anger.

"Come back here, you simpering jackass!" he howled. "Come back or I'll——" He halted and jerked savagely at the gun on his hip.

At once, Hiller appeared in the doorway, his eyes narrowed, but his steely expression showing no emotion. Quickly his glance darted to the spot where the horses had been tied; then he began scrutinizing every inch of timber near the cabin. At sight of Lobo and Purdy, however, he turned his commanding stare on them.

"Lobo!" he barked. "Let the danged coyote go!"

Lobo reluctantly obeyed. He pointed his revolver menacingly at

Purdy's back and sneered over his shoulder at Hiller.

"Ain't goin' to talk that way to me!" he ranted.

Hiller gave a bestial growl and flung out of the cabin. He bounded over to the dark-skinned man and, with a swing of his right fist, struck Lobo such a blow on the head that the latter dropped to the ground, his gun going off harmlessly into the air.

"You fool!" snarled Hiller. "Do I have to knock the paddin' outa you? Stop and think a minute. How do you suppose them horses got away all at once? Beat it back into that cabin, quick, or I'll——"

GRIEG didn't hear any more. He had crept to the door and sprung inside. As he slammed the door Hiller whirled, and Grieg caught a quick glimpse of the other's startled face and the swift flash of his gun. Hiller's gun roared, the bullet spattering into the wood and sending splinters flying to the floor. Spinning away, Grieg hurried to the ranger, his eager fingers fishing for his pocketknife.

Anthony Beckett rolled over as Grieg stooped to cut his bonds. There was no sign of surprise in the ranger's face at observing the man who had come to his aid. Instead, he disconcerted Grieg with a glad smile and a pleased remark.

"It didn't take you long," he said, rubbing his wrists and swaying weakly where he sat. "But it looks like my enemies had seen you."

Grieg nodded. "Think you can use a gun?" he asked, his anxious glance on Beckett's pale face and the bloody gash running across his left temple.

For answer, Beckett reached out his hands, and Grieg leaped to the box where he had seen one of Hiller's six-guns, with the breech open.

Swiftly he filled the cylinder with the cartridges Hiller had removed and left scattered near the weapon.

"Here!" he cried, shoving the gun into Anthony's hands. "Now, don't get in line with the window. I'll take that point. You take that chink to the left of the door where you can get down low. It's a good spot, and it's hard to see from the outside because of the bush in front of it."

"Thanks, old man!" Beckett got up, staggered across the room, and dropped to his knees by the door. He was silent a moment, looking through the slit. Then: "Where are they?" he asked.

Grieg was flattened against the wall with his rifle pressed low against a windowpane. The crack of his gun and the shattering of glass was his answer. He had seen Hiller and Lobo make for some bushes about fifty feet away, and he hoped to scare them out. Their guns answered immediately, belching fire and black smoke on either side of a bush.

Beckett grunted. "Ah-hah!" he said.

Bits of splintered glass sprayed over Grieg as the enemies' bullets shattered the windowpanes and spat into the wall across the room. The shots were wild, however, showing that the dark cabin behind Grieg hid him effectively from their view.

He took good aim at the spot where he had last seen Lobo's rifle fire and pulled the trigger. And, fifty feet away, he heard Lobo swear angrily and Hiller snort. Then a disquieting silence followed until a bullet spat into the door near Beckett.

"They've moved," the ranger said faintly, as he fired a burst of shots through the crack. "They're off to your left now, boy. Afraid of your

window, probably. Say! Have you got any more cartridges for this thing? I'm out. I——” His voice trailed off.

Grieg whirled and stared. Anthony Beckett's body was sagging against the wall and he was white to the lips. He turned slowly to look at Grieg and made a feeble, pained motion with his gun hand.

“Sorry, fellow—but—I'm—all—in.” He gasped, and suddenly collapsed on the floor.

With a shout Grieg crossed to Beckett and lifted the ranger's head, his glance going over the stricken man sharply. Beckett had not been hit by a bullet, but had obviously fainted from his previous injuries. Grieg considered a moment. Beckett might be badly hurt, however. At all events, he must be removed from danger soon, and cared for. The battle was now two to one, and Grieg's ammunition was low. Also, there was every possibility that Arctic, the head of the outfit, would arrive any moment and that Purdy might return with reinforcements.

A BULLET spat into the log above his head and another followed it, cutting lower. Hurriedly he put his eyes to the crack and then stiffened, jerking up his gun and firing. Lobo and Hiller had left their cover and were coming stealthily toward the cabin, shooting as they came. The whine of Grieg's bullet between them, however, sent them lunging for another bush screen, nearer than before.

Grieg scowled, his quick glance darting around the room. The door was the only exit, and the men guarding it knew that. The window was too small for men as large as Beckett and himself to squeeze through, but——

He caught his breath suddenly,

and his eyes narrowed. Turning, he sent several shots hissing toward Hiller's and Lobo's cover, then sprang up and rushed to the window. Ah, he had not been mistaken! The man who had cut the window opening had sawed down farther than necessary on each side of the window, cutting into the log below. Grieg's lips became grim. Would the log be rotten enough to break through? With a lurch, he grabbed the window frame in a tight grip and wrested it out.

Without waiting to see if the men outside had heard the crash, he threw the frame down and concentrated his attention on the log below, kicking at it fiercely. It cracked, and then, abruptly, Hiller's angry snort came from beyond the door. Savagely, Grieg redoubled his efforts with a battering bunch of kicks that sent the two-foot length of decayed log hurtling outside and rolling into the brush.

In a second he had whirled and lunged across the room to kneel at the crack by the door. The two men were creeping up on him again, and they were now little more than twenty feet away. Grieg aimed quickly, his rifle belching fire and swift lead through the chink.

Lobo howled, dropped his revolver as if it were afire, and plunged sideways into the nearest bush, his left hand clutching at his gun arm and his dark face twitching with pain. Hiller followed him with a jump, his six-gun returning Grieg's shot and his lips twisted in a loud curse.

Grieg sent shot after shot blasting toward the men until the hammer clicked on an empty magazine; then he heaved the unconscious ranger's body to his shoulders, staggered across the room to shove Beckett through the enlarged opening, and hurriedly crawled after him.

Outside, he again pulled the limp ranger to his shoulders, scuttled to the back of the cabin where the brush and timber were dense, and then set a course downhill as fast as he could walk.

Not once did he look back or slacken his pace as he hastened toward the river. Every second used in reconnoitering would be useless, for, with Beckett's great weight added to his own, Grieg's feet sank deep in the pine needles and soft earth, blazing an unbroken trail that could easily be followed. And the two men at the cabin would soon discover where he had gone and would pursue him, for they would know that, with his burden, he would not be able to go fast.

His breath was coming in raucous gasps by the time he came in sight of the Snake River. It was then that he heard a distant yell back on the mountainside and increased his pace by sheer force of will. He was covered with perspiration as he came out of the timber to the river bank, and he was so weary that he sat down on the steep incline and slid down it straight into the water.

THE shock of the icy water was like sharp pain to his warm body, and he leaped up with a gasp and began stumbling along on the wet rocks, Beckett slung across his shoulders. Later he waded farther out and breasted the current, his determination to go up-river augmented by his belief that Hiller and Lobo would take it for granted that he would go downstream. And after he had been in the water a while he was convinced of that fact. For his progress up the river was slow because of the velocity of the current, which sucked at him and nearly threw him down, gushing above his knees. Further-

more, the water was full of silt and treacherous whirlpools, dangers that made it necessary for him to step warily and advance slowly.

It seemed ages that he fought against the freezing current, his body tingling with cold, before he came to a bend where the spring from the mountain formed a large swamp that flowed slowly into the river. He eyed the swamp a minute and then quickly turned off into it, wading across it, and stumbling up the sharp incline to where a rugged formation of red boulders made a wide scar on the mountainside. Then, carefully, he advanced to the nearest boulder and laid Beckett down. He dropped heavily beside the ranger to gulp air into his heaving lungs and relax his aching body. He had not been resting long, however, when harsh voices sounded on his back trail, and he raised up to look cautiously around the rock.

Hiller appeared abruptly, turning the bend and halting, grim-faced, on the opposite side of the swamp.

"Nobody's been here!" he growled, knitting his shaggy brows sullenly. "I told you he'd go down the river."

Lobo came into sight around Hiller. His step wavered a little, and his face was flushed with pain. He held a bloody handkerchief around the wrist of his gun hand.

"Well, I figured he'd be smart and go up," he muttered. "We can still go back and catch him. A fellow carryin' a man ain't very spry."

Hiller snorted. "Yeah!" he mocked. "We'd likely catch a guy with you bleatin' over your wrist. That fellow's smart, all right. He'd hear you a mile away. Might as well go back to the cabin. Arctic might come, and he told us to wait there for him. He don't like to be crossed. I got a good look at that stranger, anyway. I never forgets

nothin' I've seen once. We'll find him again."

Lobo sneered, his look hateful. "Yeah! And when I get my fingers on his throat——" He gloated savagely.

Anthony Beckett suddenly moved beside Grieg and moaned. Grieg's blood pounded, and he dropped a quick hand over the ranger's mouth.

"Beckett," he breathed. "Keep quiet!"

Hiller jumped. "What was that?" he grunted.

Lobo's eyes were glazed, and his lips pale. "I didn't hear nothin'," he mumbled, walking away.

Hiller stood perfectly still, his head cocked, while Grieg held a tight hand over the ranger's mouth and the latter blinked up at him, vacantly. At length Hiller turned and morosely followed after Lobo.

"Can't tell whether I heard nothin' or not with you staggerin' over rocks," he grated.

CHAPTER IV.

BACK INTO DANGER.

WHEN the retreating sound of the grumbling men had died away, Grieg took his hand from Beckett's mouth. Then he got to his feet and lifted the ranger gently to a sitting position against the boulder.

Beckett rubbed a shaking hand over his eyes and stared around thoughtfully before a slow smile touched his lips.

"Say, you've got grit, boy!" he exclaimed in a faint voice. "You ought to be in my clothes—the government service." His smile widened. "How'd you get me out of the cabin?"

Grieg glanced away, and a look of misery settled on his strong, young face. Did Beckett expect Grieg Kel-

ler to say he'd saved Beckett's life? Well, he needn't! Beckett undoubtedly thought that Grieg had saved his life for one reason only, so Beckett would feel obligated to let Grieg have his. That would be a coward's trick, suitable to Bruno's vicious cunning. Well, he wouldn't lie to Beckett, either.

Somehow, Grieg felt drawn to Anthony Beckett, drawn warmly, and the sudden knowledge of it chilled him. He wished the ranger would sneer at him and voice threats instead of words of praise. Of course, Anthony was just biding his time, but why didn't he show his bitterness?

Beckett's chuckle brought Grieg up short. Anthony was trying to get to his feet, and laughing at his feeble efforts. Grieg sprang to help him, and when the ranger was up, supported him there in his strong arms.

Beckett smiled wryly. "I'm not really hurt bad," he said. "It's just this dizziness. Feels queer to be helped."

Grieg Keller nodded. "Where to, ranger?"

Anthony Beckett thought a minute. "Purdy's ranch," he said at last. "It's only about three miles upriver. I can make it sure."

Grieg looked at him sharply. "Purdy's ranch?" he asked.

The ranger's eyelids fluttered. "Purdy's not as bad as he pretends," he asserted. "He may be easily influenced, but he'll not argue with a government man."

"All right!" Grieg shrugged. "But we'll go through the timber. We'd be seen on the river, and I won't take chances."

Their progress uphill was slow in spite of the elk trail that they followed, for during the lapse of an hour Beckett had to rest several

times. It was while the ranger was taking one of these rests that he broke the silence between them.

"You're a funny fellow," he mused. "Unreadable. You take me prisoner, then later save my life. I wonder why?" He halted expectantly.

Grieg looked at him. "Marie Craik is the one responsible for you being here!" he returned curtly.

Anthony scrutinized Grieg, his eyes halting a moment on the younger man's wet and muddy clothing. Before he could speak, however, Grieg deliberately diverted the conversation with a question.

"What's Arctic and those others up to?" he queried. "I overheard some of their conversation. Sounded troublesome to me."

The ranger looked at the ground and scowled. "I don't know," he answered reluctantly. "I tried to listen in at their camp fire this morning and got knocked in the head for my pains." He lifted his head quickly. "But Arctic's behind it, which means it's something sinister, that's got to be stopped now." His eyes were abruptly boring into Grieg's. "You know who Arctic is," he stated quickly. "Bruno Wolfham!"

Grieg jumped, his face slowly growing white. "Bruno?" he gasped in a strangled voice. "And I left before he—" He caught himself and drew back, his expression frozen, struggling to conceal his emotion. He'd made a fool of himself now. There was no retracting his angry words.

Anthony Beckett got up quickly, for an injured man. His eyes were bright and eager, glittering with a strange wolfishness.

"What do you know about Bruno Wolfham?" he demanded in a hard voice.

Grieg's answering glance was stony, but his heart was in his mouth, pounding wildly. His eyes widened at the ranger's question. He hadn't expected this. What did he know about Bruno? That was a foolish question for Anthony Beckett to ask Grieg Keller! What *didn't* he know!

BECKETT leaned toward Grieg. The strange tenderness around his lips was gone, and in its place were unyielding lines and a grimly jutting chin. He opened his mouth to speak, opened it as if to demand an explanation, then closed it suddenly and snapped his head sidewise, looking over his shoulder, startled.

Grieg looked also, his quick glance darting beyond the ranger toward a willow bush behind Beckett. There was no wind, and yet the willow branches had quivered spasmodically and were still swaying. Swiftly, he pushed past Beckett, putting himself between the ranger and the bush.

"Come out!" he barked.

Silence followed his command, and then, without warning, Marie Craik stepped out in front of them. Over her shoulders she was carrying Grieg's pack, and in one hand she carelessly balanced her rifle. Her first glance went to Anthony Beckett; a friendly, sympathetic look that brought a smile to his face in spite of the severe expression that still lingered. The next minute her blue eyes were on Grieg, and in place of the quiet friendliness they had shown Beckett, there was a magnetic brilliance in them that made Grieg draw back, and caused a swift look of surprise to touch the ranger's face.

"I knew you'd bring him back," she said softly.

Grieg flushed, his discomfort growing as the girl continued to gaze at him, admiration in her eyes. Marie Craik looking at Grieg Keller like that! Why, he had thought she was in love with Anthony! Perhaps—perhaps it was Anthony who was in love with her! He stared suddenly at the ranger, his eyes searching the other's face and finding it strangely nonchalant.

"How much farther to Purdy's ranch?" he asked, still eying the other.

Marie answered swiftly for Beckett, her rapturous gaze still upon Grieg.

"Just over the next ridge." She halted, her expression changing instantly to consternation.

Beckett's face became gentle with understanding. "Marie and I can make it to Purdy's without help, now," he said.

Marie brightened. "Oh, yes!" she cried, hastily giving Grieg his pack and running to Beckett. "It's only a little ways and I'm very strong. We've kept you too long already. We can never thank you enough for your help—" There was pleading in her eyes for him to go; and yet, they also flashed an enchanting signal, communicating to him swiftly the message that she did not want this to be the end.

He nodded, his steady gaze leaping beyond her to the ranger.

Anthony's face held a peculiarly wry look that could not be interpreted. "Say!" he said. "Ten miles down the river is my station. There's dry clothing on the east wall of the cabin. Get into some when you reach there. My horse is picketed in the grove of aspens to the left of the clearing. Help yourself. I can't offer you much for saving my life, but what I have—" He

held out his hand suddenly, his expression deeply earnest.

Grieg's lips parted in amazement. Beckett was practically telling him to get out of the country! Offering him this chance to get away, because he had saved Beckett's life—saved it from Arctic, who was really Bruno Wolfham! What did it all mean? Grieg looked down and did not take the extended hand. He could not see how the ranger could offer his good will to Grieg Keller. At any rate, Grieg felt that he could not accept it—yet. He had no intention of leaving Jackson's Hole, now that Bruno was here. After he had settled with Bruno for the murder of Anthony's father, then he would be glad to accept Beckett's proffered friendship.

"Thanks," he said huskily, "but I can't accept your offer, because I don't deserve it. As I told you before, Miss Craik is the one to whom you owe everything." He went on grimly: "But if you'd like to do something for me, see that Bruno Wolfham hears that Grieg Keller is out to bag his snaky hide. I want him to know that, this time, he won't need to lie about who does the dirty work!"

He spun on his heel then, and started back down the trail, but not before he had seen the look of complete surprise leap into Beckett's face, and a warm light of admiration shining in Marie's eyes.

AND as he hurried away, his emotions brought a disordered tumult of conflicting thoughts. Anthony's expression had disclosed something that Grieg would not have believed, had he not seen. It showed that Beckett had not known, until this moment, that the man he had found in the cabin, the man who had saved his life, the

man to whom he had offered his handclasp and possessions, was—Grieg Keller!

In spite of the trouble that he felt was sure to come, now, Grieg was glad the ranger's mind was cleared on that point. He had been so sure all along that Anthony knew him—was hunting him—was waiting for the right moment to strike. Yet Anthony hadn't known who he was until now, this minute. On sober second thought, Grieg decided he was a fool! Why hadn't he kept his mouth shut until he could prove to the ranger that he was not guilty of the terrible crime he had been condemned for? Now Anthony might not give him a chance to prove himself!

Grieg covered the ground swiftly, his stormy thoughts leaping on to Bruno Wolfham. He'd go back to the little cabin where he'd spent a month of tortured days and nights and snare Bruno—force his enemy to reveal the truth to Beckett. But he'd have to work fast. Somehow, the thought of making Bruno confess the truth, the truth to Anthony, was the only important thing to Grieg now. Yes, he must get Bruno at the cabin. He blinked, scowled. Above his fierce plottings the face of Marie Craik stood out clearly. She was smiling sweetly, her eyes luminous. And Anthony Beckett had seen, and had looked pained. He probably thought that the man who had killed his father was trying to take his sweetheart away, too. Grieg's face was troubled. What a nightmare!

How long it took him to get back to the cabin, he didn't know. When he came to himself he was kneeling at the open chink at the back of the house, staring into the room.

Lobo and Hiller were there, working at the window. As Grieg looked,

Hiller hammered the piece of broken log back into place with a stick of firewood, replaced the window frame, and stepped back.

Lobo sat down heavily on the edge of the bunk, his face yellowish, and his eyes looking darker and more protruding than ever.

"Guess we'll tell Arctic we found them panes out," he grated unhappily, his lips drooping.

Hiller growled and sent the stick of firewood spinning toward the stove.

"Tell him nothin'," he blared. "If we start explainin', he'll know we're lyin' and raise the devil!" He stood over Lobo, scowling darkly. "You'll keep your teeth by keepin' your head shut," he warned. "Arctic ain't toleratin' mistakes, even in his blackguards! I'm remindin' you that nothin' happened to-day—nothin' at all!"

Lobo drew away from Hiller. "Holy Lucifer!" he quavered. "Even if the government fella that got away hadn't been Beckett, I'd never peep. Arctic's a maniac when he gets mad. No, sir, no talkin' for me!" He leaned toward Hiller suddenly, his frightened eyes bulging more than ever. "Purdy!" he grated. "What about his blatterin' mouth?"

Hiller's sneer was derisive. "Purdy won't croak," he declared. "I got somethin' on him that'll keep him still."

Lobo got up and began walking the floor. "Why in blazes don't Arctic come then?" he demanded.

Hiller snorted impatiently. "Arctic's maybe got business till noon. He said he might. He told me if he wasn't here by then, for us to meet him at Beckett's ranger station. He wanted to surprise Beckett before he got wise to us." He folded his arms across his chest in a patronizing manner. "Look here," he said.

"We know Beckett's hurt and a fellow's helpin' him home. They can't possibly get there in less than three hours, so we sits tight as we was ordered, and if Arctic comes heré, we'll tell him we saw Beckett and the other fellow walkin' that way. If Arctic don't come, we leaves sharp at noon as we was told. Remember, we're to bag Beckett, but Arctic's to have the fun of hashin' him."

LOBO whirled on Hiller. "I don't like that!" he snarled. "I'm yaller, but I wouldn't get help to bag one man! Besides, we ain't got no horses. If we're gonna get there by one, we better start now."

Hiller's expression was flintlike. "You'll do as Arctic says!" he growled. "And you don't need to worry about cayuses. Purdy knows our plans. He'll have 'em here on time."

Lobo sat down on the bunk with his back to Hiller. "I've done some dirty jobs in my time, but this one beats 'em all," he grumbled. "We're supposed to corner Beckett, huh? Get him with his hands up before Arctic comes sneakin' in? I seen Arctic knife a fellow, once. Wish'd I'd done away with the ranger as I started—"

Hiller snorted. "Gettin' soft, eh?" he scoffed. "As long as you got Purdy to back you, you're sort of a man. But get him outa the way and you start crawlin'. Well, you're in this now, and if you try to back out I'll give you a goin' over you'll never forget!"

Lobo looked terrified. "I ain't yelpin'!" he vowed. "I was just thinkin', that's all."

"Quit thinkin'," snorted Hiller, and turned away.

Grieg got up quietly and slipped off toward the river. Once there, he

turned down it and lengthened out his stride, his thoughts grimly intent on what he had just heard. So Bruno planned to kill Anthony Beckett as he had Anthony's father? Grieg was astonished and horrified. That was what Lobo had meant by "Arctic's dirty job." Then Bruno wasn't in here purposely to hunt down Grieg. He had something more diabolic and fiendish in mind than that. What did he really want? Why had he murdered the colonel and then come hundreds of miles to get the colonel's son, also?

Grieg drew his breath in sharply, his face darkening. He didn't know what it was all about, but Bruno's mainspring had always been his un-governable selfishness. What did it matter what Bruno's bloody plans were, if he could only be blocked before they were fulfilled? Planned to kill Anthony Beckett, did he? Grieg's lips tightened. Well, he'd see! Of course, he'd have to work fast because Bruno had allies and they would be closing in. There were Hiller and Lobo and Purdy—and there was Anthony Beckett, who did not know the part he was to play in Bruno's plans.

Grieg took a glance at the sun. As near as he could judge, the time was around ten o'clock. If he hurried, perhaps he could reach the ranger station an hour ahead of Bruno's men. Maybe he could even get there ahead of Bruno! That was what he wanted—to get his hands on Bruno before the other was ready—to surprise Bruno, alone!

One hour passed—two hours—two and a half. Grieg changed his course from the river bank to a less conspicuous one through the edge of the forest near the river. His pace was more rapid than ever now, stimulated by an increasing excitement and the disquieting knowledge that

it was taking him longer than he'd planned to reach the station.

All at once he came out of the trees into a clearing and came to an abrupt halt. Then, suddenly, he leaped back into the edge of the timber and dropped on one knee behind a bush. Of all the fools! He'd walked right out into view of Beckett's ranger station before he'd noticed it. If Bruno were already in the cabin, keeping a sharp eye out for Beckett, he would undoubtedly see any one who stepped beyond the rim of the trees. Grieg centered his attention on the cabin windows in a sharp scrutiny. When he could see no evidence of life there, his glance darted over the scene in front of him.

The cabin and barn were built near the center of the clearing, and were surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. There was a flagpole near the cabin, symbol of a governmental office; and the general neatness of the place reminded Grieg immediately of Anthony Beckett's painstaking simplicity.

CHAPTER V.

GRIEG ATTACKS.

GRIEG put some cartridges into his gun and sent a shot blasting toward the cabin. The sharp sound echoed and re-echoed, but no answering gun spoke. At once, he got to his feet, slipped to the gateway, and began running in an erratic, zigzag course across the clearing, his rifle held in readiness at his hip. It would be impossible to cross that clearing without being seen by any one in the cabin, but he'd have to take that chance—and take it now!

To his surprise, he reached the door and had his hand on the latch-string before anything happened. Then what occurred was so unex-

pected that he could only stand there, puffing and staring. A horse whinnied in a grove of aspens off to the left of the clearing, and was answered unexpectedly by a whinny close at hand, behind the barn.

Immediately the horse at the barn sprang into view with a rider hanging low on its neck. The animal reared as it rounded the corner and then leaped toward Grieg into a run. With three swift bounds it was upon him, veering away as he jerked back from it, just grazing him. The man on it raised as his mount swerved. His six-gun flashed momentarily in the sunlight. He leaned forward to take good aim, and, for one fleeting second, his face was visible. It was frozen in a stiff line of mocking cruelty; a thin, wedge-shaped face, with pale, narrowed eyes. Then the gun spoke, ejecting fire almost into Grieg's face. Hot lead thudded sickeningly into his left shoulder, the impact of it throwing him against the door.

With an angry yell Grieg jerked himself upright and spun around the corner of the cabin, his trigger finger pulling spasmodically. The other, however, had seen that his bullet had gone awry and was urging his horse to the limit. As Grieg halted at the corner, the running horse sprang through the gateway and bounded into the forest beyond, disappearing behind a screen of willows, its pounding hoofs deadened at once in the soft leaf mold.

Grieg lowered his rifle and stood there, staring after the rider. His eyes were glassy and burning as he looked, and his countenance fiercely rigid. He'd easily recognized the man who had fired upon him, in spite of the fact that he'd had only a quick glance. In the dark little cabin higher up on the mountain, he'd felt the chill of those sinister

eyes upon him always—could still picture the caustic twist of the tight mouth and the disdainful lift of that angular head with the shelving brow. Yes, the man who had once more injected a vicious barb into his victim without injury to himself was—Bruno Wolfham!

For some time Grieg stood there, his brain numb and his body trembling with convulsive rage over his defeat; then, finally, he went in to the cabin and closed the door.

Just within, he halted and looked uneasily around. Bruno had had his look at the cabin, and Anthony Beckett's belongings were strewn in wild disorder all over the floor. Grieg eyed them systematically, beginning at the heap of clothing by the east wall and ending at the west wall where the sheet-iron stove stood amid a confusion of sacks of sugar, flour, and beans. These sacks had been slit open down the sides, and the contents poured out upon the floor. Under the north window a crude, homemade desk appeared to have received the most attention. Bruno had ransacked it well, leaving heavy government books, papers, and the like, littered where he had thrown them. Beckett's bunk looked as if it had almost been torn apart, and even the dishes had been removed from the tiny shelf cupboard over the stove.

GRIEG wondered what Bruno had been looking for, and whether he had found it or not. He wondered, too, if Bruno had recognized him. Somehow, he didn't think Bruno had. Quickly, he crossed the room and began picking up Anthony's clothing. His eyes brightened as he found a new pair of forester's green trousers, with coat to match. Ah! He'd banked on Beckett having an extra uniform.

With a faint smile he began to remove his bloodstained jacket. Bruno would be back, wouldn't he? He would, if he thought the man he had hit was Anthony Beckett. And if Bruno should halt in the timber to watch the cabin for Anthony, he'd get a ranger who he thought was Beckett, but one whose heart was already bitter, who knew Bruno and what he'd done! It was well for Anthony that he had run afoul of Lobo. It would be better to let Grieg Keller take his place against Bruno!

An hour later Grieg laid aside Anthony's razor to pick up his rifle and make a cautious round of the four cabin windows. If Bruno and his men were watching the house from the timber, Grieg wanted them to glimpse him, but he wanted to be aware of their presence, also.

The battered clock on the box beside the water bucket was pointing to twenty minutes of two. Grieg's hopes of Bruno making another attack to-day began to sink. Hiller had said one o'clock. Well, Grieg felt that he'd done all he could to impress any one watching with the fact that the ranger was at home. He'd dressed his shoulder wound and put on Beckett's uniform, which fitted him nicely, and had walked out where he would be seen. He'd brought in wood and water and built a fire and cooked a meal. As a last resort, he had run the flag to the top of the flagpole, so that any one on the hills miles away would know the ranger was in. Grieg scowled and began to fidget. Maybe Bruno wasn't coming because he'd recognized Grieg Keller. Maybe—

All afternoon he watched guardedly for Bruno and his men, and as daylight waned and dusk began to settle around the cabin, he grew more irritated and restless. Suppose

Bruno didn't strike until Anthony returned—until too late. Grieg's lips tightened. He couldn't let that happen! Then again, Bruno might be waiting for darkness to cover his operations. Well, if he didn't come to-night, Grieg Keller would go up-river after him to-morrow.

The sunset was changing from flame to pink behind the Tetons in the west when Grieg was abruptly drawn to his feet by a shrill whistle that echoed through the mountains. He leaped to the nearest window, his body tingling and his eyes guardedly probing the dim light outside. Just as the clear whistle filled the air again, he saw from whence the sound had come. High up on the mountain, where patches of snow still lingered, was a great bull elk. The elk was standing alone on a ridge, and was etched grandly against the delicate pink of the evening sky; a majestic animal with wide-spreading antlers. As Grieg watched, it walked along the ridge into the forest beyond, stopping every now and then to send out its call, and when it had disappeared, another elk answered it from far up-river.

Grieg sucked his breath in sharply. There was something about the sight of that superb animal and that eerie interchange of calls that got into his blood. What was it that made his blood leap, made him respond with a feeling of primitive ecstasy? Was it the wild note in that weird call? Was it the high-spirited lift of that proud animal's head? The self-assurance with which it moved?

Suddenly Grieg knew what it was. It was the spirit of the untamed! It was the knowledge of freedom! Anthony Beckett had that spirit. That was why his trail had always led into virgin country. It was the spell of the unknown that drew him

—the lure of the wild—the fierce appetite of a strong man to be unshackled, ungoverned—free!

GRIEG moved restlessly around the room. Another's unjust shackles had held him down too long! He'd fought them, but he'd been using the wrong tack. He'd thought that by putting on Anthony's clothes, he could decoy Bruno to him. He'd wanted to do this because he had hoped, thus, to save Anthony's life and, at the same time, get Bruno off of his guard. Grieg's tightly clenched fist banged down so hard on the box by the stove that it set the water bucket and clock to jumping. Yes—he'd tried! But, as always, Bruno had outwitted him! Well, why should he wait any longer, hoping Bruno would come? Why shouldn't he go get Bruno? Get him now!

Eagerly, he ran to Beckett's desk, picked up a box of rifle cartridges he had seen lying there, and stuffed it into his coat pocket. With one hand on the ranger's rifle, he started suddenly and became rigid, his eyes frozen on the door. Had he heard something or was it simply his imagination?

As his glance came to rest, the latch wobbled and began slowly moving back. The fire that had been kindled in his body suddenly died, leaving him without warmth, as emotionless as rock. A hard smile touched his lips and lingered. Without a sound he spun to the corner behind the door and flattened himself there, his eyes gleaming fiercely.

Slowly, slowly, the latch eased back. It had dropped out of the bar, now, halting where it fell, and the door was moving inward with that same deliberate motion. Ah, his stealthy guest could see into the room! A little gloomy in here, but

the man would be able to distinguish everything! Grieg's smile grew deeper. He must make himself wait until the man was in, for he could run no chances of frightening the prey.

Feet thumped softly on the flooring at the doorway. Then they sounded inside, but their owner was hidden by the door. Grieg's muscles became taut. With a kick he sent the door slamming and sprang at his unknown visitor, his long arms reaching out and his fingers closing on the other's throat.

A sharp, frightened scream followed his attack. Grieg loosened his hold, his startled eyes glued on his visitor, staring with dismay into the terrified face of Marie Craik.

Marie dropped back, leaning heavily against the wall by the door, her mouth gaping and her face showing white even in the twilight.

He recovered, after a minute, and stumbled toward her, his face hot with chagrin.

"Miss Craik!" he cried. "Did I hurt you? I never thought of you coming through that door!"

She laughed shakily, and he saw, now, that she was eying him with approval.

"No," she breathed. "But I should have knocked. I wasn't sure that you'd be here. You said——"

His jaw tightened at her unfinished sentence. "Did you want to see me, or——"

Her smile was quick in return, but seemed faint and a little uncertain in the dim light.

YES!" she cried impulsively. "I have something important to tell you! I had to slip away, or I'd have come sooner." She stepped closer, so that she could look into his eyes, her face troubled, eager.

"Arctic is Bruno Wolfham!" she said. "My uncle says so!" She was silent a moment, fidgeting because of his apparent disinterest, then went on hurriedly. "Purdy is my uncle!" she blurted. "I didn't want you to know that, after you saw him with those men to-day, but now I——" She hesitated, then went on doggedly: "Uncle came in several hours ago, and Mr. Beckett and I overheard him talking to my aunt. He was terrified. He said he was going to leave the country to-night!"

Grieg caught her arm in a grip that made her wince. "Why?" he demanded, suddenly excited.

"Arctic—Bruno Wolfham—is planning to kill both Mr. Beckett and my uncle!" she cried.

Grieg leaned toward her, tensely. "Go on!" he urged. "Why?"

"My uncle didn't know why he's after Mr. Beckett," she returned breathlessly. "Mr. Beckett has something he wants, I guess. But my uncle saw Bruno jump up from behind a bush one day and shoot my—father—in—the back!" She paled. "Bruno and Hiller wanted the little place up on the mountain," she hurried on. "That was three months ago, when they came in demanding it. Father had proved up on it by then. He said he'd sell it, but Bruno didn't intend to buy it. He just—took it!"

"As I said, uncle saw what happened to father, and, when Hiller and Bruno found out that he had, they threatened him. They told him that if he said a word they'd have him sent to prison as my father's murderer, but that if he didn't, he could have a share in a big deal they were working on. They had him there, because he couldn't prove his innocence, and he couldn't prove their guilt.

"Then, this afternoon, uncle and

Lobo had another quarrel. Lobo got so mad that he told my uncle why Bruno had wanted him to join them. Uncle was to pay the price for Bruno Wolfham's murderous instincts. Uncle was to go to prison as Mr. Beckett's murderer! She looked away. "Oh, it's ghastly!"

Grieg's lips drew down hard and his hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. How well he knew!

Marie looked at him suddenly, and he saw with dismay that her cheeks were wet.

"Mr. Keller!" she cried huskily, reaching toward him in sudden, frightened pleading. "You're a good man, and you helped us to-day! You're the only one I can ask to help me again! Oh, can't you save my uncle and Mr. Beckett! They can't do anything to help themselves, now! And you do want to kill Bruno Wolfham, don't you? You do—don't you?"

Grieg stared at her. Kill Bruno? He hadn't meant to do that. He wanted Bruno alive, so he could make him tell the truth to Anthony Beckett. Put Bruno behind the penitentiary doors that had yawned for Grieg Keller, yes. Let Bruno spend the rest of his days rotting in prison with only his own evil thoughts for company, yes! Let the proper authorities decide Bruno's fate. But for him, Grieg Keller, to kill—"

He could see Marie's body stiffen, see incredulity leap into her face as he remained silent. She didn't understand. Did she think he was afraid? All at once, with a little sob, she whirled, threw open the door, and was gone.

Grieg ran out into the twilight after her, his cheeks burning with a new shame; feeling as if he had dishonored himself by not crying out his lust to kill. He saw her dimly

and called to her at the gate, but she mounted her horse and rode swiftly away.

CHAPTER VI.

PURSUIT OF BRUNO.

HURRYING, he crossed the clearing to the grove of quaking aspens on the left, in search of Beckett's horse. He found the animal in a hollow; a sturdy black steed, its head flung high and its ears alert. It nuzzled against him when he patted its neck, and, talking to it softly, he removed the picket rope from one front foot and improvised a hackamore. This done, he leaped upon the animal's bare back and urged it into the black rim of the forest, after Marie.

The girl's fears brought a new problem to Grieg. So Bruno had been behind Craik's death, too! And now it was Purdy and— Grieg chilled. Bruno wouldn't waste any time catching up with Purdy. He'd hurry to Purdy's ranch and find— Anthony Beckett!

Once in the timber, Grieg's mount slowed to a fast walk, and, though Grieg was in a hurry, he let the animal set its own pace. Here, under the tall spruces, he could do nothing else, for it was already night, and he wondered at the ease with which the animal found its way. Perhaps it was especially familiar with the trail to Marie's house. Well, Anthony Beckett had no stigma on his past. He deserved a girl as sweet as Marie.

Slowly, as time passed, Grieg's first quick anger settled into a firm resolve. And as he rode along, the shrill bugling of elk pulsed about him in the darkness, their haunting cries firing him with a fierce resolve to rid himself of Bruno's shackles, to free Marie and Purdy and Beckett and—

He had been riding about an hour when he felt the horse slow down, and as the animal came to a stop, he felt the quick tensing of its muscles. His own body tensed, and he strained his eyes to look at a pale patch of light. After a time he realized that it was moonlight, on an opening in the trees, and then, suddenly, unexpectedly, something moved between himself and the lighted opening. A dark blotch slowly took form, materialized into the head and shoulders of a man!

His horse gave a frightened wheeze and turned to flee. Grieg slipped down from its back, letting it go, his attention on the man. But as the animal crashed away through the underbrush, the man silhouetted against the moonlight halted, looked this way and that, and then, whirling suddenly, broke into a run that took him uphill through the timber.

Grieg sucked in a surprised breath and plunged after the runner, his heavy boots making a great crashing noise in the brush. How had the man known he hadn't startled a wild animal in the woods? Elk were all around them.

As Grieg thudded in hot pursuit, the man ahead suddenly emitted a shrill, birdlike call, while the crashing of his heavy body through the woods proclaimed the fact that he was headed in the direction of Craik's cabin. Off to the right, toward the river, the call was answered; and then, farther away, so faint that it was almost an echo, came another similar cry!

Grieg's jaw stiffened. The fleeing man had companions at his call. But could these companions be Bruno and Hiller and Lobo? Bruno and his men would go upriver after Purdy, if they went anywhere. That is, unless they were on their way to the ranger station.

OVER a wooded hill, down a dark valley, and up to the level of a low ridge, he raced after the other. On the ridge, however, he slowed down, panting, his eyes searching ahead through the shadows. Below him was another moonlit opening in the woods, a dried slough about fifty yards away, tufted with bunchy grass. Beyond it was another slight patch of timber, a landmark he remembered, for now he could hear the dull thunder of the river in the canyon below Craik's cabin, and with this came another sound—the persistent clamor of calling elk.

All at once he jerked to attention and began running toward the moonlit stretch at top speed. The man he was chasing had come into view and was leaping madly over the uneven ground in a straight line, headed for the timber on the other side. The man was tall, lean, and hatless. Grieg's heart leaped. Could it be Bruno?

The other was almost across the opening when Grieg reached it, and as the man heard Grieg's pounding feet, he turned quickly to look back. Bearing down upon him fifty feet away, Grieg saw the moonlight full upon the other—saw his face clearly, every virulent, hostile line of it—and his heart leaped, pounding as fiercely as the water against the rocks down there in the canyon, sending the hot blood lashing violently through his body.

The man in front of him was Bruno Wolfham! It seemed almost too good to be true. Yet it was true! Bruno, alone in the forest with Grieg!

In Bruno's hand was his revolver, and he fired as he whirled, without aiming.

Grieg laughed as the bullet whined past his head. "Can't you do better than that?" he shouted.

Bruno crouched, suddenly leaping backward into a shelter of trees. Grieg followed. Then he halted and sobered, his head thrust forward while he listened, the fierce tumult of his heart suddenly hushed. He could not hear Bruno running. He could hear nothing but the roar of the river and the calling of elk. If Bruno was moving, he was moving stealthily.

Guardedly, Grieg began to push forward again through the forest. It would be impossible to locate Bruno unless he showed himself. Moreover, Grieg would have to be wary, for Bruno had a gun, and, though he was not as clever with it as he was with a knife, Grieg was entirely unarmed. He had forgotten his rifle in his haste to follow Marie.

To the right, where moonbeams sprayed through the branches of a dead tree, something flashed into the light like steel, then instantly disappeared. Grieg whirled toward it, his eyes sharp and his lips tight. Bruno must be swerving toward the river. Could Lobo and Hiller be near? Bruno would want assistants—he'd be afraid to face a man alone!

Quickly, Grieg turned downward toward the river. He might get a chance to see Bruno in the moonlight when he moved out on the rocky hillside above the canyon. It would be worth trying.

It was some time before Grieg came to the edge of the trees above the rocky slope. He stopped while still in the shadow, surveying the scene below, eyes alert to detect any movement.

TIPPING the crest of Mount Lyda, far in the east, was a white moon. It was unusually bright to-night, plunging the river and the rocky hillsides in an eerie light that brought out every

rugged aspect of them. The moonlight made silver rings in the whirlpools and shone through the spray that dashed high against the rocks at the outlet of the canyon.

It changed the looks of the red rocks on the slope, too. They seemed less rigid, and had a frosted look. Grieg turned slowly to view the rock-covered slope to the left. Bruno might have turned that way, back toward the cabin. Then, suddenly, he grew rigid and stared. With an awed gasp he leaned forward and stared harder, holding his breath.

The entire sky line seemed to be moving, the whole ridge! He knitted his brows in astonishment. Yes, the ridge was alive with tawny, moving bodies, a surging, stamping horde that was coming out of the forest, crossing the ridge against the sky line and hurrying down toward the river.

For a moment he imagined the ghostly light of the moon must be playing tricks on him, then realized that his eyes were telling the truth. What he was seeing was a great caravan of elk—hundreds of them! Thousands! He had wondered why the noise of bugling elk had grown louder as he neared the river. Now he saw! In an unending flood they were sweeping down off Moose Mountain—old bulls, young bulls, cows, calves, yearlings—running five abreast, like a huge, downward-winding ribbon.

Grieg took a deep breath and leaned against a tree. This was the most exciting thing he had ever witnessed, the most awe-inspiring. He could see the proud, antlered heads of the old bulls, now, along the outskirts of the caravan. These regal sentries were running faster than the center throng, their antlers like barren branches against the sky, their urgent cries to lagging mothers, with

young calves, coming faint above the full-voiced whistling of the herd.

Now the solid block of the procession was nearing the water's edge and fanning out. Ahead were sentries, on the opposite shore and in the river, breasting the current. Backward elk at the river were being jostled into the water at the bottle neck above the outlet; the most dangerous point, a sort of funnel where the current was swift and the suction great. The frightened cries of these animals and the wails of the calves who were too weak for the current, sounded a mournful undertone to the piercing clamor.

Grieg could not take his eyes from the spectacle, and as he watched, the vanguard of the horde plunged into the river. They splashed out slowly, followed by the multitude behind, out, out, out, and down, fighting against the suction of the whirlpools and the swift water. They were drifting toward a spot where the river was suddenly compressed between the canyon walls. Now their cries became louder, more terrified. Some of the small, bobbing heads of the calves were suddenly and mysteriously disappearing from the sides of their mothers. Others were being sucked quickly away into the funnel, toward unavoidable death on the rocks below.

Where multitudes were entering the river, only a thin line of bobbing heads ever seemed to reach the opposite bank. Whether the others were drifting to their death on the rocks or coming out of the river below the bottle neck, Grieg couldn't tell. But scores of frenzied mothers were beginning to run up and down the banks, calling for young ones that did not answer. Some of these mothers ran in and out of the river in their anxiety, their wet, glistening bodies glimmering in the moon-

light, and their frantic, almost human cries made Grieg's heart contract with pain.

Yet on and on the procession moved, shoving blindly out into the water regardless of the terror-stricken cries of the ones that were swept out of sight.

Grieg shuddered and shook his head. Where did they all come from? Where were they going? And why did they try to swim the river at that particular point?

He was brought out of his spell by a sudden prickly sensation along his spine and the chill feeling that some one was creeping up on him from behind. Slowly, he turned to look; then, with a startled cry, whirled and leaped toward a tree not more than ten feet distant, where a man was crouching.

THE man, who was half hidden in the shadows with his six-gun in his hand, was surprised by Grieg's quick attack and threw his hands up to protect his throat. Instead of clutching the other's neck, however, Grieg's fingers clamped on the gun, wrenching it away with a force that sent the weapon spinning into the brush.

With a gasp, Grieg's antagonist yanked free and whirled. He took a few steps then stopped, his body bent forward, his teeth bared in a snarl.

Grieg suddenly laughed, and his laugh was as chilling as was the face of the man in front of him.

"Don't you know me, Bruno?" he asked. His voice was harsh, menacing. "I'm Grieg Keller, the man who saw you kill Colonel Beckett!"

Bruno's startled countenance froze in an expression of incredulity and fear.

"You?" he blasted, panic in his voice. "I thought you were the

ranger, Beckett! Grieg Keller's hiding some place——"

Grieg snorted. "Hiding!" he cried, his body shaking with the explosiveness of his exclamation and the violence of his emotions. "You know better! It was the law I was wary of, because it believed you! But there isn't any law here, Bruno. There's just you and me!"

Bruno's face blanched. With a cry he whirled into the deeper shadows; then, as Grieg hurtled toward him, he gave a hoarse shout and started running wildly down the slope.

Grieg bounded after him, vaulting over boulders in his haste to overtake his prey. Bruno was so frightened that he had turned and run away. He knew that if Grieg did have a gun, he wouldn't shoot in the back—yes, Bruno knew! Grieg was only a few strides behind his enemy now, reaching for him with steely fingers, when the latter looked back and swerved to the left along the cut bank above the river, racing toward the great herd of elk.

Grieg swerved also, his chin thrust forward in stubborn determination. Did Bruno think he could run through that packed body of animals and escape that way? Well, he couldn't! Why, the man would be trampled to death—killed instantly! Grieg's teeth set grimly. Bruno must not die until Beckett knew the truth.

Bruno, however, was already at the edge of the moving army of elk. He had slipped in, running low, before they had seen or scented him. Grieg jumped after him, fairly bounding among the animals, sending tawny bodies springing in every direction and snorting with terror.

Bruno gave a frightened cry. He was a length away, caught in a jam of panic-stricken elk that were shov-

ing together, not knowing which way to run. As Grieg plunged toward his enemy, a great bull reared, shrilled angrily, and lunged straight at Bruno. Bruno screamed and dodged. The animals around the two men snorted in fright, bounding toward the river, surging in a terrified throng, carrying Grieg and Bruno with them.

Bruno whirled while still in shallow water and tried to fight his way back to shore. His face was strained, white, frozen with terror.

GRIEG was thrown against him by an excited cow elk that wheeled in the river, then plunged back to the bank. Icy water gurgled around Grieg as he fell forward. In a frenzy, Bruno knocked Grieg's hands away, and Grieg's fingers slipped from Bruno's face to clutch the neck of his jacket. The next minute they were both floundering in deep water, fighting and going under, then coming up to fight again, while elk lunged and swam all about them.

Faintly, then, a human cry came from the near bank. Grieg bobbed up in the water and saw two horsemen, Beckett and Marie, ride up on the shore.

Beckett's shouted words sounded faintly above the din of the river and the whistling elk. "Let him go, Keller! Save yourself!"

Grieg's face was a dripping mask, hard as steel. Let go of Bruno? Never! It would be better to be sucked into the funnel with the man, to die against the rocks, than to face Anthony Beckett without the murderer of Anthony's father!

A black form with antlered head and open, rolling eyes loomed over Grieg, shutting off the moonlight. Bruno gave a strangled cry and tried to pull away. Marie's scream and

Beckett's shout of warning sounded far away as the animal reared up in the water and struck Grieg, its breath hot in his face and its sharp hoofs plunging him under the water. His head rang, and his wounded shoulder burned with pain.

He came up sputtering, choking, to find that he still had hold of Bruno, and that his enemy was now gripping his arm with equal tenacity. They were being swept together into the center of the stream, were being rushed swiftly into the bottle neck that led toward the jagged rocks.

"Keller!" screamed Bruno, as he saw death beckoning. "Don't let—go—of—me! Save—"

"You'll never—get away—again!" gasped Grieg.

Beckett and Marie were riding along the bank above, keeping abreast of the two in the water. Beckett shouted and sent a rope whirling out over the river. It struck Grieg's shoulders. He snatched at it, twisting it around the wrist of his free hand and clutching it with his fingers.

"Let go of Bruno!" came Beckett's weak voice. "Current—too—strong! You can't hold on—rope—with all that—weight—"

"No!" gasped Grieg. "No!"

Bruno gurgled with terror. The rope snapped tight with a hiss, almost yanking Grieg's arms from their sockets, making him groan with pain and shut his eyes.

"Hang on!" sputtered Bruno. "Holy blazes! Don't—"

Grieg's eyes were shut tight, his teeth clenched. The strain against both arms was so terrible that he felt like crying out, like Bruno. His body was a dead weight, with Bruno a trailing, ponderous anchor. The sounds of the thunderous water, leaping against the rocks, was closer, deafening, terrorizing. Bruno's in-

distinct voice above the water's din sounded like a faint whisper. The man sounded as if he were praying, and Grieg smiled at the absurd idea, in spite of the pain that racked his body.

His arms were completely numb now from the cold and strain. His injured shoulder felt as if the flesh were being torn away. The roaring river seemed to be drawing him, pulling him apart. It was breaking his arms, making him see nothing but black swirls, even when he opened his eyes. Well, if he were going to lose consciousness, Bruno would go to death with him. Grieg had a strange feeling of peace, a desire to surrender to destiny. If he had to give his life to rid those people out there of Bruno, it would be worth it! Then his urgent need to live and vindicate himself to Beckett—to the world—surged in him again. He couldn't go, leaving behind a blemished name! No, he'd never let go of the rope—of Bruno! Never—let—go—

CHAPTER VII.

FREE!

WHEN he came back to consciousness, he was lying flat on his back on something hard and lumpy. Slowly he blinked his eyes, finding it difficult to collect his thoughts. Then, suddenly, he drew himself up on one elbow, breathing hard and staring around him. He was on the river bank, in the moonlight, with the roar of the water and the distant bugling of elk still in his ears. Then Beckett's face, looking pale and drawn in the eerie light, was close to his, the lips moving.

"I won't let you kill him, Keller!" Beckett was saying. "It isn't right. Now, let go of him!"

Grieg's eyes dropped from Beckett's fierce gaze. He felt cold and tired and very wet. Then, all at once, his blood leaped in his veins and pounded hotly. Bruno was half reclining there beside him! Bruno couldn't get away because Grieg's fingers were still clutching his coat. Bruno couldn't get away, and Anthony Beckett was there!

Grieg sat bolt upright, his blood still pounding with a fierce joy. "Let go of Bruno?" he cried hoarsely. "Not until you hear the truth from his lips about what happened to your father!"

Bruno's eyes narrowed into their old, frosty scrutiny. His expression had lost its terrified look of a few minutes ago, and was set in coldly cynical lines.

"You fool!" he cried scornfully. "Beckett—knows!" There was a vindictive light in his eyes, a half-mocking sneer on his mouth which said, plainer than words: "You can't prove a thing against me unless I talk!"

Grieg's face grew dark with anger. Bruno had to tell! He had to!

"Beckett," he said with feeling, glancing up at the ranger, "your father was my best friend, just as Craik was your friend. And Bruno killed Craik!"

Bruno's teeth flashed. "That's a lie!" he snarled. "Hiller shot——"

Somebody leaped over Bruno, bellying as he came like an angry bull. Bruno cringed back against the ground, staring up. Hiller was there, his expression hard and his hands clenched angrily at his sides.

"So you'd blame it on me, would you?" he shouted at Bruno. "You'd crucify your mother to save your own ratty neck! Never thought you'd double-cross the one man who would do somethin' for you! Well,

I'll do it all right! I'll see that you go to blazes where you belong!" He reached for Bruno's throat, his angry words blasting into the cringing man's face. "Wait'll I sink my fingers into your neck!" he growled. "I've done your dirty work for the last time!"

Bruno cried out with fear and tried to jerk away from Grieg.

"Get back!" he quavered, his face stark. He gave way suddenly as Hiller's rough fingers circled his throat. "I'll tell, Keller!" he cried. "If he don't get me, you will! He's double-crossed me—ganged up with you!" He looked up, terrified, at Anthony Beckett.

"Make them leave me alone and I'll tell!" he cried through chattering teeth. "They'll kill me if you don't!"

Anthony Beckett moved quickly. He, too, was standing over Bruno.

"Take your hands off the prisoner!" he said in an authoritative voice that made Hiller step back. "Now, Keller!"

Grieg shook his head. "Not until he tells!" he grated.

Bruno began to talk, his usually scornful voice changing to a whine when confronted with his own evils.

"I murdered both Colonel Beckett and Craik!" he bleated.

Grieg heaved a great sigh. It was done! Beckett knew!

"Why?" he demanded of Bruno.

Bruno drew back. "I don't have to tell that!" he blurted.

ANTHONY'S face and lips were pale. "I'll tell you, Keller!" he cut in. "I knew that Bruno was guilty! When Marie came back in from the outside three weeks ago, she brought me all the news on the case. I'm sorry that you didn't know that the jury had

convicted Bruno because of condemning evidence, but I couldn't tell you, because I'd never met you until to-day!

"You see—my father, the colonel, wrote a letter before his death, telling me of some incriminating evidence against Bruno he'd found, evidence that would put Bruno behind bars for keeps. My father said he was going to expose Bruno. He knew he was taking his life in his hands by doing it, but he was like that, unafraid!

"With the letter he sent papers that would trip Bruno, evidence that I was to send to the proper authorities in case anything happened to my father before he'd accomplished his purpose. I got the letter—too late to save him!" Beckett cleared his throat.

"I was snow-bound up in the mountains for weeks. When I received my mail, everything was over. Bruno had disappeared; you'd disappeared. I did what I could—sent the letter and papers where they'd do the most good. But you'll never know how sorry I am this happened to you, Keller. You'll never know how much it means to me to be able to tell you this, straight to your face. I've prayed that I'd get this chance! But if I hadn't had this chance to meet you, if you hadn't been here, Bruno might still be running free! Think what that would mean to Purdy and me!"

Grieg got to his feet, pulling Bruno up with him. "I suppose Bruno was after you and those papers because you knew everything that those papers told," he said eagerly. "He killed Craik because he was desperate, and didn't have time to dally with buying Craik's place. He had to hide! I thought he was hunting me—that you were

hunting me. I had to make Bruno tell you the truth about which one of us was guilty." He made a quick movement, shoving the drooping Bruno into the ranger's eager hands. "Do what you want to with him!" he cried. "I—I'm not even resentful for what's happened to me. I just couldn't bear the thought that you believed that I was guilty. You see, I loved your father—"

Beckett's face was working, his eyes showing the emotion that he could not express in words. Suddenly he reached out and tightly clasped Grieg's hand.

"We both loved him!" he said simply. "And, Keller, I'm glad you're my kind. We don't want killers in here. We want men. I want you in the service with me! What a great power you would be for the government. It needs you! I need you! Won't you stay?"

Grieg's face lighted with pleasure. Would he stay in here with a man like Anthony Beckett? Just give him a chance to say—

"Yes!" said a soft voice at his elbow.

Grieg looked down. Marie was standing close, looking at him, and her cheeks were wet with tears, just as they had been when he had last seen her in the cabin.

Somebody, Purdy, began speaking loudly, at a distance. He was standing behind Hiller and Lobo, his rifle on them.

"What shall I do with 'em, Beckett?" he was asking. "You know, I caught 'em up in the timber with Bruno's bird call. I knew the three of 'em had seen me come down the trail and was huntin' me in the timber. Bruno was almost onto me when this fellow you call Keller come ridin' up and scared Bruno. Bruno let out the call for help, and that's where I got the idea. Hiller

and Lobo come to me like a pair of trustin' doves." He chuckled with satisfaction.

Beckett moved away, clasping Bruno tightly by the wrist, while Purdy urged his prisoners after the ranger.

MARIE and I were riding up-river to warn you not to go that way when we saw Keller and Bruno go into the water," the ranger was saying quietly. "We might have known you could handle things yourself, Purdy. As to these men—they're going outside, to prison. I'm expecting a couple of detectives in here to take the men out either to-morrow or the next day. Till then, we'll hold them in my cabin. We'll go to Craik's place and get their horses. Marie and Keller will follow when they get ready." He looked back as he spoke, and Grieg caught a half-mischievous twinkle from the ranger that made him flush.

"You ain't goin' to hand Bruno over to no detectives?" Purdy's query was incredulous.

"Purdy," said Beckett in a hard voice, "this is one time when I find it hard to stick to the law, but we rangers have to do it or we aren't any good to our service. Bruno will pay double where he's going, either with his life or life imprisonment. I couldn't do anything worse than that to him, could I, Purdy?"

"Somehow, I knew you'd help me!" Marie was speaking softly.

Grieg suddenly laughed. "I couldn't let you think I was afraid!" he admitted. "Besides, catching Bruno alive was very important to me."

She nodded as they walked toward the horses that the girl and ranger had left standing a little way up the bank.

"You look better in Mr. Beckett's clothes than he does," she commented. "You will stay here, won't you?"

Grieg swung into the saddle. "If you want me to," he said, "nobody could drive me away."

They smiled at each other, understandingly, a little self-consciously, and then the girl looked aside.

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"I wouldn't have asked you to if——" Her voice trailed off dreamily.

Grieg's glance followed hers to the river, then higher, across the ridge. The wide ribbon of elk was still coming down the mountainside in a surging, clamorous flood. Animals were swimming out into the river, breasting the current, being swept out, and down toward the funnel.

"I see them migrate across the river like this every year," said the girl. "Yet the sight never loses its fascination for me. They're coming out of the hills and going to the flats, where the grass is new and green. Sometimes they run like this day and night for a week. Everybody

wonders why they cross the river at that point. So many of them drown. Yet they do it every year."

Grieg nodded. His eyes were on the thin line of bobbing heads that reached the farther bank. Those were the strong ones, that had conquered, done the impossible. His eyes lighted at the thought of what those few symbolized for him. The knowledge of it made his heart leap for joy, brought him a deep, solid contentment. And why not? He was a part of this same wild, unburdened world to which Marie and Beckett belonged. The law that had been behind Bruno now knew the truth. Beckett knew also! And Grieg Keller was—free!

THE SKI MAKER

NEARLY all frontiersmen had some knowledge of carpentering, but a really skillful ski maker was an artist.

In the country immediately surrounding the Rocky Mountains there is no hard wood, and it is no easy matter to select a piece of straight-grained spruce, saw it into boards, and then fashion a pair of matched skis equal in length, weight and turn. The direction of the grain is important, for if it is toward the front end the ski soon becomes rough and useless. Then, too, the right amount of turn is important. The method of securing this is interesting and worth describing.

After the wood had been properly seasoned by drying, it was planed down to the desired thickness, seven eighths of an inch for a yard in the center, and sloping to three eighths at the ends. The foot straps were placed slightly to the front of the center so that, when lifted, the toe of the ski would rise first. The elaborate foot harness used by skiers to-day was unknown in frontier times. The straps consisted of heavy leather pieces laced over the toe, a small block of wood fastened under the instep preventing the foot from slipping backward.

When the skis were ready to be turned they were put in water deep enough to cover the tips—a distance of fourteen inches—and boiled until the wood was softened. They were then placed in a frame made by tacking two pieces of boards to the end of a round log of fire wood, in such a position as to hold another board three inches from the log. The toe of the ski, to be turned, was held thus firmly, and the weight of the board was generally sufficient to bend the wood. Sometimes, in cold weather, hot wet cloths were placed on the wood for an hour or two until the fibers were set. The skis were left in the frame for forty-eight hours, until the wood was thoroughly hardened again. Then they were taken out, and, when polished, were ready for use.

G. C. F.



COYOTES HANG THEMSELVES

By RAY HUMPHREYS

Author of "Shorty's Billet-doux," etc.

BUMBLEBEE BILL, so named on account of his habit of mumbling to himself, hopped jauntily from rock to rock as he crossed the bubbling, silvery trout stream. He was happy, at peace with the whole world. Bumblebee was taking a holiday from his head lettuce ranch and was spending it tramping through the woods, admiring this wild flower and that, watching the small game at play, listening to the varied music of the mountain birds. Now, as he successfully com-

pleted his rather perilous journey across the big slippery rocks, he paused to look up at the sun.

"Well, not more'n ten minutes past eleven!" he said, shading expert eyes with a big hand. "And here I am on the other side of Crystal Creek, above the falls! I got a lot of time left—maybe this would be a good opportunity for me to go on up over the shoulder of Mount Evans and take a squint at that lost valley up there where I've always intended to explore. Yes, sir, this might be just the time, seeing I got

such an early start, and ain't got nothing on my mind but my hat!"

He turned at right angles and started off through the brush, scaring up several blue jays as he went, and thinking back through the years.

"I remember when I was a little shaver," he muttered, loud enough for the startled jays to hear him had they cared to listen, "how Old Man Price, up at Slat's, used to tell me stories about lost valley. He said he killed the last wild mountain buffalo in that little valley when he was a meat contractor for the Colorado & Southern Railroad, time it pushed a line into Leadville. He said it was a sure beautiful little valley, edges all choked up with brush, no trails in or out, and plenty of big game—elk and deer and bear and cougars that—"

Bumblebee paused in his tracks and frowned slightly.

"Maybe it ain't the best idea in the world to go poking my nose up in there without my rifle," he remarked slowly. "Maybe if that valley is still the way Old Man Price left it sixty, seventy, eighty years ago, the big game may yet be there and not overly anxious to welcome no trespassing stranger such as me. Maybe I should wait till I've got my rifle before I stick my nose into any trouble."

But he started on again, shaking his head.

"Ain't no great danger of a ruckus, I guess, as long as I don't step on no she-bear with a cub!" He shrugged his broad shoulders and his blue eyes twinkled. "And if I should, I guess I can still run like the time I outdistanced that young grizzly over near Black Gopher. He never knew a two-legged animal could sprint like I did, and neither did I. But then, a seven or eight-

hundred-pound silvertip tearing down the slope certainly removes any lead that may be in a person's shoes! Well, I'll risk it."

So Bumblebee went on, whistling, gay at the thought that now, so many years after he had heard the tale from an old man's lips, he actually was going to see the lost valley. He was not quite sure, of course, that he could find it. But he remembered that Old Man Price said he had gone to it, with a span of oxen, over the comparatively gentle slope of Mount Evans's shoulder. Well, Bumblebee could do the same. But he could slice off miles here and there by going a more direct route than Price could have negotiated with a span of oxen. Once on top of the shoulder, Bumblebee felt certain that he was going to have no great trouble locating the valley. There might be several valleys visible from the high point of his climb, however, and he knew he might not be sure which one was the lost valley he sought.

"But, if one is lost up there, maybe the other two are lost also," smiled Bumblebee, watching a covey of quail march across a sun-splashed clearing toward a wild mustard tangle. "Maybe, if I don't strike the right valley I'll blunder into even a more interesting one. Old Price said, I recall, that maybe there were other lost valleys, and that maybe there were mountain bison in 'em, still hiding from Utes and the Arapahoes and the Sioux and Navajos, not knowing that the redskins were all gone away from Colorado now, except for reservations and the like."

A FAT cottontail rabbit bounced away down the slope, alarmed at Bumblebee's approach. A second later a disgusted-looking coyote jumped up

out of a weed patch and trotted off, looking back at the interloper over its shoulder.

"Well, Mr. Rabbit, I sure saved your life!" commented Bumblebee. "You were sure aiming to be lunch for that coyote."

Bumblebee stopped for a breathing spell. His climb was getting him pretty well up in the world.

"Whew! I better save my breath for walking. Reckon I'm more'n halfway to timber line! That blamed shoulder looks deceitful. I'm higher up than I figured, I guess. Maybe I'd better take it sort of easy for a bit."

He slackened his pace, and veered slightly from his original route, taking a gentler slope to the left. Almost immediately two coyotes, one full-grown and the other just a fair-sized pup, dashed out from behind a clump of wild currant bushes and scurried down the slope. Bumblebee looked around for a handy rock to heave at them, but found none.

"Dog-gone on those prairie lawyers!" he exploded. "That pair liked to startle me stiff! They're sure thick and fat and lazy up here. They probably make the night hideous, too, with their yowlings and bickerings. The old fellow as named 'em prairie lawyers knew what he was doing, I reckon!"

He continued on his way, going much slower than before. He knew it paid to take things easy when climbing, and that the proper place to sit down and actually rest was at the crest of the slope. There he could look forward to downgrade, and might also look out over a wonderful panorama of mountains and foothills and peaks, with the floating summer clouds tagging one another's shadows on the wooded slopes, and with the tiny specks he knew to be eagles skimming on al-

most motionless wings higher, even, than the playful clouds.

"I must be almost to the top," he panted as he went on. "I should have brought along one of my climbing sticks. But I reckon I can pick up one in the valley before I start back home. It would help a fellow."

He plunged along doggedly for a few more minutes. Then he stopped, looked around, stretched, and with a great sigh picked himself out a big, red, pock-marked rock for a seat. There he was virtually on a throne that commanded a vista of many hundreds of miles to all sides. Looking out over this vast domain, he was visibly impressed. He was always impressed by such sights, no matter how often he viewed them. Here, spread out before him, was the world—the better part of it, anyway—the part that appealed to him. There were the forests, deep, dark, often mysterious; the canyons, black ribbons winding around the mountain bases; the high, flat mesas, golden now in the splendor of the early afternoon sun; the lakes, sparkling in blinding glory; the silvery necklace of streams, and the occasional scintillating curtain of some distant waterfall. Bumblebee drank in the view greedily.

"Gee whiskers!" he exclaimed. "This sure is some spread of nature."

He heard a noise to his right. He pivoted, to see another coyote sitting hardly more than a hundred feet away. It got up, yawned, and slouched off.

"And I didn't bring a rifle," Bumblebee complained disgustedly. "The place is full of 'em—and they're the fattest, most insolent coyotes I ever saw. There can't be much small game around here with them devils so blasted thick. And yet they all look nice and fat."

Pondering on that, Bumblebee re-

luctantly deserted his temporary throne and started down the slope. But soon his steps became elastic, eager, again. He had picked the valley directly beneath him as the lost valley he had heard about so many long years before. He could not see it all from his present position because of a jutting prominence. As he went down, very cautiously, for the shoulder was steeper on this side than it had been on the other, he could see less and less of the valley. He could tell, however, that it was dense with vegetation, heavily wooded, well watered. No doubt there would be a great deal of wild life there. He pressed forward eagerly.

"I should have brought a pack and camped here overnight," he said.

But when he reached the foot of the mountain, having descended the last twenty feet or so atop a miniature landslide, he was surprised to find a trail. He looked at it carefully.

"Maybe an old game trail, but there's been horses along it!"

A big coyote came trotting along, saw Bumblebee, and dived off into the brush.

"I swanny!" exploded the explorer. "This must be a coyote paradise!"

THEN, before he could take another step, he heard something else coming along the trail. He quickly followed the cue of the coyote and stepped nimbly back into the thick shrubbery. He was just in time, too, for a gaunt old cow came lumbering up the trail, followed by a white-faced calf. Then came a rider on a wiry little mustang.

They all passed Bumblebee at a merry clip. Bumble held his breath.

"Well, what do you know about

that!" he exploded as he emerged on the trail again. "Cattle up here, and human beings! I guess things have sure changed in this old valley, or else it isn't the lost valley I've been looking for." He frowned and scratched his head. "Things have come to a pretty pass when the wilderness has to be all cluttered up with cows and cowboys! But there's one sure thing from what I just saw—there's an easier way to get in this place than the route I came!"

A rustling behind Bumblebee caused him to turn. But it was only another frightened coyote jumping away.

"Well, for the love of Mike!" Bumblebee said sourly. He liked animals, but he liked coyotes the least. They were such skulkers. And they were too hard on hen roosts and duck ponds around Bumblebee's home place. He shook his head sadly, thinking of the coyote scourge, and moved on along the damp, shaded trail. He had progressed about a quarter of a mile when he again paused, his eyes wide this time, his mouth open.

Ahead of him, off the trail to the right, over the limb of a tree, was the hide of a cow. The hide was turned, hair side up. It had been a rather crude job of skinning, apparently.

"Well, well, well!" said Bumblebee, stopping to regard the sight in detail. "That brindle cow sure was a peculiarly marked—"

"Keep your claws where I can see 'em!" said a gruff voice behind Bumblebee, and the tone, more than the words, caused him to stiffen into immediate obedience. It was a cruel, hard voice—one, Bumblebee knew, that must belong to a mighty tough-looking customer. In that he was not mistaken. The man finally stepped around into sight, a long six-

gun in one hand, staring hard at Bumblebee.

"What are you nosing around here for?"

"I was taking a little stroll, was all," Bumblebee said quietly. He stared at his questioner, saw that the man was a stranger to him. "I came down off the slope of Mount Evans, found this trail, and——"

"And then found that cowhide, eh?" snarled the gunman.

"Well, I was looking at it," Bumblebee admitted ruefully. "But I didn't aim to steal it!"

"Got a rod on you?" asked the stranger.

"I got no gun," protested Bumblebee. "I'm a peaceful fellow. I live southwest of here, beyond Mount Evans quite a ways."

"You're sure a long ways from home, then, ain't you?"

"I sure am. But I didn't figure on trespassing. I was just looking for a lost valley I once heard about up here, that's all."

The stranger appraised Bumblebee insolently, and Bumblebee flushed a little under the scrutiny. But he waited for the next question.

"You interested in cattle, brother?" asked the man. Bumblebee decided that this was not the fellow he had seen on the cow pony.

"Oh," said Bumblebee, "I got a few head. But I'm not a cattleman, if that's what you mean. I'm more of a farmer, I reckon."

"You ain't from the M Lazy J, then, or the Bar B? Or the Hanev ranch? Or the Castle Cattle Company?"

"Nope!" Bumblebee shook his head. "I never even heard of them—where they located?"

"You ain't got no business asking questions, stranger," replied the man. "If I ever catch you poking your freckled nose——"

THERE was a sudden clatter of hoofs, and the man that Bumblebee had previously seen hazing the cow and the calf up the trail appeared. He leaped from his horse, a heavy quirt in his hand, and advanced, growling.

"Who is this bozo, Slim?"

"He's a tourist," said "Slim," with an ugly laugh. "At least, so he says. He ain't got a gun, and acts plenty dumb. Claims he just wandered up here. I caught him sizing up this here hide!"

"Plug him—and toss him over the cliff!" advised the newcomer.

"No," said the man called Slim. "But I aim to teach him not to come snooping in this valley again. Down the trail for you, fellow! You're a trespasser, brother, and you ain't got no right here!" Slim advanced, his face twitching. Then, before Bumblebee knew what was happening, the man had clenched his fists and drove a hard right to Bumblebee's chin. Bumblebee went staggering. The other man, lifting his quirt, brought it down with force across Bumblebee's shoulders. Then Slim slammed Bumblebee along the left side of the head, all but dazing him. Bumblebee backed off, fighting mad, but aware of the fact that any resistance on his part would probably bring a bullet.

"I'm going; leave me alone," he protested.

"You come back," snarled the man with the quirt, "and I'll personally finish you off. I'll cut you down to size with hot lead!"

Bumblebee's lips tightened into a thin line. He wanted to tell that man what he really was, wade in, twist the quirt out of his hand, and give the fellow some of his own medicine. But he knew it would be suicide. He fought to swallow the

hot words that welled up in his throat.

"What we just told you goes until the last dog is hung!" cried Slim with a prelude of profanity. "You ever come back here, you numskull, and you'll never leave again. Only the fact that you're an idiot saves you this time. Trespassers, even fool ones, don't come back here twice!"

Bumblebee nodded. He could still feel the sting of the blows, the fire of the quirt. He didn't dare trust himself to speak. He turned about and went down the trail, fully expecting to be shot. He could hear Slim and the other man in hot argument as he walked. Apparently the man with the quirt was in favor of more punishment for him. Bumblebee, his brain in a whirl, increased his stride. He was going down the trail, but he didn't know where the trail led. He should go back over the shoulder of Mount Evans if he was heading for his home. But he had been ordered to go down the trail. Orders, under such circumstances, really were orders.

"I start out for a walk," mumbled Bumblebee when he was sure he was out of earshot of his late chance acquaintances, "and I walk into a fist and a quirt, to say nothing of a brindle cowhide and a whole army of coyotes, all in a supposedly lost valley! It ain't right. That brindle cowhide ain't right—nor the coyotes, human and otherwise—or the one-sided licking I took. And now, to cap the climax, where am I going?"

He sneaked a look over his shoulder. He could see no one behind him.

"I'm out of that dog-gone valley, anyway," he grunted, looking up at the canyon walls now closing in on him from both sides of the trail.

"Like as not they'll keep a watch back yonder, though."

He stepped off into a thicket and sat down.

"I'm too tired," he groaned, "and also too mad to go home now. When I think of the treatment that pair of jackals gave me, free, I get a longing to see them evil faces again right away! But I better hadn't let them see me. Next time they'd probably skin me alive!"

He rubbed his sore face and nodded.

"Them fellows are flint-hearted, sure enough. They said something about waiting until the last dog was hung! They would be the sort to hang some poor innocent pooch. They probably referred to some poor dogs that barked at their cattle. Well, they can keep on hanging dogs until—until I get my hands on them. When I do—"

Bumblebee looked up at the sky, visible, in places, through the canopy of leaves. It was as if he was making some sort of solemn vow.

"I'll get even for everything—including the hung dogs, Barbara Jane, and anything and everybody and everything!"

HE stood up, trying to forget his sore shoulders, where the quirt had cut. He hesitated long enough to get his bearings, then went back up in the direction from whence he had come—but not on the trail. He traveled deep in the brush, watching every step he took, all eyes, all ears. On the way he picked up a heavy piece of wood. If necessary, he could use it, he decided. His plans were still a little hazy.

"I got to see what sort of a layout they've got up here, and how many of 'em they are," he muttered. "I got to do that much, and maybe I can do it without getting caught."

"I reckon they have no dogs, if they've been hanging 'em."

He advanced so cautiously, so cat-like, that it took him quite a while to reach the spot where he had been first surprised by Slim. There was no sign of any one there now. The brindle cowhide was still there, however. Bumblebee longed to examine it more closely, but didn't dare.

He jumped as he saw a movement in the timber up the slope. But it was only another coyote. He shook a fist at it, but held his peace.

"This ought to be called Coyote Valley, judging from its inhabitants," he muttered. He went on, following the trail, but not on it. He pushed through high grasses and dense thickets, tearing his skin and his clothes, but he didn't mind. He was intent on one thing only.

"I got to see what this layout looks like!" he repeated doggedly.

It took him an hour, however, to penetrate far enough into the little valley to see anything of importance. The first thing he did see was smoke. Then, peeking out from his cover, he saw the precious pair that had so mistreated him. They were busy near a fire. One look satisfied Bumblebee.

"Branding the calf I saw that jasper chasing up the trail," he said. "Yep, there's the mamma cow in that corral yonder. Well, it seems like Slim and Mr. Quirt are the whole works here." He saw a rifle leaned against a tree at the far side of the clearing. "Now, if there's no dogs left here unhung, I'll just snatch that rifle."

Twenty minutes later, having encountered no dogs, and having moved forward with the stealth of a lynx, Bumblebee reached the vicinity of the rifle. He waited until both men in the clearing were busy over a second calf, and then reached out

and seized the weapon. After that he faded quickly back into the brush. He waited long enough to make sure that there was no immediate uproar, no pursuit. Then, caressing the rifle, he stepped deeper into the undergrowth, mumbling.

"If they've got cattle here I think I better take a good squint at 'em," he decided grimly. "Nothing like being thorough in these little matters. If good old Barbara Jane was here, she'd advise me that way, I reckon. Yes, sir, I still have considerable scouting around to do before dark!"

He scouted, moving alertly, careful to guard against any surprise attack from the rear. As he had half-way expected, the little valley proved to be of rather limited area. He soon found a system of corrals and edged toward them hopefully. In the first he found a small bunch of fairly husky calves. He looked them over critically. The second corral was empty. The third held several calves that were bawling pitifully. Probably orphans, he thought. The fourth corral was larger, and held fifteen or twenty cows with small calves by their side. Bumblebee stared, then worked his way to the far end of the corral and saw that there was no fence there—just a drop, straight down, of several hundred feet.

"That's the cliff, I reckon, that Mr. Quirt wanted to hurl me over!"

Breathlessly, Bumblebee worked his way to the brink and stared down in the gathering dusk. He was prepared for almost anything, but not for what he did see. Below lay a huge pile of bleached bones and carcasses. A group of coyotes was there, feeding leisurely and luxuriously. Bumblebee withdrew from the dangerous position.

"Well," he exclaimed, "I reckon

that accounts for the horde of prairie lawyers infesting this place. Plenty of beef! But why would these guys be butchering and shoving the beef over the cliff to the coyotes? Why would they have a corral on the brink of this drop, unfenced at that end? I got to take a little walk down below, that's all there is to it."

IT was hard going to the bottom, but eventually, just as the moon came up, Bumblebee made it. He stepped out of the shadows toward the huge bone yard and a coyote, bolder than the rest, snapped at him. Bumblebee was prepared. He swung the rifle butt, and there was one less coyote guest at the feast. Bumblebee stalked on, grumbling.

"Don't dare to shoot without alarming them human coyotes!"

He examined the coyotes' banquet hall with interest, then started to count the carcasses, but gave it up. There were too many. Skeletons, bones, were everywhere. But he noticed that all the carcasses were those of grown animals. There were no calves or yearlings. Further, there were no hides. Apparently the animals had been killed and skinned before being pushed off the cliff above. Bumblebee frowned. Then, an idea forming in his mind, he went back along the route he had come, carefully retrieved the dead coyote, which turned out to be a huge specimen, and started back up toward the high corral on the cliff.

"Maybe I am dumb and perhaps I act dumb," he muttered, "but once in a while even the dumbest oyster may have an inspiration. I figure I've got one now, by gosh!"

The moon, coming up across the range, flooded everything with a soft, silvery shroud. Bumblebee went on; he knew the route now. He

reached the top of the cliff in due time and rested there a bit in the shadow. Then, lugging the rifle in one hand and the dead coyote in the other, he started back, in the shadows of the trees, for the shack he had seen. He made no effort to hurry. He wanted to kill off a little time, anyway.

"Them hombres probably go to bed early—I hope," he muttered.

Once Bumblebee stopped, stooped, and picked up a length of wire he saw glistening in the moonlight. He hesitated long enough to twist one end of it around the coyote's neck. Then he proceeded, smiling.

"I reckon a coyote can substitute for a dog in an emergency!"

At length, creeping forward breathlessly, Bumblebee came within sight of the cabin. There were no lights. Evidently the two men had retired for the night, or else they weren't home at all. Bumblebee looked about the little clearing. There was no sign of life there. He took a long breath, and wondered if he was doing right in risking himself out there in the moonlight, where he would be an easy target for any one in the shack.

"Well, I got to do it, risk or no risk!"

He stepped out slowly, still carrying the rifle and his coyote. He made for the pine tree that stood some fifteen feet from the cabin door, and almost directly before it. He put down his rifle, put the wire over a low limb, and hoisted the coyote up, twisting the wire to stay. Then he stooped, picked up a small rock and his rifle, and retired to the shadows.

"Now!" he breathed, and hurled the rock at the cabin door. The result was just as he wanted it. The rock struck the door with a bang. Then, for a minute, all was silent.

"Who's that?" came a muffled call from within the shack finally.

There came another interval of silence, and Bumblebee was looking around for another rock when he saw the shack door open a few inches. Then a head was poked out. Then came an excited exclamation.

"Come here, Slim!" came the startled cry. "There's something hanging—"

Another head popped out the door.

"What's coming off, anyway?" came Slim's sleepy voice. "What is it?"

"Looks like a coyote committing suicide," said the other man. "I heard something that woke me up. I don't know just what it was, though."

"You go out and look," said Slim, rubbing his eyes.

"Well, you come on along with me," said the other man.

THEY stepped out of the dark doorway and slipped quietly through the moonlight, approaching the tree cautiously. Slim was in the lead, his partner right behind him. Slim stopped several feet from the tree.

"It's a blasted coyote that has hung himself," began Slim. "It—"

Bumblebee, his rifle ready, fired once. The fur flew from the head of the suspended coyote. The two men whirled in a panic.

"Don't even so much as bat an eyelid, gents," cried Bumblebee, stepping out with his rifle ready. "One gasp and I'll shoot you both! Lift your hands away up! And keep 'em up! It's just me, the dumb-looking and dumb-acting bozo, come back to thank you for your hospitality this afternoon!"

Bumblebee halted at a convenient distance from his shivering captives.

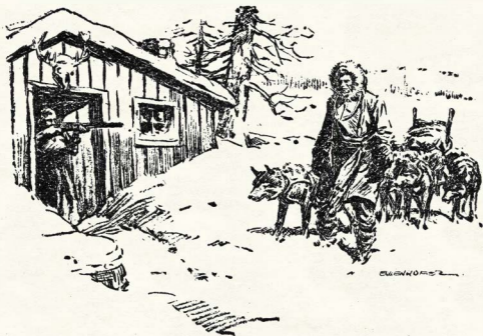
"If I was as low-down as you two I'd shoot you now in cold blood," he continued. "But, barring accidents, I got other plans for you. I know now why strangers aren't welcome in this valley. I'm referring especially to Barbara Jane, also! You two eggs probably don't know Barbara Jane. Well, that's her hide hanging down the valley here, over that tree limb. The brindle hide. The brand's cut out, but I know the brindle pattern in Barbara Jane's hide by heart. Further, Barbara Jane and her calf has been missing from my place for a number of weeks!"

He advanced a step or two threateningly.

"Further, you buzzards; I think I saw a little Barbara Jane in your corral with a strange brand on her. I saw a lot of calves there with the brand I figure must be yours, but in another corral I see calves with your brand nursing cows with various other brands. You got just a nice little rustling proposition here, is all. You kill the old stuff as soon as the calves are weaned and toss the carcasses over the cliff to the coyotes, thus destroying the evidence. Well, you cheap outlaws, you're going back into town with me, and if there's any funny business, just recall how you treated me this afternoon and how ready I must be to give you what you got coming—see?"

Bumblebee laughed at his two trembling prisoners.

"I might also remind both of you gentlemen," he remarked emphatically, "that while the last dog may or may not be hung—you two know best about that—the last coyote isn't hung yet. No, sir, not by a dog-gone jugful! You two just smoke on that as you march in ahead of this rifle!"



CARIBOU JIM'S GOLDBLOCKS

By PAUL ELLSWORTH TRIEM

Author of "Terror in the Tundra," etc.

THE thermometer stood at fifty-five degrees below zero when "Caribou Jim" left Shuganak. Through the ghostly twilight of arctic winter, his dogs sped like wraiths.

They were on a "portage trail." That meant that the cold was not quite as intense as down on the frozen river, but it was deadly cold for all that—"strong cold," the kind that turns living men into bone-white statues in a matter of minutes. Only constant and swift motion was safe.

The burly, bearded musher in hooded parka, moose-hide breeches, and mukluks, raced behind his basket sled—lightly, despite his great weight. He was alone with the cold, and with his dogs. The one was his enemy, but it was an honest one. The malamutes were his friends.

His goal was a ghost town of the arctic, a mushroom village of log huts, abandoned in the stampede of three years ago. "Caribou Jim" meant to hole up there till the cold snap broke. He had a cache of dried salmon and of rice and tallow, for

the dogs, hidden above the rafters of one of the cabins.

The trail was one over which the mail for the interior country had been hauled, nearly a month ago. Since then no one had traveled it. But the frozen foundation was still there, so that Caribou Jim didn't have to break trail for the dogs.

Six hours out from Shuganak the lead dog gave a couple of staccato yelps and swerved. Jim yelled through the scarf that muffled his face; but the other dogs followed their leader, then came to a dead stop, whining, one of them raising his banshee howl into the still, frozen air.

Caribou Jim tramped forward. Something lay beside the trail, partly in it.

A dead sled dog—not a good one; one of the kind called "Siwash dogs." There was the mark of a harness on his pelt, and for a moment Caribou Jim thought that he had died from starvation. Then he saw clotted blood around a bullet hole.

He grunted. Sluing the sled back into the track, he sent the long, snakelike lash of his whip hissing out.

"Mush!" he cried.

They hadn't lost more than a minute, but he could feel the cold penetrating to his spinal marrow. The malemutes fled on through the twilight. Half a mile farther along the trail, in a narrow slot between walls of spruce, the dogs again yelped and swerved, and there lay a second sled dog—shot through the lungs.

Jim wasted nearly two minutes, this time. The spruce thicket had protected the trail, and a film of loose snow on top showed footprints. Staring down through the ice that gathered on his eyelashes, Caribou Jim saw something that brought a faint stir to his stolid heart. After

the second Siwash dog had been shot, two people had pulled the sled. And they had been going for dear life down that portage trail!

When he resumed his journey, Caribou Jim went ahead of the malemutes, scanning not only the trail, but the wooded hills on each side. Those two dogs had been shot within the last twelve hours—shot, apparently, from a distance.

The big man stopped, stared briefly ahead, then broke into a trot. Something else dark and disturbing lay in the trail.

Not a dog, this time. A man lay on his back, his body contorted in the final spasm of death.

His hands were bare and frozen white. His face looked as if it had been carved out of marble. Caribou Jim knew better than to try to move him. In this deadly cold, the man's arms would snap like porcelain.

The stranger was young, not more than twenty-five. And he had been shot through the chest.

Caribou Jim guided the growling dogs round the body. Again they went forward. Five minutes later he saw the black, silent huts.

SMOKE curled from one chimney. Caribou Jim, advancing cautiously before his malemutes, approached this building. The door jerked open, a rifle barrel was thrust through the slot, red fire streamed at the musher. But the bullet went over his head, and the next instant he caught a woman's voice, raised in a quavering cry of pain and despair.

Caribou Jim sprinted for the hut. He reached the door and swung it open.

She lay on the floor—a muffled figure, the face turned toward Caribou Jim. The room was warm. His smoldering eyes roved over it, and he

saw the big sheet-steel stove glowing cherry-red.

He turned, closed the door from the outside, and quickly unharnessed his dogs. He opened the door and muttered a command. Plumy tails waving, the malemutes swung past him into the cabin.

Caribou Jim crossed to the woman's side and knelt down. He heard the rattle in her throat. There was caked blood on the woolen garments in which she was muffled.

"Who did it, missus?" the musher demanded. "Talk, if you can!"

She said something that sounded like "alien." He bent over till his face almost touched her lips.

Again she whispered. Caribou Jim straightened as if he had been struck.

"Baby—my baby—Aileen!"

Her head turned slowly sidewise. The breath in her throat became more stertorous, then abruptly ceased.

Caribou Jim slowly stood up. There was a bunk in the farther corner. Caribou Jim hadn't seen it when he entered, but now his eyes were adjusted to the gloom.

He walked heavily across the room. The bunk seemed to be covered with blankets and robes. Jim stooped, and with fingers that felt tingling and numb he reached down and began to draw the covers away.

Shrill and insistent there came the cry of a young human animal.

Caribou Jim's hand grew still, then drew back the last blanket. Lying there, pink and warm but obviously filled with some mysterious *Weltschmerz* of babyhood, was a tiny thing with wide, baby-blue eyes and a tangle of fire gold hair.

The infant cried as if she were singing. There was a plaintive melody in that tiny voice. Caribou Jim felt a moment of panic.

Then he clumsily picked her up, held her in front of him. A baby girl—pink, warm, hungry! There was no mistaking that dinner call. Even a young dog knows it.

Jim put her back on the bunk, covered her over, turned to stare into the hut. He was traveling light. He had a cache of dog feed in another of the abandoned huts, but the stiff dry fish and the tallow and rice wouldn't do. Such a thing as tinned milk he never carried.

He saw the sled the dead woman had dragged on to the cabin after the man with her—probably her husband, the baby's father—had been killed. Everything had been tumbled out of it, apparently in a frenzied race to get the blankets. The hut had been cold when they arrived.

A tableau of what had happened formed before Caribou Jim's eyes. These two young people from somewhere in the interior country had set out for the mission at Yakut, probably on account of the baby.

And they had been trailed, shot down, till now only the tiny thing on the bed was left alive! Who had done it? And why?

To answer that question, Caribou Jim crossed to the tumbled things on the floor, beside the sled. He moved them about with his foot.

A skillet, a meager supply of flour, and some dried moose meat; then some—

CARIBOU JIM dropped to his knees. He had uncovered a deer-hide sack. It was so heavy he couldn't roll it over. He removed his mittens, fumbled at the drawstring. It came away, and he drew open the mouth of the sack and crouched, staring.

Gold—raw, virgin gold! A great mass of it! A cache of gold so heavy

Caribou Jim hadn't been able to roll it over with his foot! What it all meant formed before his burning eyes.

These two poor young creatures—so poverty-stricken that their entire outfit, including the dead Siwash dogs, wasn't worth a hundred dollars—had gambled with privation and death, and had won! Won and lost.

He stood up, teeth slowly clenching. Into his eyes there came a red spark.

They had been marked down, pursued, murdered, for that sack of gold. Some trail vulture had watched them gather it and had swooped to possess it.

The baby was crying, softly, rhythmically. The sound brought a sudden contraction of the muscles of Caribou Jim's neck and jaw.

He knelt again and went through the stuff on the floor. He got up, walked to the stove, looked all around it.

They had been practically out of grub. That was why they had defied the strong cold of arctic mid-winter to reach Yahut.

There was nothing here for the baby to eat. For the first time in years, Caribou Jim felt the clutch of panic at his heart.

Then he steadied. He put aside the problem of the killer. He would come to that later.

The thing he had to do was to get this tiny thing through the remaining miles of the frozen trail to Fort Yahut.

Of course, it was impossible. No amount of covering would protect any living thing from the searching cold. But Caribou Jim was a man well acquainted with trouble. He looked round the cabin and saw against one wall a row of blackened niggerhead rocks, each as large as a

cannon ball. Some canny prospector had used those for warming his bed.

Now the big man in the parka and moose-hide trousers got to work. First he replenished the stove from a pile of pine in one corner.

Into the fire box he heaved the rocks. Then he took a look at the baby. It had dropped asleep.

Caribou Jim walked to the door, opened it, and peered outside. His sled was close to the cabin.

He stepped out, reached it, dragged it inside. Every moment he expected to hear the splintering crack of smokeless powder.

But he got the sled into the cabin, unlashed it, and turned it over. Out came Caribou Jim's meager outfit. In the basketlike interior he replaced his robes and blankets, draping them over the sides.

Walking over to the bunk, he saw that under the tarpaulin there was a layer of slough hay. He hauled this out.

The baby continued to sleep. Caribou Jim filled the sled with hay. He remembered a man on one of the creeks who had made a cooking box with hay and hot stones. The inventor told Jim the thing would hold cooking heat for nearly twenty-four hours.

Now Caribou Jim was making a fireless cooker—for a baby. He fished out the rocks when they were as hot as he dared use them. He worked them into the hay.

The last step before harnessing the malemutes was to put the baby into this new sleeping hole. Jim tiptoed over, stooped, and again picked up the baby.

This time she didn't cry. She stared up into Jim's face and cooed. With consternation he realized that she thought he was going to feed her.

Caribou Jim lifted the blankets

from the bunk and carried them and the baby back to the sled. He rolled her up and tucked her into the improvised cradle. She set up a protesting wail.

Placing the bag of gold near her feet, Jim lashed the covers into place. She wouldn't have much air, but he'd have to risk that.

He harnessed the dogs. He was beginning, now, to think of the killer—waiting for him, somewhere outside the shanty.

Caribou Jim turned, stooped, and picked up the carbine which the woman now dead had fired at him. He threw down the lever, and an empty shell came out. But the magazine was empty. She had fired her last cartridge at him.

He stood scowling down at the carbine. He was carrying no arms on this midwinter trek for dog feed. Now he had an empty gun with which to drive off this mysterious killer.

No matter—the baby had to be taken to Fort Yakut.

Caribou Jim opened the cabin door and gave the dogs a lift in getting the sled over the bare planks.

THE "strong cold" was waiting for him. He held the empty carbine under his arm, hoping that sight of it would make the other man, waiting and watching, cautious.

The dogs straightened away; the leader drew the lead line taut. Jim's whip hissed out.

"Mush!" he cried.

They were off in a whirl of powdery snow. Through the desolate camp, with its deserted cabins. On, down the long slope of a hill.

It was nearly half an hour later when Jim heard behind him the first crashing shot, and felt the tip of his parka hood twitch.

He whirled, jerked up his carbine. He could see nothing but the black masses of fir and spruce.

The dogs had gone flying on, and Caribou Jim turned and sprinted after them. They knew the trail.

Downhill, and on through a narrow valley—and again the rifle back there cracked. This time one of the dogs leaped high in air and fell kicking.

Clumsily, expecting each moment to hear the crash of a second shot, Caribou Jim with his mittened fingers got the dying dog loose. It was the youngest of his malemutes, the baby of the team.

He felt his eyes burn, felt the heavy throb of his heart.

The death glaze came into the dog's eyes; the final rigor stiffened its body.

Caribou Jim lurched to his feet. The lash of his long whip flicked out. "Mush—mush!" he snarled. "Faster, you devils!"

The lead line straightened; the dogs went flying on along the trail. But Caribou Jim trotted behind them only as far as the first thicket.

It was only a matter of time, he knew, before the man with the rifle would pick off the rest of his dogs, then drop Caribou Jim with a soft-nosed bullet through the chest. Then he would come creeping up to the sled, with its amazing burden. The musher could see mittened hands closing round the baby's throat. He could hear her last cry—

So he followed the racing malemutes only as far as the thicket, then pushed in at the side of the trail—and waited.

The creak of runners, the occasional yelp of the lead dog, died in the far distance. The dogs knew the trail to Yakut, and they would follow it. The silence of the strong

cold, which is like the silence of death itself, closed down around Caribou Jim.

It lasted so long that he became uneasy. Perhaps the killer had guessed his ruse.

Eerie and ghostlike, there came the pad of racing feet, and the fierce, hot breathing of dogs.

Caribou Jim gripped his carbine, took a stealthy step nearer the trail. They were coming downhill.

Suddenly he saw them. They weren't malemutes, like Caribou Jim's dogs. There was Husky blood in them, and something else—Siberian hound, perhaps. Long-legged, gaunt, they ran with heads thrust down and forward.

A muffled figure ran behind. For an instant Caribou Jim peered at the face of the killer. Like his own, it was muffled and indistinguishable.

Then he leaped forward. The dogs had hurtled by, and the figure behind the sled was just opposite when Caribou Jim struck with the clubbed carbine. The blow struck glancingly. Next instant fire flamed in Caribou Jim's face. He felt the searing sting of a bullet creasing his skull.

Without being able to throw out his arms to break his fall, he felt himself strike the frozen ground.

WHEN he opened his eyes, his head throbbed with a sluggish pulse. His heart was slowing; he would soon be frozen stiff and brittle. This thought came creeping through his numbed brain before he remembered how he had come here. When he did remember, with a lunge and a groan he sat up.

Here was where Caribou Jim's burly middle came in handy. A leaner man would never have waked. But after a minute Caribou Jim got to his feet and began to swing his

half-paralyzed arms, banged them against his parka.

Lurching like a drunken man back and forth through the dwarf trees, he staggered into the trail and set off doggedly in pursuit of the two racing dog team.

Hopeless? Of course it was hopeless. Caribou Jim knew that.

Slowly life came back to him. He thought with dull wonder that no one would believe his story. But that was unimportant, as he would never tell it.

The trail led on through that meandering valley, then straightened away over a hill.

It must have been nearly an hour later that the track forked. To the right ran the portage trail—on over tortuous hills and through crooked valleys. Down to the left sled tracks showed, heading for the river.

Jim understood. His malemutes had run like fiends. The killer had been hard pressed to keep anywhere near them.

Now he had taken a short cut—over the ice.

"He knows this country!" Caribou Jim muttered. "He'll head off my dogs at the forks of the Tanyaka!"

The big man went down through a narrow cleft in snow-covered rocks and came out on the river. Straight away before him over the snow-crusted ice led the sled tracks. He swung up his muffled head.

Far downstream, milky vapor rose above the ice. Vapor—in this land where in winter even smoke falls, deprived of its heat as it leaves the chimney! Caribou Jim had not seen a mist like that over a river trail as far back as he could remember.

But the sled tracks led downstream. He broke into a steady trot. He reached the nearer margin of the mist, turned, and angled close to the left bank of the Tanyaka.

On again, with the river swinging in great curves toward the Arctic Ocean. Caribou Jim came around a bend—and there again he drew himself up to stare ahead.

He raised one heavily mittened hand and rubbed the frost from his lashes. Far away, downstream, diminutive black specks showed midway between the wooded shores.

Caribou Jim jerked his elbows close to his sides and trotted on. He kept inshore for another mile, then paused for a nearer inspection of the activity out near the middle of the river.

Gaunt wolf dogs, hitched to a sled, were circling a man who stood waist-deep in water. The man was whipping himself about, swinging his gaunt body right and left, backward and forward. He was yelling madly at his dogs.

"Klondike—Nero—Belle! You curs, come here!"

The white vapor eddied above the blowhole. And the dogs circled it warily, knowing the danger of wetting their feet in this weather.

As Caribou Jim struck out cautiously from shore, the sled dogs saw him and, with bared fangs and eyes of green fire, came racing toward him.

He stood still.

"Call off your dogs, stranger!" he shouted.

The killer stood glaring at Caribou Jim. Then he began to scream at the dogs.

"Back! Back, you devils! Nero—Belle—"

BUT the dogs came plunging on. Caribou Jim saw the leader, a great black brute with foam on his muzzle, rise in a tigerlike spring. His mittened hand shot out, and the dog bounced back like a punching bag.

It fell sprawling. For an instant the team milled about, jerking at the thongs which held them to the leadline. Caribou Jim jumped over some of them, kicked one snapping gray dog aside, bent over the sled. Grasping a bone-handled dog whip, he backed away, swinging out the lash.

Caribou Jim could do strange things with a dog whip. Now he split some of those sharp ears and opened a slit on the leader's nose. He could as easily have flicked out eyes, cut finger-deep slashes.

The dogs slunk back, and Caribou Jim again faced the blowhole. Narrowly he inspected the strange figure out there. It was that of a man of uncertain age, with a kind of rusty forelock, braided, hanging over his gaunt face.

"Didn't you know you'd run into overflow water, when you saw the mist?" Caribou Jim grunted. "What's your name?"

"Get me out of this!" the killer snarled. His teeth chattered, and under his parka his shoulders shook.

Caribou Jim moved warily. Abruptly he again stopped.

"Where's your rifle?" he growled. "There! Frozen under! The water belched over it!"

Jim could see the gun under a thick, smooth covering of blue ice. He came a couple of steps nearer—

Without warning, the ice under his feet crunched like rotten wood. Caribou Jim shot down, and icy water, gushing out of this new blowhole, rose swiftly toward his waist.

He tried to lunge out before he was firmly set, but only wedged his feet in deeper.

From across the intervening space, the killer yelled hoarsely:

"See what you've done! If I had a gun—"

"Look out—I'm going to throw

you an end of the whip!" Caribou Jim growled. "Get a solid hold on it and we can pull each other out!"

Jim felt the numbing cold of the water, but his mukluks and moosehide trousers kept it away from his skin. He sent the lash out and saw it land around the killer's shoulders.

Then, teeth clenched, warily eyeing each other, they began fighting for freedom. Caribou Jim felt the ice loosening its grip on his feet—

Across the freezing overflow, the other man came plunging out of his blowhole. With a wild yell he leaped forward, stumbling, nearly falling—then jerked from under his parka a long-bladed hunting knife.

Caribou Jim whirled back the lash of the whip. Before the man rushing upon him could dodge or draw back, that hissing tentacle circled his parka hood. The hard-plaited cracker caught him across the eyes.

He whipped his mittened hands to his face and stumbled to his knees, then lay down and rolled with agony.

Caribou Jim tilted forward and got his hands on the edge of the firm ice. He wallowed up out of the blowhole, straightened, and for an instant stood staring down at that writhing figure.

THEN he turned back toward the killer's sled. With the captured whip cracking like a pistol, he drove the dogs back and unfastened the lashings. Underneath he found a small tent and a sheet-iron stove. Fifteen minutes later he had the tent up and a fire roaring from the chimney.

While water was heating for a great pot of tea, he searched his captive and found another razor-edged knife, which he contemptuously threw aside. Bloodshot eyes opened and blinked up at the burly musher. Caribou Jim stared somberly back.

He saw wolflike cruelty and an evil hope.

Neither man spoke. When the tea was steeped, Caribou Jim poured a portion of it down the killer's throat. He saw warmth and life coming back into the gaunt face.

"He'll live to be hanged," Jim thought. "Freezing to death was too good for the likes of him—it would have been over too quick! He won't shoot no more dogs!"

In the mind of Caribou Jim, the murder of the man and woman was almost secondary. They'd had some chance to fight back.

When he drove into Fort Yakut and headed down the main street toward the mission, he saw startled faces staring out at him from road house and dance hall. Later, turning his prisoner over to a deputy marshal, Jim told his story in his own way.

"This trail buzzard killed a man an' his wife, so I run him down an' brought him in. You'll find the bodies in that ghost camp on Porphyry Creek."

A young woman in a stiffly starched uniform came hurriedly into the room and tugged at Jim's sleeve.

"Mr.—Mr. Caribou Jim," she said, "we've got the baby in here—and the gold! We all think you're the—"

Caribou Jim tried to free himself. "It wasn't me—it was my dogs!" he muttered. "Now I got to go see how they're feeling, miss!"

"Indeed you shan't!" the nurse cried excitedly. "The baby is in here—the sweetest, prettiest little thing— Why, it's practically your baby, Mr. Caribou Jim!"

His knees shook under him. He looked imploringly at the deputy marshal, who was handcuffing his wolflike prisoner.

Jim tried to hang back, but the nurse towed him into a room where two other nurses stood near a glowing stove, holding the atom Caribou Jim had salvaged from the strong cold.

A tiny creature, pink-cheeked, blue-eyed, with a halo of fluffy golden curls! Jim's throat was dry as he stood staring down in an agony of apprehension.

He'd seen Indian children draw back behind their mothers at sight of his ugly, whiskered face. Now he—

The baby gave a bounce. She

gazed in obvious delight up into the musher's eyes. A diminutive hand came out, fastened itself in Caribou Jim's beard.

"Here—you hold her!" the nurse said.

The baby rollicked in his arms, gurgling and cooing. Caribou Jim felt his great body relax.

"Perty cute!" he muttered. "An' she's got a cute name. Aileen! Lemme sit down, miss—I feel kind of shaky!"

And for the first time that any one in the Northland could remember, Caribou Jim smiled.

*Coming Next Week, "PEACEFUL PETERS DECLARES WAR,"
by W. C. TUTTLE.*

NEW YORK COWBOYS

PERHAPS there is no career the wide world over that appeals to so many boys as that of cowboy. Stern business men, teachers, lecturers, even ministers will tell you that their youthful ambition was to be none other than a dashing cowboy. There is something about the outdoor life of the range rider that appeals to the romantic urge in each small boy's heart.

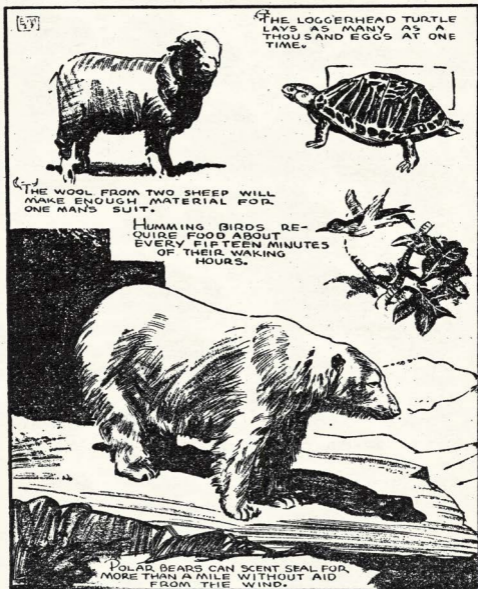
One would consider New York City with its tall buildings and paved streets a far cry from the great open spaces, but even here there are cowboys, or at least, there used to be. A recent tunnel opened in New York between Thirtieth and Sixtieth streets is the cause of this vanishing buckaroo.

It was in 1850 that a city ordinance was passed requiring that a mounted cowboy precede the railroad freight trains which ran up and down Tenth Avenue. At one time there were eighteen of these boys employed in this novel job, novel because it seemed so divorced from the rest of the city's development. The Manhattan cowboys were paid but three dollars a day for their services. Glory made up the rest. Every year the New York Central Railroad has received thousands of applications for the coveted jobs.

In the future the tracks will be used only for switching and that will require but three cowboys. The other fifteen will have to board a train and go West. They will find the life of a cowboy out there quite different, however. Just as the real Western cowboy found out the difference when he bribed a Manhattan cowboy, one day, to allow him to ride one of the horses up Tenth Avenue, waving the red flag, as was the rule. It was a ride he did not wish to repeat. With a snorting engine at his heels, and pedestrians to look out for, the noise and confusion of city traffic was too much for him.

Interesting And True

By H. FREDRIC YOUNG



Mr. Young will pay one dollar for any usable Western "Interesting And True" features which readers may send him in care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Return postage must be included for suggestions found unsuitable.



A PLUMB HEERO

By WILLIAM P. LAWSON

Author of "Well, Well" etc.

YOU sure you can cook?" Sam Abbot, owner of the Bar M cattle outfit, surveyed the applicant for a camp cook's job dubiously. Jason Moak, prospector, known generally as "Old Jase," didn't look particularly prepossessing. Thin, wiry, with a skin as seamed and leathery as the hide of a lizard, he resembled more nearly than anything else one of the hard-bitten pack rats of his native deserts. He wore frayed Levi's, scuffed half boots, a grimy blue denim shirt, and a battered black felt hat—an ensembled hardly conducive to es-

tablishing confidence in his culinary abilities.

But, as both men knew, camp cooks were hard to get during round-up season. And it wasn't looks, after all, so much as skill that was in question.

"Cook?" rasped the skimpy candidate querulously. "Heck, I been campin' round in these hills by my lonesome more years than you've lived, and I ain't never starved yet."

"Well," said Abbot resignedly, "the men ain't too partic'ler—they don't want no fancy dishes. Just good plain chow and plenty of it."

Old Jase nodded.

"I know. That's what I aim to give 'em."

His eyes, set in nests of sun wrinkles, held a serious look. It was plain he wanted the job badly. There was an element of pathos in the earnestness with which he asserted his fitness for the task.

The foreman made his decision hastily.

"All right," he said. "You'd best get started right quick—they ain't had no cook since Peg-leg Mullins broke his remaining limb and was toted down the other day for repairs. You know where they're camped at—by the Gila Forks, on Skull Mesa?"

Once more the oldster nodded.

"I know," he said, tightening his belt and turning to the burro which stood near by, packed with his worldly possession.

It was five in the afternoon when he started. Camp was ten miles distant, reached by a rough, boulder-strewn trail. The pack burro walked ahead with short, mincing steps. Old Jase plodded along in its wake, his face drawn by fatigue.

He hadn't had much sleep during the past week. The sale of a copper claim, netting a few hundred dollars, had been succeeded by a prolonged bender on which the stake had been dissipated. That morning, in the Saddles Saloon, broke and as low in mind as his cast-iron constitution ever permitted him to feel, the sufferer had heard of the Bar M's need of a cook and had set out forthwith to corral the job.

That sequence—a prospecting trip, a strike of some sort, a hectic dispersal of the profits, then a temporary job to provide the wherewithal to finance another tilt with fortune—had been routine with Old Jase for as long as he could remember. He was happiest when on the

prowl for ores among his beloved hills. At such times he lived intensively, savoring the sweets of existence. An endless succession of grubstakes, an eternal prospecting trip among mountains rich with metal, was his idea of heaven. A strike, though thrilling enough at the moment, was, in a sense, an anticlimax to the greater joy of the hunt for gold. The pursuit, rather than the attainment of the goal, furnished the veteran with his highest satisfaction.

Minor delights were whisky and the small portable radio he carried in his bed roll on the burro's back—a sole concession to the age of invention. These helped to cheat tedium in camp or town when the pleasure of active search for precious metals was denied him.

MIDWAY of his trip Old Jase stopped the burro and extracted from the pack a quart bottle of rye, nearly full. He hadn't had much money on setting out, but had decided in favor of the liquor as being essential to the tapering-off process he was undergoing. Now he took a sizable swallow, paused a moment, and replaced the bottle, feeling revived.

"Licker's right medic'nal," he ruminated as he and the pack animal started off again, "if it ain't overdone."

They reached the round-up camp at about nine that night. It was dark, the way lighted only by stars. The October air in the Arizona highlands was chill. But Old Jase, impervious to heat or cold, had plodded on steadily, eyes at length resting gratefully on the camp fire and the dark bulk of the chuck wagon near by.

Camp was pitched by a small

mountain stream, with a clump of trees not far distant.

"Humph," grunted the newcomer, "firewood's right handy."

As he neared he saw a group seated about the fire, gazing glumly into the flames. One, seemingly older than the others, rose as Old Jase hit the circle of illumination and stepped forward, a restrained eagerness apparent in his tanned features.

"Name of Ballard," he announced, "range boss. You the new chuck wrassler?"

Old Jase nodded, glancing about. The faces of the men, he noted, had brightened noticeably at his appearance.

Ballard was looking particularly pleased.

"Right glad to see you, feller. Sindy Burke's been filling in, since Mullins left, but he ain't out of the amateur class hardly."

"Shucks," protested a round-faced puncher with red hair, "it's just that I ain't hit my stride yet. Give me time——"

"Give you time and we'd all be down," Ballard broke in.

There was a laugh at the red-haired waddy's expense. He subsided, grinning sheepishly.

"Just throw your tarp anywhere," Ballard told the new cook. "If you ain't et yet, there's a mess of beans and something Windy calls hot bread in the Dutch oven—coffee, too."

Old Jase unloaded his pack and turned the burro loose to graze. Then he piled a tin plate with beans, poured a cup of coffee, and hefted one of the biscuits, which was as flat and hard and heavy as quartz ore.

"I don't hold much with baking powder," Windy volunteered; "it ain't right good for the system."

"No," Jase agreed soberly; "you got to be sparin' of it, for a fact."

He dipped the biscuit in his coffee and gnawed on the softened lump. In time he made out a meal.

The punchers were turning in, one by one. Old Jase spread out his bed on the ground, put the whisky bottle under his pillow, and placed the radio beside him.

Ballard walked up.

"There's a hindquarter of beef for breakfast," he vouchsafed, "besides beans and fixin's. You got a watch?"

"Don't need none," returned Jase indignantly. "I can wake any time I want."

Ballard displayed a dollar watch and passed it over.

"Here—take this. So there won't be no chance of a slip-up. We got a hard day's work to-morrow, chasin' strays. I want you up at four startin' chow—and get the wranglers off at the same time. We'd ought to leave by five sharp."

Jase took the watch, under protest. Soon all were in bed, sleeping soundly. The stars shone down coldly; a little breeze sprang up and whisked sparks from the dying camp fire. Cares were wiped out, trouble was nonexistent; peace reigned in the mountains.

WHEN Old Jase awoke it was dark and frosty, and a chill wind swept the camp. The stars, bright in the sable sky, gleamed sharply. From afar sounded the brittle barking of coyotes.

The ex-pro prospector turned cook dug out the watch and scratched a match, which he held in cupped hands, gazing scowlingly at the dial. The hands stood at twelve and four.

"Umph!" grunted Jase. "Knowed I'd wake up in time."

He replaced the watch and drew

out his bottle and drank, on the theory that a drink first thing on awaking sets the blood to rambling. Then he pulled on overalls and boots, washed sketchily, ran a hand through his grizzled hair, and woke the two wranglers, telling them it was high time they were leaving to hunt the horses.

While they piled out and departed for the range, Old Jase set about building a fire, cutting hindquarter steaks, mixing dough for hot bread, and bringing the huge, smoke-blackened coffeepot to a boil.

When all was ready he yelled:

"Yeah! Come and git it!"

The men tumbled out, heavy-eyed and drugged with sleep. They washed hastily, then gathered about the fire, seizing plates and cups, spearing sizzling steaks and nicely browned biscuits, pouring hot coffee.

The menu had been well within the limits of Jase's scant repertoire. The faces of the diners expressed approval of this initial effort of their new cook.

"By golly, boys," Windy exclaimed admiringly, "we shore got a chef, now!"

Jase, secretly pleased by the encomium, scraped his plate clean and rose. He rolled up his bed, slipped the watch in his pocket, and set the whisky bottle in full sight on the tailboard of the chuck wagon.

"This here," he announced, "is for medic'nal purposes only. Any feller feels porely kin take one, otherwise not."

There was no acceptance of the qualified invitation. The men understood the situation: cooks were addicted to string drink on occasion, almost invariably. When the bottle was empty Old Jase would no doubt do without, while the job lasted.

Done eating at length, the crew sat about the fire for warmth, rolling

cigarettes, talking among themselves, waiting for dawn and the return of the horse wranglers.

At that season the sky began to lighten at four thirty, and by five it was day. The punchers waited patiently till it seemed time, and past time, for light to appear; but the sky remained unchanged, a uniform black. Finally one of the hands, "Shad" Howell by name, rose restlessly and peered off at the horizon.

"Ought to be light," he muttered, and added: "Yonder's the morning star."

Another cowboy joined him, gazing in the direction indicated.

"You crazy?" he scoffed. "That ain't the morning star—that's ol' Jupiter!"

The dispute threatened to become acrimonious. Ballard intervened.

"What's the odds?" he said gruffly. "Though it ought to be day, seems like." He glanced at Old Jase. "You git up by the watch, old-timer?"

Jase nodded virtuously.

"Shore did—though it wasn't no-wise necessary. I kin tell time without."

"What time is it now?"

Jase, despite his boast, pulled out the timepiece and held it close to the fire, gazing at it frowningly.

"Why—uh—why——" he stammered, unable to believe his eyes.

Ballard snatched the watch from his hand, glanced at it, and exploded.

"Great heavens, man—it's only one thirty now. You got us up in the middle of the night!"

JASE recalled the position of the hands when he had awakened. The minute hand, he realized, must have stood at four instead of twelve, as he'd supposed.

"Got the hands mixed up," he muttered, and added defensively:

"But you all et a heap sooner'n you would if I'd let you sleep."

Ballard snorted disgustedly. The volatile Windy chuckled.

"Them wranglers ain't et yet, though. Will they be sore, waitin' out on the hillside for dawn!"

Jase, overwhelmed with chagrin, felt that the camp had suddenly become too small to hold both him and his tormentors. He grabbed up the ax and stamped off toward the clump of trees, explaining hastily:

"Got to get firewood. Most out."

Ballard, still fuming, followed the retreating back for a moment. Then his glance swung to the bottle on the chuck wagon.

"Old feller's been drinkin' heavy, likely," he said. "Couldn't even see the time plain. I'd ought to spill that stuff out—only I'm afeared he'd head back to town."

"Windy" slapped his leg with a joyful chortle.

"I've got it!"

He leaped up and walked quickly toward his bed. Windy, it should be said, was the accredited joker of the outfit. In his war bag were sundry mirth-provoking devices—explosive cigars, an artificial flower with a tube and bulb attached, from which water could be squirted, and a paper sack, full of powdered ipecac.

He poured a general portion of the drug into Old Jase's whisky, then recorked the bottle and turned grinning to his fellow.

"That'll shore make him lose interest in licker," he chuckled. "Watch when he takes his first drink!"

But though they watched as directed, the expected laugh was denied them. During the long hours they sat huddled about the fire, waiting for daylight to appear, Old Jase seemed to have forgotten the bottle's existence. He sat staring into

the flames, smoking stoically, unmindful, apparently, of the shafts of wit the men launched at him from time to time, though he knew that the tale of his misfortune would serve as an unending source of laughter for many months.

Even when day dawned and the wranglers returned, profanely resentful of their long wait, Old Jase still refrained from a defense, taking refuge in dour silence, serving the hungry men unemotionally. Only when they had all ridden off and he was alone in the deserted camp did his phlegmatic mask fall. Then his seamed face showed lines of dejection. He shook his head sadly, muttering:

"Gosh all hemlock—me missin' the time that a way! My eyes ain't what they'd ought to be, for a fact."

It was then that he permitted himself the first drink he'd had since his awakening. He noticed nothing wrong with the liquor and started to set up his radio, planning to console himself with its familiar voice. But hardly had he begun on the task when he was assailed by a premonitory pang that caused him to stiffen, a prey to consternation. That his copper-riveted interior should betray such unheard-of symptoms seemed to him a phenomenon bordering on catastrophe.

"What in the worl'!" he ejaculated, and stopped abruptly as pain gnawed at his vitals.

The strange cramping pains increased quickly in intensity. The old man groaned involuntarily. Suddenly nausea overpowered him. He staggered off behind the chuck wagon and became violently ill. When, at length, he reappeared, the dark brown of his weathered features had faded to a light tan, and his eyes held a worried look.

ONLY seventy-two," he lamented, "just in the prime of life, as you might say, and I'm a-breaking up. Who'd 'a' thought a swaller of whisky would have backfired that a way?"

He shook his head, mystified, and returned to the interrupted task of setting up his radio. When it was in working order he tuned in on Phoenix and relaxed on the ground, back against his bed roll, making a cigarette.

Presently the program faded, and the voice of a news announcer sounded:

"Flash! Two life-termers who escaped from the State pen at Florence last night, Jeff Walters and Tom Dalton, are heading, it is reported, for the hills beyond the Gila, afoot. The car they stole, a maroon sedan with a Kansas license plate, was found wrecked and abandoned early to-day near the town of San José. The men's footprints were traced from the car to Bonita Creek and there lost. Posses are scouring the region. In an exchange of shots during their get-away, Walters is thought to have been wounded in the shoulder. A reward of a thousand in cash has been offered by the governor for the capture of these desperados, dead or alive."

The instrument buzzed and crackled, and a dance orchestra blared out. Old Jase, gazing out over the range with half-closed eyes, smoked thoughtfully. Walters and Dalton, eh? A pair of hard cases. He recalled the job for which they'd been sent up a scant six months earlier, the cold-blooded killing of a rancher and his two sons, near Globe. And Bonita Creek—it wasn't far from Gila Forks, just beyond which camp lay. He wondered idly in what direction the fugitives were heading, and whether the posse men would

get them. In the midst of his speculations, his eyes closed. He sank into dreamless sleep.

He was roused by a hand shaking him roughly. A harsh voice sounded in his ear:

"Come out of it, fella! You hear?"

Jase opened bewildered eyes to see two men with drawn guns watching him. They were hard-faced, truculent-looking customers. The one who had shaken him was short and stocky, with high cheek bones and black hair; the other was thin, with a ratlike face and shifty eyes. This last hombre carried his arm, the left, in a sling.

"Wh-what's up?" The dazed prospector rubbed his eyes.

"You cook here?"

Jase nodded.

"Where are the rest of the party? Speak up, can't you?"

The old man jerked his head toward the hills.

"Out on the range, gathering beef cattle. Be back at sundown or thereabouts."

The stocky man scowled.

"Well, we're hungry—savvy? If you know what's good for you, you'll cook us up something tasty quick as you know how."

He moved the gun muzzle suggestively. Jase had already guessed who the two were; the escaped convicts on whose heads a reward had been placed. If he only had a gun in his hand! But he was unarmed, helpless. Nothing to do but follow the orders given. He'd be lucky, he decided, if the wanted men didn't kill him before moving on.

He sat up, rising slowly. The thin convict had been glancing round camp. At this moment he spied the bottle on the chuck wagon and rasped eagerly:

"What's that—hooch?"

Jase nodded.

"Private stock," he said inhospitably.

The black-haired man grinned unpleasantly.

"Fetch it over, Jeff, while I watch the old buzzard. A snort wouldn't go so bad, at that."

THE thin outlaw took a long drink and smacked his lips, passing the bottle to his companion, who drank deeply in turn. He shoved the bottle in his coat pocket and turned to Old Jase.

"All right, grandpop," he snapped, "get going."

Jase headed for the woodpile with the idea of replenishing the dead fire. He had hardly taken three steps when a sharp exclamation from the stocky man checked him. He whirled to see Dalton standing with a stupid look of surprise on his face, one hand pressed to his stomach.

"Hey," he snarled, "what's in that stuff?"

Before Jase could reply he grimaced suddenly and turned to his companion.

"You feel anything, Jeff?"

The thin man grinned.

"Heck, it's just that you ain't tasted good licker for a while——"

He stopped abruptly as a spasm twitched his face. His eyes bulged with astonishment. The next moment he bent double, wrapping his un wounded arm about his middle. His gun fell unheeded to the ground. Hoarse cries rent the air.

"I been poisoned," he yelled frantically, "they ain't no doubt about it."

He sank to the ground, twisted in apparent agony.

Sweat stood out on Dalton's forehead. His face, which had paled suddenly, was contorted with pain. But he was made of sterner stuff

than his companion. Through gritted teeth he growled at Old Jase:

"Wise guy, eh? Doctored the stuff? Well, you're through."

The prospector saw the gun muzzle rise, and flung himself to the ground as the weapon swung into line. He heard the crash of the explosion and the whine of the slug over his head. Then he had risen and was running in on the outlaw full tilt.

Dalton was bent over from the cramps that clawed at his vitals, his eyes leaden and dull. The gun wavered as he fire again, and the bullet went wild. Then Old Jase struck him head-on, and the six-shooter jumped from his hand.

Quickly the prospector stooped and seized both revolvers, then stood back breathing hard, surveying the stricken bad men triumphantly.

"Waal," he drawled complacently, "they's life in the old hoss yet. As for you boys, you best quit drinking if one swaller gets you down that a way."

Despite the words, however, he knew the whisky by itself could not have affected them like this. He wondered why he had not suspected something when he himself had suffered, after sampling the blend. At the same time he was conscious of relief in the knowledge that some alien substance, rather than the sudden onset of senility, had been responsible for his brief but fairly acute discomfort.

As he bound his luckless prisoners with a length of pack rope and, later, sat guarding them with one gun stuck in the waistband of his Levi's and another held loosely in his hand, he brought his mind to bear on the mystery. In the course of time an inkling of the truth filtered into his groping brain.

"It was that there Windy," he

muttered with conviction. "When I came back from getting wood, he had a look on his face like a cat that's been swallerin' cream. He doctored that drink, sure as shootin'."

HE rose with the words and walked purposefully to the chuck wagon, where he poured the contents of the offending bottle on the ground and flung the container itself as far as he could in the direction of the creek. Then, his charges having recovered by now from the worst of their seizure, he fed and watered them, endeavoring to draw from them, meanwhile, a connected story of their jailbreak and flight. In this he was but partly successful.

It was an hour or so later that the posse arrived and took over the care of the prisoners, with loud and profuse compliments for Old Jase on his prowess in capturing, single-handed, the two desperate men. When they had left, after having tried in vain to persuade him to accompany them, the old prospector busied himself with tasks about camp, cutting wood, keeping the fire going, and making preparations for the evening meal when the round-up crew returned, tired and hungry, to be fed.

They rode in around sundown, slumped in the saddles, their ponies dust-caked and jaded. Old Jase, bustling about the camp fire, had a hot meal ready and waiting for them. While they ate, the cook turned on the radio, and a fox trot sounded on the sharp night air.

"Hot diggety," cried Shad Howell, "music with a feller's meals! Ain't that somethin'?"

In the midst of a measure the piece broke off, and the voice of the news announcer came on the air:

"Flash! The two escaped convicts, Walters and Dalton, were located by a posse to-day in the round-up camp of the Bar M spread near the forks of the Gila. They were being held there by Jason Moak, cook for the outfit, who had captured the men single-handed. The reward of a thousand dollars, it is said, will be paid the heroic Moak promptly. To the posse, Mr. Moak stated——"

What he had stated was lost to the entranced listeners on Skull Mesa when the old prospector switched off the current and turned to face the protesting crowd, saying defensively:

"Twan't nothin' much to it, boys. Them fellers come into camp and give theirselves up, practically."

Loud yells of disbelief greeted this modest announcement.

"Listen to the old liar talk!"

"He ain't no cook—he's a plumb heero!"

"Nor we wouldn't 'a' known nothing about it, I don't reckon, if it hadn't 'a' been for that there machine."

Ballard enthusiastically slapped the embarrassed celebrity on the back.

"A thousand dollars you get, eh? Be leaving us now, I reckon, so's you can spend the money on a proper time?"

Old Jase shook his head slowly.

"I'm a-savin' that there money for grubstakes—nothin' else. And about leavin', I wouldn't want to go off and know you fellers was without a cook. You ain't a bad lot of hombres on the whole—even if you are a mite too fond of star gazing."

When the laughter and talk had died down somewhat, and quiet had been restored, Windy glanced toward the chuck wagon and asked, with an innocent air:

"What happened to your snake medicine, Jase? You get feeling poorly and drink it up during the day?"

Jase examined his interrogator through narrowed lids.

"I got thinkin', after you all had left," he said, "how it was funny a feller my age hadn't got enough sense

yet to leave it alone. So I poured it out on the ground, the hull of it. And I'm plumb off it, from now on."

He added, after a moment's cogitation: "It's too bad, Windy, you young fellers don't learn the same thing in your youth: not to have no dealin's with licker at all—another feller's private stock especial."

A Complete Novel,
"GOLD SPURS FOR STEEL," by JOHN DUDLEY PHELPS,
in Next Week's Issue.

HOW OLD IS THAT HORSE?

UNLESS it is registered, the age of a horse is left to guesswork, for nobody goes to the bother of celebrating its birthday, or even marking off the years on the calendar. Horses change hands often, and the original owners are lost sight of so that the average horse buyer must rely upon his own judgment as to the age of the animal he is purchasing.

In a Western town, recently, two farmers disagreed as to the proper method of calculating an equine's age. One insisted that the best way was to look at the horse's teeth. The other was equally positive that one could better tell by the wrinkles on the horse's neck.

The entire countryside became interested in the argument, bets were placed, and a meeting was held to determine which "school of thought" was right. A horse, whose age was known by its owner, was put up for the test. Each farmer had an equal chance to try out his theories.

It is an inescapable fact that dear Old Man Experience is bound to play an important part in such a test. The man who has raised and traded horses all his life cannot help but judge an animal according to his experience with them. He is bound to note the color, for one thing. In his opinion certain colors make better horses. He will note also the life and expression of the eyes, the way the horse holds its head, its gait, the condition of its coat, and a hundred other details of which he takes mental note. Then, he may look at its teeth, or the wrinkles in its neck, and estimate its age. The teeth and the wrinkles may count, but so do all of the other unmentioned points in the survey.

With the two Western farmers, each came within a year of the actual age of the horse they examined. Was this an accurate appraisal due to teeth and wrinkles, or experience with horseflesh?



HISTORIC MINES OF THE WEST

(THE ANACONDA-BUTTE, MONTANA)

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

MARCUS DALY was just a pick and shovel welder when he hit the California gold fields. But he was Irish. And quick on the uptake. Only fifteen when he left the "ould sod" to make his fortune in America, he caught on to the fascinating game of ore-hunting with all the shrewdness of his native heritage.

He learned about ores and ore formation in the school of practical experience. And he wound up a multimillionaire in Montana largely

on account of his faith in the Anaconda Copper Mine.

This tremendous mass of rich ore, a veritable mountain of copper, became one of the most famous mines the West has ever known. It brought Montana into world-wide prominence as a copper-mining center. And it has paid its owners and stockholders some three hundred and fifty million dollars in dividends. The West was, and is, like that—big.

Daly's discovery of the Anaconda was not one of those hit-or-miss

propositions that frequently attended early-day prospecting. It was sheer sharpness of mineralogical deduction in the face of opposition from supposedly high-powered experts who were in Butte at the time. In fact, Daly didn't discover the Anaconda. He bought it from the prospectors, Michael and Edward Hickey and their partner, Charley Larrabee, who had originally staked it as a silver property.

The Hickeys and Larrabee were simply following the rest of the camp when they staked their claim for silver. Butte, which started in with gold placering on Silver Bow Creek as a sort of satellite to the great gold production that was coming from the bonanza placers of Alder Gulch and Bannack, became a silver camp long before its potential millions in copper were ever suspected by the local miners. It took a Marcus Daly with a "nose for ore," to divine the vast fortunes in red metal that lay beneath the gold and silver showings of the weathered outcrops on Butte Hill.

It was silver that brought Daly to Montana. In 1876, already a keen and trusted judge of mines and mining properties, the young Irishman and ex-immigrant purchased the Alice Mine for the Walker Brothers, a firm of large mining investors in Salt Lake City. Incidentally, the Alice later became one of Montana's really great silver mines. That, however, is a different story. But it served to emphasize what the mining men of the West were beginning to observe with increasing admiration—namely, that Daly, minus any sort of college or engineering degree, knew his onions.

About 1880 Daly, still in Butte, became interested in the Anaconda Mine. It lay lower down than the Alice, and was apparently just an-

other silver property. But Daly was already beginning to have ideas of his own concerning the real mineral wealth in the core of Butte Hill. He was thinking of copper. And it is a tribute both to his powers of persuasion, and to the faith others had in his judgment, that he drew into the deal three of the smartest mining magnates of the day—William Randolph Hearst, James B. Haggin, and Lloyd Tevis. This same triumvirate, in 1876, had already acquired the famous Homestake Mine in South Dakota, and 1872 the Ontario Mine, which proved to be the richest silver mine in Utah. It is an amazing and remarkable fact that these particular men should have selected for their enterprise three of the richest mines ever discovered in the United States—the Ontario, the Homestake, and the Anaconda.

TO get back to Daly and his Anaconda. Daly worked the property at first for silver, but the farther down he went the more convinced he became that his theories concerning the true mineral content of Butte were correct. Nearly every prominent mining engineer who visited Butte laughed at the untutored Irishman, either openly, or behind his back. Hearst, they said, was certainly making a bad mistake to back anybody with the wild notions Daly held. They got out textbooks, books which were afterward drastically revised to suit fact rather than some professor's theoretical assumption of how ores "ought" to be formed. With these books they sought to prove that Daly *had* to be wrong.

Daly didn't pay any attention to the books. He kept on digging, taking out silver and looking for copper. At a depth of a hundred feet he cut a thin seam of copper sul-

phide. The trail was getting warm. Those millions were almost in sight. Hearst came to the scene himself, and he and Daly conferred.

"Go ahead, Marcus. Keep sinking. But start a new shaft here," said the mining magnate.

Daly bored into the hill until the shaft had reached a depth of three hundred feet, straight through solid rock. At the level a crosscut struck a five-foot vein of copper ore—a lead-gray sulphide ore with a definite metallic luster. Chalcocite was the name given it by the hot-shot scientists who had assured him he would never find it in Butte Hill. The pick-and-shovel boys said it was copper glance, which was a lot easier to roll off the tongue.

Naturally Daly was excited. Chalcocite, or copper glance, is almost eighty per cent pure copper and twenty per cent sulphur. It is a rich ore. A large vein comes into the bonanza class. But Daly didn't want to start a copper rush to Butte. Not when the only real property he had under control was the Anaconda, and he was positive that all of Butte Hill, if you got into it deep enough, was one gigantic copper reservoir.

The first thing he did was pull the pumps and close down the mine. Then he did his best to wander around Butte, looking as glum as possible under the circumstances, and answering no questions. The high-priced experts gloated, nudged one another, and winked broadly.

"Too bad about Marcus Daly. Got himself hooked for fair with his fool notions."

They felt sorry for him. He should have listened to their advice when they offered it. Rumor spread with the incredible speed that always attends bad news that the

Anaconda was a bust. The Hickeys and Larrabee were lucky to get out of it with the thirty thousand dollars that had been paid for the purchase of the property. Hearst had got stung this time. And as this talk grew, owners of claims adjacent to the Anaconda, who had been holding them for a steep price against the day when Hearst would need them to expand his mining operations in Butte, began to reconsider. In fact, Daly acted so heart-broken that mining property on Butte Hill did a depression nose dive. Business was at a standstill. Which was just what Daly wanted.

PRETTY soon some men drifted into town who didn't know the real story. At least, they acted as if they didn't. And by a strange coincidence, they were in the market for likely mines. With a whoop and a rush the boys who had been laying for Hearst and his associates unloaded most of Butte Hill before it was too late. True, they didn't get much for their property. They figured, however, that whatever they could obtain was just so much gravy. Anyhow, they were smarter than Daly. Daly didn't sell. He simply came out of his shell, and grinned.

The buyers had been agents of his, friends who had bought up property adjoining the Anaconda at a ridiculously low figure as a result of the stage play Daly had put over on his neighbors. Now, with Butte Hill under his control, the ex-pick and shovel miner from Ireland was ready to begin real bonanza operations.

Butte, once the true nature of its mineral wealth was understood, became a maelstrom of activity centering about the Anaconda Mine. Fortunes were made overnight. An

army of men descended into the bowels of Butte Hill, stripping it of its copper treasure. Forests were despoiled for timber to brace the underground workings. Smelters arose, their great stacks belching clouds of dense black smoke into the blue Montana sky. The clank and groan of giant pumps throbbled twenty-four hours a day to keep the workings free of water. Huge hollows, like vast cathedral naves, were scooped out where the treasure in red metal had lain far beneath the surface of the hill. Horses and mules were carefully blindfolded and lowered into the mines to spend the rest of their days in the dark depths of the Anaconda, where in time, like the gray beards of the older miners, their hides took on the greenish, telltale copper stain which saturated everything below the surface.

The Anaconda, supposedly a silver mine in a district originally mined for placer gold, was proving up to be, as Marcus Daly had

insisted all along, one of the greatest copper discoveries ever made in the mining history of the West. And the Anaconda is still producing millions—yearly.

As for Marcus, he had the fortune he had come to America to seek. He branched out, establishing banks, building power plants, and buying up coal lands for smelter fuel, and timber tracts to supply the mines with stulls and square-sets. He became a multimillionaire mining tycoon. But perhaps with all his wealth the spot he most enjoyed was his big ranch in the Bitter Root Valley, a hundred and fifty miles west of Butte. Here he raised his famous racing stable, where his thoroughbred turf horses were groomed and pampered like the steeds of ancient Oriental potentates. This was Marcus Daly's summer home. He spent millions on it. He could afford to. The Anaconda's wealth was, and is, as inexhaustable, apparently, as the riches of any mine can ever hope to be.

*In Next Week's Issue, "MAN WANTED, MEN FOUND,"
by GUTHRIE BROWN.*

RATTLER'S YOUNG

THE veracity of snake charmers is questioned almost as often as that of fishermen. Many of the fish stories are true, and many of the stories about snakes are fully as reliable as any true story ever told.

One feature of snake life seems to be unproven among the skeptics for the simple reason that no biographer or historian writing about snakes has happened to witness the act. And the act is this: A few people have seen baby snakes disappear down the throat of the mother snake, or have seen them emerge from the mother's throat. Those who have never witnessed the phenomenon say it is impossible. Those who have seen it, know that it can and has happened.

The fifteen-year-old son of a rancher in Colorado shot a prairie dog recently and, when he went to pick it up, discovered himself within a foot of a large coiled rattlesnake. Before the rattler could strike, the boy shot it with his rifle and before the snake rattled its dying rattle, out of its mouth crawled seventeen baby rattlers, each one measuring from ten to twelve inches in length.



GUNFIRE GOLD IN SILVER TOWN

PART II.

By ELI COLTER

BLACK MORAN waits outside the Oriental Hotel in Mesa Bend for the stagecoach, and much to his surprise, finds among the passengers a gay-hearted friend he had known ten years before, Bob Vallance. Moran expresses keen interest in a girl named Nellie who had disembarked from the stage at Heath after a gun fight in which a man was badly wounded. The girl, though bound for Mesa Bend, remained at Heath to aid this wounded man.

Moran tells Vallance discovery of silver in the Mesa Bend section promises to bring about a war between ranchers, who wish to protect their range, and prospectors, who desire to invade it for silver. On the way to the Dark Crystal Saloon to drink to their reunion, Moran and Vallance meet Tony Lombardi, a Spaniard, who asks a word with Moran.

Lombardi urges Moran to go after Bull Dillon, a powerful rancher of the section who allegedly stole from

Moran some cattle he had bought from Don Sonalo, and then stole from Sonalo the money Moran had paid for the cattle, killing Sonalo and the latter's men. Moran explains he can do nothing until he has proof, which he is seeking. Lombardi says he has the necessary proof, and agrees to meet Moran the next day and give him full details.

However, while Moran and Vallance are in the saloon, having their drink, Dillon crashes through the doors and loudly announces that the show-down has come, that he has given enough warnings to prospectors to keep off his range. He calmly murders Tony Lombardi, who had boldly announced his intention of prospecting in the Mesa Bend country, ropes him, attaches the end of the rope to his saddle horn, and rides off, dragging the body out of the saloon after him.

CHAPTER IV.

AUGUST ARLETTA.

MORAN'S thoughts were grim. This killing of Tony Lombardi was a setback for him, temporarily at least. What proof Lombardi may have had of Dillon's guilt he had no way of knowing. Where Lombardi had kept this proof, how it might be found, he also had no way of knowing. He never would know now. Dillon had effectively sealed Lombardi's lips by putting him out of the running. And Dillon had known that he was doing just that, had slain the Spaniard for that sole reason, using the invasion of his range as a plausible excuse for the shooting.

"It's getting too hot for him," Moran thought grimly. "That very act of his was tacit admission of his

guilt, but he knows that I'm the only one who can understand that. He knows I'm getting too close, too. He'll be trying to pick a fight with me next, or trying to dry-gulch me. I reckon it's my move, Mr. Dillon. But—which way do I move?"

He turned his gaze toward Vallance. Would Vallance be a safe man to trust? He needed a trustworthy aid right now, had to have one. Whatever else Vallance might be, he was no double-crosser. Yes, he'd probably be safe in trusting Vallance.

Vallance had stepped up to fill a blank at the dice table, and Moran, impartially studying his profile, left the bar and walked slowly up to the table to join him. As Moran approached, Vallance placed a bet and won. The dice were rolling for him. He passed on the next two rolls, then bet again, and again won. He looked at Moran, grinned broadly and whispered:

"Look who's standing over beyond the banker. Arletta, the fellow who came in on the same stage I did. I suppose you knew he was Arletta, didn't you? He's passing himself off as a mining engineer, but I happen to know a few things about that baby. He'll skin the gold right off your back teeth if he gets half a chance."

"Keep your eyes on the cubes," Moran answered, flicking a covert glance at Arletta. "Things can happen fast around here, you'll notice."

"I have noticed!" Vallance laughed shortly and bet again, putting up the winnings of his former plays.

As though he had laid a charm on them, the dice came to rest with his numbers up. He looked at Moran and laughed again, and the excitement which unexpected winnings bring began to show in his face. He

doubled, and doubled again, and in the space of what seemed a breath, his stake assumed rather startling proportions, and still he won. He glanced at Moran again, but Moran was studying the faces of the men gathered around the table. They were grim, rigid.

Vallance lowered his gaze to the cubes and placed another bet. Again he looked up at Moran, but Moran was not looking at him.

Moran's narrowed eyes had found the thing he sought, the source of a faint metallic sound that had suddenly assailed his hearing. The sound was caused by the action of several silver dollars being clinked together. The silver dollars were in the hands of August Arletta, who had drawn closer, and now stood impassive and idly observant beside the banker across the table.

The small stack of dollars rested in the palm of his left hand, and with the fingers of his right he was mechanically lifting them a bare inch, letting them fall back upon one another, clinking, as if he were so interested in the play that he was quite unconscious of what his hands were doing.

Something in Black Moran sensed purpose in that seemingly absent-minded toying, purpose of no casual or friendly intent, and his gaze held warily on the shifting coins.

The dice were rolled. Vallance caught his breath in excited triumph as his numbers turned up, and again he turned his head to grin at Moran.

In that instant, while his head was turned, it happened, and Vallance did not see it. A silver dollar slipped from the small stack clinking restlessly in Arletta's hand. Moran saw the deft and deliberate movement with which Arletta, with his right index finger, slid the dollar free and shot it gently to rest on the table

beside one of the dice almost before the cube had come to rest. He saw Arletta's hand dart swiftly down to retrieve the dollar. He saw the flash of the gold-and-diamond cuff link in Arletta's cuff, saw the edge of the cuff brush against one of the dice with just sufficient force to turn the cube over.

IT was a smooth move, a move that must have been made many times to achieve such facility in the doing. And it was accomplished so quickly that the dollar was back in Arletta's hand with the others when Vallance again turned his head to glance once more down upon the table. He stared, shook his head as if to clear his vision, then glared at the banker, who had reached to rake in the pile of winnings.

"Hey, wait!" Vallance snapped, his eyes flaming. "Something's wrong here. That was a seven!"

The banker gestured toward the dice and shrugged. "Call that a seven?"

Vallance swept a furious and indignant gaze around the table. There wasn't an answering look of support or encouragement anywhere. Then his gaze shuttled to Arletta, who was watching him quietly, a mocking leer on his thin, florid face.

"A four and a deuce," said Arletta, his voice silky and bland. "Don't squawk because you lost."

"Bets!" called the house man in an effort to end all contention and start the game again.

Black Moran pushed Vallance aside and leaned over the table. "Pay the last bet that was won before you call for more," he said evenly, and his eyes and voice should have been warning enough to any man. "I happened to see Arletta turn that cube over. And August Arletta has handled too many dol-

lars to drop them on dice tables out of plain clumsiness."

The banker darted a look at Arletta and brought his gaze back to Moran's face. Which was the more deadly, he wondered, the more to be feared—the voice that was silky and bland, the face that was smiling and mocking, or the face that was dark and void of all expression, the voice that rang like one piece of jasper struck upon another, toneless and cold? He, too, glanced at the men around the table, but found no look of encouragement, no more support than Vallance had had. These were men who kept their hides whole by granting neither side favor, and hugging the wall when the bullets began to whine.

The banker glanced again desperately at Arletta.

Arletta smiled glacially at Moran. "Are you insinuating—"

Moran's expression didn't change. "Oh, no. I wouldn't waste your time like that." His voice was like crackling ice. "I'm only saying that I saw you turn the cube over with your cuff when you picked up your dollar. Before you turned the dice over, the two were a four and a trey. Four and three—or perhaps your schooling was neglected?"

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the onlookers around the table began to move away. The banker gulped and cleared his throat. Vallance said hastily:

"Let it go, Black. Don't start anything just because I happened to lose a few dollars."

"But you didn't lose," Moran answered, his unswerving gaze still on Arletta. "And Mr. Arletta understands. Mr. Arletta came here with the hope of buying into the Dark Crystal, and he had some idea of proving how valuable he could be to the house at the first opportunity.

A very commendable move, no doubt—from Mr. Arletta's standpoint. I'm sure that's all there is to it. Mr. Arletta couldn't possibly be seeking any quarrel with me."

Arletta's eyes burned now with an uncontrollable fury. And Moran knew then that he was right. Arletta had seen him with Vallance, had judged the two to be old friends. He had known Moran would come to Vallance's defense. But Arletta had just arrived in Mesa Bend. Through what avenue did he come there with the primary intent of provoking a quarrel and making an end of Black Moran?

MORAN'S mind leaped to the answer. Bull Dillon. Bull Dillon sought some way of ridding himself of the threat of Black Moran, some way by which he himself would not be involved. But what was the connection between Bull Dillon and August Arletta? And ridding himself of Black Moran surely was not the sole reason for which Dillon would strive to bring a man like August Arletta into the scene. No, there was something bigger than that. Something that reached farther. Moran's mind flashed over the entire situation as he stood there those few seconds, waiting for Arletta's reply.

Arletta wasn't smiling now. "Aren't you being ridiculous, Moran? Why should I seek a quarrel with you?"

"I wouldn't know," said Moran. "Well, banker? In Mesa Bend we pay our bets, and settle our debts."

Arletta sneered openly. "Are you running this game, or is the house man running it? You weren't even playing. You seem to be the one trying to pick a quarrel."

"The poor house man!" said Mo-

ran. "Between the devil and the deep. Pay the bet, banker."

Arletta's hand made a motion toward his holster. But Arletta was a trifle too slow. Before his hand reached the holster he was gazing into the bore of the gun that leaped into Moran's fingers, and Moran's voice, cold as chilled steel, was singing in his ears:

"I wouldn't, Arletta. Pay the bet, banker!"

The house man, his face oozing sweat, slowly shoved the stack of winnings toward Vallance. Vallance, gone quite white, and visibly shaken, picked up the money and crammed it into his pockets.

"Get out, Bob," Moran commanded curtly. "Wait for me outside."

Vallance backed from the table and moved swiftly toward the swing doors. Moran also backed from the table, gun in hand.

He paused only when he felt the swing doors at his back. "And you might remember," he told Arletta, "that in Mesa Bend we keep our hands off the table while the play is being made."

Arletta's wrath was a cold fury now, the fury of a man who had lost ignominiously in an encounter, and who stings at the thought of it.

"I'll be seeing you, Moran. And remember, you asked for it."

"I saw you move the dice," said Moran.

"What do you want to make of it?"

"Whatever you choose. I live here. You can find me any time. But if you want to live here, I'd suggest that you keep your hands in your pockets when other people's money is out on the table."

"I'll bear it in mind," the gambler returned insolently. "I'm not look-

ing for trouble, Moran, but if you are, you'll probably find it."

"In more ways than one!" Moran said softly as he backed out through the swing doors.

VALLANCE, waiting for him, started to speak, but Moran holstered his gun and waved Vallance to silence all in one motion. Then he stepped quickly aside, flattening himself against the wall of the entrance where his feet would not show under the swing doors. His ears, straining for the least sound, heard the banker's voice, resentful and disgruntled.

"Well, that wasn't so good, Arletta. Next time you want to show how slick you are, don't pick on somebody that's with Black Moran."

"I'll pick on him," sneered Arletta, "and in a way he won't like."

Then the rising buzz of conversation drowned the voices, and Moran moved away from his position by the door.

"I'm afraid you let yourself in for it," Vallance said ruefully as the two started down the street. "Why didn't you let it lie? I didn't stand to lose so much. I could have weathered it."

"It wasn't what you stood to lose," Moran answered. "It wasn't what you stood to gain. It was the life of this town, a cattleman's town, the life of this whole range, in the balance. That may seem a far cry, but it isn't."

"But where's the connection?" asked Vallance, bewildered.

"Bull Dillon, Bob. Bull Dillon, and several thousand square miles of open range, and several thousand head of whiteface cattle—and a Spaniard shot down in cold blood and dragged out at the end of a rope. That's the connection. As to just how it fits, I don't know yet myself.

But the inference is unmistakable. You can see clearly that Arletta was trying to get a rise out of me, can't you?"

"Do I look dumb?" Vallance retorted curtly. "Of course he was trying to get a rise out of you. And he got it!"

"He did. I wouldn't have disappointed the gentleman for anything. Simply because I couldn't get any line on what he's aiming for unless I played into his hand. So I played into it, just as he wanted me to. What do the few dollars you won count to the Dark Crystal? Not a tinker's dam. What do you mean to Arletta? Still less. I never saw him before, he never saw me before. Why should he make a play at me?"

"He shouldn't," Vallance replied, "unless somebody else, who's vitally concerned, has hired or bribed or incited him to it. And the somebody else is our sweet-scented Bull Dillon, who goes around shooting Spaniards to keep them from talking?"

"You seem to be getting the idea, old son!" Moran's voice quickened a little in grim satisfaction. "To keep them from talking is right."

"And what was he going to talk about—our late lamented Señor Lombardi?"

"Bull Dillon," answered Moran.

"My eye!" ejaculated Vallance. "This Dillon person is getting to be a pest. Look here, let's come to some understanding about this situation! See here, Black. We were friends once, you and I. We're still friends if I have anything to say about it. I'm not so slow, as you just admitted. I came here to make a stake because I'd heard of the activity going on in the silver mines. I didn't know you were here. I didn't know trouble was brewing. But never let it be said that I turned tail and ran because I was afraid I'd

get my panties torn on somebody's boot. Come on, get it off your chest. It's big, isn't it? Not your chest; the fight."

Moran grinned rather gauntly. "Bigger than you can imagine. A little over three years ago I was sitting pretty, Bob. I'd made a fat stake in the mines over Colorado way. I could buy what I wanted, I could do what I wanted. What I wanted to do was find a wide open range where cattle could run free and never be molested by petty invasions. What I wanted to buy was the cattle to put there. I was told that there was open range, wide enough to fill the heart of any man who loves great wide spaces, west of the Dragoons. So I came to Arizona."

"And you found it?"

"I'll say I found it! Just look out there! Space—nothing but space. Hundreds of square miles, free and wild. Never a fence, never a house, nothing but browse and brush. Gad, what more could a man ask? Desert? Maybe. But some men love the desert. I'm one of them. Even the cactus. The cholla, that thick-branched stuff you've seen growing waist-high over there to the west, frosty gold in the sun. The saguaros, sticking up fifteen to fifty feet above your head, as stanch as the eternal hills, seemingly, and you feel that it's almost as old. And the little lacy fat fellows that grow close to the ground. And the old red barrels, that hold water to save a man famishing of thirst. And——"

"Phew! It's got you, hasn't it?" Vallance cut in.

YES, it's got me. It got everything in me when I first saw it. Over there, where the Dragoons cut the sky, was where I wanted to bring my cattle, and live

my life, clear of pettiness and the irritations of crowded places. And after I'd soaked my soul with it for a while, I went looking for my cattle. And, after another while, I found them, down in Sonora. A prince of a fellow, Don Sonalo, had them, and he was willing to sell them for a price that would leave me enough to live on till I could get my ranch going well.

"So I bought them, Bob. And I asked Sonalo to hold them for me till I got ready for them. Then I came back here, and chose a few acres out in the middle of the open range, and I built me a sweet little dobe house, and some corrals, and got it all ready for—no matter. I got it ready. Then I went down to get my cattle, and I took a crew with me. But when I got there, my cattle had been stolen, the money I had paid for them was stolen, and Don Sonalo and most of his men had been killed."

Vallance caught his breath sharply. "Why, that's—that's—"

"It is," agreed Moran. "And more. I discharged my crew and paid them off, then set out alone to try and trail my herds and find the murderer who had staged the raid. It took me almost a year to find out anything. I found the cattle here on the open range west of the Dragons, the range I had picked out as my haven. The man who was running them, who swore he had bought them right her in this State, was living in the dobe house I had built and was using the corrals I had erected, though he didn't know that, and I didn't tell him.

"I hadn't a shred of proof. I had nothing but the certainty in my own mind that these were the same cattle, and that he was the man who had stolen stock and money and had

killed Don Sonalo and his men. He declared that he simply had liked the old deserted place and moved into it; that there were a dozen others he could have taken as easily, but that he had happened to like this one. He said that after he had moved into the place he had bought his cattle and stocked it. A hundred men in this town and on this range bore him out in that. My hands are tied.

"I couldn't take the chance of openly waging an offensive upon a man who might, after all, be innocent of any intrusion in my affairs. I settled down to wait, to watch, to unearth some clew. And none had ever come to light—till I heard from Tony Lombardi to-day. And that clew died when Tony died, and there's nothing I can do about it. I haven't even Tony's tongue to swear that I am telling the truth. I only know that the man who committed the outrage, who bids fair to wreck everything that would have made life worth living for me, is right here, maddeningly out of my reach, yet within touch of my hand."

"And his name," said Vallance, "is Bull Dillon. But where does the rest of the range come in, and the town? You made it a pretty sweeping situation, Black."

"It is sweeping," said Moran bitterly. "And they'll begin to realize it soon. It's going to be a battle to the death, and who's to say who is right? Only the cattlemen were here first. And why wreck those thousands of acres of range, that are fit for nothing else, for a few silly carloads of silver ore? Why, for a few paltry dollars that can be dug up in countless places, ruin for a lifetime land that will still be open range after the frantic boom towns have roared and bled and died? That's the fight, Bob. That's the situation.

"And it's boiling, seething, right this minute."

"And you know something you're not telling!" charged Vallance. "You know some vital factor that can make or break this whole business, and you're fearful somebody will find it out too soon."

"Right the first time," Moran admitted grimly. "If I can just hold on, if I can just keep what I know in the dark for a little longer, if I can just blast one shred of proof out of the hole where it's hiding, I'll have everything all in my own hands."

"Yes? Well, say it!" Vallance cut in, burning with impatience. "What's this thing you're keeping in the dark? You want me to explode? What is it?"

"I don't believe I'll tell you," Moran said slowly. "No, I won't tell you. But I'll show you. And if, after you've seen it with your own eyes, you can't vision the enormity of it, I'll kill you and put you out of your misery. Nothing that stupid should be allowed to live and suffer. I'll show you—to-night."

CHAPTER V.

THE SECRET OF THE DRAGOONS.

WHICH was as far as Moran would commit himself. Although Vallance was overwhelmed with curiosity, and ventured several persistent questions, he learned nothing more than Moran had already told, and the two men did not leave the town till after darkness had settled over the land. Vallance hadn't even an idea that they were going to leave town, till Moran suggested mildly that it was a good night for a ride into the hills.

"A ride into the hills?" Vallance echoed in surprise. Then, as the significance of what might be in the hills dawned upon him: "Oh, is that

where we go for you to show me that monumental secret of yours?"

"It is."

"How long will we be gone?"

Moran shrugged. "A week, perhaps. What difference does it make? You wanted the facts, didn't you? Go get some pants out of your luggage, something you can straddle a horse in. Those tights you have on aren't fit for riding. I'll step into Lynch's corral around the corner and get the horses. I'll wait for you there."

A half hour later, with the desert moon casting their shadows upon the sand as they rode, the two men left Mesa Bend, heading eastward toward the Dragoons, whose massive heights loomed forbidding and majestic, gigantic stone ramparts cutting the horizon.

For some time the two rode in silence, each absorbed in his own thoughts, and it was Moran who finally broke the silence. "So you thought Mesa Bend would be a good place to make a stake, on account of the silver mines?"

Vallance hesitated, shooting a sharp glance at Moran's face, dark and inscrutable in the moonlight. He sensed, implied in the question, something far more than the mere words themselves asked. He knew what was in Moran's mind, he thought, and he shifted uneasily in his saddle. Moran was hinting that perhaps something more than the silver mines had made Mesa Bend an attractive place, and Moran was hitting uncomfortably close to the mark. He wondered just how much Moran suspected. Did Moran suspect that he had lied to him about the girl on the stage?

He wished, now, that he hadn't lied. Silly thing to do. Silly to have taken such a fancy to the girl, he guessed, but she wasn't like any

girl he had ever seen. One look at her there in Yuma and he'd been done for, and a fellow couldn't help it when a girl got him that way. He wondered what Moran would say if he knew that he, Vallance, had had no more idea of leaving Yuma than the man in the moon till he had seen Nellie Carlyle on the stage when it stopped there. Looking back at it now, it certainly did seem going rather strong, but it was still of one piece with the erratic things he had done throughout his careless life; to fall for a girl he saw on a passing stage, and get on the stage, bound for an unknown destination, because he couldn't let her out of his sight.

Riding across the desert beside Black Moran, his unseeing eyes fixed on the towering heights of the Dragons, he saw the whole scene again in his mind's eye, just as it had happened that day. He saw himself going down the street in Yuma, and the incoming stage, rumbling and swaying, rattling to a halt in front of the Gold Bar. Then he was passing the stage, looking into it idly, and then gazing squarely into her face, and thinking, in one blinding flash, that it was the face he had looked for all his life.

THEN for a moment that had seemed an eternity, he had stood looking at her, and she looking back, till it struck him like the impact of a wave that she was on that stage, going somewhere, and that he would never see her again. And in the next instant he had whirled to ask the stage driver how long the stage stopped there, and the driver was saying they had a broken wheel to repair, and that they'd probably be held up for twenty or thirty minutes.

Twenty minutes. It had been enough time for him to dash into

the hotel, gather up his few belongings, slam them into a couple of bags, rush from the hotel, and get on the stage. And he hadn't even known where the stage was going. It wasn't till after it had started that he had tried to make conversation with the girl, and learned that she was going to some town named Mesa Bend. It had been from the girl that he had learned of the silver mines and the activity there. He had, no doubt, allowed himself to grow a bit too fervent in his advances, and her casual cordiality had cooled, and she had rather primly mentioned the fact that she had a friend in Mesa Bend, one Black Moran.

That had startled him, Vallance remembered grimly, that her one friend in Mesa Bend should be his old pal of other days, but he had, after an instant, come to the conclusion that it didn't mean much, that he had alarmed her a little perhaps, and that she was trying to repel him with the name of Black Moran. She hadn't indicated that there was any sort of tie between herself and Moran. Vallance, indeed, had refused to take that possibility seriously, but he had withdrawn to himself, with belated caution, in an effort to win her confidence, and he had been succeeding, too, until that stop at Heath.

He remembered how she had looked out at the scene in the street, and had cried aloud at sight of the fallen gunman's face, "Dick! Oh, Dick!" Then how she had sprung to her feet, and, with a hasty glance toward him, had said: "Tell Black I'll come on the next stage." And in another instant she had flashed out the door and was running toward the man she had called Dick. He'd had half a mind to follow her, then had thought better of it, and had de-

cided to go on to Mesa Bend and wait till she should come.

He shifted uneasily now in the saddle, remembering how he had lied to Moran when he had found him waiting there for the stage that afternoon, and had guessed, only too easily, for whom he was waiting. But he shrugged his shoulders, and lifted his gaze to the dark sky, and told himself that the argument he had used to himself then was still good; there probably was nothing much between Black Moran and Nellie Carlyle, and until a girl was married to the other fellow, no man was really out of the running. All was still fair in love and war as far as he was concerned, and if he could put a spoke in Moran's wheel and win the girl himself, he'd waste no time doing it.

He recast all this in his mind as the horses' hoofs made a thudding sound in the sand, and the desert moon lifted higher and whiter in the sky, and Moran waited for his reply. He had to answer not only the question Moran had asked, but the other thing it implied; he knew that. But there was no way in which Moran could find out why he had boarded the stage for Mesa Bend; he hadn't told the girl. And he could always claim innocence of intent to deceive by declaring that he hadn't heard the low-voiced request the girl had made when she leaped out of the stage. Beyond that he'd better walk carefully and stick to the stand he had made, he decided. He didn't want to earn Moran's enmity, and he didn't want to lose Moran's friendship. He would, however, win Nellie Carlyle from any man, if he could accomplish it.

He looked across at Moran with a disarming smile. "Why, yes, I thought Mesa Bend would be a good spot. Isn't that what I told you? A

couple of fellows in Yuma were making lots of talk about the chances here, and so far as I was concerned there was nothing left for me in Yuma. When I was talking with Nellie Carlyle on the stage, she seemed to think there was great opportunity here, too, and I decided I'd made a wise choice. She seemed like a pretty nice girl, but she didn't mention your name, and I had no idea she was anything to you."

FOR the space of twoscore hoofbeats there was silence, as Bob Vallance uneasily and covertly studied Moran from the corner of his eye, and Moran's brooding gaze fastened on the rugged outline of the Dragoons. Then Moran spoke, curtly, like a man admitting a bald truth that he knew must sound harsh and cold, but which had too many ramifications to be explained:

"Nellie Carlyle isn't anything to me. She might have been, once, but she isn't now." He did not add that she might be again, he did not even let himself think that. Too much hazard and incalculable chance lay between. He added lightly: "We'll reach San Luis Creek by morning. We'll stop and have breakfast there."

What desultory conversation passed between them from then on till they arrived at San Luis Creek was casual. The sun was well up, and the two riders were within the shadows of the Dragoons, when they finally came upon the creek which skirted the lower slopes of the mountains. Thick scrub growth hid the narrow stream from view till they were almost upon it.

Over a breakfast prepared from provisions Moran had brought in his pack, Vallance grew a little more at ease, and some of the guilty feeling

that had been fretting him subsided. He looked up at the jagged yellow stone peaks, the monstrous yellowish boulders, and said with an indrawn breath: "So these are the Dragoons. My boy, I'll bet you thar's gold in them there mountings. They look just like the kind of place that gold ought to be."

"No doubt," Moran agreed dryly. "And silver, and copper, and carbonate of lead, and marcasite, and a lot of other things. Prospectors have been all over them, each covering the group of ridges or canyons that took his fancy or seemed to promise color, but no one man knows all that lies among those huge stones of the Dragoons."

"But one man knows something that's hidden there," said Vallance, with a shrewd glance at Moran's impassive face. "Since that's what we came over here for, to see what you won't tell, can't you at least give me an idea of how far we are from our objective?"

Black Moran squatted on his heels close beside the camp fire, and the sun was already hot upon his head, and the very mountains seemed to be listening for his answer. He raised his gaze to Vallance's face, studying him frankly.

"Let's understand each other, Bob. It is, of course, none of my business why you came here. It might be some of my business as to why you should lie about it, but that may not be important. It——"

"Hey, wait a minute," Vallance interrupted, but Moran cut him short.

"You lied, and you know it, and I know it. I've a faint idea what the truth is, but I'm not going to put it into words. As you said not so long ago, we were friends once, and we're friends still, if you don't make the friendship impossible. That's no

sort of idiotic warning, it's simply a fact to be taken into consideration. But if we go on into the Dragoons to see what I came here to show you, I will be trusting you with a vital secret that must remain secret till the situation is ready to break, and that means till I say it can be told. But when a man lies, how can another fellow be sure of his trust? I don't want to make any mistakes, Bob."

"I get you." Vallance's face had sobered, and he looked a trifle white around the mouth. "If you care to take my word for it, my evasion about my reason for coming here had nothing to do with my feeling toward you or our old friendship. It was personal. It was—it came of—it—oh, the devil!"

"A very lucid explanation," said Moran, with a faint smile. "You needn't say any more. That's all I wanted to know. Suppose we let the subject drop—and may the best man win. But there's one more thing I'd like to mention. I've a great deal at stake here, as will be perfectly clear to you. I can't afford to get involved too deeply in any side issues. As my friend, whatever you do will reflect on me, and for that reason I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't strain yourself to get into any arguments."

"Such as getting into games with gamblers that are crooked as a deer-horn cactus?" Vallance grinned.

Moran nodded. "That didn't happen to be a side issue, but the next one might be. I see that you don't carry a gun. Can you still use one?"

"Oh, so-so. I have one in my grip. You needn't be uneasy, old-timer. I'll keep a head on my shoulders. And that's that, so let's drop that subject also. What a pair we seem to be for dropping things all of a

sudden. Well, how much farther do we have to go?"

"Oh, we'll reach there by evening." Moran began clearing up the remains of the meal, replacing the gear in the pack. "Ought to make it by sundown at the latest."

"Sundown? If we have anything much to see, we're going to have to wait till morning then, aren't we?"

"No. For what we're going to see it doesn't matter whether we have night or day. Tighten up your cinch and let's get moving. Or would you rather stop and sleep for a few hours and go on in the cool of the evening?"

"Not me." Vallance got to his feet. "It's too hot to sleep. I'm good for another day and night before I'll begin to feel fagged. And if we didn't keep moving, I'd die of curiosity, anyhow, so we wouldn't gain anything. Or would we?"

MORAN laughed as he swung into the saddle on the big black gelding that was his special pride. "I'd hate to venture an opinion on such a vital subject. Come along. We strike off in this direction now."

In the early evening they came to an old deserted stone corral, and there they halted, since Moran said that here they must leave the horses and proceed afoot. They unsaddled the horses, tethered them, and Moran gave them a little water from the big water bags he had filled at San Luis Creek, for they had passed no water since.

The corral was at the mouth of a narrow defile that cut back deeply into a wing of the Dragoons. For a short distance the floor of the opening was smooth from the dry sands of some long-forgotten creek that had once flowed there. But that easy traveling extended for only a

very little way, and ended abruptly at the base of boulders that reared in what seemed an unbroken phalanx a hundred feet high.

But the phalanx was not unbroken—not to the man who knew his way. Without hesitation, Moran stepped into a deep crevice and turned left, and there a faint and precarious trail led upward, twisting and turning, over, under, and around and between the huge stones.

The ascent was steep and difficult. It would have been utterly impossible had man not once hewn a trail there. Unmistakable remains of that man-made trail were still clearly evident: Stones placed one upon another, stones rolled aside, footholds chiseled in the solid sides of boulders bigger than a tall house, and otherwise impossible of ascent.

Vallance was beginning to feel rather badly winded when they came out at last upon the flat top of a gigantic rock that dropped away sheer at their right, and in front of them seemed to melt into the base of a mile-high vertical wall of stone that reared and tilted crazily into the sky above their heads.

And in the side of this wall upon which they had so abruptly come there yawned a black hole some six feet high.

Vallance gasped and stared. "A cave?"

Moran shook his head. "No, only a mine tunnel. Cut in the solid stone, no one knows how, by the Indians, a hundred years ago. Here's something for you to think about as we go along, Bob: This tunnel follows a vein of ore just as the men in Mesa Bend are following veins in the Big Betty and other mines—only this one is ten times as rich as the Betty."

Vallance's eyes gleamed, and he whistled under his breath. "Man,

what are you telling me? Ten times as rich as the Big Betty! Does any one else know it's here?"

Moran smiled faintly. "Only you and I, and a few of the Indians out on the reservation. Well, we'd better be getting on."

He took from his pocket several small pitch torches he had brought in his pack, and had removed from the pack when he had tethered the horses in the old corral. He shoved all but two back into his pocket, and struck a match to light the two he had retained.

He smiled at Vallance again as he handed him one of the torches and turned toward the tunnel mouth.

"You see, now, why I said it didn't matter whether we came here to see this by night or day. Keep an eye out for rattlers."

He plunged into the tunnel, Vallance at his heels. The long bore into the mountain proceeded at a level for some little distance, winding only slightly, and Vallance noted several side drifts leading off from the passageway as he followed Moran's steady advance. They came upon a series of stone steps that wound downward in a crude spiral stairway. Vallance stared down into the blackness, penetrated only a short way by the flickering torches.

"My boy, this would be no trip for a light-headed guy!"

"No," Moran agreed. "Watch your step. This is tricky going. But there's no other way we can reach it."

VALLANCE shivered as a damp, chill gust of air struck him. He had been in mines, but never a mine like this, and there was something ghostly about it, something that made him feel strangely uneasy, and wish fervently

that he was out of the place. This feeling increased as he followed Moran down the steep stairway. He couldn't imagine what there could be down there that was so important to see.

The chill and dampness increased as they descended, and it seemed an eternity before Moran finally came to a halt at the bottom of the stone steps on slippery, wet stone that offered precarious footing.

Vallance peered at Moran in the light of the torches. "Is this it?"

"Yes," answered Moran softly. "This is it."

Vallance had been too intent on watching his footing to notice anything else around him. Now he lifted his torch and gazed about. There was nothing to see but the walls of a cavern, hewn into the bowels of the mountain.

"Look down," said Moran, and there was a queer ring in his voice. "Lift your torch outward, this way, and look down."

Vallance obeyed, and involuntarily stepped backward with a gasp of astonishment. At his feet lay a spreading pool, reaching beyond the light of the torches into the darkness; clear as crystal, but black in its unmeasured depths. In the jagged rock that lined the edge of the pool countless white streaks gleamed in the light of the flaring torches. As far below the surface of the water as that light could penetrate, the shimmering white streaks continued, widening, descending.

Vallance gasped again. "Sylvanite!"

"Native silver," said Moran. His voice rose a little, echoing hollowly in the confines of the cavern. "Native silver running down those rocks, how far, no man knows. The Indians gouged it out with pieces of flint."

Vallance sighed. "Man, oh, man! So this was what we came to see!"

"No," said Moran.

"What?" Vallance stared. "But you said this was it! If we didn't come to see that fortune in silver, what did we come to see?"

Moran's voice dropped almost to a whisper, yet the word he spoke rang like a bell from a great distance. "Water," he said.

"Huh?" Vallance looked at him stupidly. "What?"

"Water. The Indians got a long way below this, it would seem; you can't determine how far down the shaft goes. But they got there, and then—the water came."

The significance of what he was saying began to penetrate Vallance's groping senses, and he shot a quick look into Moran's face.

"But we haven't come as far down in the tunnel as we climbed up to reach the entrance. Not nearly!"

"No. We haven't."

"But, then—why—how the water? Water here in the heart of the mountain, higher than the dust-dry desert outside. I can't understand it."

"Neither can I, nor any one else." Moran's face was grim. "But, it came. From some subterranean source, far below. Water stopped the Indians—and it will stop the miners in Mesa Bend."

He hesitated for an instant to let that sink in, and smiled his thin, cold smile.

"Yes, that's it. I'm no engineer, but I have enough of an eye for land level to know that they'll strike water in the Big Betty around the six-hundred-foot level; perhaps before. Only I knew that, till I brought you up here. Now that you know it, too, profit by the knowledge, but keep it to yourself. Only, you can see, now that we have the key to

this whole situation in our own hands. No one else even dreams of such a thing. We can swing it, but we'll have to move carefully, and we'll have to move fast. Come on, let's get out of here."

THE moon was well up by the time they emerged from the tunnel mouth at the top, and the descent down the ancient trail by the aid of the moon and the two torches was fatiguing and slow. Midnight was close upon them by the time they reached their horses at the old stone corral. Moran thought they might as well stretch out on the ground and sleep, but Vallance vetoed the idea. He said he was afraid of rattlesnakes, and that he'd prefer to doze in the saddle as they rode. They could stop at the first ranch house and find safe sleeping quarters. Moran laughed.

"There aren't any ranch houses between us and Mesa Bend. The nearest ranch house is mine, where Bull Dillon lives, over there to the west. And I'm not ready to call on Bull Dillon yet. You might as well get used to the idea of sleeping out. We can't go clear back to town without a halt and some sleep. I've slept out more nights than I could count, here in the Dragoons, and I've never been bitten by a rattler yet."

"Oh, well. All right," Vallance gave in reluctantly. "But if I get bitten, my blood be on your head."

"It'd be on my knife, probably," returned Moran. "I've got a bottle of permanganate crystals in my pocket, so stop fretting. Even if a rattler did bite you, I wouldn't let you even get sick."

"Change the subject, my boy," said Vallance, "or I'll slit your throat with glee. What are you going to do now? Which way, which course, which move? Isn't there anybody

who could know what Tony Lombardi knew?"

"There's a long chance that a couple of the boys who were helping him trail the herd might know, a couple of fellows named Pedro and Carlos Manuelito. But they're in hiding somewhere in the Dragoons, and if you think that gives you any idea of where to find them, just start out and look."

"No thanks!" Vallance shook his head violently. "But isn't there any other way?"

"I think we'll call on some of the other cattlemen over here before we go back to town," Moran answered. "I know they're pretty friendly toward me, but I have to sound them out a little, to see, if possible, how much they'd believe, of whom they'd believe it, and what their probable attitude would be if things cracked open against Bull Dillon."

"However, I'm not going to worry my head about that any more tonight. We'll find a good clear spot in the sand, well away from the rocks, and get a few hours of sleep. If we start riding again about daylight, we can reach Lum Springer's place close to noon, or a little after. We can gauge a lot by Lum Springer."

Vallance inquired, "Who is he? Sort of barometer of the range?"

"After a fashion, yes. He's a fair man, a hard man to fool; and there's nobody better liked or respected among the ranchers. I told you we'd have to move quickly. They're going to reach that six-hundred-foot level in the Big Betty—well, we'll let that pass. But it won't be long. And when that happens, the town will go as flat as a rain-soaked dobe wall. Mining will be dead."

"It will be a cowman's town again," said Vallance softly.

"Yes, it will be a cowman's town

again, Bob. But, for the sake of those cowmen themselves, it must not be a cowman's town again too soon. They've fought too long and too hard to make this range pay; they stand on the verge of winning now, if the cursed mess doesn't break too soon."

"If it doesn't break too soon? How can it be a cowman's town again too soon? You're keeping something in the dark!"

"Yes," Moran sighed. "I'm afraid you're right. And don't ask me what it is, because I'm not going to tell you yet. If you try to swallow too much at one time you might get indigestion."

"My boy, you're running around in circles!" Vallance's voice rasped a little in exasperation. "Look—is this any kind of sane declaration? You say you have to dig up some proof of Dillon's guilt so you can get your own land and cattle back; you have to move fast, because Dillon is afraid you're already on his trail; you have to move carefully, because all the other ranchers think Dillon is on the square, and probably would refuse to believe he's a crook; you don't want the thing to break against Dillon before they strike water in the mines and kill the town for miners. And yet you don't want the water to show up before you get the cattle question cleared up for the sake of the cattlemen. I ask you! Does that make sense?"

"It would, if you knew everything," Moran answered steadily. "If we can't make her break together and break right, this whole range will be killed for the cattlemen as dead as the town will be killed for the miners. Other cattlemen may come after them, years after they're dead and gone, and solve the problem, but for these present cattlemen it will be the end, and everything

they have hoped to build and win will be lost. And don't start asking questions. I haven't talked so much all at once for ten years. I'm tired of the sound of my own voice. Here's a very decent spot to stop. So pull in your reins and we'll see if we can get some sleep on the matter."

CHAPTER VI.

HATE ON THE RANGE.

THEY both slept soundly. Moran awoke with the early sun peering into his face, and shook Vallance awake. Together they began gathering dead mesquite and scrub-oak sticks for a breakfast fire. Vallance made a few efforts at conversation, but found Moran grimly silent and abstracted. He good-naturedly desisted from trying to make him talk, and turned to helping with the meal.

Moran's mind was a tangle of confusing thoughts. He was trying, for one thing, to estimate what weight his word would have with Lum Springer. He knew very well the various exaggerated ideas about himself that were more or less rife. In Mesa Bend, people usually paid little heed to his coming and going, since he had kept rigidly to himself, had confided in no one, and had moved as unobtrusively as possible. But no effort at reticence could save him from the tongues that wagged for their own entertainment. Some said he was a secret agent of the cattlemen. Others said he was a mining expert who knew some deep dark secret about the Dragoons. Still others were certain he was a gunman, a killer who would shoot a man merely to ascertain just which way he would fall.

Yet another group insisted that he was an ordinary highwayman, retired from that dubious profession

temporarily and living off the ill-gotten gains of previous raids. But those who came nearest the truth said, and never dreamed that they had even brushed elbows with the truth, that he had come there for redress and revenge, that he was merely marking time in Mesa Bend, scanning every face, watching all men, till he could corner the one he had come to seek.

And all of this would have been heard by the cattlemen, greatly elaborated. What part of it did the cattlemen believe? He had never known. He had never sought to know, because he was not ready to move. But he had to know now.

There were a few other things he would have liked to know now, too, but he saw no possible chance of learning them. For one thing, he would like to establish the identity of the man at Heath, for whom Nellie Carlyle had left the stage. Some man who had taken his place, perhaps? He didn't know that he could blame her much, if that were so. Three years could be a long time in a girl's life, and she had been waiting three years. Had it been three years, really, since he had left her in Red Bluffs to go searching for the open range where they could build their home and cease their wandering?

Three years. Yes, it had been that long. He had written her occasionally when he could, keeping her informed of his movements. She knew of the little adobe house out west of the Dragoons that had been built for her, and that she likely would never see; she knew of the stolen herd and the massacre; and she knew of the trail that he followed, hoping, with a hope that faded, day by day, that some time they would be together again.

Perhaps he had been a fool to

write that last letter three months ago, telling her that the end was nowhere in sight, that she had better forget him and find somebody else; but he had been in the depths of despair when he wrote it, and there had seemed no light on the horizon anywhere. Perhaps that cryptic note she had written in answer hadn't meant what he had thought it did. It had said so little, merely:

I will arrive Thursday in Mesa Bend on the Yuma stage. I am tired of waiting. You will understand after I talk to you.

Perhaps he had been a greater fool when he had thought that she meant she was coming to him. Maybe she had taken him at his word when he told her she had better find somebody else. Maybe the young gunman was to have joined her at Heath, was to have come on with her. It was all a dreary scramble. Whatever the answer, he'd probably know some time, when she reached Mesa Bend—if she ever did.

Mulling it over was no sort of profitable thinking. He'd better put his mind on hurrying through breakfast and getting on to the Springer ranch with Bob Vallance.

THE sun had passed the meridian nearly an hour since when the two men rode up to the Springer ranch house, a crude adobe structure where Springer lived alone, eating his meals in the long adobe bunk house, where a kitchen had been partitioned off at one end. Lum Springer came to the door and looked out before Moran and Vallance had dismounted from their horses, smiling broadly and calling out in a hearty voice:

"Well, Moran! What are you doin' away over this way?"

Springer was a small, thin man with a seamed and weathered face,

earnest blue eyes, and a protruding Adam's apple above his hairy chest. He stepped out to the porch, which was shaded by a spreading live oak.

Moran smiled and waved a hand toward Vallance.

"Oh, just came over to call and make you acquainted with an old friend of mine, Lum. This is Bob Vallance. He came in just day before yesterday on the Yuma stage."

"How do, Vallance!" Springer advanced to the edge of the low porch and thrust out a friendly hand. "Pleased to meet any friend of Black Moran. You boys et yet?"

"No, we haven't," Moran answered. "But don't bother the cook now that he's got his noon meal all cleared up."

"Oh, blazes!" Springer retorted. "Pete ain't that sort of ranny. Come on out to the cook shack, and he'll dig you up somethin' to take wrinkles out. You stoppin' long in Mesa Bend, Vallance?"

"I can't say." Vallance eyed the little man with amused appreciation for his friendliness. "I hope to stay, and probably will, if I can find a profitable berth."

"Oh, you'll find one, likely. Hey, Corny!" Springer turned his head to shout at a lean, stooped man just emerging from the adobe barn beyond which the horses of Moran and Vallance stood.

"Take care of the boys' horses while they come in and eat a snack, will you?"

"Sure. You bet." Corny turned promptly toward the horses.

Springer beamed at Vallance. "He'll get 'em in out of the sun. Nice boy, Corny. Sure is a hummer to-day, ain't she? Ninety-nine in the shade, if you want to know. Hundred and four yestidy. Can't see much difference myself. Well,

here we are. Step right in, boys. Hey, Pete! You in there?"

A fat, grinning fellow stepped instantly into sight in the kitchen doorway, his sleeves rolled above the elbows, sweat rolling down his face and neck, half his shirt wet enough with sweat to wring. "Right here, boss," he said. "Grub?"

"Grub, and plenty of it, for Black Moran and his friend, Vallance. Shake your hoofs, Pete."

"Sure enough, boss!" And fat Pete turned back into his kitchen.

"Siddown, boys." Springer gestured toward one of the long tables strung down the center of the room. "You a miner, Vallance?"

"Well, not exactly a miner," Vallance answered. "I know something of mining, but I can't say just what kind of place I'll look for yet."

MORAN'S eyes swerved quickly to Springer's face. Odd that Springer should pick that subject so quickly. Was there significance in this? He had his answer in another instant.

Springer sobered, and his eyes crinkled in a slight frown of distress.

"Oh, yes, of course. Ain't had time to get your bearin' yet, naturally. But it might be a friendly act to sort of give you a tip, seein' you're a friend of Black, here. We've got a kind of messy upheaval goin' on right now on this range. And if you—if you're plannin' on minin', I wouldn't say these parts was any too good a place to stop. I venture Moran's already told you this is cattle country, ain't he?"

"Yes, he has." Vallance darted a look at Moran as fat Pete came up to set before them a small platter heaped with bread and a tin plate half covered with butter kept decently firm by a cooler he had de-

vised in the window of his kitchen. Vallance's gaze seemed to say that they evidently weren't going to have much trouble eliciting their information, and he added, pleasantly casual: "Black says it isn't fit for anything but cattle country."

"Yes, and he's right, by Harry!" Springer bent an approving glance on Moran. "Always did say Black Moran had his share of good sense. This wasn't never meant for anything but cattle country. Us cattlemen come and settled on this range a long time ago, Vallance. We drove out or made peace with the Indians. We made roads and built bridges, what roads and bridges we needed, such as they is. We put up the town of Mesa Bend. That's all true, ain't it, Black?"

"Quite true, Lum!" Moran's dark eyes fixed intently on Springer's withered face. "Are you a little bit upset over something, Lum?"

Springer smiled ruefully. "Well, I did sort of jump into it roughshod and sudden, didn't I? But I am a bit riled, Black, and that's a fact. But, then, this fool business would rile anybody! As far as you can ride, in any direction, it's cattle range we got here, fit for nothin' else. And we're gettin' it—I mean we was gettin' it, to the point of where we had some hope of seein' it pay us for all our fightin' and workin' and dyin'. And then that all-fired Louie Clumm has to go and pick up a rock and start a stampede, and we ain't peaceful cattlemen no more. What have we got now? Can't go to town without meetin' up with cutthroats, gunmen, killers and gamblers. A decent rancher can't get up to the bar without shovin' past grubbin' dirty miners, and he has to brush 'em off like flies when he walks down the street. And there don't seem to be much hope of things gettin' any

better, unless we up and do somethin'."

"Do what, Lum?" Moran asked quickly, grimly aware that Lum Springer was "riled up" to a high pitch of excitement.

"Do plenty!" Springer answered, his blue eyes ominous. "We've got to, Black. Go take a look at the river. It's ours, Skull River is; it's been urn for a long time, and it's about all we got. It ain't much of a river, but it's water in the desert, and that's somethin'! Two years ago it was clean and clear, and look at it now! Muddy and poison from the washin' from the mines, sour with sewer poured into it by them miner rats that swarm to town at the cry of silver, runnin' to only half its level because they ain't even got the decency to turn the water back into the main channel after they use it for their dirty minin', but just run it out to sink in the sand. We got to do somethin', Black, or everything we've fought for is goin' to be plumb ruind, and so are we!"

VALLANCE was speechless, startled, and he saw with dismay the apprehension and consternation that paled Moran's dark face. Moran leaned upon the table toward Springer, forgetting the meal Pete had unobtrusively laid before them. His voice was cool and steady, but there was something in it that brought Springer's heated excitement up short and held his attention sharply.

"It might be more disastrous to do something now, Lum, than it would to sit tight and wait a little longer."

"Wait!" echoed Springer. "Wait? My glory! That's just what we can't do, Black. We ain't got no time to wait. Warnin' has got to be sent out to these minin' men that they've got to make a change in

their ways and make it quick. The word's got to be give to the prospectors, and give pretty all-fired plain, too, that they got to keep off the range from now on! The first gun's spoke, Black, and we cattlemen has got to stand by each other. Know what happened to the last prospector that come pokin' around the range over west of the Dragoons?"

Moran nodded, and his dark face was harried and strained. "I was in the Dark Crystal at the time, Lum. I was sorry to see that happen."

"Well, so was I. Sorry it had to happen, Black. But we cattlemen have got our backs up against the wall, we're facin' our last fight for this range, and it's goin' to be the biggest and ugliest fight we ever made. And listen, Black!"

Springer's voice tightened, and his earnest blue eyes fixed on Moran's, pleading and exhorting.

"Ain't it time you got off the fence? If you're still ranklin' because Dillon settled that stretch of range ahead of you, now is the time to get over it or show your cards. If you're an honest cattleman, plant yourself on one of the ranches out here and stay away from the crowd at Mesa Bend. Goodness knows, you're plenty welcome right here on my place. But if you hold with those blasted miners, we got no quarrel with you, but stay off the range."

A thin white line grew around Moran's tightly compressed lips. The harried light in his eyes increased.

"Aren't you being just a little hostile, Lum? I know Dillon doesn't like me, but I thought you and Williams and Clark were my friends."

"But that's just it, Black!" Springer's earnestness waxed genuinely painful. "We are your friends,

all of us ranchers. You can't properly say Dillon doesn't like you. He just wants you to get in with the rest of us and help to save this range. He ain't got no reason not to like you. This is open range and you've done no man harm. But the range is all taken up. There's all the ranchers on it now that can make a livin'. Don't you realize that?"

"I'm afraid I do, Lum," Moran answered grimly. "That's the bitter truth, more bitter for me than you know."

"Oh, I wouldn't go to talk like that, now," Springer protested. "There's all the whitefaces here right now that there's browse and water to keep alive, but that don't shut you out. If you want to start ranchin' here, if you like the country, just throw in with one of the outfits that's already runnin'. Because we're organizin', Black, us ranchers are."

"Dillon's got the biggest ranch, the most cattle, and he's by far the best off of any of us, and he's give the word. And I'm with him. He says that when he has to come down to shootin' prospectors to keep his range clean, it's show-down, and he's right. Him and me went over and talked to Williams and Clark—I just got back this mornin'—and they're in favor of it. We got it all planned out."

"Yes?" Moran's voice rang, it was so tight and hard. "What have you planned, Lum?"

WELL, we're startin' our own town at Gila Point, right on the new railroad survey. There's some old buildin's still good over there, and we've got a stock of grub and stuff comin' in there soon by freight wagons. We're stayin' away from Mesa Bend from now on, and the Mesa Bend miners are goin'

to stay away from us. If we have any more trouble from that town, every rancher and rider on this range is gettin' together to ride down there and clean 'em out. We'll burn the town if we have to. We mean business, Black. We're goin' to save this range if it's in mortal power, and we're makin' our move."

"It sure looks like it," Moran agreed, and his face was gaunt and white. He did not look at Vallance, who sat staring at him in speechless consternation. He fixed his weary dark eyes on Springer's flushed face.

"You've moved fast. But I'm afraid, Lum, if you force this through, that you're going to bring on complete wreckage, the very wreckage you are trying to avert."

"Try to grasp the significance of this: Mesa Bend will be free of miners, before long, if you'll just have the patience to wait a little longer. Don't move in haste to something that can only bring ruin and lifelong regret."

"Yes, but now listen yourself, Black," Springer argued patiently. "You've been sayin' that for a year, sayin' to wait. You've had us with you, hopin' this business might clear up without a fight, but we can't wait any longer. Them veins in the mines at Mesa Bend ain't runnin' out none! The stampepe to Mesa Bend is still on. And every day that goes by they're makin' more trouble for us, more of 'em comes to overrun our range and dump their rubbish in Skull River. Well, what's the one last thing that could make this range the success we've fought to make it, providin' we get our river clean again and save our water supply and our range? What's the one last thing that would make it pay, and pay big? You know and I know—the railroad! The railroad and a near-by station to ship our beef

from. And we're gettin' it! We're takin' our post at Gila Point, and mercy on the man that tries to stop us."

"Then mercy on me, Lum, because I'm going to try to stop you," Moran said harshly. "For your own sakes. I'm telling you straight facts that will make or break the whole range, Lum, by the way you react to them. You won't get your railroad at Gila Point! The railroad wouldn't come into Mesa Bend for the cattlemen, and it won't go into Gila Point for the cattlemen. They've changed their survey, Lum. Because they *are* coming into Mesa Bend for the mines and the silver shipments going out of there.

"But—just about the time the road is laid and gets to running, the mines in Mesa Bend will shut down, they'll go dead! And you cattlemen will have your town, your range, and your railroad, clear. For Heaven's sake, listen to me, Lum. Use your influence to make the cattlemen wait!"

For a breathless moment Springer stared, his blue eyes wide and round with wonder. "Why—how in tarnation can you know all that, Black? Are you sure of it—do you know what you're talkin' about?"

"Yes, I know, Lum. It's as sure to happen as we're sure to have thunderstorms and rain on the desert. I know! I can't tell you how I know, I don't dare let it get out yet. But we cattlemen have the whole situation in our hands, if we can grit our teeth and wait."

"We," muttered Lum Springer. "You said *we* cattlemen, Black. I guess that's all I wanted to know. If you say you know all that, your word's good enough for me. I don't know just what I can do with the boys, but I'll use all the influence

I've got with them. Can I tell 'em what you said?"

YES," Moran answered tersely. "Tell all of them but Bull Dillon. That may sound like a queer thing to say, but I don't want Dillon to know anything about this just yet. He can't stage a war all by himself. He can only raise a rumpus and get himself disliked. If you other men will hang together and stick with me, he'll have to wait, too."

"I can't promise, Black, but I'll do all I can. I sort of think the boys will listen to me. How long do we have to keep on waitin'?"

"I think three months will see the end of it, Lum, at the outside."

Moran rose from the bench, stepped over it, and moved back from the table.

"And Bob and I have to be getting back to Mesa Bend. I have to keep my finger on the pulse of things there. I have to know exactly what's going on at the mines. I'll keep you informed of anything important that might come up."

Springer rose and followed Moran and Vallance out of the adobe bunk house, his face furrowed with distress.

"Three months! My glory, Black, that's a long time to wait. Our cattle is already sufferin' for water."

"I know it, Lum. I know we're in a tight spot, and three months seems like a long time. It may not be that long, but there's nothing else to do but wait. Unless you want to see this range wrecked for the lifetime of every man on it, use every scrap of influence you have to make the men hang on and wait."

Springer shook his head dubiously as he followed them toward the shade of the tree where Corny had left their horses standing. "Well, I

—I don't know, Black. I'll do the best I can. You goin' to see Williams and Clark before you make town?"

"No." Moran swung up onto his horse and turned to glance back. "I'll leave it to you to see them, Lum. It's imperative that I go straight in to Mesa Bend."

As Moran and Vallance rode out of sight of the adobe ranch house and swung into the direction leading toward town, Vallance heaved a long sigh.

"My boy, she looks bad. Bad!"
"You said it!" agreed Moran. "She looks so bad I wouldn't give a hunk of iron pyrites for my chances or my life right about now. But, I always was a fool for hope."

"Yeah?" drawled Vallance. "Well, not only fools hope, long face. Gamblers and idiots and men in love sometimes do. And brave men always do. That lets me out."

CHAPTER VII.

A MATTER OF BUSINESS.

BLACK MORAN and Bob Vallance were still on their way back from the Springer ranch when the next stage pulled into Mesa Bend. There was the usual crowd of watchers before the Oriental Hotel, waiting eagerly for the mail and to catch a glimpse of any newcomers arriving in town. In the same spot, leaning against the same post where Black Moran had stood three days before, was August Arletta, his left hand toying idly with a trinket that dangled from his ornate watch chain.

The stage rumbled up and stopped. The door opened and the passengers began to descend. Arletta paid little attention to the first three who emerged, merely men who were of the constant incoming stream bound

for the mines. Then the fourth passenger stood in the doorway and stepped to the ground, and at least a dozen men made a move as if to spring forward and offer assistance, though what assistance might possibly be proffered was not as yet evident.

The girl who had caused that swift start of attention was tall and slender. Her eyes, a clear, light brown, were direct, challenging, the eyes of one who knew how to clear her own path.

Under her blue straw hat, her hair lay straight and thick and fine, as yellow as maize, her skin milk-white and damask rose. Her beauty would have arrested the eye in any gathering, yet that same beauty, which had drawn men toward her as if she had called them, held them irresolute from any farther advance, her brown eyes stating clearly that she could attend to her own affairs and would thank others to do the same. Every man who had started forward halted just as involuntarily.

August Arletta had not moved, but he had stiffened to attention, his cool eyes alert, fixed on her face. She stepped to the ground, gazed deliberately about her, then turned her head and looked back into the coach. And beyond her shoulder, Arletta saw the figure of a man half propped in the corner of the forward seat, a small, thin man, with a drawn white face. The girl said clearly:

"Can you manage to get out if I help you, Dick?"

The white-faced man tried to rise from the seat.

By that time Arletta had moved from the arcade post, crossed the intervening space, and halted at the girl's side.

"Can I possibly be of any aid, lady?" he asked, with exactly the

right amount of deference, of sympathetic concern.

The girl turned her head quickly, and her brown eyes surveyed him from head to foot in one swift, comprehensive glance. Arletta was of a breed not too easily mistaken, but she had dealt with his kind before, had learned about men from a great many males of varying status and degree.

"You came up on the stage from Yuma to Heath when I did, on the stage before this, didn't you?" she commented. "You're August Arletta. Yes, you can help Dick out of the coach, if you will. He's so awfully weak from the wound he received at Heath."

She turned again to the coach and spoke to the white-faced young man inside.

"Dick, here's August Arletta. He'll help you out."

She stepped back to allow Arletta to reach the coach door, and he saw that no one else was left in the coach but the wounded man.

"All right, son." Arletta reached in both hands. "Just take a grip on me and slide out. Easy, now."

The wounded man gripped Arletta's hands, managed to slide along the seat and thrust his legs out toward the ground across the coach steps. Arletta stooped quickly, slipped both arms around the other's small, thin body and lifted him easily. He turned to the girl, holding the wounded man against his chest.

"I suppose you haven't made any arrangements as yet? You're Miss Carlyle, if I remember correctly."

The girl gave him a fleeting smile.

"Yes. I'm Nellie Carlyle. No, I've made no arrangements, Mr. Arletta. I want to get Dick to a room as quickly as possible, so he can rest."

"We'll fix that," Arletta said promptly. "You just follow me. I'll send for your luggage."

HE stepped forward, walking toward the arcade, carrying the wounded man carefully, while Nellie Carlyle followed him, and the gathered crowd of onlookers gaped at them. He proceeded on into the Oriental Hotel, crossed the lobby, and ascended the stairs, the girl close behind him.

As the three of them passed from sight into the hotel, a man in the crowd chuckled, a man who had stood close enough to hear what had been said between Bob Vallance and Black Moran the day Vallance had arrived.

"Black Moran's girl," he said in an undertone to the man beside him.

"Not any more," the other man returned, "not if I've guessed Arletta right."

"Wonder who the fellow is that was too slow on the draw? He looks pretty washed out, don't he?"

The other man chuckled again. "I'll bet Black Moran would like to know who he is, too. I'd sure like to hear what's going on between her and Arletta right about now."

He would have been slightly astounded if he could have looked on as August Arletta walked into a room on the second floor of the hotel and carefully deposited the wounded man on the bed. The girl glanced around the room quickly, and brought her gaze back to Arletta.

"Your room, Mr. Arletta? Thank you. Presently I will go down to the desk and arrange for rooms of our own."

Arletta smiled, and he had charm when he smiled.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, Miss Carlyle. There simply

aren't any rooms to be had. People are coming in too fast. A third of the population sleeps in tents, another third out on the ground, in the open. I paid a bartender five hundred dollars to get out of this room for me, and he's sleeping back of the Dark Crystal in the box the dance hall piano came in. Sit down, Miss Carlyle, and rest yourself a few minutes. I want to talk to you."

Nellie Carlyle moved to one of the plush armchairs the Oriental Hotel boasted, slipped into it, and removed the blue straw hat from her head. She dropped the hat upon her lap, ran a hand back over her gleaming hair, and smiled at Arletta. Her glance, however, went beyond him to the wounded man on the bed, who lay exhausted, his eyes closed.

"Thank you. It's a relief to be free of the motion of the stage. Do I infer correctly that you had something particular to say?"

"I certainly have," Arletta answered promptly. "I'm no hand to beat around the bush, so I'm going to lay my cards right down on the table, face up. As we came up on the stage to Heath that day, I heard you talking to Bob Vallance, the big blond fellow who got on at Yuma. I couldn't help hearing most of what was said between you.

"I heard you say that you had a friend in Mesa Bend, Black Moran. I gathered from what I heard that you hadn't anything in view here yet, but expected to take care of that after you arrived. When you left the stage at Heath I heard you request Vallance to tell Moran you'd come on the next stage. Before I go any further, I'd like to know if there's anything serious between you and Moran. I'm not trying to pry into your affairs. I simply want to know whether you and Moran are—engaged, or anything like that?"

Nellie Carlyle shook her head slowly.

"Engaged? No, not now. We were once, Mr. Arletta. But—well, Mr. Moran may have other ideas of the future now. I couldn't say till I've talked to him. Is he still in Mesa Bend?"

"Well, you couldn't say he's in Mesa Bend, exactly," Arletta answered. "He's in and out of town spasmodically. Nobody knows what he does or what he's here for, though there are a lot of conjectures. You know how it is. He was in town to meet the stage three days ago; evidently came to meet Vallance, who's an old friend of his."

"An old friend?" Nellie Carlyle roused in her chair. "Why, he didn't act like it when I mentioned Black on the stage."

ARLETTA smiled meaningly. "Perhaps he had reason for that. At all events, they are old friends—that was apparent in their meeting. I got off the stage before Vallance, and I witnessed the meeting. I heard Vallance greet Moran, and I heard him give Moran your message, and I heard Moran say, 'Oh, yes?' And I heard Vallance tell him about your getting off at Heath."

The girl eyed him steadily. "Your hearing's very good, isn't it?"

"It has to be, in my business," Arletta said with a dry smile. "I learned who Vallance was, and a good deal about Moran's doings here, after the two left town. They left town that night, together, destination unknown, and they haven't come back yet."

"And Black knew I was coming in on this stage?" Nellie said slowly.

"He had to know. Vallance told him. But I think that subject is exhausted. Am I right in believing

that you have nothing in mind to do here yet?"

"I'm afraid you are, Mr. Arletta. I know nothing about the town or anybody in it."

"Then I've a business proposition for you."

Arletta leaned toward her, and his voice quickened, his tones grew brisk. He gestured toward the man on the bed.

"I don't know who your friend is, or how he come to get shot up, or why, and I'm not asking. It's none of my business. But I do know he's in no condition to sleep on the ground, and I do know there are no living quarters to be had in Mesa Bend unless you pay high for them. And this boy you call Dick has got to be taken care of right if he's going to pull through."

"His name is Richard Harlow." Nellie's eyes were steady on the gambler's face. "He is a little slow with a gun, sometimes, but he doesn't miss. I think perhaps that's enough for you to know. Yes, he has to be taken care of."

"Well, I can make that easy for you. I can make everything easy for you if you care to take me up on it. Last night, in the Dark Crystal, I got into a little game, and I ended it owner of a boarding house up here on Fifth Street, just off Boom. It's a nice place, and the fellow who'd owned it was leaving for Frisco anyway. It stands me an even thousand dollars. I don't want it. I wouldn't know what to do with it. But it's pretty well fixed up, a dobe building, and it could be a money-maker.

"It would be a big money-maker if somebody like you would manage it and run it. If you want to take it off my hands, you can pay me as you make it. It'll give you a living,

a place to take good care of Harlow, here, and a chance to make a stake."

Arletta leaned back in his chair and surveyed her coolly.

She returned his gaze with eyes that missed little of his expression and probed deeply for his intent.

"And where is the catch, Mr. Arletta?"

He laughed. "You can take it or leave it. There isn't any catch. Fortunes are to be made or lost in this town in the blink of an eye. I'm here for two reasons, because an old friend of mine sent for me to come and help him out of a tight spot, and—to make money."

"An old friend?" the girl interrupted quickly.

"Yes. You wouldn't know him. Not Black Moran. The fellow is a rancher here now, though he wasn't exactly a rancher when he and I used to run together. But that's neither here nor there. If he wants to settle down and work like a fool raising cattle, he's welcome to it. I'd rather make money after my own fashion. And one way I make money is to turn over everything that comes into my hands at the first possible opportunity.

"Heaven knows I can't run a boarding house. You could make it pay hand over fist. I thought of it the minute you stepped off the stage, and I'm making my bid before you get a chance to tie up with anything else. That's straight goods."

IT was, as far as it went. But it didn't go far enough to lay bare the whole truth. Arletta prided himself on being an adept at that kind of deception which has its roots in truth, and, by that very fact, bears the semblance of truth itself. He was shrewd enough to realize that by no other type of deception

could he possibly inveigle Nellie Carlyle. And, from his standpoint, it was very important that he arouse the interest of Nellie Carlyle and get her into his camp before she could talk to Black Moran.

When he had received Bull Dillon's urgent request for aid, he had obligingly taken the first stage for Mesa Bend. He had not yet had opportunity to talk to Dillon extensively, but he knew already, from Dillon's letter, that the enemy Dillon wanted to annihilate or run out of the country was Black Moran. He believed in gathering all the reins of control into his hands in any given situation, and certainly the girl who had come to the town especially to see Moran must be a part of this situation.

Arletta had needed bait to lure Nellie Carlyle, and Bull Dillon would make good any loss he might suffer; or he could easily sell the boarding house if the scheme failed to work. He had no particular worry about the girl discovering the discrepancies in his statements. He would take a chance on being able to prevent that, and a man in his profession had to take chances every day, which were a lot less safe than this one. He had a faint idea that he had succeeded even better than he had hoped, as he rose from his chair and spoke again with brisk geniality.

"Well, my cards are all out, face up, Miss Carlyle. I'll run down and see about your luggage, and give you two a chance to relax. I'll be back in about an hour, and you can tell me what you think of the boarding-house idea. If you'd rather not buy it, you can take it over and run it on a percentage basis. Either way is all right with me. I want the responsibility of it off my hands. I'll be seeing you shortly."

He left the room with a deferential smile.

The wounded man opened his eyes and looked across at the girl.

"Why didn't you want him to know I'm your cousin, Nellie?"

Nellie Carlyle smiled, a smile so wise that it seemed almost out of place on her lovely face.

"I don't want any one to know it, Dick, for a while. I'll tell Black, as soon as I can see him, and then I don't care, if Black is the same to me as he used to be. But until then, I fancy I'll have less annoyance on my hands if the inhabitants of Mesa Bend know only that I have with me a young gunman who might resent it alarmingly if anybody attempted to molest his lady friend. A cousin is scarcely close enough to intimidate or threaten violent defense, Dick; but a gunman sweetheart——"

An admiring smile lighted Dick Harlow's wan face.

"Good figuring, Nellie. Too bad you'd never mentioned me to Moran, though."

"A person doesn't tend to mention any one he hasn't seen for fifteen years, Dick. You were a very small boy when I'd seen you last, and I never had known what became of you or where you'd got to. I'm afraid I hadn't even thought of you very much, although I was awfully glad when you looked me up in Red Bluffs last April. It's nice to have some one who belongs to me again, Dicky. I felt so alone after mother and dad died, till Black came, and then—then I was alone again."

"Well, neither of us is alone any more," Dick said quickly.

"No, but I'm afraid I will be, unless you take better care of yourself, darling. I wish Bruce Elgin would go after his own hard cases instead of sending you. You almost didn't shoot quickly enough."

WELL, it taught me a lesson." Dick Harlow's white face set grimly. "I should have done as I was told. But you mustn't feel that way, Nellie. It's my business to obey Bruce. He's my boss, and he had a tougher nut to crack on up the line. Haywood had been holed up at Heath for six weeks, and they couldn't smoke him out. I felt complimented when Bruce assigned me to collar him. But what I got is my own fault. Bruce warned me not to give him a chance, that he was a rat, and to down him the minute I could throw a gun on him. Next time I'll do as Bruce tells me. But you stop worrying about me. I'll be all right. The doc at Heath said so. What I want to know is, are you going to take on this boarding house?"

"Yes, I think I will. Of course, there's something back of Arletta's offer. He was waiting there at the stage for us, and he probably realizes I know that there's more to this than his desire to turn over what comes to his hand, as he expresses it. But it might prove profitable—and I'd like to know what Arletta is up to."

"Do you suppose Moran's left Mesa Bend?"

"I scarcely think so, Dick. I can't understand why Vallance didn't say something about knowing Black when I mentioned him on the stage. You put it all together and it looks a little queer, Dicky. There's something wrong somewhere. Either Arletta is telling the truth, and Black has really changed, or Arletta lied and Black didn't know I was coming to-day. And Black would have had to change a great deal not to be here to meet me to-day if he knew I was coming. I know Black well enough for that."

"He must be a grand guy, Nellie."

"He is!" The brown eyes gleamed,

and a swift bright light illuminated the lovely face. "They don't come any grander. But he's had a terrible streak of bad luck. I told you all about that, Dick. There's a funny look on your face. What's on your mind, Dick?"

"I was just wondering, Nell. Suppose—suppose this friend of Arletta, the rancher who was something not so savory once, and Dill Kragg, the hard nut Bruce is after, are the same man. And suppose that man is Bull Dillon."

The girl's face blanched a little. "Dick! Could it be?"

"Of course it could be," Harlow answered emphatically. "A lot of little things point to just such a possibility. But if that is so, we're going to have a heck of a time tracking it down. Bruce has been on Dill Kragg's trail for seven years, and that's a long time to trail one man, Nellie. The fellow's slick. He pulled that mail robbery and didn't leave a clew. Bruce tied him up with the killing at Miller's Ford by the merest chance. He's covered his tracks well."

"Still, I don't see how Bruce is going to unearth anything on him now."

The girl sat up in her chair, and laid the blue straw hat on the floor by her feet.

"I don't see how he can possibly prove anything on the man after all this time."

"Neither do I," admitted Harlow. "But Bruce is a bloodhound. And he's got the patience of Job. He'll never give up trailing Dill Kragg as long as he lives, and if he never gets him he'll not rest in his grave. That's the kind of fellow Bruce is. I hear somebody on the stairs. Maybe Arletta's coming back."

Both of them were watching the

door as it opened, and Arletta entered the room.

"Well," he said jovially, "I know the hour isn't up, but I thought you might have figured out what you wanted to do, and would like to get settled."

Nellie picked up the blue straw hat and rose to her feet.

"You're quite right, Mr. Arletta. On both counts. I'll take over the boarding house, but I'd rather not buy it. I prefer to run it on a percentage basis. And the sooner we can get there the better I'll be pleased."

"You've made a wise decision," Arletta commended heartily. "I hoped you'd take me up. I've a buckboard waiting downstairs to take your friend over, and I've already stowed your luggage in it, just in case. So I guess we might as well move along."

HE carried Harlow down the stairs, as he had carried him up, and Harlow did not demur. Arletta had removed the rear seat of the buckboard and padded the back of the wagon bed with blankets, providing a very acceptable pallet for the wounded man. He installed Harlow, then helped Nellie into the front seat, got in beside her, gathered up the reins and sent the horses trotting down the dusty street.

It was nearly evening, and the street was thronged with the usual crowds. The night-shift men were already in the mines, and the day-shift men were swarming to the evening's entertainment. No one paid much attention to the passing of the buckboard.

A little over a block down Boom Street, a group of brawling miners had started to celebrate the opening of the Tin Can Café, and the cele-

bration, judging from its beginning, seemed to promise a big amount of discomfort as well as considerable financial loss to "Slant-eye" Sam, the proprietor, who was the fat Chinese who had arrived on the stage three days before.

Nellie Carlyle gazed at the scene with sharp eyes as the buckboard approached and passed, and glanced back over her shoulder as one burly miner, with a ribald shout, hurled a pie into the middle of the board walk.

"If somebody doesn't do something, that Chinaman is going to get hurt," she said to Arletta.

"Probably," Arletta agreed without looking. "But the chink shouldn't have tried his hand here, Miss Carlyle. The miners made it too hot for the Chinaman who had the restaurant before, and that's the only reason Sam got it so cheap. They don't like having the chinks around; they're always in the way, washing the tailings at the mines. The chink may get hurt, but he won't get hurt bad, just enough to scare him and make him move on; and anybody that tried to interfere would get hurt a darned sight worse. Don't let it bother you."

Nellie didn't answer. It always bothered her to see unkindness or abuse heaped upon the weak or defenseless, and she usually tried to do something about it. But this was a case where she could do nothing, though she continued to watch the roistering scene with apprehensive eyes till Arletta turned the buckboard off into Fifth Street, where the boarding house stood two doors down from Boom Street.

Because of that, she did not see the two horsemen who rode into Boom Street from the opposite direction; nor did she see them glance

toward the buckboard and stare at each other, and draw their horses up short as one of the two cursed angrily.

The one who cursed was Black Moran.

Vallance gaped. "Well, I'll be hanged for a horse thief! Nellie Carlyle, and August Arletta! And the fellow in the back is the gunman that was shot up at Heath. What in the devil do you make of that?"

"Nothing. But it will bear looking into," Moran answered curtly. "Did she seem to know Arletta on the stage?"

"No, she didn't. She didn't know him at all. She never once spoke to

him, and she scarcely looked at him. She must have known who he was, all right, because one of the fellows on the stage was talking to him and calling him by name. But, my boy, I don't like the look of that. Are you going to follow them?"

Moran shook his head. "Nothing so crude as that, Bob. Nellie Carlyle is a free agent. We're going to eat, the first thing. Then we'll go down to the Chinaman's. That poor devil will always have a hard time of it here. From the look of things, I'd say the miners were ragging him again. Come along. I feel in just the right mood to raise the devil with somebody."

To be continued in next week's issue.

TO PREVENT OVERGRAZING

IT is the advice of H. D. Hauser, range examiner, of the Black Squirrel Creek project of the Soil Conservation Service of Texas, to build dams and provide salt licks in such a manner as to spread out the cattle and prevent overgrazing. When cattle are allowed to graze around a watering spot they will not go far afield for grass, but will feed upon what is nearest and most convenient. Soon this area becomes trampled and sodden, and eventually it is provender for a small dust storm. The safeguard against this all too prevalent condition may be remedied by equal distribution of stock water ponds and salt licks.

Says Hauser: "Any small draw where there is sufficient drainage area and a suitable spillway, provides an ideal location for a small earthen dam. Farmers, equipped with a tractor and a team of horses, can build these structures in their spare time.

"Although a finished job with a cut-off wall at the end of the spillway and the front face of the dam protected by rip-rap, is desirable, these may be added later, even after rains have afforded some stock water. If the dam can be located where the spillway spreads out on a well-sodded area with little slope, a cut-off wall may not be necessary.

"In building these dams it is well to remember that an excess of earth fill is more desirable than a limited amount, since strength and bulk are necessary to withstand the force of excessive run-off water. Compacting of the fill is necessary since settling is an important factor in successful dam construction.

"Salt licks should be placed on high ground and far enough from the watering spots so the cattle will graze the entire area instead of concentrating around the ponds."



The Humiliation Of Hep

By **GLENN H. WICHMAN**

Author of "Gumshoe Gallegher," etc.

MY partner, "Hep" Gallegher, along with a lot of other silly gents, had been sparking Mrs. Belinda Harlow ever since she had come into the county and had bought the Box O Ranch. Mrs. Harlow was a sharp-tongued widow lady who had a lot of money and wasn't half bad to look at. Even if she did have as severe a disposition as a Texas tornado, every son of a gun around those parts who wasn't already married, except me, seemed obsessed with the idea of leading her back to the altar. The married women said it was on account of the ranch and her bank account, which, at that, may have had

something to do with it. But Belinda, while she was reasonably polite to all her suitors until they proposed matrimony, would have nothing to do with getting married.

This state of affairs had existed for all of two months when one night, along about ten o'clock, Hep Gallegher came storming into the room which was off the barn where me an' him and a couple of other cowhands slept. The Rafter S, which was a neighbor to the Box O, wasn't a prosperous enough outfit to afford a regular bunk house, so we slept in this lean-to.

"George," growled Hep, as he woke up, "can you imagine what's happened?"

"Anything," I sleepily told him, "can happen to you, except that, so far, you've never had the good luck to break your neck, which would have put you out of your misery. What's the matter now?"

"George," continued Gallagher, "this evening I proposed to Belinda that she join me in the bonds of wedlock, and what do you think she did? She ordered me out of the house. Not only that, but threw a volume of Charles Dickens at me. The thing came like a cannon ball an' hit me on the head. She told me never to darken her door again."

"That's fine," I said. "Now mebbe a man can get a night's sleep around here without being disturbed. Kindly shut up an' go to bed."

But Hep was in a talkative mood, and nothing short of having the barn fall down on him would have buttoned up his mouth. "There must," he said, "have been a flaw in my courtship. Something I overlooked doing. In some way I must have failed to impress my personality upon her. Why, I've got more personality than any gent within forty miles of here. I'm disgusted, humiliated and disappointed. But humiliated especially. I'm burned up and on fire with indignation. The idea of a woman turning me down just as though I was a saddle bum!"

"I yawned. "So you're full of wrath," I said. "Well, that's something. Usually you're as empty as a leaky cistern."

"Full of wrath!" shouted Gallagher. "I'm so full of it that I'm about to bust! My pressure's gone up to two hundred and fifty pounds. Come to-morrow, and I'm going back to the Box O an' tell that lady where to get off at!"

"Better not," I advised him. "If you do anything rash you may end up in the penitentiary. An' have in

mind that you ain't the only one that's got the bum's rush."

"Yes," admitted Hep, "I ain't the only one. To-night after I got mine, Parsons Dougan got hisn. Dougan came out the door with his coat tails flyin'. Me an' Parson are thinkin' of putting in together an' ganging up on the Box O. He's comin' out an' see me to-morrow."

"Think twice before you have anything to do with him," said I. "Dougan ain't exactly an angel."

Which was a fact, because "Parson" Dougan was a gambler, and not a minister. He invariably referred to a deck of cards as his "flock." He'd say: "Gents, with your kind permission, I'll now deal the members of my flock." That was why they called him Parson. That, and because the members of his flock obeyed him with considerable regularity, and nearly always managed to get into the right pew. One of these days Parson Dougan's card dealing would, more than likely, get him shot.

"No reason why I should fear Dougan," said Gallagher. "He's as insulted as I am. We're in the same boat. Mrs. Belinda Harlow threw a vase of flowers at him."

This didn't make much sense, because anybody in their right mind should have been fearful of the Parson. I was about to argue the point, but just then the two other Rafter S cowhands, who'd also been awakened, got mad. They offered to punch Gallagher's nose unless he shut and went to bed. So Gallagher, being hopelessly outnumbered, surrendered and hit the hay.

THE next day was Sunday and a day of rest, for the Rafter S did nothing on the Sabbath except the necessary chores. Along about ten o'clock in the morning

Parson Dougan came riding out from town on his big bay horse. He came into the ranch yard. Me an' Gallegher, who'd been sitting in the shade of the barn, got up and met him by the hitch rack.

Dougan, as always, was dressed up like a house afire. He wore a flowing black coat that came halfway to his knees, a pair of tight-fitting pearl-gray trousers, a vest, the color of which would have put a man's eyes out, and, on top of his handsome head, a black derby hat.

"Greetings, gentlemen," said Parson, as he climbed down off the bay. "Gallegher, has your head recovered from the book treatment? That book bounced like a ball when it hit you."

"I'm as sore as fifteen boils," answered Hep.

"Me, too," admitted Dougan. "All night I wrestled with the devil while I was being consumed with wrath. Gentlemen, the manhood of the West has been trampled in the dust. Is this going to become a petticoat country, or isn't it?"

"Can't see it's changed much," I said, "or is likely to change much. Ever since I can remember the women have picked out the gents they wanted to marry, and no bones were broken. If you two soreheads would go soak your domes in the horse trough, you'd feel better."

"You don't appreciate the finer points of the matter," Parson told me. "It may be all right for a lady to turn down a gentleman's proposal, but when she starts heaving the furniture at him at the mere mention of a proposal, why then something ought to be done about it. What's more something is going to be done about it! I've been outraged. An' nobody outrages Parson Dougan an' gets away with it."

"If Mrs. Harlow was a man," said

Gallegher, "I'd challenge her to forty rounds in the squared circle. Seeing that she isn't a man, I'll have to figure out something else to do." He looked appealingly at Parson Dougan. Dougan was looking up at the sky, but his eyes were twinkling and a smile played on his lips.

"All last night," presently said Parson, and he looked like he was delivering a benediction, "I was just a-thinking and a-thinking. After no end of mental gymnastics I've arrived at a solution of our difficulties. Fundamentally we must make the lady feel ashamed of herself and regret having heaved things. We must make her contrite in spirit, and as humble as a piece of apple pie. We must make her apologize to us. She must come to us on bended knee."

"Sounds good to me," interrupted Gallegher. "What's your idea?"

"You gents'll never get near her again," I put in. "At the mere sight of you she'll start to shoot."

Dougan looked straight at me. "George," he chuckled, "there's where you've come in. I've thought of everything. You, my friend, are going to help us."

"Oh, no, I'm not!" I told him.

"Oh, yes, you are," came back Dougan.

"Of course he is," said Hep.

"Let me explain," continued Parson. "We must handle things so that Mrs. Belinda Harlow will be so grateful to us that she may even want to kiss us. How is that to be managed? Easy. We'll rescue her from a watery grave after the poor soul has gone down for the second time."

"Sounds good to me!" exclaimed Gallegher. "That's no worse than having an eight-hundred-page book land on my head."

"Gents," I announced, "you're the most ungallant buzzards I ever heard

tell of. Besides that, there's no sense to what you say. If the lady wouldn't let you marry her you don't suppose she'd let you drown her, do you?"

"Ah," said Dougan, "there's where you're mistaken. She herself will ride right into the drowning without knowing it. It will appear to be an accident. Are you gents acquainted with the creek that's in the upper reaches of the Bar 3?"

We were, but not very well acquainted. Neither me nor Gallegher knew much more than that there was a creek on the Bar 3, and that sometimes it had a lot of water in it.

"Well," continued Parson, "I happen to be very familiar with the creek. And I also happen to know that at a certain spot the water appears to be shallow, but isn't. The shallow part runs out some ten or fifteen feet from the shore, and immediately beyond that there's a hole twelve or fifteen feet deep. It's deceiving, that hole. Why, I've seen a horse try and ford the creek at that spot and fall right into the hole. If Belinda and her nag were to fall into that trap the poor woman wouldn't know what had happened to her until she was too wet to care. The beautiful thing is that, right downstream from that hole, is a sand bar so we could probably rescue Mrs. Harlow without much more than getting our feet wet."

Hep was positively gleeful. "By thunder!" he yelled.

"George," said Dougan, "you are to go over to the Box O ranch house and tell Belinda that her foreman, of whom she's somewhat fond in a business way, has met with financial difficulties and needs her assistance. She will suspect nothing for the following reason, to wit: Mike Hardigan, her foreman, went to town last night and tried to drink the

place dry. He spent the night sleeping under a hitch rack, thinking he was a horse. This morning he again started to drink the town dry, and the last I saw of him he was going good.

YOU tell Mrs. Harlow, George, that Mike has a gambling debt to settle quick or somebody'll cave his head in. You offer to lead her to where he is, and insist that she take three or four hundred dollars along. I'd suggest that you leave your gun home so she won't think you're going to hold her up. In fact, I think we'd all better be unarmed. I personally haven't got a smoke-pole with me."

"Now the rest of the plan is this," continued Dougan. "George will take Belinda due west from the ranch house. At a distance of a mile me an' Hep will happen to show up. This may make her mad, but we'll be very polite and tip our hats and explain that it was an accident. By another accident, we'll be going the same direction that she's going. I'll explain that I know a short cut, and lead the way to the place on the creek that I've been telling you about. When we get there, being perfect gentlemen, we'll let her cross first. Of course you know what'll happen then."

"Nope!" I stoutly maintained. "I'll have nothing to do with such a scurvy arrangement."

"What!" cried Parson Dougan. "Didn't you know that all's fair in love and war? This is love, my dear fellow. Mrs. Harlow will be so grateful to either Gallegher or me, that she may relent and marry one of us."

"A little while ago," I reminded him, "you were talking about revenge and now you talk about getting married."

"Fact of the matter is," acknowledged Dougan with a blush, "that I'd still like to marry Belinda, if she would have me. And I'm sure that Mr. Gallagher would like to marry her if she would have *him*. Wouldn't you, Hep?"

"I'd consider the matter," admitted Hep, as he, likewise, blushed.

"A couple of love birds," said I. "You're persistent cusses, if you aren't anything else. But I still won't have anything to do with it. Suppose that some of the Box O ranch hands want to come along?"

"Little danger of it," explained Parson Dougan. "Last evening all hands went to town with the foreman. Those who aren't still in town will be nursing their heads to-day. But suppose that a couple of them do come along. What of it? They won't be in on what's going to happen, or why it's going to happen. That, George, is no reason why you shouldn't help us."

Well, sir, those fellas bore down on me something terrible. They intimidated that I was a coward and no true friend of anybody's, and that I hadn't any more sporting blood than a Mexican billy goat.

"Shucks!" snorted Parson Dougan. "Why this thing is all good, clean fun. It's the kind of fun that Mrs. Harlow'll like. And here's something to bear in mind. There's an off chance that Belinda may fall in love with *you*, George."

"I've no interest in love," I told him, "or any of its ramifications, including matrimony. But I suppose if I don't do it you'll get some sucker who will. I'll go along so as to protect the lady. For all I know, maybe you really are intending to drown her."

"Spoken like a man," chuckled Parson.

Gallegher and me got our horses,

and then all three of us rode for the Box O. We went by a round-about way, and didn't stop until we were in the low hills, something over a mile west from the Box O headquarters. I left Parson and Hep in a little gully while I rode straight for the ranch house.

The Box O ranch yard looked as deserted as a cemetery as I rode into it. By now I was feeling kinda nervous, and I felt a lot more nervous as I strode up on the veranda and pulled the doorbell handle. The door opened almost immediately, and there stood Mrs. Belinda Harlow. She was dressed for riding, and looked as severe as a blizzard. Anger showed plainly on her pretty face, but the color in her cheeks added to her beauty, rather than detracted from it. Any way you looked at her she was a pleasant eye-ful, even if she was as mad as a nest-ful of hornets.

"Well!" demanded Belinda. "What do you want?"

"Ma'am," I began, "my name's George Armstrong, an' years ago down on the Pecos I rode head on the same outfit with your foreman, Mike Hardigan——"

"Mike Hardigan!" she interrupted. "I'm not interested in what happened to him down on the Pecos. I'm interested in what's happened to him now! I'm about to start out looking for him. The worthless, shiftless loafer!"

This cheered me up. Without meaning to at all she was making things easy. "I've just come from where Mike," I continued, "is being held captive."

"Captive!" gasped Belinda. "You mean the no-good bum's in jail?"

"Worse than jail," said I. "He's being held by an irate poker player to whom he owes some money in the way of a debt. Last night in town

Mike tried to fill too many inside straights——”

“I have no interest in playing cards,” cut in Mrs. Harlow, “or the fine points of poker either. You’re like all men, you have a wandering mind. Go on!”

“Well,” I said, “the gent he owes the money to is going to take off the top of Mike’s head, or otherwise incapacitate him unless the debt’s paid within two hours. I’ve just come from where he’s being held. Hardigan’s broke flatter’n a pancake. He wants you to come an’ bring some money. Four hundred dollars.”

“Good gracious!” exclaimed Mrs. Harlow. “I never knew that Mike was as poor a card player as that.”

THEN it was that she really got mad. She thought it was *me* that Mike owed the money to. Her hand came up, and she gave me the swiftest whack on the side of the face that I’d felt in a long time.

“You viper!” she screamed. “It’s you that cheated my poor foreman!”

“Ma’am,” said I, “you never was more mistaken. I just happened to come upon the spot where Mike an’ the gent he played with are camped. They talked me into comin’ here so that you could ransom Hardigan out of hock.”

“Oh!” said Belinda, as she calmed down. “Maybe you’re right, but I don’t believe it. If you’ll wait a minute I’ll get the money, and you can lead me where he is.”

Her horse was already at the hitch rack. Pretty soon she came out wearing a gun and a belt that was filled with cartridges. We mounted, and I led the way off toward the west. I got to thinking about what she would do when she saw Parson Dougan and Hep. It wasn’t a pleasant prospect. But it would be their

hard luck, and not mine. I had a mind to run for it and forget all about the business. I didn’t.

“Listen,” presently asked Belinda. “Is Mike full of bug juice?”

“The last time I saw Mike,” I told her, “he was as sober as three different denominations of churches.”

“It’s a wonder,” sighed the lady. “I’ll bet a dollar it was that terrible Parson Dougan that he played cards with.”

“Nope,” I assured her. “This time it wasn’t.”

“By the way,” she wanted to know, “are you some relative of that lame-brained Hep Gallagher? I think I saw you together in town once.”

“Gallegher,” I said with dignity, “is no relative of mine, but we’ve been riding around together for ten years or more.”

“Well,” she declared, “I suppose there’s no accounting for bad tastes.”

We passed up into the hills, did some more riding, and came down into the little draw where I’d left Hep an’ Parson. They must have heard us coming and mounted, for when we rounded a bend in the narrow draw there they sat on their horses, not more than twenty feet away. They completely blocked the passageway.

“Land of Goshen!” cried Mrs. Belinda Harlow. “What is this trash doing here?”

Parson Dougan swept his derby off his head and doubled up as though he had the colic. “My dear Mrs. Harlow,” said Dougan, “this is indeed an unexpected pleasure.”

“Madam,” said Hep, as he touched his Stetson, “I trust that you are feeling well to-day, even if I ain’t.”

“Out of my way, you saddle

bums" shouted Belinda. "What are you loafing here for?"

Neither of them moved an inch. It was Parson who answered the lady's question. "Ma'am, Gallegher and I are taking our Sunday afternoon exercise. I trust there's no legal statute against it. It's quite by accident that you met us here."

"It's neither an accident nor a coincidence," snorted the lady. "Well, are you going to continue to sit there like a couple of cigar-store Indians?"

Still they didn't move, and they were certainly in the way.

"George," said Dougan to me, "whereabouts do you happen to be bound for?"

"The creek over on the Bar 3," I told him, as per our agreement.

"Tush," chuckled Parson. "The pity of it. You might at least be heading in the right direction. You should be going more to the south and not so much to the west. So happens that Gallegher and I have nothing of great moment on hand. I know a short way to the creek. Been there lots of times. I'll guide you."

With that he turned his horse around and started down the draw. Hep followed behind him, then came the lady, and I brought up the rear. We rode to the end of the draw, turned to the right, and then entered another one. For all of a mile we rode, and nobody said a word. At the end of the mile we were going up a rocky gorge that had sides all of fifty feet in height. To the left there was a cave in the rock wall that was high enough for a man to stand in. I was looking at it when, all of a sudden, I heard somebody up ahead call out:

"Hoist 'em, you folks! If you don't, I'll drill you!"

I looked up. Darned if it wasn't Parson Dougan. He'd been riding a

little distance ahead. Now he was on foot, and facing us. The rascal had a gun in either hand, and those guns were pointed right at us! No wonder he had wanted me an' Hep to leave our shooting irons at home. He must have had his concealed in his saddlebags and then surreptitiously gotten them out as he had ridden along.

At Parson's command, Belinda let out a squeal of fright. All three of us stopped our horses, and all three of us, naturally enough, put up our hands.

"Listen, Parson," said Hep, "this wasn't on the schedule of events. Quit your foolin' and put up the pop guns. Do you want to frighten the lady to death?"

Instead of complying, Dougan cocked both his six-shooters. The fellow's expression had changed; he looked now to be as tough as a road agent. "Climb down off your nags," ordered Parson. "Hands up! An' the first one who makes a funny move——"

We did as we'd been told.

"This is carrying a joke too far," objected Hep, as his face got white. "I'm running out of my sense of humor. Mebbe, Parson, you've gone loco."

"Parson Dougan," said the gambler, "always wins, an' he's far from loco."

HE lined us up along the wall of the gorge near the entrance of the tunnel and, holstering one of his own guns, relieved the lady of her .38. By now, Belinda's face was the color of a bed sheet.

"If you're looking for my four hundred dollars," gasped Mrs. Harlow, "you'll find it in my saddlebag. Take it and let me go."

This made Dougan laugh. "My

dear lady," he said, after he'd finished laughing, "I'm playing for bigger stakes than that. I offered you matrimony that I might gain possession of your wealth. You refused me. Now I'm making you another offer. I'm offering you your life in exchange for all the ready money that you can lay your hands on. I don't just mean the four hundred dollars, but forty times that much. I happen to know that you have it in the bank."

Gallegher swore. "Why you low-down son of a sheep-herder's——"

"Shut up!" interrupted Parson. "And that goes, Hep, for both you an' your partner. You gents have been very handy up to now, thanks to you both being pretty brainless, but now I'm through with you. It would be easy for me to lay you out for the crows to pick."

Then Dougan told us what he proposed to do. The three of us were to be bound up and put in the cave until the sixteen thousand dollars was in his hands. Mrs. Belinda Harlow was to write a draft on the bank in town——

From the corner of my eye I could see that Hep was looking my way. I felt sorry for the gent. He certainly hadn't intended that things should turn out this way, and it was obvious that, if we were ever going to do anything about it, now was the time. Both of us must have had the same idea at the same instant, or we must have automatically read each other's thoughts. Anyway, without even a signal, we moved together!

Both of us doubled up and made a flying dive at Dougan's legs. Long before we'd hit him he had opened up with both guns. But we were moving fast, and he missed. I got

hold of one of Parson's trouser legs. From then on it was pretty hard to tell what happened. A gun went off so close to my ear that it practically made me deaf. I could hear Belina scream. Me an' Gallegher and the gambler were on the rock floor of the gorge, and all tangled up like a lot of worms. I caught a glimpse, as I rolled over, of the woman advancing upon us. She had a big rock in her right hand.

Parson fired again, and then things got better as quickly as they had got worse. First thing I knew Hep and I and Mrs. Harlow, weak and trembling, were standing there looking down at the prostrate Dougan. He was out colder than a turkey, having been hit on the head with the rock. Belinda had hit him.

"That was a brave thing you two boys did," said Mrs. Harlow, "jumping a man with two guns when you were both unarmed. After Mr. Dougan comes to, he'll rest in jail for a few years."

"Hep," I said, "I think it's time you told the lady what we were really up to. Then we can take our medicine. I think we've got it coming."

Gallegher turned the color of a beet and told the story. This made Belinda laugh because, as she was a lady who threw things, this was her kind of humor. She laughed and she cried and then, darn me, if she didn't give Hep a good big kiss and invite us both to come to her house for supper.

But she didn't marry Gallegher. Oh, no! Come another week, and she threw a Webster's unabridged dictionary at him. This convinced Hep that he wasn't wanted as a husband. He never went near the Box O again.



SQUIRREL BAIT

By CLIFF WALTERS

Author of "Double Cross At Trailcross," etc.

WHEN Tom Radford rode into Caprock, and up to the porch of the miniature town's only store, he herded before

him a prisoner with bushy brows and sullen dark eyes. A half dozen loafers on the porch came to their feet, gaping at the two riders.

It was "Limpy" Jones, the one-legged, fifteen-dollar-a-month constable that called:

"Good for you, Tom! Where did you pick Pete Bomarr up?"

"Over on the head of Goose Crick, Limpy. He looks kinda sore—and guilty, don't he?"

"I'm sore, all right!" rumbled the prisoner sullenly. "I didn't murder Al Blaine. Oh, him and me had a set-to about our division fence, but that's——"

"You bet you had a set-to!" interrupted Limpy Jones excitedly. "Haze him on down to the jail, Tom! We'll lock him up!" The constable pulled his gun and hobbled on down the street.

Ten minutes later Tom Radford was back at the store, and answering questions put to him.

"Huh!" grunted "Squirrel" Tice, a small, dull-eyed prospector whose homely face was dominated by a

large nose. "Reckon your friend Al Blaine would've been mighty proud of you, Tom, if he could been here to see you fetchin' Pete Bomarr to jail."

"Think so, Squirrel?" There was a peculiar smile on Tom's wind-burned face.

"Yep," replied the prospector. "Some folks claimed Turk Harrideen killed your friend, Al. But they blame Turk for everything that happens."

"Seen Turk lately?" Tom casually inquired.

"Where would I see him?" Squirrel parried. "Me, I'm out huntin' gold, not outlaws. Well, Mr. Storekeeper, dump the rest of my grub in these panniers, I want to get my burros packed. Got a long way to ride yet this evenin'."

Tom Radford, cowman, lingered in the store, watching the merchant dumping supplies in Squirrel's panniers.

"Ain't struck that vein of gold yet, have you, Squirrel?" Tom asked. "What would you do if you found one? Buy a gunny sackful of peanuts and really fill up on 'em for once?"

"Not at this store, I wouldn't," Squirrel replied, disgustedly. "They ain't got no peanuts. Not even a quarter's worth! I'll tell you what I'd do if I made a strike, Tom. I'd buy that fancy, silver-mounted saddle you won in the buckin' contest last Fourth."

"Nope." Tom Radford's gray eyes smiled. "I wouldn't sell that for anything. I'm mighty proud of that saddle, Squirrel. Besides, it cost a lot of money."

"It don't seem to be doin' you much good," Squirrel countered, those blank, pale eyes of his entirely void of expression. "I notice that for hard ridin'—like chasin' Pete

Bomarr—you still use the same old kak you've allus rode. Uh—you ridin' toward home purty soon?"

"Why?"

"Oh, I'm headin' back for the mountains. Thought if you was goin' home, we'd jog along together."

"My sorrel horse is pretty tired, Squirrel. By rights, I should stay in town to-night and rest him up a little."

"Well, I'm sure glad you ketched the man that killed Al Blaine, Tom." Squirrel turned to the bald-headed storekeeper. "But I sure wish this store had some peanuts. My mouth's been waterin' for peanuts."

"You've said that no less than ten times!" snapped the storekeeper. "No wonder they call you Squirrel! The last time you was in here, two years ago, I had plenty of peanuts, but you didn't have any money."

"I've got money now," came the answer. "Here! Hand me back the change for this!" Squirrel tossed a twenty-dollar bill on the counter.

Tom Radford rolled a smoke, watched Squirrel Tice lug his supplies out of the store, pack them on the burros tied at the hitching rack, and ride away toward the mountains.

"Peanuts!" rumbled the storekeeper. "Most fellers hit for the saloon when they come into town, but that blank-eyed half wit wants to go on a peanut jag and litter this place with shells!"

"I guess he is a little bit off," Tom answered. "Still, you never can tell about that kind. Sometimes they're a lot smarter'n you give 'em credit for."

"Not Squirrel!" snapped the merchant. "He's got a mind that's a lot younger than him. And if he had sense enough to know gold when

he found it, what would he do? Probably come bustin' outa the mountains to eat peanuts—and maybe try buyin' that fancy saddle you won. Maybe he'd offer you three or four times what it's worth."

"Yep, that saddle ketches his eye," Tom agreed. "There goes Constable Jones down the street. I've got to have a little talk with him." He left the store.

Off toward the mountains, Squirrel Tice was disappearing around the jutting prow of a cliff. Tom Radford looked in that direction until the prospector was out of sight.

HALF an hour later Tom was riding toward the mountains, toward the little valley in the foothills where lay his small ranch. At last he was passing a cabin in the lower end of the valley, a desolate-looking place now.

Al Blaine, Tom's best friend and neighbor, had lived there. Now Al was dead—murdered; and already this place had assumed a forsaken atmosphere that was depressing to Tom, who was goaded with sharp memories.

His gray eyes took in the smokeless stovepipe protruding through the dirt roof; the corral gate standing open, and already beginning to sag; the two gray saddle horses, which would never more be reined by their master, looking up from their grazing in the bountiful pasture to gaze, ears pricked forward, at the passing rider.

Al Blaine's rangy black horse, Cricket, was not with the two grays. Cricket was missing. He had been ever since the day that Tom had found Al Blaine lying there by the corral—dead.

Tom didn't look at the Blaine place any more. He faced the

mountains again, low, rugged mountains veined with dozens of crazy, twisting canyons, and his gray eyes suddenly reflected the same granite hardness of those hulking rocks at which he gazed.

Another mile and Tom was at his own place. He rode directly to the log barn, swung from his jaded horse and stared at a bare harness peg jutting from the wall near the door. Then he turned, unsaddled the sorrel, and led him into the adjoining corral.

Fifteen minutes later, and mounted now on a roan horse, Tom Radford had started to climb the rocky slope of the Monument Mountains. Over tilted ledges of rock he rode, and toward a spot from which spread, fanwise, the sunless fingers of a dozen puzzling canyons. Always he studied the earthless terrane over which he slowly traveled. Yet there were no hoofprints to follow.

It required some little time for him to select one of those dozen canyons, and this particular one would have been the last one he would have chosen to ride, ordinarily. It was void of water, narrow, forbidding; rock-walled and rock-bottomed. Yet it was through this tortuous gorge that the hoofs of the roan plodded slowly onward.

Three miles. Six. The rocky defile was getting narrower and darker. There would not be much more daylight left now. Tom spurred the roan into a faster walk and saw the canyon suddenly widening and leveling out for a short distance.

Warily scanning the thicket of brush at the base of the west wall, it was a movement on the east side that caught his eye. He turned quickly, saw two men standing there

near a cedar tree. One was Squirrel Tice, prospector. The other was "Turk" Harrideen, a squat, broad man with a pair of black eyes in which live coals seemed always smoldering.

"Where you goin'?" called Harrideen, hand close to the .45 slung at his hip.

"ME?" Tom was taken by surprise, but he was cool. "Why, maybe Squirrel there could tell you why I'm travelin' up this way, Harrideen."

"Don't start no trouble now, Tom," Squirrel protested, blank eyes wide and vacuous. "I—I just borrowed your fancy saddle, Tom." He pointed to the silver-ornamented saddle in question, a saddle that Tom had missed from a certain harness peg on his barn. "You didn't think I'd stole it, did you?"

"That's just what I thought." Tom's jaw was thrust out at a battle angle. "And I still think so. Why would you stop at stealin', Squirrel? You've done worse things. You've thrown in with Turk Harrideen. Gone down to Caprock and bought a supply of grub for him—and fetched it to this hide-out, which only an eagle could see!"

"Yeah, it is powerful hard to find," Harrideen agreed, black eyes gleaming. "It's kinda funny that Squirrel didn't hear you trailin' him—with all the rocky goin' below here."

"Maybe I wasn't taggin' that close," Tom answered. "Maybe I knew Squirrel's weakness for peanuts, the reason he got that name tacked on him. And maybe I had a good-sized sackful of 'em planted in the pocket of that saddle he was always so crazy about. And which I knew he'd steal if he got the

chance. Maybe a trail of peanut shells guided me to a place I'd never found without some help."

"You said you was stayin' in town to-night!" Squirrel Tice gulped.

"I said that, by rights, I should rest my sorrel horse. But I had to see if you'd take the bait I set for you, Squirrel."

"Better give him his saddle back," Harrideen told the half-witted prospector. "Uh—Squirrel tells me you ketched and jailed the man that murdered Al Blaine, Radford. That must be right comfortin' to you, bein' that you and Blaine was such good neighbors."

"Pete Bomarr, the man I jailed, didn't kill Al Blaine," Tom said glacially. "I did that just to throw Squirrel—and you—off guard. Off guard long enough that you wouldn't ambush me—which you might have, otherwise."

Harrideen's dark eyes burned brighter. His tone was flat as he said, "What's eatin' you, Radford?"

"This. The skunk that killed my friend also stole his black horse, Cricket. A fast horse. The kind that crooked, thievin' murderers need—when the law's on their trail! The same black horse that's tied up there in that clump of trees!"

"Why, you tricky——" Turk Harrideen's tense hand swept gunward.

ROARING echoed filled the rocky canyon, defiant echoes of the smoking gun that Tom Radford's lightning-quick hand had whipped from a holster. Torn by that first shot, Harrideen reeled, tried again to lift the sagging gun he had pulled an instant too late.

Tom's .45 cracked again. This time Turk Harrideen, murderer of the man who had caught him steal-

ing a black horse, slumped dizzily to the ground, lay still. Squirrel gaped vacuously at the vanquished, then shifted his blank gaze to Tom.

"You goin' to kill me, too—for stealin' your saddle?" The words came slowly from his fear-constricted throat.

"No, Squirrel." Tom's voice had changed again. It was gentle now. "I'm not blamin' you for anything. If you went down to buy grub for that buzzard, it's probably 'cause you was hungry, too, and outta grub."

"I—I didn't know he killed Al Blaine! He told me he bought that black horse. He told me he'd give

me ten dollars if I wouldn't tell nobody where he was."

"Stop shakin', Squirrel." Tom smiled reassuringly at the unnerved man. "You saw Harrideen go for his gun first, didn't you?"

"Yuh—yeah!"

"Then you can tell the folks down at Caprock what happened in case they want to know. We'd better be startin'. I'm sure glad that you was so stuck on that fancy saddle, Squirrel. There's about a hundred dollars on Harrideen's scalp. You can have it. Buy yourself a fancy saddle. All I wanted was—him!"

"A hun— Gosh! I allus knowed I'd strike it rich some day!"

THE COYOTE'S COUSIN

A COUSIN of the coyote is the gray wolf, whose depredations rank first in wild animal lore. South Dakota claims that this gray scourge and dread to ranchmen has disappeared entirely from their State. Where he has gone is a moot question. It may be that he does not care for the modern ways of the world and has gone into retirement, or it may be that the last of his clan is dead.

One of the Dakota's famous gray wolves was Three Toes, who, it was estimated, killed fifty thousand dollars' worth of live stock before he was caught in Harding County in 1925. It was the custom, when these predatory animals roamed in conspicuous numbers, to hire experienced men to kill them.

A story is told about a trapper, Bill Garrett, who was hired by the Turkey Track outfit in western Dakota to rid that section of wolves. Tony Day, owner of the Turkey Track, agreed to pay Garrett ten dollars for every "scalp" brought in. Garrett killed and brought in twenty-two of them and received two hundred and twenty dollars from Tony Day.

Pocketing the money, he said casually, "I've got a live one on the buckboard and I want twenty dollars for her."

"Nope," said Day. "We agreed on ten dollars."

Garret shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "All right, I'll turn her loose."

He got the twenty dollars pronto.

NOTICE—*This magazine contains new stories only. No reprints are used.*



The Round-Up

TO-NIGHT we shall give you the low-down on E. C. Lincoln, that delightful yarn-spinner about Big George and Willie Joe.

E. C. Lincoln was born in New England in 1884. His earliest recollections are of fishing, hunting, and camping in the woods of Maine and New Hampshire; also clambakes on the Massachusetts coast. He greatly preferred all this to going to school. His first ambition he can recall was to drive the white horses that hauled the "barge" from the railroad station to the hotel. The driver was always unshaven and usually drunk. When he was drunk, young Lincoln was afraid to ask him to let him drive, and the days when he was sober there was even less chance of being allowed, so this was an ambition that went unfulfilled.

In 1912, after college, and a few minor jobs, he drifted to the Judith Basin region in Montana. He was accepted at once as a native because his legs, due to early riding, had acquired a permanent bow. For the next three or four years he worked for various cattle outfits, one of which was owned by a vigilante. Then he homesteaded three hundred and twenty acres on Sage Creek, and began to experiment with the cow business. Soon after he had proved

up, the War came along, and he was accepted as a first lieutenant in the cavalry. Needless to say, the cow business blew up.

About this time he began to receive some notice writing poetry. In 1920 he published a book, and another in 1924.

Five years ago Mr. Lincoln acquired forty acres and a cabin that used to be William F. Cody's cow camp, eight thousand feet up in the mountains on the South Fork of the Shoshone, in Wyoming, where there is a great deal of timber, antelope, deer, elk, and fish. He is thirty-five miles from town and six miles from a road, and it takes two hours to go over that six miles in good weather; he says it can't be done at all in bad. Sometimes he has to pack in the last mile of it. Visitors do not go to the ranch very often for obvious reasons.

For recreation he attends race meetings, rodeos, polo and horse shows, for horses, any and all kinds, are of paramount interest to him. After that, he is fond of guns, preferably the Colt automatic, Savage 303, and the Parker 20.

And speaking of horses, E. C. Lincoln says he still thinks Jackson Sundown was the prettiest bucking horse rider of this century.

MINES AND MINING

By

J. A.

THOMPSON



THE fascinating desert country of Southern California around the Death Valley section always holds a definite appeal for the modern prospector, particularly as a winter stamping ground. Just when we get a request for some data concerning this wild, and mostly uninhabited mineral region, from K. Lester, of Springfield, Massachusetts, R. E. Winber swings into camp with a mighty informative letter covering that very territory.

Winber is a fine prospector and mining man, and he's out there in the field right now. His present address is the Twin Tom Mine, Oasis, California. Says Winber, after reintroducing himself with the statement that it has been a brace of years since he last wrote us:

"For the past year and a half I have been prospecting and developing an old mine in the White Mountains in the Deep Springs mining district in Inyo County, California. As you probably know, this section is situated in the northeastern section of Inyo County, close to the Nevada line, and bordering Death Valley on the north.

"Quite a number of prospects and mines are scattered all through the section. Some of the early histories

of these mines date way back to the '50s and '60s. Many of them are being operated in a small way at present. One of the older mines is Scott Broders's '87 Mine. Scott is the hombre who ran the toll station in the days of Bachelor Springs on the west slope of Westguard Pass. Another old-time mine here is Beery's Gold Coin Group, later the Katherine, and now the Twin Tom Group.

"I purchased a half claim out of the Twin Tom Group in the old main workings and have been prospecting and developing it further, both underground and on the surface. This whole country is typical of the terrane bordering Death Valley—tough to prospect in, tough to mine in. But plenty of good prospecting is still left around the section. Right where I am there are only six of us engaged in actual mining. The total population numbers perhaps twenty.

"Aside from gold there are deposits of the following metals to be prospected for profitably: Silver, manganese, molybdenum, tungsten, copper, and quicksilver. There is also some placer ground. Of course, it is 'dry' placering out here. Among the placer areas being worked just now are the Palmetto Placers, and a new section booming just below the

old camp of Sylvania, across the line in Esmeralda County, Nevada. It has been said that seventeen sacks of placer material scraped off bed rock in this camp contained two thousand four hundred dollars' worth of gold.

"Come on out when you get a chance. I don't seem to recall any articles on this particular locality having appeared in Western Story Magazine, at least, not recently. So I thought I would pass along a little 'dope' in case any of your readers might be considering 'this neck of the woods' as a prospecting area for themselves. There's lots of room. You could hardly call the district overpopulated. Or even populated. And there's some mighty good prospecting around here."

Thanks a lot, Winber. We always like to get informative letters from you fellows in the field, as well as mail, asking questions. And don't forget to let us know when you sink onto that high-powered ore shoot in your slice of the Twin Tom. We're rooting for it to come in a bonanza that will put the Gold Queen in Mojave in the shade.

And Lester, it looks as if Winber has called the turn for you for a prospecting section in the area you asked about. If you are going West by car, the paved road past Owens Lake, Long Pine and Bishop takes you through Big Pine. Big Pine is about three hundred miles out of Los Angeles. And out there you will find a rough road over the old Westguard

Pass Winber speaks of—elevation seven thousand feet—to Deep Springs, thirty miles from Big Pine, and on to Oasis, eleven miles farther across the desert, where you have all the space in the world to prospect around in.

"I am just as interested in prospecting as any man," writes Mrs. Myrtle R., from Washington, D. C., "and hope some day to try it. I have often read in your columns of recent finds and gold strikes. But they have all been made by men. What's the matter with the girls? Don't they ever find gold, too? Or are you prejudiced?"

No, ma'am, we're not prejudiced, and in our day we have known quite a few lady prospectors who made good strikes for themselves. Maybe they haven't made as many bonanza finds, as the men, because there are not nearly so many of them in the field.

Anyhow, consider the case of Mrs. Nellie Graham, owner of the Williams Placers way up above timber line on Pennsylvania Mountain, in the vicinity of Fairplay, Colorado. She got a big surprise recently when she was watching the men she hires shovel the gravel into her sluices. A nugget, reportedly weighing very close to a pound, suddenly slithered off the edge of one of her worker's shovels. And pure gold is worth thirty-five dollars an ounce. How's that, Mrs. R.?

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

Conducted by HELEN RIVERS



MONTANA and Wyoming, two of the Western States surrounded by the glamour of pioneer days, stretch to the westward of South Dakota. Among the Southwestern States, New Mexico, Texas, and Arizona have been the stamping grounds of old-timers who have sung the praises of these States. Perhaps South Dakota has not come in for as great a share of the romance of the West as some of these other States, but within its boundaries, especially in Western and central South Dakota,

there is plenty of romance in its history, much of which is centered in the Black Hills region. There are such noted cities as Deadwood, where "Wild Bill" Hickock was killed; and Lead, the site of probably the richest gold mine in the United States—the Homestake Mine—which is undoubtedly one of the richest gold mines in the world. Then there are the much-talked-of historic places such as Custer, Belle-fourche, and Forest City, and we must not forget Pierre and Fort Pierre. So if it is old Western lore that you folks are interested in, you will want to trek over South Dakota.

So much has been said about the "Waddy from Texas," the "Lone Star Cowboy," and the "Bronc Buster of the Longhorn State," that we sometimes forget that there are big spreads farther northward, and South Dakota has and always will be the home and stamping ground of the cowpoke. South Dakota has been the battle ground of many a range feul, and there are an almost uncountable number of cattle ranches in this State. You will not see many sheep ranches in the land of the Dakotas, for the old-timers loved their dogies too well! You will begin to run into cattle ranches when you hit Onida and Okobojo. And you will find spreads in the Bad Lands of South Dakota, too. In short, South Dakota is a real, honest-to-goodness cow country!

And now, suppose some of you folks from this same grand old Western State just speak up and let the rest of us get acquainted with you-

all. Looking over the membership of the old Holla, one finds thousands upon thousands of members from California, Texas, and other Western States, and the postmistress is truly dismayed to find that only a handful of the hombres living in South Dakota have registered their names with the old Holla. In the future, let's have full quota of letters from South Dakota.

Here are the South Dakota members we now have listed: D. Davis, who is at the present time visiting in Chicago, Illinois, and who is partly responsible for our stirring up the members of his old home State. He has some information to convey to Jim Wray, Jr., of 614 University Avenue, Ithaca, New York, who wrote to the old Holla recently and wanted information about some Western States, including South Dakota. This information is contained in our introductory ramble, and we hope Mr. Wray will be properly impressed by the old-time and present glamour surrounding this not-so-much-talked-of State. Mr. Davis, incidentally, was born in South Dakota, and when his visit terminates in Chicago he is going right back to

good old South Dakota, where he and his dad expect to buy a ranch one of these days. His dad and grandfather have both seen a little more than a score of years as ranchers, and his granddad had three ranches at one time. Mr. Davis himself has had a few years' experience as a cowboy, but is still quite a greenhorn, he says.

Continuing with our list of South Dakota members, we find E. E. Benteen, 420 8th Street, S. E., Waterton, South Dakota; C. Hill, Star Route, Edgemont, South Dakota; O. Hudson Whitman, Gen. Del., Custer, South Dakota; Sam Severson, Artesian, South Dakota; Thomas Wilson, Custer, South Dakota; Ted Bender, 120½ West Ninth Street, Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Earl Hart, Fort Meade, South Dakota; Bert Hart, Fort Pierre, South Dakota; Floyd Wright, 418 West Ninth Avenue, Michell, South Dakota; John Crofoot, White, South Dakota; Irene Scherer, Winner, South Dakota; Dorothy Rohrer, 722 East Eighth Street, Sioux Falls, South Dakota; and Marianna Messex, Weta, South Dakota.

It is a natural impulse and it is a good impulse to desire to wander and to roam. Not too much, of course. But the desire to go places and see things should be and is in all of us—in all of us who amount to anything, at least, for traveling educates us, and changing our geographic location often is of great benefit to health, mind, and economic well-being. A wise man once said, "A rolling stone gathers no moss," but a wiser man, we think, added, "but a standing pool stagnates."

If you are one who would travel, it is a mighty good thing to have man's best asset along the way, and at your destination. We mean, of course, friends.

If you would like a friend or friends in a certain section, write to Miss Rivers, and she will put you in touch with readers who want to correspond with folks in your part of the world.

It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

Address: Helen Rivers, care The Hollow Tree, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

By JOHN NORTH

AT Canyon Creek, in east-central Oregon, there is a two-hundred-square-mile hunting preserve where only archers may hunt, the only one, I believe, in the United States. Enthusiastic bowmen from the Western States gather at Canyon Creek for the deer and elk-hunting seasons. Oregon woods are said to furnish the best material for bows and arrows, Oregon yew and Port Orford cedar. Steel-tipped arrows and bows that have a pull of as much as eighty pounds are used with great success by these big game archers.

Speaking of shooting, Monty G., of Miles City, Montana, is planning to invade the Canadian province north of him and wants to know something about the hunting up that way.

"I want to trek up into Saskatchewan for some hunting this fall, Mr. North, and would like to know what sections I will find the best for wild fowl and big game."

If you're after wild fowl, Monty, Saskatchewan is a good place to go.

As the season advances, the birds drift south and congregate in great numbers on the larger bodies of water, such as Lake Johnson, Last Mountain Lake, Qu'Appelle, Quill, Great Manitou, and Jackfish Lakes, as well as on a number of smaller lakes and marshes.

Besides the plentiful supply of goose, duck, snipe, and prairie chicken, the Hungarian partridge, which is not a native bird, but which has drifted into Saskatchewan from Alberta, where it was introduced some years ago, furnishes excellent sport at many points.

The greater part of all big-game hunting is done north of the most northerly lines of railway. Moose and deer are reported on the increase, the deer moving south with quite a number being taken in wooded areas north of Township 34. The best moose districts are in the territory lying between the Torch and Saskatchewan Rivers; all the

country north of the city of Prince Albert, and in the land surrounding Prince Albert National Park; and the territory north and west of Big River, and the vicinity of Pasquia Hills.

Of the caribou, the woodland species is the one usually taken by big-game hunters in Saskatchewan. Its habitat is the northern muskegs, and in favorable seasons these animals drift southward in considerable numbers, although it is seldom that they come far enough south during the open season to be generally accessible to hunters. The areas in the vicinity of Montreal Lake, Candle Lake, Lac La Rouge, and Lac La Plonge are well-known hunting grounds. The barren-ground caribou, which migrates in tremendous herds, is found only in the extreme northern portion of the province.

The southern and central parts of Saskatchewan are well served by highways and railways, and hunters may reach any section of this territory without difficulty. Guides, equipment, provisions, and accommodations may be secured at almost every town and village in the game areas. In the northern portion, the railways are the chief means of transportation to the "going in" points, at each of which outfitters are located who are prepared to furnish provisions, boats, tents, and guides, as well as transportation from the railway to the hunting grounds.

While some folks are thinking in terms of sport just now, others, such as Ben P., of Augusta, Maine, are undertaking more serious ventures.

"Bad health is making it necessary, Mr. North, for me to move to a milder climate, and I have New Mexico in mind. The town of Estancia has been recommended to me and I wish you'd give me some information about it and the valley surrounding it. Do you think it would be a good place for a farmer to settle?"

From all reports we'd say Estancia would be an excellent place for you to settle, Ben. This town is surrounded by one of the best farming and livestock regions in New Mexico, with from thirty to forty thousand acres of land in cultivation and from thirty to fifty thousand acres of land that could be irrigated from shallow wells.

The Estancia Valley will grow such vegetables as cabbage, turnips, and lettuce, while the shallow water country is fine for alfalfa and sweet clover. This valley is in the heart of the Pinto bean country, and the farmers in this valley grow from one to two thousand carloads of Pinto beans each year. Many renters have paid for a home of one hundred and sixty acres from their part of a bean crop in a year. A large area of the country is grazed by herds of cattle and sheep.

We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North supplies accurate information about the West, its ranches, mines, homestead lands, mountains, and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

MISSING DEPARTMENT

McWILLIAMS, JAMES ALFRED.—Last seen at Barstow, Texas, in 1927. He has dark brown hair and eyes, is six feet tall, and weighs about two hundred pounds. He has a small scar on his chin which looks like a dimple. Any one knowing his whereabouts please notify Mrs. Ella Henry, 207 Guadalupe Street, Carlsbad, New Mexico.

MAC.—He is a prospector that lives up in Rocky Bar, Idaho. Do you remember some of your friends from the CCC that came to see you in September, 1935? I am one of them and would like to get in touch with you. Any one knowing this man please write to Private Herbert C. Krebs, 13th Field Artillery, Battery B, Schofield Barracks, Hawaii.

PITZPATRICK, LAURA.—Colored. She is my mother. I left her in Parkin, Arkansas, in 1919, and have not heard from her since. Am anxious to know where she is. Information appreciated by L. M. Jackson, Ripley, California.

LOST RELATIVES.—Would like to hear from any of my relatives. My dad's name was Bennie Paladino. He was a stone worker. My mother's name was Sarah Gubbins. She was born in Winulpeg, Canada. Please write to Mrs. M. Russo, 3550 Gladstone Street, Vancouver, B. C., Canada.

GARVIN, WALTER EDWIN.—Am not giving up hope of seeing you. Please write to your anxious mother, Mrs. Lela Sims, P. O. Box 265, Richmond, Missouri.

RATLIFF, H. Q.—Last heard of at Miami, Arizona, in 1927. Any information whatsoever concerning him will be appreciated by his mother, Mrs. Alice Ratliff, Box 209, Weatherford, Texas.

INFORMATION WANTED.—Am trying to find the lady who gave me away at the Terminal Station in Macon, Georgia, on November 1, 1920. She said that I was Mary Douglas, of Quitman, Georgia. I was adopted by Mr. and Mrs. E. L. Sherwood of Ashburn, Georgia. Am also anxious to find my real parents. Lella Mae Sherwood, 1102 Napier Avenue, Macon, Georgia.

WINKLER, ALFRED.—Last heard from when he lived at Merced, California, in 1922. Any information regarding his whereabouts will be appreciated by his sister, A. E. Perry, General Delivery, Pico, California.

JOHNSON, IVAR.—Twenty-seven years old, blue eyes and a fair complexion, five feet ten inches tall and slender. Last heard of in 1933, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I believe that he enlisted in the U. S. army or navy. Any news concerning him will be appreciated by Albin Johnson, Box 1901, Fort Frances, Ontario, Canada.

WELCH, IRENE.—Daughter of William Welch. She married Jim Hitchcock. Last heard of around Pauls Valley, Oklahoma. Information appreciated by her first cousin, S. B. Welch, Langly Route, Glenwood, Arkansas.

SCOTT, LIZZIE MAE.—Please help me find my dear sister. She is sixty-three years old. She left her home forty-six years ago and went to Detroit, where she worked in a confectionery store. Later she married a man from Buffalo, New York. I do not know her marriage name. Lizzie dear, if you read this please write to your sister, Mrs. Alice Scott Hawkins, Route 2 Jackson, Michigan.

CANNON, PAUL M.—He has worked in Woodland, Washington. Last heard from in Portland, Oregon. He had been gone seven years April 8, 1937. He is now thirty-seven years old, five feet ten inches tall, and weighs about one hundred and eighty-five pounds. He has brown eyes and has a shallow complexion. He has a scar on his under lip and one on his forehead on the right side of his face. Any information concerning him will be greatly appreciated by his mother, Mrs. C. S. Cannon, Lakemont, Georgia.

McGRAW, ERNEST.—He enlisted in the U. S. navy and trained at Berkeley, Virginia. Naval Training Station, was transferred to the U. S. S. Michigan, and served as a member of the Armed Guard on board the U. S. A. T. Arcadia. His first trip was to Italy, and all the rest were to France until we were transferred to the Receiving Ship at Norfolk and then were sent to various ships of the fleet. Please help me find my "buddie," J. L. Daniels, 5321 Webster Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

ROIG, HERBERT.—At one time he lived in Fort Worth or Dallas, Texas. Has also lived in San Francisco and Los Angeles, California. Any one knowing his present address please notify, S. A. Jones, 1146 Webster Street, San Francisco, California.

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 notice, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

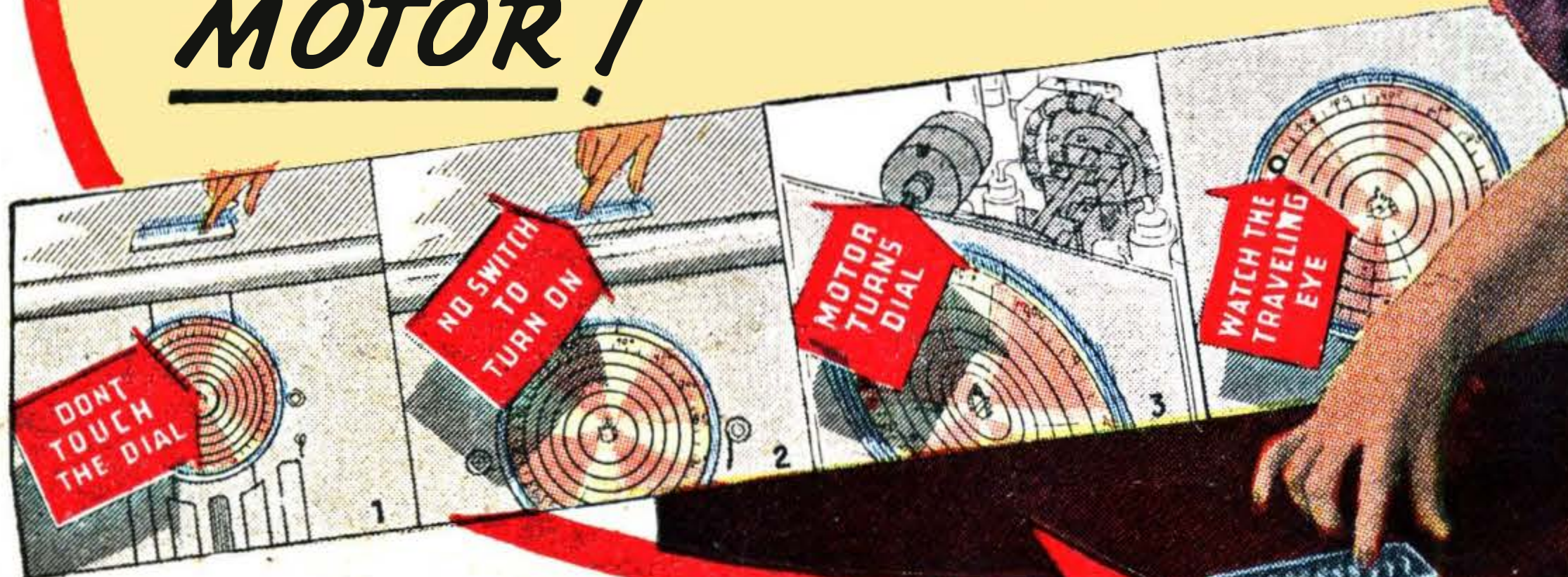
If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to any one who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

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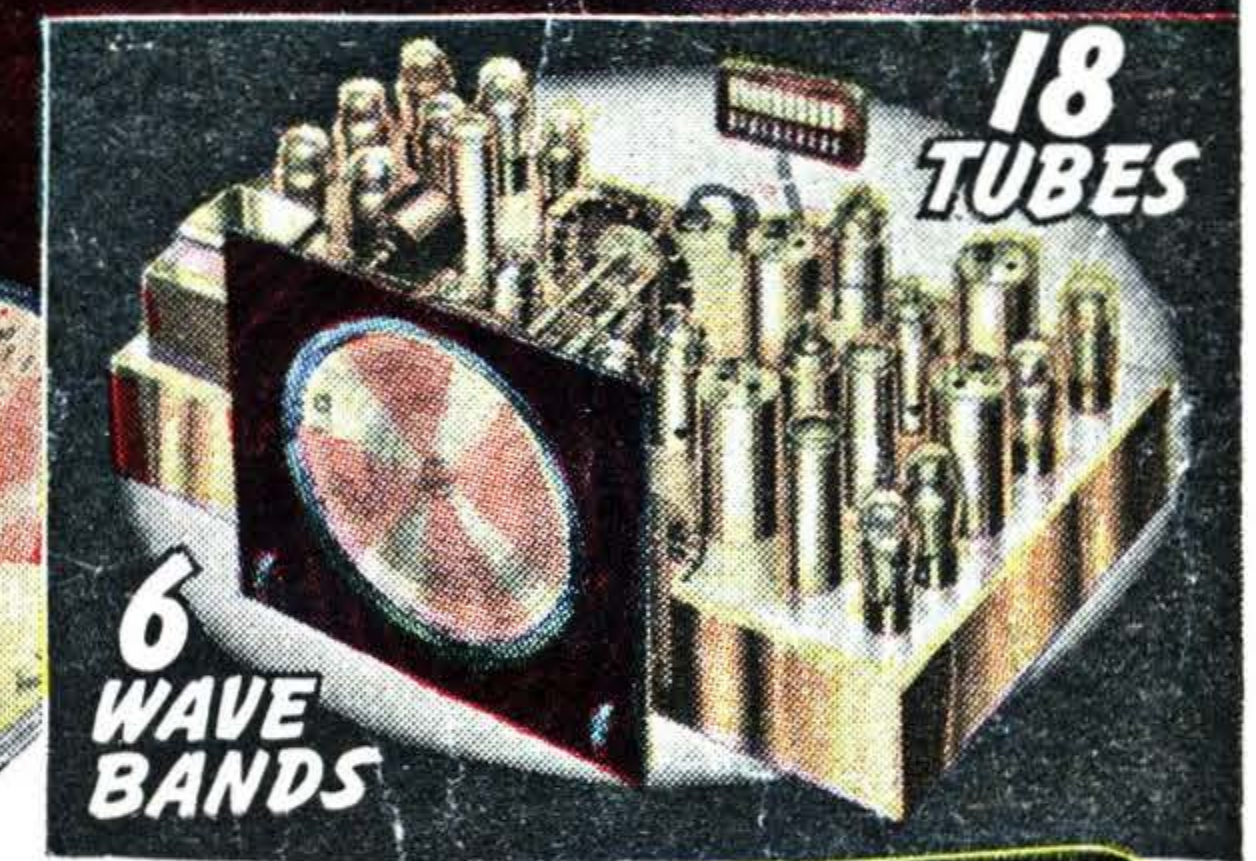
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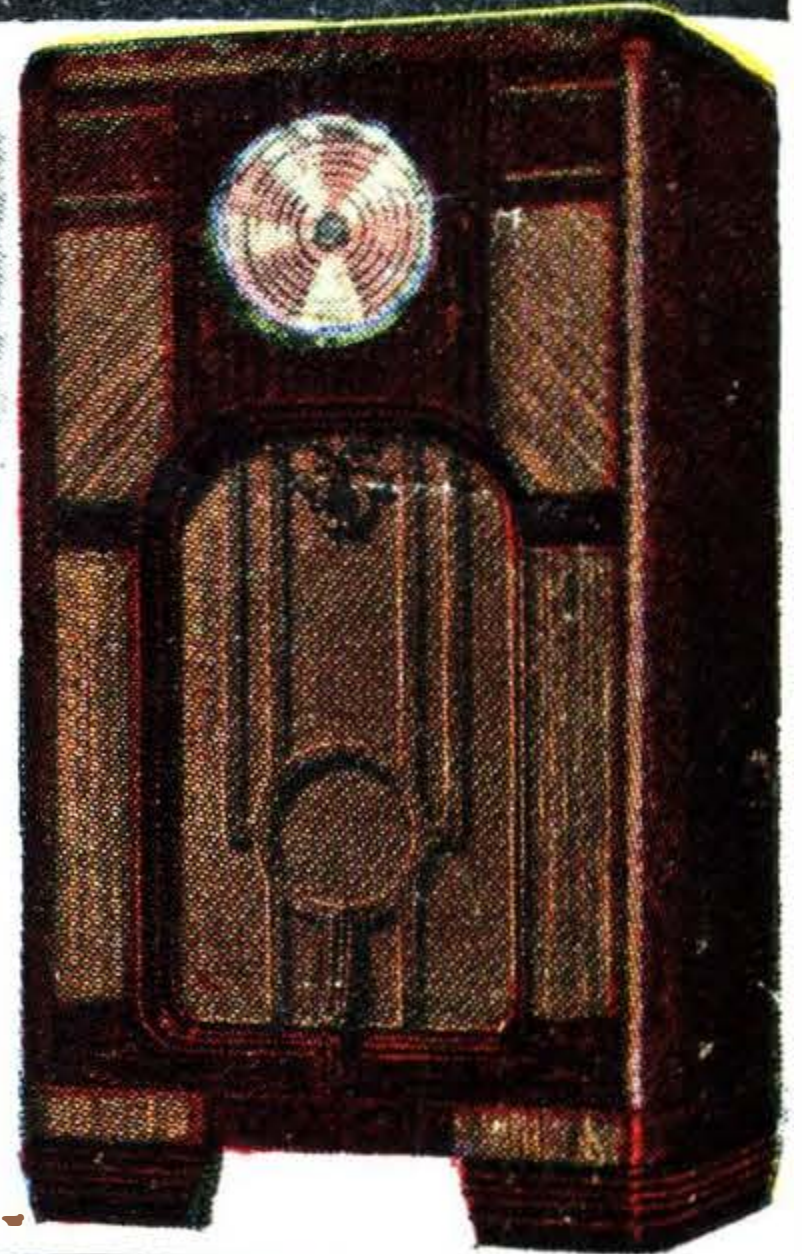
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