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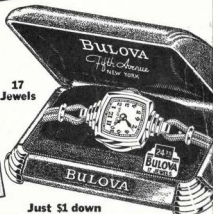
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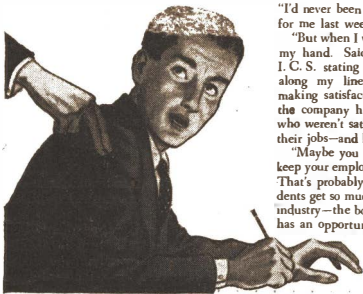
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WESTERN STORY

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VOL. CXCI, No. 6

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TWO SERIALS

- GHOST-TREE GAMBLE** Kenneth Gilbert
 First of Five Parts
 "There's only one boss on this river! The Thundergod made that rule a long while ago, and I aim to keep it alive!" Lance Strawn declared—but could he himself boss the Turnagain when he wore the mark of a renegade river hog?
- THE STAGLINE FEUD** Peter Dawson 108
 Conclusion
 "Steele doesn't know it, but he's sittin' on sixty thousand dollars' worth of bullion," Frank Justice told his trouble-pruned crew—unaware that he himself was sitting on a powder keg that might blow Stagline to bits!

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- IRONCLAD ALIBI** Harry Sinclair Drago 77
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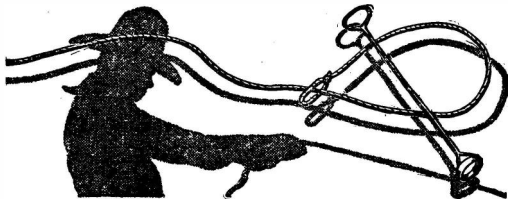
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The Roundup

THE mailbag produced an interesting letter this week from Ray Nafziger, one of our ace writers, and a great favorite with Western Story readers. Ray lives in the Southwest, as the authenticity and color of his stories indicate, but he is at present in Santa Monica, California. We were sort of envious of his opportunity just to sit and watch the waves roll in, but evidently all his sitting is being done at a typewriter, where he watches waves of copy roll out.

"I am a little ashamed to have been sitting here along the seashore," Ray writes, "doing nothing more exciting than work. I might mention, however, that on my way out here I stopped off to visit some old stamping grounds of mine in southeastern Arizona, in the Gila and Sulphur Springs Valleys.

"I stayed two years on the 76 Ranch near Fort Grant, under Mount Graham, where I saw some real mountain cowboys work. This Mount Graham cattle range is supposed to be one of the roughest, if

not the roughest, in Arizona—which is saying plenty. Have read about the brush hands of Texas, but the Arizona hands had the brush and steep canyon slopes on top. Of the half dozen 76 cowboys, it was rumored that one or more was always on the crippled list; even the 'rock' horses raised in the mountains couldn't always keep their feet.

"You might be interested to know that I have a history of the 76 about half done; expect to finish it before long. The ranch was started by a Texan and his wife, who drove a little bunch of Sonora heifers up from Mexico. Oftentimes when the rancher was away, his wife stayed on the ranch alone. This was in the days of Apache raids, and the 76 was on the main route used by bands of renegades. They killed freighters and ranchers only a few miles away, but the Texan's wife stayed on the job, branding calves. The Fort Grant commanding officer used to send for her to come in for safety to the army post when raids were on. Sometimes she'd go, and sometimes she wouldn't, if she was too busy. That's the kind she was.

"Besides the original 76, the ranch now includes half a dozen others; their range once ran 14,000 cattle. Not far from the headquarters is the little ravine where an army pay-

master and his escort of colored soldiers were put to flight by some bandits, who got over \$28,000 in gold. The bandits had rolled a boulder in the way of the two ambulances in which the soldiers were traveling, and when the soldiers climbed out to move the boulder, the bandits opened fire on them from little rock forts on the hill. That was over fifty years ago, but you can still see the signs of the forts and bullet holes in the cedars."

Good luck on the book, Ray, but meantime let's have some more stories like *SIESTA FOR MARSHAL SCARECROW*. You'll find that one on page 31 of this issue, folks, and you don't need to be told that Ray Nafziger can rope, throw and hogtie a yarn for any man's money.

Mr. R. J. Leonard objects right strenuously to a recent criticism directed at Tom Roan. Mr. Leonard writes:

"Sorry to be so late with my comment, but I didn't notice the article—in the March 8th issue by a certain Mr. F. L. Miles—about Tom Roan, Western's top writer, soon enough, I'm afraid. My purpose in writing is to convince Mr. Miles that Mr. Roan is among the best for my money. Maybe if Mr. Miles would read more of Tom Roan's stories he'd change his mind.

"Mr. Miles is from my home State of Oregon, and I have to admit I'm very much ashamed of it. If he cares to argue the fact, he can always reach me at U. S. Naval Hospital, Mare Island, California. I am in Uncle Sam's navy, and most of my buddies agree with me on this."

No use to turn the navy loose on Mr. Miles, Mr. Leonard, for we invite adverse criticism. However, we're glad you and your buddies dis-

agree and like Tom's stories as many, many others do.

An old cowhand himself, Mr. W. H. Holcombe, of Woodward, Oklahoma, writes that any author who says a puncher ever rode a nag or a mare is plenty wrong. He says if he'd been caught astride either on the streets of any Western town he'd have been laughed at and hoorawed the rest of his life.

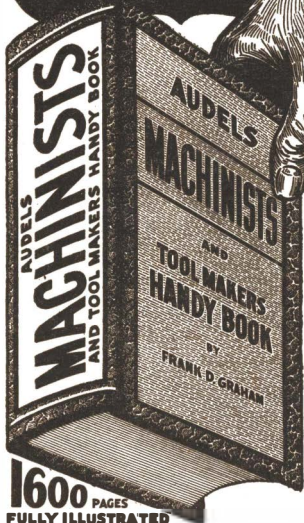
There were certainly conceivable occasions when a cowhand was down on his luck that he had no choice but to ride a nag. If you will point out the story where an author had his hero riding a mare, Mr. Holcombe, we'll be very glad to see if said author can buck himself clear of the charge.

In your next W. S.—

"My guns are in moth balls," Wild Jack Rawson told the tin-horn who tried to buy his lightning trigger rep. But when the snarling lead of a range war began to tear the Rincon foothills apart, could any red-blooded hombre let sleeping smoke poles lie? Harry F. Olmsted tells the smashing story of a town tamer who had to win a victory over himself before he could ride herd on a renegade combine. Don't miss *A MARSHAL SHEDS HIS GUNS*, a suspense-packed full-length novel.

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GHOST-TREE GAMBLE

PART ONE



"I can't swim!" Legg yelled. "Then walk!" said Lance curtly—and hurled the treacherous birler into the stream.

BY KENNETH GILBERT

CHAPTER I

BRANDED

"NEVER aim to see the like of it if I live to be a hundred—which I will!" declared old Stumpy Purvis, squatted amidships in the wanigan which he had ruled so many years as cook of the great Strawn timber outfit's drive crew. There were three other men aboard the broad-beamed scow, heavily laden with supplies, as the swift current of the Turnagain hurried the unwieldy craft around the

erratic twists which gave the river its name.

Harmony Jones, the giant bull cook, steered with a long oar set between tholepins at the stern. Bill Flagg and Jeff Prouty, going downstream on the wanigan in order to open the booms for the log drive when the latter reached Dead Man's Pool, looked bored. They had heard Stumpy's account at least a dozen times since noon.

"Lance Strawn had knocked Bull Cordeau flat, as slick as old Thun-

dergod Strawn could have done in his best days!" Stumpy went on. "What happens then? Why, instead of puttin' the boots to Cordeau, Lance steps back and gives him a chance, figurin' he'll get up and fight some more. But Bull is too smart for that. He dives for Lance's ankles, and upends him. Then Bull jumps clean off the floor, aimin' to tromp on Lance's face with his calked boots, but Lance jerks back just in time, and Cordeau's boot struck his chest instead. Must have knocked the wind out of Lance, for he tries to get up but can't. They grab Bull then, and the scrap is over.

"But the damage is done," Stumpy continued morosely. "Nobody's seen Lance since then. Bull's been braggin' up and down the river that he's put the Mark on a Strawn at last—somethin' he couldn't do while old Thundergod was alive—and that he's run Lance clean off the Turnagain!

"A scrap ain't nothin'. It's the effect of it what counts. This one is the spark that'll touch off a blast and blow us all sky high, wreck a thing worth millions that took old Thundergod a lifetime to build, blacken the Strawn name so that he can't rest in his grave, and turn the country over to a pirate who'll crush everybody that won't knuckle under him. That's what keeps stickin' in my gizzard!"

Harmony Jones stirred uneasily. Despite his size and strength—he had been a log cat until two heavy timbers had crushed his left foot and relegated him to the lowly task of keeping Stumpy's cooking fires going—he was a peaceable man, and Stumpy's warlike talk disturbed him.

"No sense to fightin'," he protested. "Lance Strawn was finished before he had that scrap with Bull

Cordeau at Beaver last week. Everybody knows that Thundergod left him nothin' but a lot of debts and a stand of timber that can't be logged because he ain't got the money to build a road to it, and because no river hog that ever breathed could drive the timber through the canyon at Devil's Elbow. That's all he's got—besides a valley full of ghost trees! No sense to fightin', I say!"

Stumpy snorted wrathfully. "You fresh-water walrus!" he roared. "What you mean there's no sense to fightin'? I'd swear you was yaller if I hadn't seen you knock the tar out o' four of Cordeau's bruisers single-handed at Pilchuck last spring!"

"That was plumb different," the giant explained patiently. "I like harmony, as I always say, but them fellers wouldn't let me have it. It was nothin' like the case of Lance Strawn—and his ghost trees!"

FLAGG and Prouty grinned in mild enjoyment at the two, who were notorious for their constant bickering. The row made entertainment for a dull day—and perhaps Flagg and Prouty, loyal to the Strawn tradition, felt the same poignant sense of loss that underlay the irascibility of the little river cook. Like Stumpy Purvis, they had a feeling that the world was awry.

Old Thundergod Strawn, legendary figure of the storied Turnagain—a man whose deeds would be told at night fires along the ancient river so long as white-water men gathered after a day of battle with the turbulent stream—had gone roaring off into that Valhalla of the Hereafter where all two-fisted conquerors are gathered, and a part of the green wilderness seemed to have died with him, a part of its soul. The war club of his prowess had proved too heavy

for his son to wield—too heavy for any other man, perhaps. Lance Strawn carried the Mark of Bull Cordeau, and apparently the shame of it had driven him into self-imposed exile. These were things which Flagg and Prouty and the others sensed vaguely, although they could not have put them into words.

"Ghost trees, hey?" Stumpy Purvis snapped back at Harmony. "You—" But he broke off as a thought came to him. "Ghost trees!" he mused to himself. "Old Thundergod Strawn bought that tract years ago from Bull Cordeau, and it was all fine, green timber then. But the blight hit it, and Cordeau's been laughin' ever since!"

Harmony blinked at him in puzzled fashion. "Why shouldn't he laugh?" the bull cook asked. "Everybody knows that blight makes the bark fall off, and the trees get weathered and white. So—they're ghost trees! No good!"

"Who says they ain't?" demanded Stumpy, jarred out of his reverie and willing to quarrel further. But the hopelessness of it was discouraging. "If Lance hadn't run away!" he mourned. Then: "Dang it! Maybe he *didn't* run away! That ain't the Strawn style. More likely he went off to lick his paws somewhere, and figure things out. For, mark what I'm sayin', there is a way out o' this! Thundergod would have found it! So will Lance! I'll bet a plug of chawin' twist—"

"Shut up!" exclaimed Flagg in sudden uneasiness. "We're comin' to the gorge above Dead Man's Pool! Mind that steerin' oar, Harmony! I can't swim and I don't aim to learn now!"

The speed of the river quickened and the wanigan, ponderous though it was, began to buck and fidget in

the froth-crested waves that leaped up magically from every side. With a final bounce that sent even Stumpy Purvis clawing for a hand hold, the awkward scow plunged into the canyon.

For some reason Harmony Jones looked backward. Maybe he wanted to make sure that his steering oar was biting into the water, for skill and strength were needed to guide the wanigan through the gorge. What he saw was the figure of a man who had come out of the woods upstream—a tall, broad-shouldered, bareheaded man who stared curiously after the vanishing scow. As a twist in the canyon shut off the view suddenly, Harmony raised his voice in an excited shout at what he had seen, but the roar of the tumbling water drowned his words so that the others could not hear him.

As buoyant as though it were a cedar chip, the scow went racing through the canyon, slewing to one side and then the other, missing disaster by inches. Then it shot out at last into a long stretch of swift, smooth-running water. Suddenly Stumpy Purvis gave a yell.

"Look at that!" he cried. "Some chin-whiskered son of a hand logger has got our booms filled with his own sticks!"

The others had already made the same discovery. Not far below the mouth of the gorge was a great eddy where the river had cut into the bank—Dead Man's Pool, named, perhaps, in remembrance of some white-water man of an earlier day whom disaster had overtaken. In this eddy, protected from the incessant drag of the river by means of long booms which were anchored securely from bank to bank across the entrance, was a mass of freshly cut logs.

WELL up on the shore was a small cabin, newly built, judging by the yellowish white of its peeled logs. A shovel-nosed Indian canoe, hollowed from a single cedar log, was drawn up on the beach. Between the cabin and the water were two figures which stirred to action as the wanigan swung that way.

One, a gray-bearded man, turned and hurried toward the cabin. The other, a slender girl, came quickly toward the water's edge.

"Holy smokes!" muttered Bill Flagg. "Matt Breen and the boys with the drive will be down here inside half an hour, an' there won't be room in that boom for our logs. The eddy is half filled already!"

"Then," decided Stumpy Purvis promptly, "open the booms and turn that old pelican's logs loose in the river! Who in thunder does he reckon he is? That eddy has belonged to the Strawn outfit ever since I came to the Turnagain. Swing her closer ashore, Harmony! Flagg, you and Prouty get ready to jump to the boom sticks when we touch!"

The bull cook pulled hard on his steering oar, and the wanigan, obeying the impulse, slewed around crab fashion toward the boom.

"Jump!" yelled Stumpy.

The two lumberjacks hesitated, for the old man had reappeared at the door of the cabin, and this time he had a rifle. He moved determinedly toward the shore, the gun hanging loosely in his hands.

"Jump, nothing!" Flagg demurred. "That old wart hog means business. Where in tarnation did he come from? What put the idea into his head to use our eddy and booms?"

Nobody offered an explanation. Prouty stuck a pike pole into the side of the nearest boom log and stopped the wanigan. The heavy scow lay there, water whispering

along its sides as an amazed silence settled over the four men aboard.

The girl's voice came clearly across the mass of logs between the boom and the shore. "What do you want?" she called.

"Want?" roared back Stumpy. "What in tunket do you folks mean by stealin' our booms? This here eddy belongs to the Strawn outfit, and the whole drive'll be along in a few minutes. We always raft our logs here overnight so we can finish runnin' 'em to the mill in daylight."

There was no immediate reply, but the girl and the old man spoke together. Then she raised her voice again. "We were told by a man named Cordeau that he controls this eddy, and that we were free to use it," she replied. "Anyway, we were here first, and we claim prior rights!"

Stumpy made a choking sound. "Hear that?" he demanded incredulously of the others on the wanigan. "Bull Cordeau framed this! He knows that if we can't raft our logs here we'll have to drive Storm Rapids after dark, and that likely means a jam and maybe some of the crew drowned. This old coot"—he indicated the bearded man with the rifle—"has been hand-loggin' these sticks all winter, and he likely don't know that this is our eddy. Bull Cordeau is usin' him to play a game against us!"

AS boss of the wanigan and by virtue of his long service with the Strawn outfit, Stumpy was in charge of this party.

"Well?" he demanded of Flagg and Prouty. "What're you waitin' for? Jump out there and open that boom! Turn them logs loose so we can use the boom for our own sticks. We've got justice on our side!"

Flagg and Prouty looked at each other, then away, but did not stir.

"Justice," remarked Flag pointedly, "ain't goin' to stop a bullet! Let Matt Breen settle it when he comes. That's why he's river boss!"

"Flag's right," declared Harmony. "What's the sense of fightin'?"

"Why, you overgrown moose!" raged the peppery little river cook. "You ain't got as much sand in your craw as a dicky bird! That goes for you and Prouty, too, Flag. If you two ain't got the nerve, I'll open that boom myself! Hand me that maul so I can knock the pin out of the shackle!" He stood up in the wanigan and leaned over the ends of two boom logs that were joined by a short length of heavy chain. But as he lifted the short-handled maul something said *wump* past his head, and hard on the heels of it came an explosive crack.

The old man on the shore lowered the rifle from his shoulder. "Next time," he warned, "I'll plug you!"

Stumpy, speechless for a moment and his red face suddenly pale, sat down abruptly in the wanigan and let the maul drop from his fingers.

"You blasted bushwhacker!" he exclaimed at last. "You know what's goin' to happen to you? In a few minutes this place is goin' to be crawlin' with river hogs! They'll swing you by the neck from that tree yonder! Wait and see!"

Silence greeted the threat, yet it became immediately apparent that the intent of it was not lost. Again the girl and the old man conferred hastily. Then the girl moved toward the shovel-nosed canoe on the beach. The old man spat on the sand and fingered his rifle again.

"You and your outlaws will hang no honest man here," he declared. "Bull Cordeau runs this river, and he'll be here to help us! Meanwhile

don't any of you set foot on shore or touch those booms!"

The girl pushed the canoe into the water, leaped into the craft, and caught up its paddle. Stroking swiftly, she sent the canoe into the current, heading directly across the river.

Stumpy scowled, thinking rapidly. "Cordeau's got a camp on t'other side," he reasoned aloud. "About a mile below here. Boys, she's strikin' across the river to get him! We've got to stop her!"

Harmony Jones sighed and wagged his head. "How?" he demanded practically. "We can't head her off in the wanigan!"

"Don't need to stop her!" declared Flag suddenly. "Hey!" he yelled loudly to the fleeing girl. "You'll never make it! The log drive will be comin' out of that canyon in a few minutes. You'll get caught in it!"

"By gum, Flag, you're right!" exclaimed Stumpy. He swung to the man on shore. "You hear what he said?" he demanded. "If you don't want your gal drowned, call her back before it's too late! There'll be a mess o' logs comin' out of that gorge any minute now! Stop her, you old fool!"

BUT the man on shore merely glared at them, unconvinced. "Think you can play a trick on me?" he asked derisively.

"You old catamount!" raged Stumpy. "It's no trick. Them logs'll catch her sure!" He faced toward the stream, where the canoe was fighting the current at an angle up river and across. "Hey!" he yelled through cupped hands.

The girl heard him and looked over her shoulder.

"Logs!" he called. "Logs comin' out of that gorge! Turn back, quick!"

The girl either did not understand clearly, or maybe she, too, suspected a trick, for she kept on paddling.

"There!" cried Stumpy. "*There they come!*"

Out of the canyon came a great brown raft of almost solidly packed logs, the freshly cut ends of them appearing and disappearing as they bobbed in the current; an implacable line of heavy timber that moved with ominous swiftness. At the forefront of the drive stood two men. Farther back on the logs were twenty-five to thirty others, pike poles or peaveys in their hands, riding the jostling, uneasy sticks with unconcerned ease.

"Look!" exclaimed Stumpy. "Who's that up in front with Matt Breen? By the piper, it's Lance Strawn!" he added with growing excitement.

"That's what I yelled at you just before we went into the gorge," said Harmony. "I saw him come out of the woods—"

He broke off as realization of the girl's predicament out there in that canoe struck home again. She, too, had spied the oncoming logs, and, in sudden panic, turned the canoe with the intention of sending it shooting downstream ahead of the massive drive.

But it was a tricky craft at best. In her anxiety to escape the onrushing drive, the girl dug the paddle too deeply in the water. The canoe lurched abruptly and turned over.

Stumpy Purvis made an inarticulate sound deep in his throat, but he, like the rest, sat there frozen, realizing their inability to help. The girl's head reappeared in the rushing water. They saw her throw both arms over the end of the capsized canoe. Then her voice, shrill with

terror, came across the water in a frantic plea for help.

Canoe, girl and the grim mass of the drive swept downstream, toward the foam-covered rocks below, where the reckless, turbulent Turnagain flung itself furiously into the throat of another canyon.

CHAPTER II

RETURN

THE man who had come out of the deep woods above the gorge just as the wanigan was disappearing into it, had a youthful face, yet the breadth of shoulder and stalwart height which belong to one of mature years. About his eyes was that crinkly look of determination which a man has when he knows he is facing an ordeal.

He was hatless, and the burned-in tan ran to the roots of his hair, and he looked as though he had come a long and hard way. The bright plaid shirt he wore had seen much service, and so had the brown canvas pants, staggd just above the tops of steel-calked boots. But save for his bigness, the most arresting thing about him was his eyes.

They were bloodshot and tired, yet seemed to burn with smoldering defiance. His lean face was haggard. He rubbed his chin with the back of one hand and licked his lips as though he craved a stiff drink of whiskey. As he raised his head, peering upstream, the notch of his unbuttoned shirt collar revealed a newly healed wound on his upper chest, a curious scar like the pattern of a nail-studded boot sole, for there were symmetrically curved lines of red dots in the firm, tanned flesh. At that moment the young man caught sight of logs coming down river, and he reached up and buttoned the shirt collar hastily, so

that the scar could not be seen.

The sticks came scatteringly at first, thickening abruptly. Then a great mass of them swept around a bend above. Riding the logs were men wearing the same sort of rough, serviceable outdoor clothes that he wore, with the same tendency toward bizarre colors. Their faces, most of them heavily bearded, turned toward the young man curiously.

A swirl of the river brought the first of the logs near the bank where he stood. He went down the short slope on a quick run, and his broad jump carried him accurately to a stick near the shore. As he struck it, the log rolled abruptly, but the cunning skill in his steel-shod feet coaxed it to a stop. Then he moved nimbly from one stick to another, until he reached the front of the drive, where a man stood alone.

The latter stroked his gray-stubbed chin and grinned. "Been expectin' you somewhere along here," he declared. "You get what you went after, Lance?"

Lance Strawn nodded. "How about the crew?" he queried.

Matt Breen jerked his head toward the men on the logs behind. "Reckon they're too flabbergasted right this minute to make any kind of a guess," he said. "They figured Bull Cordeau run you clean off the river. Some of 'em, like old Stumpy Purvis, took it pretty hard. But not Bart Legg," he added with a touch of grinniness. "Never could figure why Thundergod made him a straw boss—or why you kept him. If it came to a showdown between you and Bull Cordeau, I know where Legg—"

"Let it ride, Matt!"

"Sure, sure!" agreed the river boss placatingly. "Well, now, what can you tell me about this here scheme of yours?"

"Nothing," was the reply. "I'm

asking you and the rest of them to go it blind with me!"

MATT BREEN wagged his head. "Reckon you Strawns," he remarked, "ought to have been right smart poker players! Sure can play your cards close to your belt buckle! "Well, I followed Thundergod



through hell an' high water, sometimes without bein' able to see farther ahead than the end of my nose, and I reckon I'm too old to change!" Breen took a round box of snoose from his shirt pocket and tucked a v-shapedwad into the pouch of his lower lip, and spat into the current. "But of all the crazy schemes I ever heard tell—"

He broke off then as the logs entered the gorge and the mutter of the river burst suddenly into an angry roar. Besides, there was no opportunity to talk now, for the mass of sticks became a treacherous, uncertain footing that plunged under the frothing waves one second, only to lift wildly from it the next. Yet somehow the drive kept moving, although every man on it was watchful for a sudden jam that would send them scurrying for their lives. Then the drive was through and into smoother water.

Suddenly Breen gave a yell and

pointed to the shore. "Somethin' wrong!" he cried. "There's the wanigan, but they ain't got the boom open. Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, we'll have the whole drive smack into Storm Rapids after dark! That cabin's been built since last fall! Danged if the eddy ain't half filled with logs, too!"

"There's somebody in a turned-over canoe up ahead," explained Lance.

Breen squinted. "Must be some fool Injun," he declared. "Why in thunder doesn't he let go and swim ashore? He'll be into that gorge ahead in ten minutes!"

But Lance was gone. He had turned and was darting with swift, springy steps over the logs toward the crew behind. From the hands of the nearest man, who stood there astonished, he snatched a long pike pole, then retraced his route to the front of the drive again.

"Swing the logs toward the eddy and get the boom open!" he told Breen hurriedly. He jumped on one of the leading logs, gave it a tremendous shove by setting his pike pole against the other logs behind. The log shot ahead of the press, and Lance began paddling furiously with the pike pole, first on one side, then on the other. Slowly the log drew out in advance, but it was at once apparent that it would be a long chase before it could overtake the drifting canoe, and unlikely that it could do so before the capsized craft entered the canyon.

"Swim upstream!" he yelled at the bedraggled figure clutching the end of the canoe. "Slow yourself if you're afraid to let go!"

One arm began flailing the water obediently, and Lance redoubled his strokes. But sculling the log by means of the pike pole was painfully slow, and the frowning rock where

the river poured through a comparatively narrow slot seemed to rush upstream with the speed of an express train. Yet log and canoe continued to draw together, and at last, with the mutter of white water ahead growing ominously louder, Lance ran to the front end of the log and reached out with the pike pole.

"Grab it!" he commanded. The swimmer turned her face toward him, and for the first time he saw that this was no hapless Indian, but a white girl.

THE discovery was so surprising that he hesitated for an instant; then, as the girl let go of the canoe and seized the pike pole, he drew her to the log.

"Hang onto me!" he ordered, setting her on her feet. They still had to reach shore, and he needed the pike pole for an oar. She clung there while he slewed the log crosswise the current and began stroking for the beach. Soon the water was shallow enough for him to touch bottom with the pike pole, and with a last shove he sent the stick close inshore. Picking up the girl, he carried her to dry land and turned to move upstream toward the eddy. As he faced about, he confronted the old man with the rifle. Coming on a run, too, was Stumpy Purvis.

There were tears on the old man's cheeks. "You all right, Lina?" he asked the girl anxiously. She nodded, and the old man turned to Lance Strawn.

"I want to thank you," he declared. "That was a right smart piece of work. Rest of us couldn't do a thing—and Lina can't swim!"

The stern expression on Lance's face did not relax. He was eying the gun in the other's hands. At that moment Stumpy Purvis, breathing hard after his dash across the rafter

logs, from the wanigan to the shore, came up.

"Tarnation!" exclaimed the cook. "Lance, you got back just in time! That gal was goin' across river to bring help from Bull Cordeau, I reckon. This old bushwhacker"—he indicated the man with the rifle—"has us held up. Matt and the boys are tryin' to get the booms open, but most of the logs are goin' past. This gent tried to shoot me when I argued with him!"

The old man with the rifle stiffened. "I thanked you for savin' my gal's life, mister," he told Lance, "but I'm not givin' up this eddy! Look at that! They're tryin' to open that boom! Call 'em off, or I'll shoot!"

Lance reached out and jerked the rifle from the other's hands. "Listen!" he commanded. "That eddy was used by the Strawn outfit long before you came into this country. If Bull Cordeau put you up to this, it's your own hard luck. There'll be no shooting!" He lifted the gun and broke it in two across his knee, flinging the useless parts on the ground.

"There!" cried Stumpy triumphantly, shaking his fist at the old man. "For two cents I'd—"

"Shut up!" Lance said sharply. "Get up there and start your cooking fire. We're staying here tonight. Hash up the best grub you've got on that wanigan, because we'll be working late until we're finished!"

He started upstream, Stumpy hurrying ahead and calling orders to Harmony Jones. Matt Breen and two other men came running across the raft to meet Lance.

"What'll we do with those sticks inside the boom?" the river boss asked. "There ain't room to handle half of ours!"

"Open the lower boom," Lance Strawn ordered. "Turn that outlaw

timber into the river!"

"But I'll lose it!" wailed the old man helplessly. "I'll lose our winter's work!"

Lance shrugged. "What do you expect?" he demanded. "That I'm going to lose my own logs? You've no business here anyway!"

Then he turned abruptly to confront the girl, who stood there with eyes blazing, small fists clenched. Her clothes clung soggy to her and her wet hair was matted on her forehead, but in her fury she seemed unaware that she was bedraggled and that but a few moments before she had been pulled, almost exhausted, from the river.

"Outlaw timber?" she demanded. "Those logs are ours; they were cut honestly. We worked hard to get them, dad and I! No river outlaw is going to take them away from us!"

Lance frowned, then shrugged. "I don't intend to argue with you," he said. "Maybe we are outlaws, but back this deep in the woods we make our own rules. You and your dad seem to have run afoul of the most important one—that there's only one boss on this river! The Thundergod made that rule a long while ago, and I aim to keep it alive!"

THE girl smiled derisively. She was recklessly angry, and unafraid. "We haven't ignored the rule," she told him bitingily, "because the boss of this river *isn't* named Strawn!" A moment later she added: "All the hand loggers on the Turnagain have heard the story!" As she spoke she let her eyes rest on his shirt collar, which was still buttoned snugly about his neck, although the other men wore theirs open.

Deep color spilled into Lance Strawn's face, then drained from it. "Lina!" warned the old man

sharply. For her words had been heard by the nearby men, busy at their task, and a sudden, tense silence fell upon them.

Lance shifted uneasily, then faced the crew.

"Clear out the rest of those out-law logs!" he ordered. "Fill the boom, and what's left of ours can go on downstream. We're driving *all* the sticks that get into Storm Rapids tonight—ours and this hand logger's!" He swung around abruptly on the old man. "I'll take your name," he declared. "When we get to the mill there'll be a settlement. Who are you?"

The old man was plainly scared. "I'm Pete Jackson," he said. "This is my daughter, Lina! Mister, it ain't right to be too hard on us. We're come here in these parts, and all we know is what we've been told. Lina's a little excited, maybe, but she—both of us, for that matter—ain't forgotten that you saved her from the river just now. I take it that you're Lance Strawn. We heard . . . well, the word is around that you'd left the Turnagain. Now you say you're goin' to drive my logs through Storm Rapids with part of yours tonight. I . . . well, I'd sort o' made other arrangements!"

"I'm driving your logs for a price," Lance told him. "I'm driving the timber of all other hand loggers below here, just as the Strawn outfit has always done. If you've made a deal with Bull Cordeau, you've made a mistake. He's going to drive only his own logs, and when that job is done he'll be finished here!"

He broke off and swung again toward the crew. The upper end of the boom yawned widely now, and such Strawn logs as had not already escaped down river were swimming into the eddy. At the same time Jackson's logs were moving out and

into the current below.

"Grub pile when you're finished there," Lance told Matt Breen. "Then we're going to Storm Rapids!"

The river boss nodded. Over by the cooking fire, Stumpy Purvis jerked his head in the direction of Lance Strawn.

"Thundergod's come back," he told Harmony Jones. "Lance ain't makin' a bluff—he's got suthin' up his sleeve. He's goin' to handle all the timber of hand loggers along the river, because he needs money. For what? Might be," he added with satisfaction, "that he's found a way he can beat Bull Cordeau. Harmony, there's goin' to be Strawn logs movin' down this river for quite a spell—or else you and me and the rest of us had better start kowtowin' to Bull Cordeau!"

"No sense in fightin'," insisted the bull coker. "When a man's licked, he's licked!"

"You dratted fool!" Stumpy said angrily. "Can't you see that Lance Strawn ain't licked, that he's got suthin' up his sleeve—a plan of some sort?"

He stopped speaking to stare at the Jackson cabin. The girl had disappeared within; now she came out to join her father, who stood near the door. She had changed her wet clothes, and was dressed as though for the trail.

"That gal ain't lettin' Lance Strawn handle those logs without a scrap," Stumpy added. "Seems like she's plumb forgot that Lance saved her from goin' into that gorge. Wonder what in thunder she aims to do."

Harmony Jones stopped pushing the cooking fire together and likewise regarded the girl.

"If we hadn't got into a ruckus over this eddy," he pointed out, "she wouldn't have tried to cross the

river in that dugout, and wouldn't have been caught by the log drive. Maybe she figures it that way. Thunderation, I've been thinkin' that when all this blows over, a peaceable man like myself might settle down here with a gal like that—"

"Shut up!" Stumpy commanded. "Suthin's in the wind!" For, after a brief talk with old Pete Jackson, the girl turned and started down river, following a trail which led along the bank. "She's goin' for help," declared Stumpy. "An' this time I reckon she means to get it!"

CHAPTER III

SETBACK

DRIVING his men to the task of getting as many of his logs inside the boom as possible, Lance Strawn apparently gave no further thought to the Jacksons. The old man had withdrawn, and now stood regarding the crew from a distance, eying them moodily. In the west the sun flared redly over the treetops; up river and into the north went a wedge of high-flying geese, their clangorous call drifting slowly to earth. In the still air the smell of cooking food held temptingly.

"Grub pile," announced Stumpy at last, without enthusiasm. Despite his plump, well-fed look, the little river cook was ravaged by a gnawing dyspepsia, and three times a day the enormous appetites of the river hogs disturbed him greatly. The men quickly disposed of the beans which Harmony ladled out, slab after slab of bread, three or four cups of coffee each, a broad wedge of dried-apple pie and, as a sort of side dish, a half dozen fried eggs stripped with bacon. Watching them, Stumpy sighed and mixed himself a fizzing concoction of vinegar and soda.

As the sun sank, Lance stood up
WS—2F

and led his men to the river.

"Matt," he told the river boss, "you and three-four of the boys stay here with the raft and the wanigan. If you don't hear from us by daylight, turn the rest of the logs loose. We'll have Storm Rapids clear by then. We're picking up the cuts of other hand loggers downstream tomorrow." He motioned toward a sandy-haired man who stood near the cooking fire. "Legg," he said, "you'll go with me!"

Bart Legg did not reply, but stared for an instant, then moved off with the other river hogs toward the stream edge. A few scattering logs were still drifting by slowly, and the birlers leaped aboard these and started off down river. There was a pole trail down to Storm Rapids, but the men preferred riding timber in white water to walking.

Stumpy Purvis stared after Lance Strawn, who was out in the river now.

"When he snatched that gun out of Pete Jackson's hands," the cook told Harmony, "it seemed like old Thundergod had come back to the Turnagain. Bull Cordeau ain't got us licked yet!"

"You keep sayin' that," Harmony Jones replied, piling more wood on the fire, which was beginning to glow redly as darkness thickened, "when all the time you know better! Just whistlin' in the dark!"

"Shut up!" rasped Stumpy irritably. "What I'd like to know is why that gal lit out so fast for down river. There's been a change on the Turnagain since we went into the woods last fall. Too many of these dang hand loggers. Looks to me as though Bull Cordeau has been linin' 'em up so that the Strawn outfit will be playin' second fiddle. But Lance has hit on a scheme since he went away. You watch and see!"

As the reds and yellows in the western sky changed to a deep purple, the last of the drive crew, riding the logs, vanished into the gorge below Dead Man's Pool.

THERE was no talk among the men. The song of the river grew louder and all their attention was required to keep their footing on the sticks which rose and fell in the foaming water. Night fell swiftly

inside the gorge, and when the scattering logs came out at last, only dim light was left on the river.

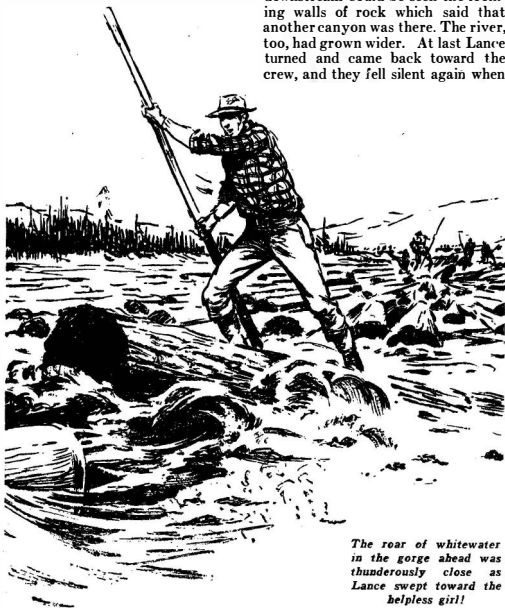
Lance Strawn rode at the head of the drive, and behind him were the vague shapes of men. Lance, too, kept silent, staring ahead. After a while Bart Legg hooked the end of a pike pole into the nearest log on which another man rode, and drew the two sticks together. There was a long stretch of comparatively



calm water now before Storm Rapids was reached, and Legg began to speak to the man beside him in tones low enough so that Lance could not hear. Other men drew closer, and after a time practically all of the crew had gathered as closely as the logs would permit. But Lance

Strawn, up ahead, apparently was unaware of the conclave. A mile of it, two miles, and then the muttering of the river seemed to die away altogether.

The men looked into the water on either side of them. The logs were drifting more slowly now, and yet downstream could be seen the looming walls of rock which said that another canyon was there. The river, too, had grown wider. At last Lance turned and came back toward the crew, and they fell silent again when



*The roar of whitewater
in the gorge ahead was
thunderously close as
Lance swept toward the
helpless girl!*

they saw his figure bulking in the gloom.

"Storm Rapids is jammed," he announced. "Legg, we'll go ashore and hit the pole trail until we reach the jam. Something's wrong here! It's not likely that the few sticks which were left over from the raft at Dead Man's Pool could have piled up! All right, boys! Work your logs over to the left bank!"

Some of them obeyed, but others, including Bart Legg, hung back.

"Lance," Legg said abruptly, "this is no time of day to break a jam in Storm Rapids! The boys and me figure we should wait until daylight, at least! We don't fancy gettin' drowned in that gorge!"

Lance swung around sharply. "I don't ask anybody to get drowned for me," he replied. "But this job can't wait! The more timber that comes down, the harder the jam will pack. You know that as well as I do! You mean to tell me, Legg, that you're balking?"

The man stared at him in the gloom. "What's the good of it, anyway?" he demanded at last. "We'll be through workin' for you when we get the logs to the mill!" His voice grew bolder. "We're thinkin' that you're makin' a play that you can't back up!"

There was silence for a moment. "Maybe," suggested Lance at last, "you'd rather abandon this drive and let Bull Cordeau have the logs?"

"We don't aim to tackle the jam tonight!" Legg said stubbornly.

"How many of you feel that way?" Lance demanded.

There was hesitation. Then one man rubbed his whiskered chin and spat into the water. "Not me!" he declared. "I follered Thundergod, and I aim to stick with a Strawn as long as there's one left on the river. Nobody ever called Tom North a

quitter!" Others muttered agreement and moved apart from Legg and the rest.

"I'm needing a new straw boss," Lance said. "North, you take over. Legg, here, is going down the pole trail!"

LEGG made a sound deep in his throat. "Yeah?" he gritted. "Maybe there was a time a Strawn could run a sandy on me. Boys"—he raised his voice to the rest who still hesitated—"I'm tellin' you—"

He got no further, for Lance Strawn took a short leap to the log where the other stood.

"Legg," Lance asked almost casually, "can you swim?"

"Swim?" repeated the man uneasily. "No! Most birlers can't. What you drivin' at?"

"I told you that you're going down the pole trail," was the reply. "First, I aim to see you get off my logs. To do that you'll have to reach shore. I want to be sure you don't fall in while getting there!" In a move hard to see because of the darkness, he caught Legg suddenly by the upper arm and below the knee, and swung him across his own shoulders.

"Leggo!" cried the man in terror. "Leggo! Boys, he's goin' to drown me!"

"Ride easy," Lance told him, "or we'll both drown, because I can't swim either!"

Legg subsided limply as he was carried across the logs. Just before reaching shore, Lance paused; there was an open stretch of water between the last log and the firm ground beyond.

"Here you go!" Lance declared. "If you can't swim it, you can walk it!" With a mighty heave he threw the man toward the beach. Legg struck with a mighty splash, discovered that the water reached only to

his armpits, and struggled out, gasping. There were joyous hoots and catcalls from the men on the logs, and Legg, dripping and muttering defiance, hastily vanished into the brush.

Somehow, the rough discipline administered by Lance caught the fancy of the men. This was the thing they understood and appreciated.

"Anybody else want a lift ashore?" Lance asked. "This is the quickest way to the pole trail!"

Tom North laughed. "I reckon we'll stay on the logs, Lance," he said. "Doggone, if that wasn't funny, the way Bart Legg went flyin' through the air—"

"Get busy and crack that jam!" Lance broke in sharply. "I want to see what's hanging us up."

The men moved downstream over the slow-moving logs, looking for a likelier spot to reach shore, and the murmur of their voices came back to him. Some were chuckling. Bart Legg had never been a popular straw boss.

But Lance Strawn lingered, for he had caught sight of a slender figure which had appeared on the beach. He hesitated a moment; then took a running jump which carried him close enough to shore to wade. Lina Jackson stood there as though waiting for him.

"You're a long way from home, sister," Lance told her shortly. "I suppose you did the job you set out to do—get Cordeau to jam our logs. But, don't forget that your sticks are in that canyon as well as mine, and there'll be settlement later!"

THE girl shook her head impatiently. "I went for help, but not to Cordeau," she replied. "The sheriff is at Dobson's Landing. But I didn't get any farther down river than Storm Rapids. I . . . I came

back to warn you!"

"Warn me?" Lance repeated. "Warn me of what?"

"Of the canyon!" Lina said hurriedly. "Cordeau is waiting there—with his men! Since the logs jammed he can cross from the other side of the river!"

Lance laughed. "Cordeau?" he asked. "Why, I'll be glad to see him! Aimed to look him up the first chance I got, anyway." Another thought struck him. "Why should you go to all the trouble of warning me?" he queried. He could just make out the girl's face in the gloom, and it appeared troubled and confused.

"Because you saved my life," she answered, "and it seems only fair that I should save yours. I was near enough to Cordeau and his men to hear them talking. They're planning a trap there!"

Lance wagged his head in amazement. "You save my life? Your dad was ready to shoot rather than give up the logs in the eddy! Seems like you had something to say about who's boss of the river—"

"I'm only trying to repay you for saving my life!" she cut in. "I've warned you! Maybe it would be best for the Turnagain if you river hogs destroyed each other!" She swung around abruptly and started off in the night, bound up river in the direction of the Jackson cabin.

"Wait!" Lance called after her, but she did not stop. Shrugging, he turned toward the river again just as a faint call came from below.

"Lance! Hi, Lance!" Tom North was down there in the canyon with the men, and he sounded excited.

Lance took a look at the log-strewn river. Too slow that way, for the current was made sluggish by the jam. He struck out along the pole trail—that curious route

through the brush made by securing poles end to end, across gullies and mucky spots, which gave good footing to a man shod with steel calks, and accustomed to walking logs. The girl, Lina Jackson, must have found it tough going. But Lance Strawn went hurrying along the trail until he came to the gorge of Storm Rapids, and saw the forefront of the jam rearing ominously, foaming water pouring through breaks in the jumbled mass of logs.

At that moment, too, Lance made out dim shapes moving across the jam, discernible in the gloom of night only because the boiling water seemed to create light of its own. Tom North and the crew, probably. Yet Lance did not make for them.

CHAPTER IV DYNAMITE TRAP

AS he went swinging down the short slope until he reached the lip of the gorge directly above where the logs were jammed, Lance heard North call again. He answered, and presently the straw boss came across the logs toward him.

"Lance," said North abruptly, "this ain't no ordinary pile up. The gorge is half filled with big rocks. Must have been split off by frost durin' the winter. Unless we get this mess broken up and water enough backed up to make a draw through the gorge, there ain't goin' to be any more logs driven through Storm Rapids!"

"How long ago did Cordeau's drive go through?" Lance asked.

North peered at him in the darkness. "'Bout a week," he replied. "but— Holy mackerel!" he exclaimed sharply. "That is funny! If frost peeled off all that rock from the wall, then it must have waited until Cordeau's drive went through!"

He clapped his hands sharply. "The son of a gun might have blasted the canyon just to hang us up! But we'll show him! We'll take that drive apart stick by stick—"

"Wait!" commanded Lance in a low voice. "Get all your men off that jam. Keep 'em together, but out of sight, and tell 'em to get ready to skin their knuckles!"

"You mean," asked North, "that Cordeau and his crowd is still about? That we'll likely have a scrap on our hands?"

Lance nodded. There was no use explaining why he knew—or that Lina Jackson had warned him. There was no need or time for it.

"Send a couple men up here to start a big fire on the lip of the gorge," he ordered. "There'll be no moon tonight and we'll need light. But I want the rest of the gang to stay close at hand. Tell 'em to keep off the jam until we're ready!"

North shook his head. "Don't know what you have in mind," he declared. "But that jam is gettin' tighter every minute. Some of 'em could start unlockin' it!"

"Not yet," was the reply. The girl had spoken of a trap. "Get 'em off—and get 'em off fast! Then start that fire on the bank!"

PRESENTLY the night shadows were being driven back by red light from the growing blaze which two of the men had kindled as Lance Strawn had directed. As the flames rose higher, fed by pitchwood, it revealed the awful scene in the gorge—the crisscross jumble of logs, water spurting between them with a hissing sound, the rising lake behind the jam, and the turbulent stream twisting away below. Tom North and the rest of the crew were nearby, and out of range of the fire-light Lance Strawn moved in silence

along the edge of the cliff.

At last Lance came to a spot where a great slab of rock, weighing many tons, had been split away, to fall into the stream bed below and divert the current. He stooped and rubbed his hand along the place where the break had occurred. The surface was jagged, which indicated that there had been no natural seam of rock there. Dynamite had taken out the rocky wall!

Lance Strawn straightened and looked around. The canyon seemed deserted now, yet the jam was still there and, with headwater growing, more scattering logs coming in to pack the mass tighter, the task seemed less possible every moment.

There was no way of knowing what lay in his mind, yet he seemed to have a considered plan. After that few minutes of hesitation, while he studied the situation, he turned abruptly and went down into the gorge.

From his vantage point beyond the fire, old Tom North saw Lance, and the straw boss moved as though to protest. Yet the last orders Lance had given still stuck in the man's mind. "Keep out of sight—get off the jam!" But Lance himself seemed to be defying the import of those instructions. If danger lay in the canyon, if it seemed foolhardy to attempt to break the jam at this moment, there seemed no explanation of Strawn's action. Tom North and the others stared down at him in silence.

The fire on the lip of the canyon blazed up again as fresh fuel was piled on it, and as the reddish light strengthened, the men could see Lance moving over the logs as though studying the problem that the jam presented. Then, below the face of the jam, a match flared briefly and went out.

The watchers stirred uneasily, but said nothing. Maybe Lance had seen that lighted match and maybe not; but it was clear proof that somebody else was down there. A splinter of pitchy wood in the fire blazed up fiercely, lighting the whole scene.

"There!" exclaimed one of the Strawn crew, pointing. "There's somebody below the jam, leggin' it up a trail on the other side!"

Tom North saw the man, too, but said nothing. Suddenly the night wind, blowing up the gorge, was traced by the acrid taint of burning powder.

North jumped as though touched by a knife point. He ran to the edge of the gorge and, cupping his hands, bellowed down at Lance Strawn: "Fire-er-rr! *Fi-er-rr!*"

Lance heard, hesitated for a moment. Then he turned and came racing across the logs.

"Pile more wood on that blaze!" North yelled at the men tending the fire. "Give him light to see what he's doin'! By thunder, he's got to hustle if he makes it! *That's* why he told us to get off the jam! By the Horned Spoon, if they get him I'm goin' to hunt down every last one of 'em!"

"Hunt down who?" demanded one of the men.

"Cordeau's gang!" North snapped back at him. "Can't you see? That jam is loaded with powder. They figured to catch us when we tried to break it, but they'll be satisfied to get Lance alone!"

THE river men were silent with a sort of amazed horror. They were accustomed to battling rival drive crews, but such warfare did not include planned murder, as this seemed to be. Men had been killed in fights along the river, but always some

code of honor had been observed. It was one thing for a man to use his fists and his strength, and another to slay in this fashion.

Breathlessly the birlers watched Lance Strawn as he zigzagged across the mass of logs, while somewhere below, that burning fuse kept growing shorter. He was at the rock wall now, climbing swiftly along its broken ledges; then he was almost at the top when the ground shuttled crazily under their feet.

From the gorge came a muffled roar that was deeper and more ominous than the steady muttering of the angry river. There was a mushroomlike burst of reddish-yellow flame, then fragments of broken timber that rose buoyantly and seemed to hang suspended in midair for several seconds before falling again; a blinding sheet of spray that swept



out of the place and spattered their faces, and on the heels of it a gust of wind that seemed to shove them back as though by the thrust of a mighty hand.

But Lance Strawn's face was above the rim, and Tom North and

another man had him by the shoulders and were pulling him upward.

"You hurt, Lance?" demanded North anxiously. "Damn those murderin' skunks! This is the worst thing that ever happened on the river!"

Lance grunted and straightened up, shaking himself. His clothes were drenched by the water which the blast had lifted, and he was splotted with mud. After that last wild dash his breath came quickly. He shook his head.

"Say the word, Lance, and we'll start huntin' 'em down!" North cried. "Cordeau's camp ain't far from here. By daylight we'll have the whole nest of 'em wiped out, like a den of polecats!"

But Lance shook his head again. "No time for it," he declared. "We'll settle with Cordeau later. This is a break for us!" He pointed toward the gorge. "Get down there and get busy! *That blast loosened the jam!* The drive is going out!"

Tom North and the others saw that this was true. The song of the river in the rock-walled canyon had changed abruptly. Now it was speaking with a gathering roar. By chance or otherwise—maybe Cordeau's men had planned to drown what Strawn birlers the blast didn't kill—for the dynamite charge apparently had been placed with cunning understanding in the face of the jam. With that pressure of rising water behind the tightly packed mass of timber, the powder had loosened the key log, and now the others were feeding rapidly through a natural sluice.

"Come on, boys!" North yelled at his men. "We've got enough head-water to take the whole drive through. And if any of Cordeau's gang gets in the way, they'll never

see daylight in the swamp again!"

The birlers poured down into the gorge again, but North lingered for a moment with Lance Strawn.

"There'll be headwater enough to take the rest of the logs at Dead Man's Pool," he said. "If we can get word to Matt Breen, he can start his drive movin' before daylight. This'll be the first time a whole drive has been taken through Storm Rapids after dark," he added jubilantly.

LANCE nodded briefly. "Send one of your men up the pole trail to tell Matt that we're ready for the rest of the drive," he ordered. "You'll have no more trouble from here on. Pick up every stick you find along the river—all the rafts of hand loggers between here and Milltown. We're going to need money, and we owe it to these hand loggers to take down their timber just as the Strawn outfit has always done in the past!"

Tom North spat. "There'll likely be trouble," he pointed out. "If what happened at Dead Man's Pool is a sign, it means that Cordeau has set every hand logger on the river agin' you, Lance! Told 'em that you'd quit the Turnagain, and that he was takin' over, like as not!"

"Trouble?" Lance echoed. "You'll have a bellyful of it! But trouble never stopped a Strawn drive yet!"

North grinned. "Sounds like old times," he approved. "We'll drive every log on the river—at the regular price—whether these hand loggers string with Bull Cordeau or not. I'll handle this crew, Lance. Since Bart Legg pulled out, they'll back you. Reckon they already know that Legg must have suspected trouble here at Storm Rapids. That's why he didn't want to tackle the job at night. But as long as you're here to show 'em the way—"

"I'm not going to be here," Lance cut in. "I'm pulling out now for Milltown, and I'll be waiting for you there when you and Matt bring down the drive. I'm depending on you, North!"

The old straw boss opened his mouth as though to ask a question, but decided against it. It was not the way of a Strawn to tip his hand. North turned and followed his men down into the canyon, where the work of driving the logs was already under way.

Lance Strawn swung off into the darkness, headed down river. In the gloom of the woods it was barely possible to see one hand before his face, yet he instinctively held to the pole trail, his calked feet cunningly seeking out the worn surfaces of long and slender logs which were laid end to end through the brush, over gullies and mucky spots, a fast highway for a foot traveler who had the skill to follow it. Off to the right of him was the river, grumbling its way over its rocky bed, but there were no other sounds save the usual night noises of the wilderness.

At daybreak Lance came into the clearing of Dobson's Landing, and sized up the tiny camp.

The place was asleep. There was a small store, a half dozen cabins scattered about. Lina Jackson had said that the sheriff, Ben Salters, was here. Lance saw nothing of the lawman, nor did he see anybody else. What drew his attention was Old Dobson's fine raft of newly cut logs locked within the booms.

THE Strawn outfit had always driven Dobson's timber, even as it had the sticks of other hand loggers along the river; for all Lance knew to the contrary, the custom would continue. Yet even as North

had pointed out, Bull Cordeau might have worked on Dobson, just as he had done on old Pete Jackson, the newest hand logger on the river. Dobson might have agreed to let Cordeau handle his timber. And, if Lina Jackson was correct, the sheriff was here to back up any possible opposition.

Out in the river were many logs which had already come through Storm Rapids. Tom North and his crew probably would be along soon and, following them, Matt Breen with the after guard and the wanigan. Lance hesitated only a moment, then walked across the raft to the lower end of the boom. Calmly enough, he stooped and unfastened the chain which held the ends of the boom logs in place.

Immediately, as the boom swung open, the rafted logs behind it began feeding slowly into the current. Inside of a few minutes the entire raft was swimming downstream. Lance went on once more, still holding to the pole trail. From somewhere among the silence-shrouded buildings of Dobson's Landing, a dog barked a couple of times, then subsided. There was no further alarm.

Strawn grinned fleetingly. Old Dobson would be surprised when he awakened and found his logs already on the way to market, although without his permission. Sheriff Ben Salters would be surprised too.

Two miles farther on was another eddy. Lide Feek didn't have as many logs as Dobson, but the Strawn outfit had always driven them. Again Lance opened the booms, and the current did the rest.

So it was that Lance came at last to the slatternly little settlement of Milltown, the smoke of its industry pluming above it in the still morning air.

The sun was not yet high, but

the song of power-driven saws biting into green timber rose thin and complaining. A few persons moved about the streets. Doors of saloons that never closed opened and shut, and Mackinaw-clad river men reeled out. Lance licked his lips, realizing that he needed a drink himself. But he was not yet ready to make his appearance in Milltown.

He swung about and stared at the river. Already there were many logs in it, drifting down to be caught in the great boom which ran entirely across the stream above the power dam. Tom North and his crew were not yet in sight. On the heels of them, too, would come Matt Breen with the rest of the men and the wanigan.

Lance grinned fleetingly as he eyed the logs. Some of them probably were his own, although, naturally, he could not make out the brand on them from this distance; others belonged to hand loggers such as Pete Jackson, Old Dobson and Lide Feek. A dollar a thousand was what he would charge for driving their timber. Bull Cordeau was going to raise the dickens when he discovered that Lance Strawn had come back to the river in time to grab this tree harvest right from under his nose, especially since Cordeau had made the brag that the Strawn outfit was finished on the Turnagain. The money that Lance Strawn would get from this job would be vital in financing the venture which Cordeau never dreamed he would tackle—that gamble whose secret Lance Strawn still kept locked in the back of his mind, and which would mean win-all or lose-all for him.

IT was still too early for Lance to make his appearance in Milltown. He yawned, reminded at last that it had been many hours, days in fact,

since he had slept. When Tom North and Matt Breen arrived with the crew and the main drive—that would be proof to Milltown that there was still a Strawn on the river. Lance picked out a grassy spot in the lee of a clump of bushes alongside the river, stretched out luxuriously, and almost instantly was asleep—healthful, dreamless sleep, yet light, like that of a wild animal.

Lance stirred into wakefulness at last, with the midday sun beating down into his face. Yet it was not the warmth which awakened him; somebody was nudging him with the toe of a calked boot. He opened his eyes to see Matt Breen standing over him.

"Come alive, Lance!" said the river boss worriedly. "Tom North and the rest of the boys have the whole drive into the booms. When I found you hadn't showed up at Milltown I started back-trackin' you. Figured you'd might be sleepin' out. You'd better be stirrin' yourself now!

We've got the logs down, all right, and maybe we've won the first skirmish. But you'll have to crack this bigger nut yourself!"

"What's wrong?" demanded Lance. "All I wanted was to get this drive to Milltown—to prove to old Steve Drury, who owns the place, that Bull Cordeau hasn't got me licked! Drury agreed that if I could do it, he'd back me. Matt, *I'm going to log that stand of ghost trees?*"

Matt Breen stared at him in astonishment. "Log those ghost trees?" he asked unbelievably. "Why, that sort of thing has never been done before! Didn't figure old Steve Drury had gone crazy, too!"

Strawn said nothing, and Breen shook his head.

"Anyway," the river boss added, "it doesn't make much difference.

You ain't likely to log them ghost trees or any other, for a spell. Bart Legg was found dead on the pole trail this mornin', upstream from where you put him ashore. Neck was broken. Somebody had man-handled him!"

Lance Strawn straightened. "Bart Legg dead? But who could have killed him—and why?"

"The sheriff," replied Breen, "figures you're the lad to answer that! Think it over, son. The boys say they saw you throw Bart Legg off the raft. Then you follered him ashore. What happened after that they couldn't see, because it was plenty dark. Then you showed up at the Storm Rapids canyon!"

"But why," demanded Lance, "should I want to kill Bart Legg? I was through with him. I started him down the pole trail when he balked at breaking the jam!"

Breen nodded. "Sure," he agreed, "but the sheriff has been inquiren' among the boys, and he pried out what he figures is a reason. Bart Legg wasn't loyal, I reckon; more than likely he'd sold out to Bull Cordeau!" He shrugged. "Well, that's the way she sizes up!"

"Do you think, Matt," Lance asked quietly, "that I killed Bart Legg?"

THE older man hesitated. "Wouldn't be your style," he admitted. "Still, who else could have done it? Anyway," he added hastily, "I'm backin' you, Lance, and so are the rest of the boys. After what happened last night—Bull Cordeau tryin' to blow us up in that canyon—we ain't likely to worry much what happens to Cordeau's men!"

"Thanks!" replied Lance bleakly. "I didn't kill Legg, and I don't know who did. But maybe I'll find out!"

"What do you aim to do?" asked Breen. "Things are poppin' in Milltown. Sheriff's there, and so are these hand loggers whose timber we drove downstream. Even that girl of Pete Jackson's is on hand. They're all lookin' for you!"

Lance Strawn's eyes narrowed. Lina Jackson in Milltown? He remembered just then that she had appeared on the river bank right after Bart Legg had vanished in the brush. Legg, so Breen had said, had been found above the point where Strawn had sent him ashore; possibly the man was headed for Jackson's place, where the wanigan lay, to get his "turkey," or outfit. The girl had come upstream from Storm Rapids. She had talked with Lance Strawn; she had gone upstream after leaving him. Surely she could vouch for the fact that he hadn't followed Bart Legg ashore to kill him.

Suddenly he knew that Lina Jackson was a key figure in his defense, if he needed one, and it appeared that he did. But—what would her attitude be? The account between them had been squared; henceforth she was his enemy, if anything. This was her opportunity for revenge for the summary way he had disposed of matters at Dead Man's Pool by grabbing the gun from her father, breaking it, then seizing the Jackson logs. There was slim hope that she'd go out of her way to aid him now. More than likely she'd gloat over the fact that he was in trouble.

Suddenly Matt Breen touched Lance's arm. "Somebody's comin' down the trail!" he whispered.

But Lance had, likewise, heard the same sound—the rhythmic thud

of heavy-soled boots on the hard-packed earth. He did not move, nor did Breen, for they were off the trail and screened from the view of anybody on it by a clump of thick brush.

"Bull Cordeau!" breathed Matt Breen. "He's alone, too! Headin' for Milltown to stir up more trouble. Lance," urged the older man excitedly, "now's the time to square things with him—while he ain't got a crowd to back him up!"

Lance shook his head. He watched Cordeau pass by within a few feet of him; a big man with hulking shoulders, face bushy with black whiskers, his checkered and plaid clothes a clash of violent colors. The rival lumberman walked with shoulders stooped, eyes on the ground, and in a moment he was gone.

Breen looked at Strawn questioningly. "You're not likely to have another chance to get Bull Cordeau alone again," he reminded the other. "Don't seem possible you're skeered of him!"

"I'm not scared," replied Strawn quietly, "and I'll make my settlement when the time comes. This isn't the time!" He added, "I want you to follow Cordeau into town and somehow get word to the sheriff that the last you saw of me was up river. Draw him out of the place so I can get in touch with Drury!"

"You mean," demanded Matt, "that you're fixin' to go into Milltown while the danged place is b'ilin' over with everybody from the sheriff to Cordeau and the hand loggers lookin' for you?"

"That's just what I mean," said Lance. "Now get going. We've wasted enough time!"

Will Lance be able to prove his innocence? Who did kill Bart Legg? How will Bull Cordeau take his defeat? Another adventure-packed installment of GHOST-TREE GAMBLE appears in next week's issue of Western Story.



*Guns ruled Clear Creek,
yet old Bill Loren set out
to tame the mining camp
with nothing but a rope!*

SIESTA FOR MARSHAL SCARECROW

BY RAY NAFZIGER

BILL LOREN was licked. All seven years that drought had made his big cattle ranch on Dry Lake Flats a corner of Hades he had been licked—but never until now had he admitted it. About every waterhole lay dead cattle—piles of shrunken hide and bone. The few that still

lived were so thin they looked like the ghosts of the thousands that had died.

Bill Loren, gaunt, his face deep lined with seven years of struggle and worry, looked like a ghost himself. Seven years he had fought—using his last cent for feed, cutting

yucca stalks into fodder, tailing up cows, hauling water, burning spines off prickly pear. But never had he admitted himself beaten—until this moment when in a sudden fury he made up his mind to quit and ride out.

"I'm beat," he muttered as he threw his kak on old Whitey, who looked as gaunt and weary as his master. "Licked." Wearily, his face set and bleak, Bill swung into the saddle.

Pasqual Paz, the one remaining rider of the half dozen Loren had been forced to turn loose, squatted by the door of the adobe house where he lived with his fat wife, Maria. Pasqual himself was fat. He wasn't the kind to worry. He left that to his boss.

A broken spur rowel giggered old Whitey's side, and the white gelding moved toward the Mexican who sat smilingly inhaling the perfume of the chili Maria was cooking in the kitchen. Pasqual looked up as Loren halted, and his smile froze at his employer's set, bleak face.

"Pasqual, I'm pullin' out," said Bill. "Finished. Leaving, savvy? You and Maria head back for Mexico—where it rains. If you see anything you want around this outfit, take it with you. We're through here."

Pasqual, shocked by the bitterness on Loren's face, stared at his employer. "But, Don Beel," he protested, "soon the rain she come; the sky she open wide in wan beeg flood. An' the water she stan' everywhere like the wan beeg lake."

"Blast you, shut up!" bellowed Loren. "For seven years you've been sayin' she will rain soon. It'll never rain here again! I've fought this country thirty years, but at last I got enough sense to know it's licked me. I'm finished, savvy?"

He turned and rode away. Pasqual, sympathy in his soft coffee-brown eyes, got to his feet and called "Don Beel!" His boss was out of his head; gone loco. Loren did not answer, and Pasqual waddled after him on his short bowed legs. But when hearing the clump of boots, Loren turned, it was with so fierce a glare that the Mexican shrank back in fear, and returned to his house. Of a certainty Don Beel Loren had gone crazy in the head.

LATE that night Bill Loren, a few miles off the ranch he had abandoned, stopped at the camp of a freighter. Invited to supper, he ate a few mouthfuls and sat silently staring into the fire. The next night he stayed with a goat rancher. For three more days he rode, heading steadily for a distant shadowy mountain range, stopping where darkness found him, with settlers or freighters.

Bill Loren had only one idea in his head: to reach the high mountain range toward which he was traveling. There he would find running water, green trees and grass, be soaked again by rains. Sometimes he doubted he would ever live to reach those mountains, for old Whitey was getting weaker with long days of travel and poor feed. And when they did finally reach the mouth of a canyon in the range, it was bare of vegetation, and the stream bed in it was dry. Wearily Bill Loren rode up the canyon, Whitey often stumbling under him, until around a bend a long lake appeared, fed by a stream and fringed with green grass and brush.

Bill sat his saddle, his deep-sunk eyes gloating at the lake and grass and brush, and then, with a hoarse cry, he flung himself flat on the bank to bury his head and shoulders in the

water. Then, unsaddling Whitey, he sprawled out on a soft carpet of grass watching the horse jerk great mouthfuls of green stems.

It was late afternoon when he went on. Farther up the canyon, cedars and piñons gave way to pines, and the stream that ran underground at the canyon mouth became a broad, swift-flowing creek.

Where the canyon widened lay a little mining camp, a few winding streets of business places and log cabins, with stamp mills and shaft houses on the slopes above. Unlike most mining camps the nearby pines and spruces had not been all cut down; through their bushy crowns flowed a cool, moist breeze. And the stream, rushing over its rocky bed, raised music that for Bill Loren no great orchestra could have equaled.

Halting Whitey by the corner of a saloon, he sat his saddle, admiring a grassy little park by the stream.

He was aroused by a sudden burst of loud cursing that came from within the saloon, followed by the roar of a shot. A man dressed in rough miner's garb came backing out of the saloon, holding his hands high. Blood blotched one side of his shirt.

"Don't shoot me again," he pleaded as he staggered backward across the porch. Reaching the steps to the street, he fell down them to land on his back in the dust. There was, Bill observed, no sign of a gun or cartridge belt on the miner. Then Bill's eyes shifted to the slim, dandified tinhorn who came through the doorway, smoking gun in his right hand, his eyes fixed snakelike on the helpless miner.

"Don't shoot," begged the wounded man, but the dandy only laughed and cocked his six-shooter.

"Where'll you have the next bullet?" he asked. "I figure it makes you plumb out o' balance havin' a

lead slug on one side. I'll put one on the other side to even you up and teach you to accuse me of hidin' out a ace."

WITH a deliberate cruelty he raised the six-shooter to take aim. At his side, Bill Loren stood suddenly in his stirrups and, knotting his right hand, lashed out. His fist struck the slim tinhorn squarely in the temple.

The man toppled and fell off the side of the porch, but the fight was not all out of him. His hand still held the six-shooter, and now lying on his back, he began dazedly to raise the ugly snout of his gun toward the rancher.

Loren spurred Whitey, who, creaking joints or no, was without peer as a quick-starting cow pony. Before Whitey's hoofs the tinhorn gambledropped the gun and rolled away with a yell of terror, putting up his arms to protect his head.

Halting Whitey above the fellow, Loren took down his rope. The gambler, recovering from his panic, thought of the gun and scrambled desperately on all fours to reach it. Behind him the gaunt rancher slapped the doubled rope down, whacking the tinhorn in the rump. The man let out a yell as if shot and, getting to his feet, fled toward the porch and the door beyond.

He never reached it. As he took his final leap, the rope loop dropped and, tightening about his shoulders, jerked him from his feet. With Whitey headed up street on a trot, the man was dragged through dust and small rocks, now on his back, now on his belly, and letting out a series of scared yelps. The yells stopped when his head struck the stump of a little tree.

Bill halted then and looked down at his captive, lying in the dust, his

fine white shirt and frock coat ripped and soiled. One trouser leg had caught on a nail in the porch floor and was slit down to the fancy boots. Blood streamed from the man's nose and from a badly scraped cheek.

Down street men were carrying the wounded miner into a nearby doctor's office. About Loren a crowd hastily gathered, grinning down at the tinhorn who lay in front of a solid door of a small square rock house with barred windows.

"Jail's the right place for him, stranger," laughed a broad-faced, beefy-shouldered fellow, stepping up to unlock the steel door of the rock building. Then he took off Loren's rope and, rolling the unconscious gambler inside, locked the door again.

After that the big man, like the others, looked the rider over curiously. What they saw was a ragged, oldish scarecrow rancher on a bony-hipped mount whose ribs showed under his lusterless gray hide. The rider, with his gnarled hands folded on the saddlehorn, his white-streaked mustache so long and heavy that it seemed to weigh the head down, looked even gaunter than the horse.

"My name's Nick Walner," said the big fellow. "I buy and sell mining claims here. That was a mighty brave thing you done. The man you drug up here was Dandy Jim, counted the fastest gunman and worst killer in camp. We'll send for the sheriff at the county seat to come for him. That shooting of Tom Burge will put Dandy Jim where he won't be wearing a gun. As it happens, we ain't got no marshal here now to take care of hombres like him. Last marshal we had died a week ago of lead poisoning. Several others we hired got scared and left on a lope. You got guts, stranger. I'm sort of the mayor here. Want to put

on a marshal star and keep order for us?"

"Me be marshal?" said Bill in surprise. "I never had no experience with that kind o' job."

Beefy Nick Walner looked at him with shrewd, calculating little eyes. "Never too late to git experience," he said and winked broadly at the crowd. "We got a tough town here that needs quietin' down. You a good shot?"

"I've killed a few coyotes in my life," said Loren, and he meant literally the four-legged kind. He breathed in the fresh, cool air flowing down the canyon and listened to the song of the creek. It would be mighty fine to be able to stay here. And, by George, he was going to stay!

"I'll take the job," he said suddenly. "I got nothing to lose. I stayed seven years with something a dang sight worse than anything else could be."

"Pays a hundred a month," said Walner briskly, and brought out a marshal's badge from a pocket.

Bill took the star and pinned it carelessly on his shirt. "What do I do?" he inquired.

"Do?" repeated Walner ironically, while a laugh went up from the crowd. "Job's a cinch. All you got to do is keep order in camp. Wrangle gunmen like Dandy Jim into jail when they go into action. But you'll need a gun. You can have Dandy Jim's. Chink's got a restaurant where you can eat, and he's got sleepin' rooms above."

He waved a hand toward a restaurant across the street, which reminded Loren suddenly that he was hungry. He hadn't been hungry for a long time, but mountain air brought back a man's appetite. He headed Whitey across the street.

"He won't live long enough to collect any pay," observed Walner behind the new marshal's back. "Just an old scarecrow, too ignorant to realize what he's up against. But he'll hand us a few laughs while he lasts."

"Which won't be long," predicted some man in the crowd.

Bill pulled off Whitey's saddle and got the horse a half bucket of oats from a feed barn. Then, in the Chinese restaurant, he ordered a T-bone steak. It came, thick and juicy, off a yearling fattened on mountain grass. Bill cleaned it up and relaxed with a sigh. He had forgotten the star on his chest. It wasn't important. What was important was the cheerful song of the stream outside the restaurant windows, and the cool freshness of the canyon.

Yawning widely, Bill saddled Whitey and rode along the street, stepping off to look into the various saloons and gambling places. There were grins and laughter at the new marshal, but he ignored them. Even when he heard men calling him "Marshall Scarecrow," at first behind his back, and then to his face, he said nothing. Dandy Jim's gun was given him, but when he went to see how Tom Burge was getting along, he gave the wounded miner the gun as a souvenir.

The laughter redoubled when it was learned that the new marshal refused to wear a gun. Bets were offered that he wouldn't last three days, but there were no takers.

There was no trouble in camp that night, and Marshal Bill Loren retired early to his room above the Chinese restaurant. A big green pine bough stretched across one of his windows, and he could have spit into the creek, it was so close. Lulled by the stream, he slept soundly for

the first time in long years, untroubled hours of solid slumber.

Whitey he had hobbled out back where the horse could crop grass and drink out of the creek when he was thirsty. Long past sunrise Bill got up, fed Whitey more oats, and had another T-bone at the Chinaman's. Then he saddled up and rode along the main street and back. The town was quiet. The wounded Tom Burge had been taken to the nearest railroad by his brother; he had a chance of living, but it meant months in a hospital.

Returning from his morning rounds, the new marshal pulled Whitey's shoes and, sitting with his back to a tree watching the horse graze along the creek, fell asleep. He had lost a lot of sleep in those seven years of drought.

IN the afternoon the sheriff arrived to get Dandy Jim and to swear Loren in as deputy sheriff, giving him another badge, which Bill pinned beside the marshal star. That evening there was a couple of drunken fist fights, each of which the new marshal ended by throwing his rope through doorways and giving the word to Whitey, who snaked the battlers out together and dragged them up the street to jail. The men in the town watched with roars of laughter. Nick Walner laughed until the tears rolled down his beefy face.

"He won't last long, but he's sure funny," Nick stated.

Everyone agreed. Roping prisoners and taking them to jail was novel and entertaining, but it couldn't last—not in Clear Creek mining camp. Sooner or later an explosion was due to blow Marshal Scarecrow into kingdom come.

The explosion came the next night in the Golden Horn, owned by Hon-

est John McCaslin. Three hardcase tinhorns had ridden into camp that day to win over a thousand dollars off McCaslin's faro layout before Honest John discovered that his faro banker was in cahoots with the strangers. He had jumped the faro dealer, and the three tinhorns had flashed guns. When the battle ended, three men—the crooked dealer, Honest John and one of his bartenders—lay on the floor dead, and the three tinhorns and their fast guns were left in command of the place. Coolly holding the dealers and patrons in the place under their .45s, they slowly retreated to the back door, beyond which they had their horses tied.

Someone ran to carry the news to Marshal Scarecrow. He had heard the shots and was already in Whitey's saddle, taking down his coil of hard rope. Told the situation, he nodded and giggled Whitey into a lope. A friendly saloonkeeper ran across to give him a sawed-off shotgun, but the marshal had already disappeared.

Bill Loren was riding along the creek behind the row of buildings that faced the main street. The creek certainly made better music than the dance-hall pianos, he was thinking to himself. People who had never ranched on Dry Lake Flats couldn't realize what a blessing they had in a stream of running water.

The three tinhorns, still taking their time, were mounting in back of the Golden Horn. Just as they started off, a tremendous loop sailed out from behind a willow clump. It was so big that it fell over the neck of one horse in addition to all three of the men.

Old Whitey promptly looped across the creek, tightening the loop with a yank and drawing the three riders and one horse swiftly together. Guns

exploded and curses sounded, just before the horse and the three men were jerked in a struggling pile into the water. After that the guns abruptly fell silent.

When the mess was untangled, it was found the horse had been shot by one of the tinhorns, crushing his rider under him as he fell and drowning the man. Another tinhorn had his neck broken. The third, all but choked to death, woke up in the little rock jail.

After that the ridiculing laughter at Marshal Scarecrow became subdued. He was no longer a joke. No gunman had a chance for glory by showing a faster draw than the unarmed marshal, and plenty miners were heard to declare that any hombre using a gun on Bill Loren would be hanged from a pine limb immediately afterward.

The laughter died altogether when two road agents wanted for a series of stage robberies rode into camp and were roped from their saddles by an old geezer who had quietly ridden up alongside of them on a white horse. One bandit got a gun loose and sent a bullet that grazed Whitey's rump. For that Marshal Scarecrow gave the two a really rough ride to jail.

A dozen of the worst of the potential killers quietly left. It wasn't altogether the threat of the old rancher-marshal. The careless attitude of the town over violence had been changed by the calm courage of a man who kept the peace without the backing of gunpowder and lead.

IN the decent men in camp—Miners, honest saloonkeepers, merchants—who had been cowed by gunmen, grew a real liking and respect for Marshal Scarecrow. If he was an odd sort of bird, that was his business. And undoubtedly he was

queer. All he seemed to care about was sleeping or sitting out under the trees by the creek, often pulling off his boots to dabble his feet in the cold water. Regularly he made his rounds on Whitey, dismounting to drop into possible trouble spots for a few minutes. That chore over, he always retired to the creek bank to watch old Whitey stowing away grass that turned to fat in hollows under his projecting bones and ribs.

Dozing on a grassy bed, with the green brush over him, Bill occasionally thought of Pasqual and Maria. He ought to send for them. Maria could get a lot of laundry work and Pasqual could lie in the shade and enjoy the cool breeze here, too. But he kept putting off writing to them. As a matter of fact, Pasqual couldn't read anyway. And anyway the couple had likely gone back to Mexico.

The months slipped by. Sometimes Bill thought about the ranch he had left, but not often; it hurt him to think of those nightmarish seven years. He was satisfied here, just living along, eating, sleeping, trading friendly talk, taking a hand at poker occasionally.

An ideal existence Bill Loren would call it, until Nick Walner called on him in his hotel room one night.

"Tom Burge and his brother," said the dealer in mines and claims, "are due back tomorrow."

"That's good," Bill said heartily. He'd be glad to see the man whose life he had saved the first day he'd been in Clear Creek.

Walner dropped his voice, although the bedroom door was shut. "Marshal, I want you to lock those two up in jail for a couple days. Arrest 'em as soon as they arrive."

"What for?" Loren asked in surprise. "They ain't done a thing."

"I'll tend to that—by riggin' it up so's they'll get in a fight," Walner promised. "I want 'em kept in jail two days. It's a favor I'm askin' you, and that ought to be all you need know. You ain't forgot I give you this job?"

Bill studied Nick Walner and discovered that, although he hadn't thought about it, he had never liked the man.

"This must mean money to you," he said shrewdly. "What do I get out of it?"

"The two Burges," explained Walner, "got some gold claims down the canyon they didn't finish this year's assessment work on 'fore Tom got shot and his brother took him out to a hospital. Now they got only two days left for them assessments, and several of us plan to file on those claims. We want the Burges thrown in jail so they won't be able to arrange to have that work done in time, savvy? I'll make it worth your while. After we get those claims I'll give you a tenth of my interest. What do you say?"

BILL LOREN straightened. "I say you're a dirty crook," he declared calmly.

"A crook!" growled Walner. "Why, you old—" He got hold of himself. "You listen to me. We sneaked some samples of those Burge claims out for assay, an' they're hog rich. A share in those mines will provide for your old age. If you don't get yourself a stake before long, you old coot, you'll be swamping out a saloon for your meals and sleeping on the bar."

Bill Loren blazed up at that. "Old, am I?" he said hotly. "Not too old to bust you in two, you polecat."

Walner's hand fell to his gun. "Don't try it, Marshal Scarecrow. You been lucky in your fights here—

mighty lucky. But you go agin' me and it'll be one time when you won't be able to throw any ropes to save yourself."

"Speakin' of ropes," said Bill Loren, "you want to be careful, Nick, or you'll find yourself danglin' at the end of one, with yore boots swung off the ground. Now git out. I got to git my sleep."

He got up next morning and went down to breakfast. In the restaurant he saw Tom Burge and his brother. Tom looked pale from his hospital stay, but he was back on his feet. Bill shook hands with the two men and sat at their table. The Burges looked downcast.

"What's up?" Bill asked. "Trouble?"

Tom nodded. "When we came in last night we found Walner and a couple of gambler partners of his had hired a bunch of gunmen and jumped out claim down the canyon. We hustled over to see the sheriff, and he said he couldn't do anything. Told us to go git a injunction. We've only got today and tomorrow to finish the assessment work on our claims—a'most a hundred dollars' worth. Walner's crowd aims to keep us from finishin' it and filin' as soon as our time is expired. We're sunk. We figured to come in and get thirty or forty friends to work those two days to make up the work. But we can't get in on the claims now to do any labor."

"I'll see what I kin do," said Bill Loren.

The Burges looked startled. "But you can't go down and rope all those birds out of there," Tom protested. "Walner and his pals must have fifteen men camped below. They even got dirt barricades thrown up."

"Fifteen, hey?" said Bill. "A reg'lar army."

"And all fortified up so the devil

himself couldn't git at 'em," said Tom. "You forget it. It would take forty men to git them out o' there. We can't afford to hire no gunmen, and we wouldn't ask our friends to risk their lives for us."

The marshal went into a deep study, with the murmur of the creek outside the window in his ears. Yes-sir, a mighty big blessing—water. People who hadn't ranched on Dry Lake Flats couldn't realize what a blessing it was.

SADDLING Whitey, who was so fat that he tried a few playful bucks to show he had his old ginger back, the marshal went down creek with the two Burges, climbing the canyon slope back of their claims for a look-see. They lay practically in a little branch of Clear Creek, on the other side of Clear Creek Canyon. The stream was dry now, but when it ran it emptied into Clear Creek a half mile below the claims. For some distance above the claims, the two streams lay parallel, separated only by a high bank of stone and dirt. From the slope they could look down on Walner and his gunman force, camped in the dry stream bed with tents to sleep in and guards posted behind dirt embankments.

"I think I got it," Bill Loren said suddenly. "Don't worry; we'll have those birds out of there tomorrow. And you'll have your assessment work done too. That creek past your claims is dry most of the year, ain't it? And you need water to develop those claims, don't you? And any work you'd do to bring running water to your claims would count as assessment work?"

"Sure it would," said Tom promptly. "But how we going to get close enough to those claims to develop any water?"

"Those friends of yours in camp,"

said Bill, "you get 'em all ready to work tonight and make 'em promise to keep it quiet."

The two Burges looked at Loren as if he were crazy, but they had a hunch the old fellow knew what he was doing. Although he really didn't look old any more. Like Whitey, he had lost his gaunt look and put on fat which had rubbed out the deep lines of worry. Marshal Scarecrow, in short, was no longer a scarecrow. He looked twenty years younger than when he had arrived in town.

That night a queer sort of work went on in the canyon below the town. Tom Burge and one crew of friends were digging a wide, deep trench through the high bank lying between Clear Creek and the dry branch above the Burge claims. Another crew of men helped Tom Burge's brother make a temporary dam of woven wire and brush across Clear Creek, just below the trench.

The Burges had chuckled when they reported for work with forty miner friends and the marshal had told them his plan.

"I git you," said Tom. "We'll be developin' water for our claims and finishin' our assessment work?"

"You'll be developin' water for Nick Walner, too," said Bill Loren. "Nick and his men might be, thirsty along in the morning."

The new channel, all except a thin block of earth left at the dry creek end, was completed an hour before dawn. The wire-and-brush dam had been placed across Clear Creek, and the backed-up water was filling the cut level with the top of the banks. They waited until dawn when the last block of earth was dug out, letting a wall of water ten feet high sweep into the dry creek bed to go boiling on down toward the Walner gunmen camp.

It was as if a fair-sized dam had broken, releasing a small reservoir of water. The wave that went racing down on the tents of the Walner gunman army in the creek bottom knocked the canvas shelters over and poured tons of water on the men that were still sleeping inside.

Waking, the Walner gunnies found themselves battling for their lives in a raging torrent. There was no time for dressing or to grab for guns. Cursing, splashing furiously, they seized limbs of trees and brush to draw themselves to the bank, where they were rounded up promptly by the waiting miners. The capture of the unarmed, half-drowned men was easy, but among them the Burges looked in vain for Nick Walner.

IT was known that Walner had been in the camp. One of the men who had been on guard gave the explanation. Nick had risen before daylight to descend into the Burges' chief claim to take ore samples from a drift.

"But that shaft was right in the creek bed!" exclaimed Tom. "The flood poured right over it. A man in that drift below wouldn't have a chance of getting out. Nick's in there drowned and we can't even get the body until the shaft has been pumped out."

Marshal Bill Loren wagged his head at this. "I tell you what," he commented, "if I was you boys, and Nick was down there stealin' my ore samples, I'd just let him keep 'em."

Booting the half-dressed gunmen on their way and warning them to keep traveling out of the country, the Burges, the marshal and the miners went back to town, where, after a few rounds of drinks to celebrate the victory, Bill Loren went to

eat his usual hearty breakfast. Coming out, he sighed with satisfaction, lighted a cigar, and squatted against a wall, smoking and watching old Whitey crop grass.

Whitey suddenly whickered as a horse and rider came up the canyon, and Bill got to his feet, staring intently. He had a hard time to identify Pasqual Paz—a sadly changed Pasqual, thin as a corral rail, with his brown face weary and lined and gloomy.

Bill Loren let out a glad whoop as greeting. "But, amigo, what's happened to you?" he demanded solicitously. "You don't look like you et for a while. I reckon times been mighty tough with you since you left the ranch. Jobs mighty scarce, hey? Well, don't worry; I can get you a good job here in camp."

Pasqual only glared at his former boss. "Jobs!" he burst out indignantly. "I got jobs, Don Beel. Too much damn jobs. You leesen to me. Two week after you go, the rain she come. The grass she grow tall, and your cows they get fat. And they now have calfs—lots of calfs. All day, a'most all night, I ride to brand them calfs so rustlers don't steal. I got no time to eat; I got time only to work and to worry. When I find where you are, I ride right over to breeng you back. And w'at do I find? You are loafing in shade, with beeg seegar."

"What's that?" asked Bill unbelievably. By now his ranch was only a nightmare dream of drought, starving cows, gaunt horses, and carcasses piling up by the dry water-holes. "I got some cows left, you say? And it rained?"

"Rain! Hah!" Pasqual exploded. "It ain't done notheeng only but rain. There is water all over. So

wet it is, the wil' ducks they theenk the ranch she is joos' wan beeg lake. Me and Maria, we can not sleep for the 'quack-quack' they make. But me I got no time to sleep; I got to ride; I got to brand. And you, Don Beel, you and Whitey, you loaf here in shade and eat grass and smoke seegar! You come—ri' now!"

As if moving in a trance, Bill Loren got to his feet, threw away his cigar, and climbed into Whitey's saddle. The men who were in the street celebrating the defeat of Nick Walner crowded about curiously.

Bill Loren looked down at them. "I guess it's good-by, boys," he said, still dazed by the news that Pasqual had brought. He unpinned the two badges and tossed them to the crowd.

"You're not leaving?" protested Tom Burge. "We're giving you a share in our claims, marshal, for saving them for us. We'll be producing ore there inside a couple of months. You'll be rich."

"I'd like to stay," said Bill regretfully, looking at the trees and the creek. "Yessir, I'd like to stay," he went on, "not because you'd give me a share in those mines, but because I like it here. I caught up on a lot of sleep, and me and Whitey shore fattened up. Yessir, it was fine here, nothin' to worry about and a job with nothin' to do but eat and sleep. It's been a wonderful rest."

"Wait!" called a saloonkeeper. "Did you say a rest, marshal? You call cleaning up this tough town a rest?"

"Why, shore," said Bill Loren, surprised. "You never ranched out on Dry Lake Flats in a drought, feller, or you'd know just how much of a rest this here job has been."

He sighed and turned Whitey down the canyon, following meekly after Pasqual.

RANGE SAVVY

by CARL RAHT

Range branding is still carried on in the badlands and mountainous section of the West where ranch roundup work is most arduous. Any time the range rider comes upon a cow of his brand with



a newborn calf, he ropes the little animal, builds himself a fire and slaps on the owner's brand then and there. Later, if the calf is missed in the roundup, there still can be no dispute over ownership, and it is less likely that cattle thieves will get in their work, as might happen in the case of an unbranded calf which has been weaned from the mother cow.

There are Spaniards who cannot speak Spanish. Sounds like a paradox, but the writer ran into the interesting fact some years ago while employed as a Spanish interpreter when the Federal government



was inspecting and dipping a half million sheep in northern Nevada, near the Idaho boundary line.

The sheep were in charge of three hundred herders who were brought over from Spain. Naturally they spoke no English. But neither could they speak Spanish! They were Basques from the high province near the Pyrenees dividing Spain from France. They spoke only Basco, a language as foreign to Spanish as Chinese.

All wild things seem to have an instinct which warns them of danger long before we more intelligent human beings are aware of it. A short time ago a family of eagles, which for many years



had made a home atop Eagle Nest Rock, a landmark of the Petrified National Monument in northern Arizona, suddenly abandoned their nest. Park authorities, noting the eagles' behavior, expressed belief that the great rock was doomed. Sure enough an unusually strong wind recently swayed the formation a fraction of an inch, enough to overbalance the 30-foot rock, and it toppled, crashing into innumerable pieces. Instinct had warned the eagles the rock was no longer stable and they had acted accordingly.

Considering the fact that the Pony Express carriers faced constant danger from savage Indians and desperadoes of the Southwest, along every mile of their lonely ride across a wilderness, it is



astonishing to note that the charge for carrying a letter from the Missouri River to Denver, in ten days, was only ten cents. Yet the public was slow to avail itself of this reasonable service. The line was financially a failure and was sold in 1861 to Wells Fargo Express Co.

Mr. Raht will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

MUTTON MASSACRE

BY S. OMAR BARKER

WHENEVER one cowboy quits offering merely to blister another with a branding iron, and threatens to say it with six-guns instead, then it's time somebody threw 'em into separate pastures. Which is what ol' Tootin' Tom Tuttle, ramrod of the RU Lazy 2, up and done. Sent Sweet-bunch to hold down the line-camp boar's nest on Gitaway Gulch, and kept ol' Long-spur here at the ranch, warning him that if he even strayed within gunshot of Gitaway Gulch, Tootin' Tom personal would plow him up and plant pertaters on him. Not that Tootin' Tom was such a rootin'-tootin'-two-gun-shootin' sort of a feller. Fact is, he was only called Tootin' Tom from the musical way he blowed his nose.

Sweet-bunch taken the boss' order in right good part. At least it'd give him a chance to resume practice of the art of blow, suck and quaver, otherwise knowed as harmonica playing.

Of course neither ol' Tootin' Tom nor nobody else foreseen such a terrible outcome to pore Sweet-bunch's exile.

This feudin' between Long-spur and Sweet-bunch had commenced about a month before, first time they ever seen each other. Ol' Tootin' Tom had found Sweet-bunch chawing a piece of hay at the Beautiful Rose Livery Stable in Las Flores, hired him on and brung him right on out. The new hand was layin' in the bunkhouse palpatatin' his lip piano when Long-spur and the rest of us RU Lazy 2 hands dusted in off the day's ride. The tune was "Sweet Bunch of Daisies," and this new-

comer had just sucked sour where he should've blowed sweet on "brought from the dell," when ol' Long-spur stepped in the door.

"Hey, Johnny boy!" Long-spur snaps out like a well-popped bull-whip. "You cain't play that tune in here!"

"Cain't play it outdoors, neither—not to speak of," responds the new hand, mild as milk on mush, "but I don't know of nothin' to keep me from tryin'."

Long-spur had only been with us a coupla months his ownself, but the way he could rope, ride and wrastle the livestock, we already rated him a ring-tailed ranny from who ripped the rawhide. If he had asked one of us, polite like that, to quit playing the mouth harp, we would've thunk twice before sassin' him. But of course this taffy-haired, round-eyed, meek-lookin' little newcomer didn't know Long-spur Davis from Adam. Calm as a claw hammer, he started suck-blow-suckin' again.

JOHNNY boy"—Long-spur starts slowly toward him, his black eyes narrowed down to little flat peep holes—"maybe you didn't hear me: I said lay off that mouth harp!"

"Ain't layin' on it, Mr. Twitchell. Besides, my name ain't Johnny, it's—"

"Mine ain't Twitchell, neither!" Long-spur says it in the same tone of voice that a wolf curls his lip at a coyote trying to snatch meat from his kill. "It's Davis, an'—"

"Please to meetchuh, Mr. Davis. An' I hope you ain't got your tail in a knot over me miscallin' your name.

Whether that goat was a
him or a her, it was shore
dynamite when it went
on a rampage.



Y'see, I jest call ever'body Mr. Twitchell till I fine out what their right name is. What I always say, you never know when a man's name *might* be Twitchell, so you call him Mr. Twitchell, an' if it turns out his name *is* Twitchell, then he's liable to be mighty pleased that you called him Mr. Twitchell in the first place."

"Johnny boy," busts in Long-spur Davis, brittle as bobwire on a frosty morning. "The subject of this meetin' was mouth harps, of which there ain't goin' to be none played in this bunkhouse while I'm livin' here! 'Specially that song you was workin' up such a suction over jest now— you savvy!"

"You mean 'Sweet Bunch'? Say, that there's sure a purty tune, Mr. Twitch—I mean Mr. Davis! Only where it goes 'brought from the dell', I never can remember whether you blow or suck. Listen!"

He starts to show what he means but Long-spur Davis has evidently had all the beatin' around the bush he cares for. He yanks the spit organ right out of the new hand's face, starts to poke it in the bulge-bellied stove, but there ain't no fire, so he tucks it into the inside pocket of his vest instead.

"I'll jest keep this for you, Johnny boy, till you learn who's the he-wolf around here!" he says.

For a jiffy it looked like the new hand might be aiming to make a declaration of war on it, the way his round blue eyes turned toward the pearl handle sticking out of a six-gun scabbard hung at the head of his bunk. But then he shrugged.

"All right," he sighs. "But I'm afraid I ain't goin' to like you, Mr. Twitch—I mean Mr. Davis."

"Sure you will," laughs Long-spur. "As long as nobody don't play no mouth harp in my hearin', especially that tune I mentioned, I'm as tame as a pet rabbit in a carrot patch. An' lay off that 'mister' stuff. Jest call me Long-spur, Johnny boy, an' we'll git along."

"All right, Mr. Twitch—I mean Long-spur. An' I hope you won't mind my tellin' you, but my name ain't Johnny boy. It's Charlie—Charlie Perry, frum—"

"Charlie?" snorts Long-spur, bristling his hackles all over agāin. "I wouldn't put that name to a skunk! I don't know which I hate worst, that name, 'Sweet Bunch of Daisies' on a mouth harp, or mutton stew!"

"By golly, Mr. Twi—I mean Long-spur!" the new hand throws another longing look toward the pearl handle stickin' out of his gun holster, jest out of his reach. "Jest because you don't like the sound of my name, you can't—"

"Maybe we better call him 'Perry,'" suggests Tootin' Tom Tuttle, who sure does like to keep peace in the RU Lazy 2 family.

"Personally," drawls Slim McGuire, like he was maybe kind o' disgusted at the new hand's lack of fight and fizz, "I'm aimin' to call him 'Sweet-bunch.'"

So that was the name that stuck, though personally I had been kind o' toying with "Twitch"—short for "Mr. Twitchell"—till Slim beat me.

AT supper this Charlie—I mean Sweet-bunch—Perry kept his mouth shut except to let in the chuck. When we come to the prunes, it was noticed that he did not spit out the seeds. After a while, when his jaw begun to bulge with 'em, he turned to ol' Long-spur, looking as anxious as them pictures of the ostrich that tried to swaller a sponge.

"Long-spur," he inquires, having some difficulty getting words out, "would you have any objections if I was to spit out one or two of these here prune seeds?"

All the answer ol' Long-spur give him was a snort, which Sweet-bunch must've took to mean O. K., for purty soon he began easin' 'em out, one at a time.

After supper, whilst the rest of us flipped the pasteboards in a few rounds of seven-up, Sweet-bunch got out the Sea-hoss & Sawbuck Catty-log.

"Long-spur," he inquires, "would you have any objections if I was to kind o' amuse myself mullin' over the mouth-harp page in this here cattylog?"

"Jest so you don't order you none of 'em, Johnny boy!" grunts ol' Long-spur.

"Why, Long-spur," protests Sweet-bunch, meek as a mud hen, "can't you trust me?"

Long-spur never give no opinion whether he could or not, but after-whiles when Sweet-bunch kind o' forgot himself and started humming "Sweet Bunch of Daisies" under his breath, all it took was one hard look to shut him up as tight as a book.

During one of Long-spur's deals, Sweet-bunch come over and touched him on the shoulder, timid as a titmouse.

"Seems like my nose— Would you

rather I'd snuffle or come right out an' blow it?"

This time Long-spur pretended not to hear him, but when ol' Shirt-tail Shatto let out a sound somewhat resembling a snicker, the look ol' Long-spur give *him* would've shriveled the horns off a Texas steer.

That night, along about the feeble hour of two a. m. I was dreaming me a dream that one of them good-lookin' gal pictures in the cattylog had come to life and was setting beside me on a rail fence back in Arkin-saw curryin' a hog with one hand an' playin' "Sweet Bunch of Daisies" on a French harp with the other, an' when I reached over to give her a hug, I skun my knuckles against the wall, and woke up to find both the gal and the hog was gone—but not the music. Sounded like it come from under Sweet-bunch's soogans. Evidently my thrashing around woke ol' Long-spur up and he heard it too.

"Waugh!" he snorts, lights a lamp and goes barefooting over to Sweet-bunch's bunk in his long-handled unawares.

"Gimme that spit organ, Johnny boy!" he says.

"Why . . . why you done taken it, Mr. Twitch—I mean Long-spur!" Sweet-bunch whimpers. "Surely you ain't accusin' me of havin' another un hid out, are you?"

"I ain't accusin' you of playin' tunes on your toe nails!" grunts Long-spur, and proceeds to haul him out of bed while he turns Sweet-bunch's bunk, warbag and everything else, inside out huntin' for that mouth harp. But he don't find it.

"You must've been dreamin', Long-spur," I says. "I know I was—about a gal an' a hog."

"Was her name Mrs. Twitchell?" inquires Shirt-tail Shatto.

Long-spur blows out the lamp,

crawls back in bed and we all roll over to see how much more snooze we can seize before sunup.

SO that's the way it went from there on out: Ol' Long-spur bullying Sweet-bunch every chance he got, and Sweet-bunch takin' it as meek as a shorn sheep, to where he wouldn't even risk sneezing without Long-spur's O. K. But every two or three nights, along about the middle, ol' Long-spur would roar out of bed claiming he'd heard Sweet-bunch playing that tune he didn't like. Only no matter how often he hunted through Sweet-bunch's bed and belongings, he never could find no harp. And though you could sometimes see Sweet-bunch looking anxiously toward that fancy six-gun butt sticking out of his holster like he wisht he had the nerve to grab for it, still he never done it.

Both of 'em was mighty salty hands on cow work, and the way their loops would heel up a calf was plumb pretty.

"Them too yoodlums must've learned ropin' at the same school," was Tootin' Tom's comment. "Lookit how they got the same back-handed twist to yank up the slack."

"Arizona style," observes Slim Maguire. "Learnt in the roughs."

"I wisht ol' Long-spur would let Sweet-bunch play the mouth organ," sighs old Shirt-tail Shatto, who is purt' near sixty and still no brighter than the law allows. "That 'Sweet Bunch of Pansies' is sure a purty tune."

"'Daisies,' " I correct him.

"Pansies is jest as purty," he says. "I wisht I knowed how come ol' Long-spur don't like it."

"Maybe you better ask him," drawls Slim Maguire. "I expect he'd as soon shoot you as anybody."

"Maybe that's what ails him!"

exclaims Shirt-tail. "Maybe wunst upon a time he had a fav'rite little brother an' accidentally shot him an' when they buried him they put a sweet bunch of pansies on his grave, an' ever since he jest can't bear to—"

"Daisies, doggone!" I busts in. "Besides, ring-tailed wowsers like ol' Long-spur don't come but one to the litter."

"Huh? You mean he never had no little brother?" Shirt-tail scratches his head a minute over that one, then busts out with another one of what Slim Maguire calls his brain crackers: "By gollies, boys, I got it! This feller he accidently kills an' they put pans—I mean daisies—on his grave. You know who I bet it was? I betcha it was this Mr. Twitchell they been talkin' about!"

"Yeah, probly," grins Slim Maguire. "Look a-comin'!"

We looked and yonder come Sweet-bunch chousing an old calico nanny goat ahead of him on his lass rope. As he come on toward where us four was heel-squatting outside the corral, you could see he looked as pleased as a polecat that's just perfumed a pup.

"What you think of 'er, boys?" he inquires gayly, yanking the nanny up to give us a good view. "For only two dollars! Ain't she a dilly?"

"Why, as goats go," says ol' Toot-in' Tom, looking kind o' puzzled, "she seems to run about avvidge. But you can't keep no pet nanny goats around here. This's a—"

"Pet my eye!" busts in Sweet-bunch. "We're goin' to eat her. Good ol' mutton stew. Don't it make your mouths drip jest to think of it?"

WELL, I didn't notice no mouths drippin', but I did notice ol' Long-spur Davis come riding around the corral just in time to hear Sweet-

bunch's lip-licking remarks. Long-spur was ridin' a young bronc that he had been out schoolin' under about its fourth saddle. The colt kind o' throwed up his head at sight of the nanny goat, but Long-spur held a tight rein on him and spurred him right on past it within glarin' distance of Sweet-bunch.

"Mutton stew!" he snorts. "Dang it, I'd rather eat a skunk with the hair on!"

"Now look here, Long-spur!" says Sweet-bunch with somewhat more dander than usual. "Mutton stew don't smell like skunk an' you dang well know it! In fact it's the most dang appetizin' smell that—"

"To me," busts in Long-spur, narrowing down them black eyes of his, "mutton smells like a mouth harp sounds. An' if you're figgerin' on stinkin' up the cook shack by cookin' up the carcass of this here short-tailed shepherder bait, you jest as well—"

"I dang tootin' am!" whinnes Sweet-bunch. "I been lettin' you whamdoozle me out o' practicin' my mouth harp because I ain't no hand to hunt trouble, but when I get a hanker for mutton stew, I ain't goin' to let no man alive—"

"Ain't, huh?" This time Long-spur sure 'nough sounds kind o' tough. He nods toward the nanny goat. "Turn him a-loose, Johnny boy!"

"It ain't a him, it's a she, Long-spur," ol' Shirt-tail puts in. "An' I wish you wouldn't—"

But Slim Maguire hauls him back. "You better keep out o' this, Shirt-tail," he advises, "or you're liable not to be either a him or a she by the time it's over. I ain't sure but what I smell fight."

When Sweet-bunch don't make no answer nor neither no move to turn the nanny loose, Long-spur

fishes for his pocket knife, opens it, kicks his pony up a step or two and leans out o' the saddle, reaching to cut the rope.

It happened so quick that I never could see whether Sweet-bunch give the rope a little jerk to start it or not, but right then that calico nanny give a little twitch of her tail, says "na-aa-aa" and darted smack under Long-spur's bronc. In the hossflesh explosion that follered, either Sweet-bunch or the nanny goat or both managed to let that rope jerk up between the bronc's hind legs, and the bronc must've thought it was a rattlesnake, the way he started comin' to pieces in all directions at once. If Long-spur Davis hadn't been just about the old he-curly wolf of all bronc peelers he'd've been thröwd the first jump. As it was he come off the third. To add insult to a dang purty fall, the ol' nanny goat kicked him when he lit.

I know eighty-three good cowboy cusswords, by actual count, and enduring the thirty seconds it taken Long-spur to ketch that nanny goat and yank the rope off her neck I heard seventy-nine of 'em, plus six I hadn't ever come onto before.

STILL cussing, Long-spur picked up his hat and the belongings that had flew out of his pockets, including the mouth harp he had took away from Sweet-bunch—which he jammed back into the inside pocket of his vest. Last of all he picked up his gun, blowed the dirt out of the barrel and stepped over to where Sweet-bunch was coiling up his lass rope, stiff-legged as a wolf.

"Johnny boy," Long-spur snarls, "I've a notion to kill you for that! That's a gun handle I see stickin' out o' your holster, ain't it?"

"I don't expect I could hit noth-

in' with it, Long-spur," says Sweet-bunch, mighty quiet. But he hangs his rope on the saddlehorn and steps out clear of his horse, facing Long-spur about ten feet away, like he was ready to try anyway.

Right then was when ol' Tootin' Tom Tuttle teetered up from his boot heels and jumped between 'em.

"Boys," he says in a voice that's purty firm considering the way the rest of him is shakin'. "I've had about all this feudin' foolishness I aim to put 'up with!"

I don't know whether Long-spur figgered Tootin' Tom was too wide to shoot around or too deep to shoot through, but in the half second he hesitated over which to try, both Slim Maguire and me stepped in to back the ramrod's play—and there wasn't no shooting.

That was when Tootin' Tom kind o' asserted his authority and sent Sweet-bunch off to the boar's nest on Gitaway Gulch.

"I'd fire one o' you," he grumbles, "but it wouldn't be noways fair to fire one without firin' the other; and we dang sure need Long-spur right now to heel calves for this brandin' I've got comin' up."

Two days later Shirt-tail Shatto dropped by Gitaway Gulch to see how Sweet-bunch was makin' out and reported back that goat mutton stew wasn't bad a-tall—not if you helt your nose and et it hot.

Ten days later Shirt-tail swang around that way again and come back lookin' sadder'n a wet saddle. Where the boar-nest cabin had been, he said, all he'd found was ashes, and amongst 'em a little pile of bones which he tenderly gathered up and brought along in a sack on his saddle.

"Pore Sweet-bunch," he gulped. "Cabin must've took fire in the night

an' he never waked up in time to git out."

It was with mixed feelin's that we prepared to bury them scant remains under a purty little juniper right back of the saddle shed. Twice since the brandin', Long-spur had come in way late at night with the young broncs he was schoolin'. Since he hadn't offered no explanation where he'd been, naturally we'd jumped to the conclusion that he'd probly been over in Starve-out Valley helping that red-haired nester's gal scratch her elbow. But supposin' he hadn't? Supposin'—well, just supposin'.

"We'll run this thing down after the funeral," Tootin' Tom tells Slim and me on the quiet, "an' if Long-spur done it, we'll sure as hell hang him."

"Suit me to hang him before the funeral," I growls, "an' make it a double. Supposin' he pulls a gitaway on us?"

"I don't figger he'll try it," says Slim Maguire. "But if he does—" Slim pats his hogleg to indicate what he means. "Just because a feller don't favor mutton and mouth-harp music ain't no proof he'd puppytrate a monstrosity. Don't fergit there's sheep camps not far west of Gitaway Gulch, an' where there's shepherders you can always expect—"

"Goats," busts in ol' Shirt-tail. "Fact is, that's where pore Sweet-bunch was gittin' his mutton!"

"Yeah," says Slim. "Maybe had a row with some fool herder over the price of a goat or somethin'."

"But hang ding it, man, you heard Long-spur threaten to kill him after that nanny goat run under his horse!" I says. "That makes it practically habeas corpus, right there."

"Habeas who?" inquires Shirt-

tail. "I didn't quite ketch the last name."

"Twitchell," I says. "But shut up. Here's Long-spur now."

CHOP a dog's tail off and slap him in the face with it and he couldn't look no more grievous than Long-spur had ever since the bad news. Either he's taking it mighty hard or else he's a plumb good actor. But he just don't say nothin'.

So, like I say, it was with mixed feelings of sorrow and suspicion that we stood with our hats off under that little juniper whilst ol' Tootin' Tom spoke a few obsequies.

"Lord," he says, "we're jest a bunch of iggerunt cowboys, same as ol' Sweet-bunch was. We don't know much an' like as not half what we do know is wrong, but as we ain't goin' to be specially busy with cow work the next few days an' you probly are, I jest like to say that this job of findin' out who brung about this unhappy demise, an' seein' that he gits what's comin' to him—well, we was sort o' aimin' to take it off your hands—that is, if it's all right with you. An' now"—he turns to the rest of us—"if any you boys like to say a few words in mem'ry of the diseased, hop to it."

Flollering this touching tribute there come a couple of seconds' silence, then to the surprise of one and all, Long-spur Davis' chin come up off his brisket and he give a mighty solemn look around the circle.

"Boys," he begins, kind o' hoarsely, "I got a confession to make."

As he kind o' pauses, I see Slim Maguire unfold his hands from behind him so the right one swings free within easy reach of his gun, and I done the same.

"Now that it's too late," Long-spur goes on, "I reelize I never had

no business bullyin' Sweet-bunch like I done, an' I'm sorry I done it. But gents, I had my reasons for not allowin' him nor nobody else to play the mouth organ in my hearin'—'specially that one tune—an' I'm goin' to tell you what they was: this time last year I was courtin' a gal down in Arizona by the name of Leona Spadwinkle, an' I had a rival. Never did see him, never did even hear his last name, but his first name was Charlie, an' to hear her tell it, he was a mouth-harp player from who laid the chunk. Ever' time I'd blow my lovesick heart out for her on my mouth organ, she'd heave a sigh an' say: 'That was right purty, Wilmer, but gee—you ort to hear Charlie play it!' Spite of all such talk, an' the fact that her pa was hell on cowboys, I finely got it all fixed up to elope with her. I was to come play 'Sweet Bunch of Daisies' under her window for a signal, an' as soon as she figgered the coast was clear she would sneak out and away we'd go to git married.

"Boys, don't never put no faith in a female. If I played 'Sweet Bunch of Daisies' one time that night, I played it forty times, endurin' which Miss Leona Spadwinkle walked out the front door on the other side of the house an' run off with another man—this Charlie of hers, I reckon; I never stopped to find out. Another thing, the Spadwinkles had had mutton stew for supper that night, an' waitin' out there I could smell it. Nacherly I ain't cared much for stewed mutton, the name Charlie, nor 'Sweet Bunch of Daisies' on a mouth organ since. But now"—he pauses to pull the harp he'd took away from Sweet-bunch out of his pocket—"well, boys," he gulps, "all I can say is, I hope pore Sweet-bunch, somewheres up in yon beautiful sky, is listenin'."

LIVE or die, I ain't never heard music as purty as ol' Long-spur softly suck-blow-suckin' "Sweet Bunch of Daisies" through a spit organ over that there little mound of earth out back of the saddle shed. He was jest giving a special quaver to "brought from the dell" the second time through, makin' me purt' near sorry we still might have to hang him, when from the corner of the saddle shed right behind us comes an interruption.

"Who you fellers buryin'?" it inquires. "Mr. Twitchell?"

The way Long-spur Davis whirled around you'd 've thought he'd caught his shirt tail in a buzz saw. There at the corner of the saddle shed, stood Sweet-bunch, wearin' a grin as wide as a wash bowl.

"You said you hoped I was listenin', Long-spur," Sweet-bunch says. "An' sure 'nough I was. Gosh, it was sure purty, too! An' did I hear you say your name was Wilmer, an' you used to court a gal name o' Leona Spadwinkle down in Arizona?"

"That's right," gulps Long-spur, kind o' dazed. "But—"

"Then it must've been you I heard playin' 'Sweet Bunch of Daisies' that night. Sounded so purty that on the way to the parson's I got out my mouth organ and tried it my ownself—an' you know what Leona says? She says: 'Gee, Charlie, you ort to hear Wilmer play that piece.' So about the tenth time she said it I jest handed her the reins an' clumb out o' the buggy. 'Maybe you better jest git this Wilmer to play it for you hereafters,' I told her. 'I'm goin' to New Mexico.' 'New Mexico?' she gasps. 'What for?' 'To teach my Aunt Tillie how to milk ducks,' I says. An' that was the last I ever see of her. But one thing I did make up my mind, an' that was

to learn to play 'Sweet Bunch' on the mouth harp the way I'd heard *you* playin' it, Wilmer, an' that's—"

"Wup, here!" busts in Long-spur. "Jest because I was born with a name like Wilmer ain't no sign I got to be called by it! Hereafter you call me Long-spur or I'll—"

"You'll what, Mr. Twitchell?" Quicker'n a scared cat toppin' a fence, Sweet-bunch slaps that pearl-handled equipment of his out of the holster and pokes the snout of it into Long-spur's middle. "Put 'em high, *Wilmer!*"

Long-spur is so took by surprise he don't even look down to see what's pokin' him.

"Now, Long-spur," says Sweet-bunch, friendly but earnest, "a minute ago you was playin' 'Sweet Bunch of Daisies' over my grave to prove you was sorry you'd been bully-raggin' me all this time, wasn't you?"

"Yeah—I reckon I was." Long-spur looks kind o' ashamed.

"An' you're still sorry, ain't you?"

"Yeah—I reckon I am. But—"

"Then we're goin' to let bygones be bygones, so you can learn me to play that dang tune as good as you play it, ain't you?"

NOW looky here, Sweet-bunch! Jest 'cause you got me where the hair is short—"

"Are you or ain't you? We got witnesses—make it a promise!"

"All right, dammit!" says Long-spur. "Only get that gun outa my—"

"With pleasure, Mr. Twitch—I mean Wilmer!"

Only the pearl-handled insternment he thereby withdraws from Long-spur's midriff ain't a gun—it's a nice shiny mouth organ riveted on where the barrel ought to be. So that's the

harp he'd been playin' at night which Long-spur couldn't never find!

"Well, I'll be hornswoggled!" Ol' Long-spur grins kind o' sheepish.

"You ain't the only one!" snorts Tootin' Tom. "What I want to know is whose bones ol' Shirt-tail gathered up from the ashes of that burnt boar's nest for us to hold a funeral over?"

"Maybe they was Mr. Twitchell's," grins Sweet-bunch. "Fact is, I expect they was the bones of that fresh-butchered nanny goat I never had time to carry out when I woke an' found the cabin on fire. I'd laid down to practice my mouth harp awhile before blowin' the lamp out, and I must've dozed off, knocked it over in my sleep, an' well, boys, I sure do thank you for givin' me such a touchin' funeral, anyhow. I'd been here sooner to help you dig the grave, but after the boar's nest burned I rode over to Starve-out Valley to mooch some breakfast off that nester, an' they begged me to stay for dinner. He's got a good-lookin' daughter that likes mouth-harp music, an'—"

"Wup, there, Johnny boy!" busts in Long-spur with that old curly-wolf gleam in his eye. "You keep away from that nester gal on Starve-out, you savvy!"

Maybe it was just that a wolf don't never look quite as curly to you once you've twisted his tail right good. Or maybe Sweet-bunch Charlie's inards had toughened up some from eatin' stewed mutton. Whatever it was, he never paid no more attention to Long-spur's new outburst than a grizzly pays to a scolding squirrel. Just raised that fancy six-gun spit organ to his mouth and begun to play. The tune, though still kind o' sour in spots, was "Sweet Bunch of Daisies."



Jim O'Hara ran toward the crowd of buffalo hunters. "The last one of you," he yelled, "will get down and crawl or—"

RED TRAIL TO *Dodge City*

BY ART LAWSON

CHAPTER I

MURDER ON THE TRAIL

JIM O'HARA smelled trouble as he led the way down the muddy main street of Fort Griffin, past the rickety hide huts of the settlers, to the raw wood buildings at the center of town. He saw it in the bearded buffalo hunters who hung around the Di-

vine Dance Hall, taking pot shots at the new lightning rods on top of the We Got Everything Store across the street. They were spoiling for trouble, Jim knew; waiting for fun or fight.

He dropped back, closer to the big covered wagon following him. On the high seat a bearded oldster sat tooling the four mules. Beside him

was a girl, dark-haired, dark-eyed, in a tight-bodied gray dress that covered the toes of her cowhide boots.

"I wish your old man had a gun," Jim said. "Those buffalo hunters are mean hombres. They got no more use for cowboys than for Injuns—and they'd rather shoot Injuns than buffalos."

The girl did not seem frightened.

"I've got a shotgun, and Coosie here has got two six-shooters. But dad—" She glanced sidewise, not at the man on the seat beside her, but at a broad-shouldered, gray-haired cowman forking a horse to the left of the wagon. "Dad hasn't carried a gun since the war. We don't have to worry, Jim. Just mind your business while we stock up. We've got to have these provisions—and we'll get them."

Jim smiled at that. There was nobody in the world like Nell Linden. No bigger'n a kid, she was, but with all the fight the Old Man used to have. A gal to ride the river with, even if it did take you up the Clear Fork of the Brazos into this wild town below the hill, where Fort Griffin sat looking west, but never looking down at the blood and gun smoke at its feet.

He jiggled ahead, got alongside the lead mule, who skittered as another big buffalo gun boomed. This time the drunken hunter got a bull's-eye and the lightning rod twanged as if struck by a giant bolt. The bug-eyed little owner of the store looked out, frightened. The buffalo hunters howled a thunderous cheer. Then one of them sighted Jim, leaning from the saddle, steadying the boogered mule.

"Yippee! Cowboys! Yippee—live game!"

His voice stopped in a rasp, and he tipped a bottle to lubricate his throat. His companions were egg-

ing him on. Jim was having trouble with the mules, and it was made worse when the hunter tossed his empty bottle into the middle of the street, where one of his pals shattered it with a well-placed shot from his big Henry rifle. Big Tom Linden hopped his horse ahead and grasped the cheek piece of the nigh lead mule. Then Jim stepped down from his horse to hold the team.

Coosie, quick as a fox, was already on the ground. And as the wagon stopped, Nell stood up. Apparently it was the first the buffalo hunters had seen of the girl. A sudden silence fell upon them.

Big Tom had come around alongside Jim now.

"Can't think of nothin' I got to buy in there, Tom, only a box of shells," Jim said. "Take my hoss over to the rack, will you? I'll bring these ornery jackasses up to the loading platform."

BIG TOM trotted the few paces to the rack, leading Jim's horse. Jim was holding the mules steady and Big Tom, his back to the buffalo hunters, was swinging a leg over his saddle when Nell chose to climb down from the high seat. He never saw what happened.

The hunter who had thrown the bottle into the street whistled shrilly through his fingers. Already frightened, the mules lurched. Nell was upset and she slipped from the wheel. Somehow her long, gray skirt became snagged and she slid through it, hanging there for a second, the white frills of her pantaloons showing. Biting her lip with embarrassment, she jerked down the dress, ripping the hem where it had been caught.

The buffalo hunters began to snort, to whistle, to paw at the ground. Nell swung toward them,

her face flame red. They started to scream—and Jim went berserk. Dropping the mule harness, he stepped into the middle of the filthy street, dragging his gun as he went. A couple of the hunters ducked into the dance-hall door, while a third backed away, holding up his hands, showing he had no part in this insult. Two more ran around the corner of the canvas-roofed honkatonk, but there were still a good half dozen there on the boardwalk ready for a brawl.

"By Satan!" Jim yelled. "You'll all crawl over here on your knees and beg that lady's pardon, or—"

The thunder of a big-bore Henry rifle drowned out the rest of his speech, and the bullet kicked up dust between his feet, ricocheting with an angry whine to smash into the We Got Everything Store front. Jim fired point-blank for the man who had shot at him, and missed.

It was then that Big Tom Linden stepped into the battle. One of the hunters who had dodged around the corner of the dance hall had his gun lined up for the kill. Big Tom was unarmed, and he could not reach the killer in time. He did the next best thing. He picked up a wagon stake that was leaning against the hitch rack, ran across in front of the rearing mules, and threw it hard at Jim O'Hara. The stake caught Jim in the back of the head, just as the cowboy was triggering a second shot, and knocked him over, flat on his face in the muck.

Then Coosie was struggling with the boogered mules. Nell was kneeling in the mud beside Jim. She looked up through tear-starred eyes.

"I'll take on any one of you cowards," she said bitterly, "or the whole lot of you, one at a time. Buffalo guns or pistols or fists!"

But the buffalo hunters had had

enough. One by one they backed into the Divine Dance Hall or slunk off down the street to some other saloon, where they could get more whiskey bravo—

JIM awoke, feeling sick and dizzy, with an awful gnawing in his stomach and a headache that beat like a Kiowa war drum. The bed he lay on was only a musty pile of prairie grass, and the roof over his head was of scraped hide lashed with sinew to willow withes. Nearby he could hear the lapping of river water—and farther away the sounds of horses, of men. He could hear someone yelling, and it cut into his head like a bowie knife.

Jim closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he could not hold them steady. He tried to concentrate, to think, and finally he found himself looking waveringly into the dark, familiar hook-nosed face of an old, old friend of his.

"Running Wolf! What in tarnation—"

Running Wolf shook his head, making the black braids dance on his shoulders.

"Keepum quiet. We killum. Not now. Maybe soon."

"Where's the Old Man?" Jim cried. "Where's Nell?"

"You no talk," Running Wolf suggested again. "Me, I cook for you to eat."

Jim pushed himself to a sitting position, felt of his head. There were two ridges on his scalp, both very tender to touch. He remembered now the scrap he had gotten into with that mob before the Divine Dance Hall. He remembered that someone had come up from behind and whacked him over the head, and it brought the red to his eyes. Someone had smashed him down from the rear—and hit him again while he was

unconscious in the muck.

"If I get a hold of that son—" he threatened.

"He dead," Running Wolf told him. "They have his funeral."

That only made Jim angrier.

"They could've left him to me," he muttered. "The least they could've done was—"

Running Wolf shrugged his lean, hard shoulders.

"Maybe you kill. Mr. Coosie say you kill. Mr. Mike and Mr. Slim say you kill. They tell me 'We find Jim—hang him.'"

Jim shivered. This didn't make any sense to him, and the sickness was a live thing within him. He caught Running Wolf glancing furtively out the opening of the sod-and-rawhide hut, and tried to follow the line of his vision. But everything in the sun-lit street was a blur, a fanciful, wild imagining. Out there, it seemed to Jim, were Coosie and Mike and Slim, slogging down the street, their heads hanging low on their chests. Behind them—Jim saw it as if in a nightmare—was Nell, her eyes flashing, her lips set. She was wearing Levis now, a shirt and bandanna, and she carried a shotgun with which she herded along her men.

Behind were a flock of kids, hooting and yelling, but the cook and the cowboys and the girl trudged on un mindful of their audience.

Jim tried to call out to them. But Running Wolf, as if he had stumbled, fell against him, sending a wave of pain through the cowboy that shot into his brain and sent him back into unconsciousness again.

When he woke it was dark, and he knew this was all a dream. He told Running Wolf about it. He told Running Wolf that as soon as he had something to eat he was going down below town on the flats, where the Muleshoe trail herd had been held

while he came to town for provisions. Running Wolf listened gravely, nodded, agreed.

Running Wolf fed Jim a foul-tasting soup made of buffalo hump and native herbs, following it up with some whiskey he had sweated out of an empty keg. It burned like gunpowder in Jim's stomach, but it cleared his mind.

He felt again of his head, of the two bumps there. He swore briefly, then grinned at the old scout who had fought many a frontier battle with him during the turbulent years after the war.

"Thanks, parci," he said. "I better be goin' now. That sure was a funny dream I had. Did I dream that feller was killed, too?"

"You wish you dream," Running Wolf said. "There are three suns now." The Kiowa scout felt that he could now tell his patient the truth. Jim's eyes were clearing, and the uncontrollable trembling had gone out of him. "Mr. Old Man hit you with wagon stake," Running Wolf continued. "He save your life. He take you to camp when Miss Nell and Mr. Coosie buy grub. Come first sun Mr. Slim find Mr. Old Man dead. Bullet in back of head. No Jim. I make the trail, find you, bring you here. Mr. Slim, Mr. Coosie, Mr. Mike, they say you plenty mad and kill Mr. Old Man. They look for you two suns. Miss Nell, she come with shotgun, she make them bury Mr. Old Man, she run them down to flats. They round up herd, and go to Dodge City."

Jim tried to concentrate on this. The Muleshoe boys thought he had killed Big Tom Linden. They had hunted for him for two days, while Running Wolf hid him out. They'd still be looking if Nell hadn't taken after them with a shotgun. It was incredible. It was more of that

nightmarish dream.

But it was no dream. With a face that could have been carved of mahogany, Running Wolf verified all this. He nodded his black head gravely and said:

"That is true."

Jim was feeling of his head again, of the two ridges there.

"The Old Man," he asked hoarsely, "he didn't hit me twice with that wagon stake?"

Running Wolf shook his head.

"Once—some other man twice. Same man shoot Mr. Old Man. But everybody say you shootum."

"Who did it?" Jim cried.

Running Wolf shrugged.

CHAPTER II

GUNS AROUND THE CAMPFIRE

JIM came out at night. Whiskey had steadied his nerves, and great slabs of beef, so fresh Jim claimed they kicked around on the skillet, had given him strength. Four days' beard was sufficient disguise in a town with such a shifting population while he haunted the saloons up and down the muddy main street. Running Wolf took him over the grounds, where Big Tom Linden had been found dead, where he, Running Wolf, had finally discovered Jim lying in some flood brush below the red bank of the river.

Then Jim went looking for some buffalo hunters that he never found.

"Like Chinamen," he told Running Wolf, "they all look alike except to themselves. Gotta shoot 'em all to get the right one. And there's thousands of 'em."

"Maybe good thing shootum all," Running Wolf said. "They make trouble. They take food from my people."

Maybe it would be a good thing, Jim thought. A queer lot, that buf-

falo-hunting tribe, used to danger and death, afraid of nothing. Some fine men among them, and some of the worst on the frontier.

He went out again to see what he could find. The headache was gone, his strength coming back, but the two welts on his scalp still reminded him that someone had knocked him out and killed Big Tom Linden while blaming it on him.

In the Palace Bar Jim picked up some gossip. In the Divine Dance Hall he learned another bit. Everywhere he heard the story, and a couple of times people asked him half jokingly if he were the cowboy in the tale. Jim always managed to laugh it off.

"He's long gone by now," he'd say.

"You gotta admit it was a skunk trick. His boss didn't even have a gun. Didn't believe in guns. Cracked this hombre over the head to save his life," these casual acquaintances would tell him. "His boss was takin' him home when the cowboy come to and shot him in the back."

Then he'd hear someone else telling the yarn over a bar to some newcomer.

"Them Muleshoe boys went loco. Lived on whiskey. Turned the town upside down. But that cowboy was over the horizon by then."

And another hombre spinning it out:

"The Bull's-eye outfit come up the trail a couple days after the Muleshoe. John Cave, he's the boss of that bunch, wouldn't even let his boys come to town. Afraid they'd join in with the Muleshoe and wreck the place. They're neighbors down there on the Brazos somewhere."

In the Divine Dance Hall the talk was mostly of Nell, and the honkatonk gals made it windy with envy.

"She went out to camp, put on her Levis, and come back with a shotgun. Rounded up her boys made 'em sign the pledge and bury her old man. Then she run 'em out of town, got her herd together, and went on up the trail. She got out just one jump ahead of the Bull's-eye boys."

"Yeah," a seedy-looking gent boasted to the girl, "if I'd found that cowboy, I'd have pulled the rope that hanged him, myself."

And so it went until dawn, when Jim would creep back to the sod-and-rawhide hut to lie on his back and think while the twin bumps on his head subsided and his brain cleared. Three or four days, maybe, hearing the tales, finding nothing, when he said to Running Wolf:

"I'm goin' up the trail, Running Wolf. No sense lookin' for that buffalo hunter. He's gone. Nobody knows where. And Nell needs all the help she can get to make that stretch between the Red and Camp Supply. Rough country up there, and I'm goin' along."

Running Wolf ran his finger across his throat, made the sign of a man being hanged. But Jim would not be moved.

"We worked like the devil to be the first herd up the trail this spring," he said stubbornly. "Now the Bull's-eye is catchin' up. If they get to Dodge before we do, they'll bring the prime prices, and the Muleshoe will be about finished. I'm goin'."

Running wolf said nothing. He pursed his lips and shook his head.

RUNNING WOLF stole a couple of horses, a big black cavalry mount for Jim and a half-broken prairie mustang for himself. It was some hundred and twenty miles from Fort Griffin to Doan's Crossing on the Red River, a ten-day drive for the Muleshoe trail herd—a three-day

lope for men a-horseback. So they took it easy, pitching camp in the pecan groves along the Brazos, moving on to the Wichita, where, from the top of a high hill, they could see for miles in all directions, but spotted no dust of trail herds. On the third day they reached the new town of Vernon on the Pease, and Running Wolf went into the center to find out what he could, while Jim scouted the flats below town. It was dark, and there seemed to be only one herd there. Jim did not dare get close enough to find out which it was, Muleshoe or Bull's-eye, so he rode back to the spot where he had agreed to meet Running Wolf and waited for the Indian to bring him the information he sought.

Running Wolf showed up at dawn. He had had a couple of drinks too many.

"Find 'em," he said. "Rest today. Tomorrow go to Dodge. Muleshoe and Bull's-eye, they marry."

"Who's married?" Jim asked sharply.

"Wohaws," Running Wolf said, using the Indian word for cattle. "Some day, maybe Miss Nell and Mr. Ted Watson. *Quien sabe?*"

He grinned foolishly, sat down and promptly closed his eyes. Jim shook him violently.

"What's that about Watson?"

"Him and Miss Nell ride in chuck-wagon." Running Wolf looked off over the horizon, and his face was a carved wooden mask again. "Him like Miss Nell very much down home? Huh?"

Jim did not answer. They were camped in a hackberry thicket, and the cowboy began striding back and forth, while the Indian slept. Jim had been afraid of something like this, and now he admitted to himself that this fear had been one of the chief reasons for giving up his

search for the buffalo hunter who had killed Big Tom Linden. Down home he had always trusted Ted Watson, who was straw boss of John Cave's big Bull's-eye spread next to the Muleshoe. Their rivalry for Nell had been friendly enough, with the odds on Jim. But up here on the trail, accused of murder, Jim was galled to the bottom of his soul by the thought of Ted Watson—and as he walked up and down suspicion began to creep into his mind.

They had thrown the herds together. Ted Watson was riding the chuck wagon with Nell Linden. All this would have been impossible except for the murder of Big Tom that caused the delay at Fort Griffin and branded Jim O'Hara as a murderer.

Yes, it looked as if he had stumbled on something here. The Bull's-eye herd had been a couple of days behind the Muleshoe, but Ted Watson could have ridden ahead. He could have been in Fort Griffin when Big Tom was taking Jim back to camp. He could have whacked Jim the second time—and murdered the Old Man.

Jim tried to shake it out of his head, but it would not go. The sun climbed high, sank toward the west. Running Wolf still slept half drunk, dreaming apparently of very pleasant things, judging by the expression on his sharp face. Then, when Jim could not stand it any longer, he slung a leg over the stolen cavalry mount and rode.

He circled Vernon, came in from the northwest and had a drink. Then he ate a meal, went down to the canvas tent that served as a barber shop, and had a shave. Coming out of there it was dusk, and he walked slowly through the town with his Stetson down over his eyes. A couple of cowboys rode by. He did not dare look up at them, so when they had

gone into a saloon he walked back and glanced at the brands of their horses. They were, as he had expected, from the Muleshoe.

Night had come when Jim got back onto the black horse and turned its head toward the flats below town. Two campfires burned out here, half a mile apart, and the cattle were a dark, moving mass beyond. Near one of the fires the white canvas top of a covered wagon shone in the red glow. Jim rode straight for it—

JIM O'HARA rode lightly in the saddle, his spine tense, his hands ready to reach for gun butts. There was no telling what would happen, or who he would see there, when he broke into the Muleshoe camp.

He reined in as he came upon four men sitting around a blanket playing poker by campfire light. Only Coosie looked up. His eyes got no further than Jim's horse and, not recognizing it, his voice was pleasant as if addressing a stranger:

"Light an' set, amigo. Plenty coffee b'ilin' in the pot."

Jim stepped down from the saddle, flipping reins over the black's head, and hunkered beside the blanket where he found room for his long legs. Coosie was here, and Mike and Slim. The fourth man was a stranger to Jim, possibly one of the Bull's-eye crew. In the great-wheeled wagon hardly twenty yards away, Nell Linden would be sleeping. John Cave, owner of the Bull's-eye, and Ted Watson, trail boss, were among the missing—over by the other fire, most likely.

"Evenin', boys," Jim said.

Fire glow was on his rugged face, and he could see the dingy cards making a full house in Slim's hand. The boys had been too busy with their poker to pay much attention to a stranger riding in from the night.

But now Slim's eyes flashed to the newcomer. Coosie glared up under bushy brows. Mike, between Slim and the stranger, hitched his hip around so that he could get to his gun quickly. The fourth man smiled his greeting, a sandy-haired, lanky individual who made no hostile move. Jim nodded to him.

"Evening, stranger," he said.

"Takin' my advice, Jim," drawled Coosie, "you'll just drop a leg over

hand hovered over gun butt now, and Coosie was frankly fingering the holster of his six-shooter. Slim was a rifle man, and his rifle was only a few inches from his full house. If his hand hadn't been so good, he probably would have gotten that long gun by now.

But Jim showed no emotion in his voice. The last ten days had taken it from him, and he was as smooth as a week-old calf.

These men had been Jim's friends, but now they were waiting for a chance to gun him off his horse.



that black hoss and ride back where you come from."

"Or, if you'd rather," Slim added, now holding his full house close to his chest, "you can unlimber yore shootin' iron and we'll get it over with right now."

"That sounds like a good idea," Mike agreed.

The fourth man remained silent, but he was breathing unevenly, and his pale brown eyes shuttled from one man to the next. Mike's free

"You fellers look right uneasy for a trail crew bedded down next to town," he said casually. "Been havin' trouble?"

"We ain't askin' for none," replied Coosie.

"If you ain't," Jim said significantly, "I might suggest you don't try pullin' that gun. I come a long way to talk to you boys—and I'm goin' to talk."

Coosie was going for his iron anyway when Jim seemed to shrug his

shoulder as if seating his buckskin jacket. In his hand appeared a black double-barreled derringer, the camp-fire gleaming on its sleek metal. Before any of them noticed the gun, Jim said, to draw attention to it:

"I got a pair of aces here that'll beat anythin' you got, boys."

Coosie's hand jumped away from his weapon, which dropped with a soft *chunk* into its oiled holster. Slim remained motionless. Mike gripped his cards with both hands, and the eyes of the stranger widened with admiration.

"This the feller you was telling me about?" he asked.

"Yeah," growled Coosie, "an' it looks like he's been studyin' murder since we seen him last."

Jim laughed easily. His hand was empty now; the derringer had disappeared.

"Good little trick, isn't it? Won it off a tindhorn down to Fort Griffin. It's on a spring. Hops up and down yore sleeve like a jack-in-the-box. Only it got tangled with a card this feller had up his sleeve alongside it, and we never even found the weapon until we was buryin' him."

His shoulder twitched again and there was the derringer once more in his palm, an evil little black thing squatting there.

The men stared at it. Jim made it vanish up his sleeve and said:

"Go on with the game, boys. Don't let me interrupt you. Couple of fellers I wanted specially to see. Guess I'll have to wait around for 'em."

He leaned across the blanket, took a tin cup from near the fire, shook out the drift of ashes in its bottom, and filled it with boiling coffee. Then he hunkered back, blowing on the steaming, bitter liquid. He seemed as easy and comfortable as if he were

at a singing social—but he held the cup in his left hand and he watched the four Muleshoe men from the tops of his eyes.

CHAPTER III

BUSCADERO ON TRIAL

COOSIE, Slim and Mike—the three of them had been pals of Jim O'Hara once down there on the Muleshoe Ranch, by the brick-red banks of the Brazos. Yes, they'd been friends a long time—rounding up the trail herd for the boss—before that, fighting Injuns on the Llano Estacado, guiding for General Mackenzie, learning the ways of the high prairies with Running Wolf, the Kiowa scout. They had been *amigos* fighting Kansas Jayhawkers during the war when Jim was only a button with a rifle three hands longer than he was high.

But Jim was listening as well as thinking, and from the far side of the herd came the song of a cowboy telling the bedded herd what they could expect of the Kansas City stockyards. Jim thought he recognized that voice. Ted Watson? Had the Muleshoe turned over the herd intact to the Bull's-eye?

Slim, winning on the full house, raked in the silver money spread on the blanket. Poker-faced, he shuffled the cards. Mike cut them. The lanky stranger dealt. He dropped a card in front of Jim and Slim said sharply:

"There's only four hombres in this game, Yank."

Yank blinked. He pushed the card over to Slim and after that dealt only four hands. Jim grinned sardonically.

"No offense, stranger," he said. "But I guess you don't know the Texas rules. Once you make a polecat of a feller you never come close enough again even to take a sniff

and see if it's true. If you get in gunshot range you plug him—and that's all."

"My mistake," Yank grinned. "Up in my country, you plug him first. Then you run like blazes. You make a skunk outn him later. If you got the time."

"I'm openin'," Coosie cut in quickly.

"Down Texas way," Jim said, "you plug a feller first, too—if you can find him." He laughed, a touch of harshness creeping into his voice. "If you can't find him, you make a skunk out of him. And if you're as pigheaded as these three old goats, you keep him a skunk until you start stinkin' of polecat yourself."

Coosie looked up through bushy gray eyebrows.

"If you don't like the odor," he suggested, "you can put a clothespin over yore nose and light a shuck out of here. Or you can toss that trick gun on the blanket, use a white man's weapon, and I'll let you draw first."

It seemed to Jim that Coosie was a better friend than the rest, in spite of his war talk.

"There's a real amigo," Jim said to Yank, grinning. "I was just a button without a mammy or pappy when Coosie picked me up on the range. Taught me how to draw a hogleg in a mighty big hurry. But he's a pard to the last—givin' me first chance at the gun."

SLIM had a good hand, but, though he seemed to be studying it intently, he did not actually see his cards.

"You hid out on us pretty good, Jim," he said. "Why in Hades didn't you stay hid out?"

"My conscience wasn't botherin' me none," Jim said, "so why should I hide out?"

"Maybe you was drunk," Coosie

said. "Maybe you was riled and ornery because he hit you with a wagon stake. Maybe you got a dozen excuses, Jim, but they don't any of 'em ring the bell. You might as well have writ a confession as to run away like you done after the shootin'."

Jim took off his hat, leaned over so that the top of his head was visible in the firelight. The two welts could still be seen on his scalp.

"Did the boss hit me twice?" he asked Coosie. "Or did some other hombre give me that second whack? First I knew of it I was in Running Wolf's buffalo-hide shack, with a headache as big as all outdoors. I saw you fellers walkin' down the street with Neli chousin' you along in front of her shotgun. I tried to holler, but my lungs wouldn't work."

The three men looked slightly abashed at the memory of their humiliation in Fort Griffin. Then Coosie said:

"Tom only hit you once—in the street. Maybe you got the second one from fallin' off yore hoss. How do I know?"

Jim shrugged. "Somebody knows."

Coosie was fingering his cards. After a while he said very slowly:

"Nell's sleepin' in the wagon. She's goin' up to Dodge City with us. She's boss now. You tell her that story. You tell her you didn't kill her old man and if she listens we'll spit on the slate and rub it off. We'll let you ride out of here, Jim, but you ain't ever goin' to side us up any more trails again, *sabe*, no matter what yarn you spin or how many tricks you got up yore sleeve."

Jim glanced sidewise at Slim, at Mike. They and Yank were staring intently at him, not showing in their eyes whether they agreed with Coosie or not. Their code was as inflexible as the sharp long horns of the ornery steers they herded. It

would be a real concession for them to let him talk to the Little Boss and to allow her to pass judgment.

He knew that the sign was against him, that his chances were nil, that his only hope was to produce the actual killer of Big Tom Linden. He knew that he would have to stall for time in the hope that Ted Watson would ride into camp before these men blew up. So he said softly:

"Thanks, Coosie."

"I'm with Coosie," Slim said, after a while. "Make yore peace with Nell and we'll call it quits—until the next time we see you."

JIM leaned back, his hands clasped over his knees, and any man there could have gotten to his gun quicker than Jim could flick that derringer into place. But they had passed their ruling and they would stick to it. Jim smiled thinly, grimly.

"All right, Slim," he said. "I'll do that. But I'm not quite ready to talk to Nell yet. Go on with yore game and pretend I'm not here."

They looked at the cards that had been dealt them as if they no longer had any meaning, and Jim let his eyes wander from the little circle as his mind moved from the immediate scene. He was pretty sure of it now. He was pretty certain who it was who had killed Big Tom Linden. But he could not just speak up and tell his one-time friends. The two days he had lain unconscious in Running Wolf's hut off the muddy main street of Fort Griffin had damned him completely in their eyes.

He glanced back at the men. They had not gone on with their game.

"Who's watching the cattle tonight?" Jim asked. "I hear a feller singin' down there by the river. He's comin' around the west side—comin' in, likely. It's about time for the next watch. Don't any of the

Muleshoe boys work any more?"

"You forgettin' you ain't boss now?" Mike asked sullenly.

They had been won for a moment. Now they were turning against him again.

"It ain't none of your affair what we done," Coosie said. "You talkin' to Nell or ain't you?"

Jim glanced over at the dark wagon. Its canvas top was white against the sky, the oval opening to the rear as black as a cave. The shock was sudden, sharp. A ghost-like figure sat there by the tail gate, the face pale, almost featureless, in the fading rays of the campfire, a black line bisecting it across the middle.

And Jim knew that Nell Linden had been sitting there, listening—holding a shotgun across her knees—

JIM stood stiffly, stepped away from the fire, deliberately turning his back on the four men and walking straight toward the wagon. The shotgun moved. Its sights lined up on Jim's chest, and it was steady as if held in a vise.

Now he could see Nell's dark hair, her eyes reflecting twin fires. And the lips that were habitually full of laughter had become straight, a stiff dark line against the whiteness of her skin. He could see now why she seemed so like a ghost, for she wore a long-sleeved white night robe, belted about her slender waist, and her bare feet showed just below the hem.

"Why'd you come back?" she asked in hardly more than a whisper.

Jim could no longer play this game of unconcern. He said stiffly:

"Because I signed on to make this trip to Dodge City, and I reckon on going along."

"I heard you talking riddles to the boys over there," Nell countered

sharply. "If they like guessing puzzles on their time off, it's all the same to me. But I'm not interested in games right now."

"I didn't shoot your father," Jim said. "And I'm not running out on him now. I'm going to Dodge City. Either aboard a horse—or in a box."

He sensed, rather than heard, the men around the campfire shifting their weight. He could not see them, and Nell's eyes, steady on him, gave away no secrets. But he knew that they had covered his back, and that as long as he stayed there he was reasonably safe. The girl was in the line of fire, and her men would not shoot unless they became rattled. So he stepped over to one side where he could watch her and the men at the same time. He did not want her protection.

"Where were you those two days?" Nell asked quietly.

"Sleepin' it off in Running Wolf's shack," Jim said. "He claims he found me out there, pushed over the bank of the river with my feet in the water, and he brought me back to town. When I woke up I was half starved. I was so weak I couldn't stand up. And you were gone before I could get around."

"Why didn't you come after us?" Nell asked.

"I was lookin' for that buffalo hunter," explained Jim.

The silence was thick, broken only by the singing of the cowboy watching the herd. He was riding toward the Muleshoe campfire now, only a few hundred yards away in the darkness.

"That sounds like Ted Watson," Jim remarked. "I heard tell the Bull's-eye threw in with you. Ted ramroddin' both outfits now?"

The girl's breath came in a tight gasp.

"You leave Ted out of this. We

couldn't have come on without his help. We need him."

"I didn't deal Ted his hand in this game," Jim said coldly. "He picked out his own cards. A club for me—a spade for your dad. There's a diamond at the end of the trail when he gets top prices instead of you for his cattle—and maybe a heart, too. But they're all deuces—and I'm the joker."

Nell stared at him as if he were talking nonsense. But Jim was no longer looking at her. He was gazing into the night where a shadowed figure astride a big horse rode into the fire glow unaware of the explosion that awaited him.

CHAPTER IV

THE HERD GOES ON

TED WATSON studied the impassive faces of the men at the poker blanket, then glanced over toward the wagon. He saw the pale ghost of a girl there, and the dark, lean shadow of Jim O'Hara, and he stepped stiffly down from the saddle, dropping the reins to the ground behind Yank. Nobody said a word as Ted, hitching up his gun belt, cat-footed over to the wagon. He halted ten feet from the man and girl, and his eyes moved to hers first, then to him.

"I kind o' thought you might show up," Ted said quietly. "One of my boys in town last night got your Injun drunk. Where is he now?"

"Sleepin' it off in a hackberry thicket," Jim retorted, "and he didn't tell your boy a thing. Running Wolf knows how to keep his mouth shut."

Ted Watson was stopped for a moment. As big as Jim, about the same age, he had a reputation for speed with gun or fists. He did not look like the kind of man who would shoot an unarmed old-timer

in the back of the head. But to Jim the rest of the picture fitted neatly together, and he said:

"This is sure the unwelcomedest place I've ever been at, Ted—but I reckoned you'd be glad to see me, anyhow."

Ted Watson's eyes moved to the group at the blanket. Unreadable faces—and back at the wagon Nell Linden was holding her breath.

"Or did you figure that whack you gave me on the head had put me out of the fight for keeps?" Jim added softly.

"He's got a derringer up his sleeve, Ted," Yank cut in quickly.

Ted Watson did not immediately get the meaning of that. Jim shrugged his shoulder, laughed, and the ugly little gun dropped into the palm of his hand.

"Neat trick, isn't it?" he said. "But I reckon I won't need it. Thanks, Yankee boy, for reminding me."

He worked at the catch, got the derringer loose, and tossed it into Nell's lap. His right hand was clear of his six-shooter, and Ted Watson was keeping away from his Colt.

"Yeah," Jim went on. "When you hit me that night, you didn't get the same place that the Old Man struck. So I had two bumps on my head when I woke up—like I been tellin' these folks. It set me to thinkin'. So, if you want to go to heaven you might better tell our friends all about that second bump."

"Dragging me into this murder won't clear you a bit, hombre," Ted Watson said harshly. "I don't know what yarn you've been spinning, but—"

"Where were you that night?" Jim cut in sharply. "I know where your cattle were—but where were you? On a good horse you could have ridden to Fort Griffin and back between

sunset and dawn."

Ted blinked. He spoke too fast, too loud.

"The boss and I—John Cave and I—" He stopped abruptly, then plunged into it again. "We were looking for a shorter cut. Some place to pass you. The first herd into Dodge brings top prices, an' the Bull's-eye has as much a right to it as the Muleshoe—if we get there first. There's nothing wrong in that."

"Nothin' wrong in murder, either?" Jim asked. "When you couldn't find any short cut? I suppose any way is all right, as long as it delays the Muleshoe? Huh?"

Ted's eyes glazed. Jim said swiftly:

"Well, boys, you want to hang this hombre or—"

"Hang me!" Ted shouted. "I can prove it. I was with—"

HE stopped abruptly. The men, so quick to accuse Jim, were as quick to change, and Jim had begun to laugh now, from sheer nervousness rather than pleasure. And all this, the condemning faces, the laughter, unnerved Watson so completely he dug for his gun. Jim's hand dropped, too, with the speed of a swooping hawk, and his .45 cleared leather just as Watson's Colt leveled for the kill.

Jim was cold now, thinking of all he had heard about gun fights. He was stepping backward, to the side, and his finger curled on the trigger. Soon it would be over. Soon he would not be in exile any more, and the Muleshoe would go on up the trail to be the first herd in Dodge this season. Soon everything would be fine again and he could sing in the moonlight to Nell Linden without the ghost of her father to haunt them.

His sights lifted. Watson's lips became a tight, thin line, his eyes narrow, expressionless. Jim's lips twisted up for a laugh of freedom—his finger tautened.

Then, like a bolt of lightning, something struck the side of Jim's head, glancing up and over, across those two sore spots where the wagon stake had gotten him nearly two weeks ago. The blow was hard and sudden, and it swung him over, dropped him as Watson's gun spoke. His gun barked, too, jumping from his hand and sending its slug into the grass, plowing a furrow before skittering off into the night.

Jim struggled to keep his feet. He stumbled forward, going to his knees. He fumbled blindly for the six-shooter that had been lost in the darkness. He looked up through bloodshot eyes, and there was Watson skylighted above him, staring incredulously at him, a thin banner of smoke curling up from the Colt that still pointed toward him.

Jim roared, the bellow of a wounded bull. He got to his feet and plowed into Watson, slugging hard. The Bull's-eye man was trying to get his gun back into play, and from somewhere behind Jim, Nell Linden was shouting, the words meaningless in the ringing of his ears.

Then somebody yanked Jim back hard, sitting him down, and he saw that Coosie and Slim had piled on top of Watson. And now, cold as a mid-winter norther, Nell swept between them.

She stood there, looking accusingly at Jim.

"You're doing the same thing," she said bitterly. "Just like they did to you. You're all doing it—accusing men of murder when you don't have any proof at all that they did it."

Jim's throat was clogged. Ted

Watson was trying to say something, but Nell would not listen to him.

"Get him out of here," she ordered. "Take him back to his own camp-fire."

Coosie and Slim dragged Ted away. Mike lifted Jim to his feet and Nell turned to face him.

"You better go, too," she said coldly. "We can't take the chance on fighting when we get into the territory. It's only luck that the herd isn't stampeding now."

Jim found his voice. He felt of the side of his head and knew that Nell had hit him with the barrel of her shotgun.

"Yore father appointed me trail boss of this outfit," he said slowly, "and he never fired me. So I'm still boss until we get to Dodge. We're startin' at dawn—without the Bull's-eye. We're startin' right now to cut out our herd."

Jim no longer needed anyone to hold him up. Mike and Yank just gaped at him. And Nell was keeping her lovely face expressionless.

"No more fighting?"

"Until Dodge," Jim promised. He swung on the men. "What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "Are you deaf? We're going to Dodge at dawn. Get busy cuttin' out the Muleshoe beefs. We're goin' to be the first herd up the trail—you hear?"

The men looked to Nell. She lifted the butt of her shotgun from the ground. She wasn't using the gun on them. She only showed them that she still had it.

"You heard him!" she said.

Mike shook his head. Yank started to grin. A moment of hesitation, then they went over to the campfire, picked up the cards and money, rolled the blanket. Then they went searching for their horses.

EVEN in the light of the late moon they had to ride up almost alongside a steer to tell its brand. Then they would cut it out and send it at a run to the eastern edge of the flats, where Coosie or Nell would pick it up and take it on to the southern bank of the river. In and out, up and down, Slim and Mike, Yank and Jim, rode, curving like Snake River through the startled animals, whipping up those who had bedded down for the night and were too contrary to get up again. The Muleshoe cattle liked it here in the lush grass with the smells of two rivers on either side; they liked their friends of the Bull's-eye outfit—and they did not want to cross over into the territory.

So dawn came, and with it the herd poured in a tawny stream down the high steep bank, into the shallow water and pointed their suspicious noses and long, sharp horns toward the Canadian River some two hundred miles away across hostile wilderness. And after them came Nell, handling six mules and the big covered wagon with its little trailer as if it were a backboard on the way to town for Saturday's shopping. And after her came Coosie, chousing along the remuda.

They wound up, through the hackberry and brush along the river's edge, onto the rolling prairie beyond, and then for the first time Jim looked back. Sitting a horse on the high south bank was a lone rider, like an Apache Jim had once seen beyond the Pecos. He stayed there for a moment, then vanished, and with his going Jim felt uneasiness.

After all, he had not proved anything last night except that he was hot-headed. He had not proved a single thing.

Slowly he edged his horse away from the point of the herd, signaled

Mike to take the lead, and dropped back to where Nell was tooling the chuck wagon at the far edge, out of the drifting, choking dust. He came alongside, knotted the reins and dropped them over the saddlehorn. Then he stepped over the high wheel and into the seat beside the girl. No longer was he riding the cavalry mount which he had turned back near Vernon. This little beast was a Muleshoe-trained cow pony. He'd trot by the mules until Jim needed him.

Jim had many things he wanted to ask Nell, but the way in which she looked straight ahead over the waving long ears of the mules warned him. He said finally:

"There's something I don't savvy about this set-up. What happened to the Bull's-eye cowboys? How come Watson was the only one around. I got near their camp, and there was a kid with their horses. How come?"

"We had an agreement," Nell said. "They didn't have a chance to hold a party at Griffin. So they went to town while our boys watched the cattle. They're probably all drunk."

"That'll give us a day lead," Jim said. "But it's not enough."

She glanced around at him, her eyes frightened.

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing," Jim said slowly, "but keep ahead of them. Watson was up there looking down from the south bank when we crossed over. He'll bring that herd up alone—if he has to—after last night."

"Of course he will," said Nell.

"What happened to Watson's boss, John Cave?" Jim asked. "He was with them at Griffin. Did he go back home? Or is he still along?"

"He's with us," the girl said. "I mean, he's back there in Vernon. It was his idea to join the herds. He

went to town with his boys. He should have been back last night."

She was clipping her words off and not looking at Jim when she spoke, and he began to wonder what had gone on between Nell and Ted Watson during those long days that Ted had ridden the chuck wagon with her. He was watching her closely, watching tears gather in the corners of her eyes when she snapped the long whip over her mules, starting them off into a trot.

"The dust," she said. "It . . . it gets in my eyes. I'm going to ride ahead of this herd."

The wagon rattled on past the cattle, up ahead to the clean rolling country, where new spring grass poked its spikes through the reddish earth, and after a while the tears stopped coming and Nell said softly:

"Watch your back, Jim. Yank is one of the Bull's-eye boys signed over to us. Slim and Mike still think you might have killed my father. Only Coosie believes you really, and . . . and—" Her dark eyes were full on him. "Nobody believes Ted Watson shot him."

CHAPTER V

BUZZARDS FLY LOW

AFTER Nell's warning Jim rode warily. At night, he slept away from the herd. Like a mother hen on her nest with one eye open, the slightest unusual sound would waken him. He rode hard, doing the work of six men, always letting someone else take the point while he fell behind to keep up the strays, the dogies and laggards in the dusty rear.

Four, five, six days passed. They met a freight wagon coming down from Camp Supply, and the old mule skinner told them that a tiny bunch of cattle brought up from the Panhandle had sold at better than forty

dollars a head. Big money for those who got there first with the railroad crying out for traffic. They met an old-timer who was picking up buffalo bones in a huge cart. And a family of reservation Indians overtook them, riding out to do some spring hunting before the buffalo men finished off the great herds of bison.

And on the seventh day the dust cloud raised by the Muleshoe herd drifted on to the horizon and over it—and Jim knew that another herd, not too far behind, was keeping that dust in the air.

He rode up and down the tail end of that herd, whipping along the thirsty cattle whose minds were on the Red River behind them rather than on the Canadian ahead. Now they seemed to be gaining, and then losing. But when sunset came the red haze hovered back there not more than three or four miles away; and with night Jim could see a campfire glowing from the top of a rise in the rolling country.

"They're not five miles behind us," he told the boys at supper. "If they keep on coming at that rate, they'll be by us in another couple days—or sooner."

Slim was out with the cattle. Mike, his horse picketed nearby, was watching this side of the herd while gulping his supper. Nell had not come out of the wagon yet. Coosie pretended to be busy with a pot over the stove—but the other two men were sullen, even Yank, who took everything as a joke, kept on busily eating.

Jim had trouble keeping his voice down.

"You two have been holding parleys all day—ever since we sighted that dust. What's the matter?"

Mike shrugged. "It ain't only our idea, but Slim agrees, too. Coosie



In the dead of night the Bull's-eye crew stampeded its herd straight at the Mule-shoe camp!

wouldn't say nothin' without Miss Nell's agreeing to it. But we've been thinkin' it would be a good idea to drop back with the Bull's-eye—or let them catch up. We ain't goin' to beat them to Dodge anyway, so we might as well go on together."

"You seem to have forgotten Watson's with the Bull's-eye," countered Jim.

"We ain't forgot that," Mike said. "We also ain't so sure he killed the Old Man. You and him could sign a peace pact or somethin' until we got to Dodge. After that, whatever you do is your own business."

FOR the last two or three days Jim had been expecting something like this. The men had been talking among themselves, and keeping silent when he was around. Now he said:

"Watson never denied it, did' he? He practically admitted it, didn't he?"

"We hold with Nell," Mike went on doggedly. "You ain't proved a

thing. Besides, Yank says Watson couldn't have been at Fort Griffin that night. He went scoutin', like he said, but his hoss fell lame and hardly got him back to camp."

"That's right," Yank said. "I didn't think of it until later. You and him got to fightin' so quick."

"Maybe so," Jim said shortly. "But we still aren't joining them."

"If Watson couldn't have done it," Mike went on doggedly. "Well . . . somebody else must have. I ain't makin' no suggestions who, *sabe*? But if Watson didn't, and they're going to get to Dodge the same time as we, there's no sense trying to outrun them. Them Injuns got me—"

"There's plenty of sense in trying to outrun them," Jim said. "And those Injuns were just a family out buffalo hunting. They won't bother us."

"It's the other Injuns," Mike said. Now that he had started he was going to finish. "I saw one pop up today from behind a hill. Yank seen

one yesterday. If they ain't fixin' to jump us up the trail a piece I'll take off my pants and ride bareback through a mesquite patch. Forty bucks a head is great stuff. But it might as well be a nickel if the Injuns have your herd—and scalps."

Jim stood up. "We're going to get that forty bucks," he said shortly. "Tonight we'll double the watch. Tomorrow we'll go ahead. Start before dawn. If anybody sees any more Indians, let me know. I'll find out who they are."

Coosie spoke up for the first time since he had hollered, "Come an' git it!" He said: "That sounds like good sense. Maybe they was just a couple braves lookin' over the country. I'm with Jim."

They pushed on early, and the sun was slanting just west of the zenith when Mike dropped back from point to drag where Jim was whipping up the laggard steers.

"We seen another Injun," Mike said succinctly. "Over that rise to the east. He waved his arms. Signalin', we figger."

"Keep this herd moving," ordered Jim. "If anything happens, circle 'em so they don't stampede. I'm ridin' over that hill."

HE lifted his horse to a fast lope, cut around the hill to the rear, and came upon the Indian Mike had sighted at the distance. Jim, all tensed up for trouble, felt the fight go from him in a flood. The Indian was Running Wolf forking the stolen cavalry mount.

"Two, three suns I try find you," Running Wolf said. "I go down at night, but you are not there."

"I been sleepin' away from the rest of the bunch," Jim told him. "Figure it's safer."

"I see many funny thing," Running Wolf continued. "Firewater

burns in my head. I go to saloon and see Mr. John Cave talk with buffalo men. There is that buffalo man who throws the bottle in the street and the one who shoots it."

"What were they saying?" Jim demanded sharply.

"I don't hear. Now buffalo men—three-four—and two-three Comanches come along trail over side of setting sun. They have many guns."

Jim was trying to think this out. He had never thought of John Cave being mixed in murder, though, with Watson in it, it seemed reasonable Cave should be, too. Then Jim remembered that Watson had said Cave was with him looking for the short cut that they never found. Watson, after saying so, had tried to cover it up.

"Maybe," Jim spoke his thoughts aloud, "his hoss did go lame. Maybe it was Cave who went up to Fort Griffin." Running Wolf looked puzzled at this, and Jim asked suddenly: "Those buffalo hunters, Running Wolf, did they usually hang out in front of the dance hall taking pot shots at those lightnin' rods?"

Running Wolf shook his head. "First time. They stay inside and get drunk."

"They were planted there to scare us off," Jim muttered. "They knew the Old Man didn't carry a gun. Cave planted them there to delay us."

"Me—I think same thing," the Indian agreed.

"Yeah"—Jim was still talking out his thoughts—"an' when that didn't work they plugged the Old Man. They got the herds together and I broke it up. Now they've got those hunters trailing us. They'll be coming down on us, and—" He hesitated. "Running Wolf, get around there and find out what they're up

to. I'll see you at sunset, off the point of the herd—"

Jim rolled his spurs. He came out the north side of the hill ahead of the plodding herd. To the rear he could see the Bull's-eye dust cloud joined with that of the Muleshoe. They were coming on, steadily closing the gap. Tonight—or at the latest, tomorrow—those buffalo hunters would strike. Jim trotted down to the wagon.

Nell's dark eyes were wide when she saw him.

"Slim told me about the Indian he saw," she said.

Jim tried to laugh it off. There was no sense frightening her more than need be.

"Only one of 'em, far as I could tell," he said. "Mostly curious, I'd say. Doing a little spying on us. Nothing to be afraid of."

But Nell was worried.

"The boys have been suggesting—"

Jim cut in, trying to keep his voice from being sharp:

"It's your herd. You can do what you want with it." He was wondering how much of this to tell her. Running Wolf's story and the implications he had gotten from it were fantastic, unless you were ready to believe it. He decided to hold it until a better time. "They've tried twice to get ahead of us," Jim said. "Watson even admitted to that. And they'll try again. What makes you think they'd take us if we did drop back?"

NELL had not thought of that. When she had been almost alone, her father murdered, and her foreman vanished, John Cave had seemed generous. But now Jim was back, and both Cave and Watson believed him to be a killer. She would have to send Jim away if they

were to combine herds again, and she was not at all sure that he would go.

Jim was about even with her wheel mule, and he noticed a flock of buzzards rising from behind a hill to the west. They wheeled high, started down, then went up again. Something had disturbed them, and it could not have been Running Wolf who had not yet had time to get around there. The buffalo hunters must be mighty close, Jim thought.

"What's the matter?" Nell asked with sudden fright.

Jim had to get her out of here before they struck. Below them to the left and rear the herd was moving on slowly, and Jim came to an abrupt conclusion.

"Just saw some buzzards," he said. "Off to the west. Dead buffalo likely. Maybe coyotes scared 'em off. When I was looking for that Indian I saw some behind the Bull's-eye, too. They must be shooting the culls and bringing on only the stronger steers."

"Would they even do that to beat us?" asked Nell.

"Looks like it," Jim said. Now he pointed ahead. A couple of miles beyond cottonwoods showed the location of a small stream. Rolling hills closed in slightly there, making the trail somewhat narrower than in most places. "We'll camp there tonight," he said. "They'll have to stay south of us, and we can have a parley with them. They won't be able to get past us there, and they'll have to listen to reason."

"Then I'll go ahead," Nell offered, "and get the camp ready."

She lifted the mules to a trot. Jim sent Coosie after her. He told Slim that he would take the drag of the herd and that Slim and Mike should go on to the stream to keep the cattle from piling up when they got to water.

That would leave only himself and Yank with the herd. But the three loyal old-time Muleshoe cowboys would be with Nell Linden. It was like expecting lightning to strike, then picking the hour and place for the bolt to hit. It was creating a perfect set-up for the Bull's-eye and their buffalo hunters.

It would bring battle, but Jim was choosing the field and lining up his tiny army, and at sunset Running Wolf would be waiting beyond the stream ready to come in from the rear if necessary.

CHAPTER VI

JIM MAKES PLANS

THE wind, a faint breeze, was coming across the trail from the west, so it did not bring the scent of water to the thirsty cattle, and when Jim stopped urging them on they drifted very slowly, grazing as they moved ahead. The dust lowered, and the wind cut away the cloud between the two herds, and Jim, looking back, could now see the man riding point for the Bull's-eye, and the long, shining horns of the lead cattle.

Still Jim took it easy, riding off to the left to where he saw the covered wagon vanish into the cottonwoods with three riders close behind it. He cut over to the right to talk with Yank, and it was while he was on his way there that two horsemen broke from the Bull's-eye herd and came up at a fast trot.

"Looks like we're havin' visitors," Jim remarked to Yank.

He still did not know if he could trust this man who had once been with the Bull's-eye.

"Looks like Cave and Watson," Yank said.

Jim and Yank rode down to meet them. The two men trotted in, holding reins high, their hands away from

gun butts. The two parties halted about twenty yards from each other.

"Evenin', gents," Jim greeted. "Anything I can do for you?"

John Cave was a big man, and tough. He was obviously annoyed. Ted Watson, on the other hand, was studying Jim closely. The enmity of the previous meeting seemed to be missing in his expression. Cave did the talking.

"Looks like you're pitching camp on that creek," he said.

"Reckon it does," Jim agreed.

"Well—Ted and me come up to tell you to move on," Cave said shortly. "It's two hours until sundown, and we plan on watering our cattle and passing that creek before we stop for the night. You're blocking our way."

"I'm sure sorry about that," Jim spoke softly. "But I'm afraid we can't move on until tomorrow, Mr. Cave. I was plannin' on givin' those steers a good bellyful of water to start them on the next big jump."

The leaders of the Muleshoe herd had already smelled water, and were trotting toward the stream. Up there, Mike and Slim were riding hard, trying to keep the cattle from piling up in the nearest spot as those in the rear sensed the excitement of the others and began running, too.

Now the cattle were a black line clear across the trail, vanishing into the trees and brush lining the river.

"If that's the case," Cave said harshly, "we'll expect you to open a path for us so that we can come through."

Jim shook his head. His voice remained at the same low level.

"Don't reckon we can do that, either, Mr. Cave. Too narrow up there. And once your beef smells water, they'll break line. They'd spread all over that creek like our steers are doing now, and we'd all

lose another day cuttin' them out again. So I reckon you'll just have to wait until tomorrow."

Cave's eyes narrowed. He was not accustomed to having people talk to him like this.

"And if we can't hold our herd?" he asked.

"You can," Jim said. "You got plenty of men. But if you can't—I reckon I can drive 'em back, or turn 'em."

"You reckon," Cave said sarcastically. "There's only one way you can do it. And if you use bullets, we'll answer with bullets."

Now Jim smiled crookedly.

"That's better'n shootin' an unarmed man in the back of the head," he said gently.

The muscles covering Cave's cheek bones hardened. For a second it seemed that he was going to reach for a gun. Then his eyes dropped to Jim's arm. Apparently he had heard of that derringer Jim had carried, and Jim wondered what these other two men would do if Cave chose to shoot it out with him. One had been a hireling of his once, and might still be in his pay. The other was his trail boss.

Then John Cave breathed deeply. His glance moved from the sleeve in which he thought Jim carried the ugly, short gun.

"Come on," he said brusquely to Ted Watson. "I told you there was no use talking to that killer."

It seemed that Ted wanted to speak, but he clamped his mouth shut and rode off with his boss. When they were gone, Yank said to Jim:

"You talked straighter to him than anybody I ever heard. I liked that."

Jim looked Yank straight in the eye.

"When you signed onto the Mule-shoe, did you sign all the way?"

Yank nodded. Jim shook hands

with him. He believed this hombre.

"Then let's get up to the creek," he said. "They'll be coming through sometime tonight. There's plenty to do before then."

IT was sunset, and Jim brought Running Wolf back to camp to tell what he had seen. The Indian told it from the start, from finding Jim half dead down the red side of the Clear Fork of the Brazos, to his getting drunk at Vernon. He told about the buffalo hunters who had camped up the creek from the trail, in a little hollow there, and how one of their Comanches was even now watching them from the hill to the west. He told how he had seen Ted Watson and John Cave ride back to the Bull's-eye herd, and how not long after that one of the cowboys had drifted over the hills to the west and ridden hard to the spot where the buffalo hunters were camped. That cowboy was still there, Running Wolf said.

Then he fell silent, and eyes turned from him to Jim. Slim was still suspicious: Coosie, Mike and Yank seemed to have switched entirely to Jim's team. Nell's thin face was white, but her lips were set and the spirit of fight that had driven her to rounding up her boys and herd at Fort Griffin was in her again. She, and the rest, were looking to Jim, the man they had condemned, to tell them what to do. And Jim did not know.

"Me and Running Wolf," he said slowly, "figure John Cave paid those hunters to start the trouble in Fort Griffin. If your old man hadn't hit me on the head they probably would've cleaned out the lot of us right there. So Cave had them come up the trail, and when he stampedes through us tonight they'll come down an' run off the cattle. Take 'em east,

most likely, and peddle 'em. And Cave can say they're just a bunch of renegades, and nobody can prove different."

It was a fantastic, incredible story, and yet little signs pointed it out.

"Cave was along with Watson lookin' for that short cut," Yank said quietly. "And his boss didn't go lame. He could have gotten to Fort Griffin and back."

"I got to beg yore pardon, Jim," Slim said. "You tell me what to do and, by heck, I'll do it. I'll go up after them buffalo hunters single-handed."

"That would sure be a help," Jim laughed. He sobered as quickly. "As a matter of fact, I sort o' planned something like that for you. I want you and Mike to ride up the trail a couple of miles. I scouted out that country, and there's a round hill on the west side with a gully on the far end of it. If the buffalo men don't come down that gully, I miss my guess. And if you two can't stop 'em, you ain't Muleshoe boys." Slim nodded, and Jim added: "There's seven of 'em."

"Only seven!" Slim snorted. "And three of 'em Injuns. Holy smokes, I could—"

"One Injun better'n ten white men!" Running Wolf cut in. He scowled at Slim.

"White men," Slim said, "got a similar saying. Ever hear it, Running Wolf?"

"I hear it many times," Running Wolf still scowled. "But no white man ever say it to me who still alive."

Jim said hastily, before this could go any further:

"Me and Yank are goin' to ride herd, just like nothin' was up. Coosie, you and Nell go on up the trail about three-four miles. When the cattle come by, turn 'em. They'll

head right back for the creek."

The girl was suspicious.

"You're still trying to get us out of the way. These are my cattle. I'm staying with them."

"The best way to do that is for each of us to take a job and do it," Jim told her. "Slim and Mike are going to be too busy to keep those cattle from scattering from hell to breakfast. Yank and I are going to be plenty occupied down this way. And—"

"Me?" Running Wolf pointed to himself.

"Get your ten white men," Jim said. "Get their horses first. Don't shoot them unless you have to. They may be workin' for Cave, but chances are they don't—most of 'em—know what he's up to."

Running Wolf's eyes glittered. Nell Linden stepped back from the fire. She was small, even for a girl, but Jim was sorry for any one of the Bull's-eye outfit that should happen to run into her that night. He stood beside her. Briefly she touched his elbow.

"I'll see you in the morn'g," she said softly. "Come on, Coosie. We better be going."

CHAPTER VII

GUNSMOKE STAMPEDE

JIM sang of Billy Venero, of murder and Apaches, of the girl whose cowboy lover never reached her because he sacrificed his life to save her spread. He sang to the cows and to heaven as he rode back and forth across that narrow part of the trail, and he saw the Bull's-eye campfire wink out and on again as someone passed before it. Three miles away, they were, but the wind had shifted, and he knew that those steers must be restless with the smell of water in their dry nostrils. It would not be

long now, unless Jim O'Hara had missed his guess.

So Jim sang:

"—that a band of Apache Indians,
Were on the trail of Death;
Heard them tell of murder done—
Three men killed at Rocky Run—"

There it was again, someone riding in. Jim stopped singing long enough to say:

"Yank?"

"Jim?"

It was Ted Watson. He came on. Under the starlight they could see the glinting of each other's eyes, the reflection of stars on shiny butts of six-shooters. Men of a kind, both in love with the same girl, each the straw boss of warring factions.

"John sent me up," Ted said. "Seems our cows are gettin' restless. John says we can't hold 'em there another half hour unless the wind changes. Suggests you open up a path so his beef can come through."

"You tell him," Jim said, "to take his wind and to take his beef and—"

Ted laughed.

"I'd like to. But he don't expect me back."

"Huh?"

"He sort o' resented that crack you made about shooting unarmed men in the back of the head. So I told him you meant me. It's a funny thing, Jim. But I never thought John killed Linden until then. But he looked scared of his own shadow. He said if he'd thought you meant him, he would have shot you right there. Then he tells me to come over with this message. He knows I'm the only one who can show that he was in Fort Griffin that night. I even think he hired those buffalo hunters to start the fight. So he'll have things fixed and waiting for me. On the way back to camp he'll have

me bushwhacked—unless you and I shoot it out first."

"Nice feller," Jim said grimly.

Ted's hand dropped to his gun, then, and Jim did not try to beat him to the draw. The Bull's-eye man shot twice into the ground, closely spaced explosions that blended into one long roll. Then he triggered a third time and dismounted. Turning his horse back toward the Bull's-eye outfit, he slapped him on the rump. The horse hesitated for a moment, then trotted off into the night.

"Cave'll hear those shots," Ted said in a half whisper. "He'll wait for the horse to get back. When he's sure I'm gone he'll start the stampede."

Jim had to take Ted on faith. There was nothing else to do. And when this was over the two could finish their feud—if any of it were left. So they waited there, silently testing out each other, and two or three minutes later the ground began to tremble. From the Bull's-eye camp shots sounded. Moments later, the earth was actually shaking, and now that down-trail herd was bellowing.

"Know where I can get a boss?" Ted asked. "Maybe I shouldn't have sent mine back. I didn't figure he'd start until he was sure of me. Thought he'd wait."

Jim leaned down from the saddle. "I want to shake yore hand, Ted." They gripped, grinned. "There's plenty of horses in the cottonwoods, down by the creek, over by that hill to the east," Jim said. "But you better run, they're coming fast."

Ted ran, close along the line of trees. Now Muleshoe cattle were sniffing the air. One after another they got up from the ground, raised their noses to the night. Those that had been grazing began to trot north.

In the brush along the creek horns rattled and steers snorted.

Jim put the spurs to his mount and rode for the west side of the trail.

Now it seemed as if an earthquake had hit that part of the country; and in the pale starlight Jim could see the mass of longhorns thundering toward him. They spread out for half a mile, fifteen to twenty cattle deep, a great wave of maddened destruction. There was no stopping them or turning them now. They'd take along everything that got in their way.

JIM was near the trees when the first phalanx ripped by, a rider right on their tails. The horseman loomed up so quickly Jim did not



have time to bring his gun into play; but the second he saw this man a rifle spat above him, a horse

screamed. The Bull's-eye man went high in the air, came down like a sack of sand—and from a cottonwood branch over his head Jim heard Running Wolf talking to himself:

"One white man."

"This white man down here is me—Jim O'Hara!" shouted Jim.

"Maybe I shoot you later," Running Wolf warned. "You sing next time."

"I sure will sing," Jim thought.

He swept out of shelter, leaned down to drag the unconscious cowboy up the side of the hill away from the stampeding cattle. He took the man's guns and threw them away as he heard Running Wolf get his second man. Then he curved down again, skirting the herd, coming upon the men in the rear who were flapping slickers, howling and shooting to keep the cattle on the move. He aimed for their horses, too, shot them out from under them, but did not stop to disarm them, and in the choking black hell of dust he did not know how many he got or how many he missed; and he could not have told if Yank were there or Ted Watson; nor could they have told who he was.

All he could do was to ride hard, to take the men with slickers, to fire at gun flashes. And when someone loomed up who was silent, it was wiser to avoid him than to try to check his identity.

Clear across the rear of that stampede Jim rode, and back again, the dust stinging his eyes, tears running down his cheeks. Then he curved back, down trail. At the Bull's-eye camp were only the chuck and bed wagons, bedrolls spread out, a scattered fire, and the rickety old cook who had smuggled enough bottled goods from Vernon to still be drunk.

The boss? He didn't know where the boss was. The boss had sent Ted

Watson to the Muleshoe with the ultimatum, then he, too, had disappeared, and shortly after that there was the stampede. No, nobody had started that stampede; the cattle sniffing water had started it themselves right after the shooting by the creek.

Jim ransacked the wagons, found nothing. He spurred back up to the dust of the stampede, cut west over the hill. He passed the hastily doused fire of the buffalo hunters, and noticed that they had taken all their equipment with them. Then he spurred harder, and from the top of a rise he looked down on the broad trail.

John Cave had miscalculated one point. The long horns of the steers in a wild rush to get to water had become tangled in the brush along the creek. A great mass had piled up there, but others had broken through, and the black, swirling dust told of their presence below Jim. For two miles up trail this ebony cloud roiled and tumbled, and up there, tiny pin pricks of light, the steady staccato of six-shooters, told Jim that Nell and Coosie were doing their part to turn back the cattle.

Up there, too, on this side of the trail, the solid roar of guns told Jim he and Running Wolf had laid out correctly the route of the buffalo hunters. They had not gotten through the gully. Slim and Mike were holding them there.

Jim rolled the spurs again, alone in the night. The dust cloud was rising higher, but not spreading, when he dropped down to the west of the hill and came around the rear of the gully. Here he dismounted.

Snorting horses! He found them, cut them loose, slashing at the picket pins, and as he was doing this, his heart beat with sudden frenzy. One of these animals was hot, wet with

sweat. The saddle was damp and warm; a fine saddle with silver inlay; a saddle carrying a hand-tooled carbine holster—John Cave's saddle!

Jim went on. A bullet whistled by. Spotting gun flashes, he pictured the layout of the buffalo men and the manner in which they had fortified up. Eight of them in here, but not eight of them firing, and beyond a rifle and a six-shooter punching out lead with deathly regularity.

Jim edged around, found cover. He saw the face of a buffalo hunter in the flash of his own gun and fired very carefully.

That buffalo man folded up silently.

Guns faltered then. Jim had to scream to make himself heard over the bellow of cattle and the pound of their hoofs. He guessed by the sound that Nell and Coosie had gotten the cattle milled just below, beyond the gully.

"Come out of there!" Jim howled. "We got you surrounded."

The guns were still. Someone took a pot shot at him and he got that man before the powder stopped burning. There was a conference, then someone shouting:

"All right—we're comin'!"

They came up, their hands high. A Comanche, looking bold, disdainful. A hunter Jim had never seen before. The man who had thrown the bottle into the street of Fort Griffin and started all the trouble. This man looked as if he were trying to chin himself on the sky, he reached so high. And behind him was John Cave.

Cave was cold as an oyster. He might have been congratulating Jim on a good game of checkers.

"I didn't think you could do it, Jim," he said.

"But we did," Jim told him.

Mike and Slim had not yet had

time to come up there. Jim shouted for them. He was covering too many people here in the starlight, and the dust still fogged his eyes. He had ridden too far and too fast, and he hadn't yet gotten to the bottom of Cave's treacherous soul.

Suddenly Cave stumbled. At the same time the Comanche flicked a knife from a sheath down the back of his neck. The knife got Jim in the shoulder, and the bullet from Cave's gun slicked past his throat. Jim went to his knees. Cave shot again, slapping Jim over as if he had been kicked by a mule. Then Cave and the Comanche ran hard for their horses, not knowing that Jim had driven them from the gully.

Gritting his teeth, Jim rolled over. It took both hands to hold up that six-shooter. But he only shot twice. Cave plowed over on his face. The Comanche bent in the middle, slid sidewise and vanished into the gloom.

THE acrid smell of gunpowder and cattle, of dust and sweat—the smell of whiskey and the blazing hell that was made up of two bullet holes and a long knife gash. But through them all came the thin, sweet fragrance of the wild rose, and Jim knew that Nell Linden was near, that it was her small, delicate hands that so tenderly ministered to his hurts.

He whispered through the haze of pain:

"How's it goin', Nell? Everybody accounted for?"

"We turned the cattle," she said. "They're back on the creek. Ted turned most of them. He's down there now. Ted and Yank. And that buffalo hunter told us what happened down at Griffin. I'm sorry, Jim."

Something very soft and warm and

sweet touched Jim's lips. A kiss? Yes, for the fragrance of Nell was close, and her hair brushed his forehead with a sweet, soothing caress.

When she was sitting up again, something still bothered Jim.

"Running Wolf?" he asked.

At first there was no answer. There had to be an answer. What had happened to Running Wolf?

Slim tried to tell it straight.

"I guess he's counting up his ten white men," he said.

Anger burned through Jim. This was no time for wisecracks. Then he heard a muttering. He sat up, with Nell's arm strong on his back, and through the starlight a little procession approached them. Jim could not count, but he saw Running Wolf, grinning like his namesake, herding along a band of cowboys, and he heard Slim breathe:

"Well, I'll be jiggered! He done it. Seven-eight-nine-ten . . . I'll be a Piute."

"Better be a Piute than a no-good cowboy," Running Wolf said. "What you say, Slim, one white man better'n ten what?"

"I ain't never sayin' it again," Slim said.

Jim grinned and his hand found Nell's. It came to him that for the first time in weeks he could relax, rest. In a few days the Muleshoe cattle would be in Dodge City—and, wherever he was, Big Tom Linden would be nodding approvingly because his cows were first. Some day soon, Jim thought dreamily, he'd get around to asking Nell that question that had been on the tip of his tongue so long. Or maybe he wouldn't even have to ask her, for it seemed to him that the answer was there, glowing in her dark, luminous eyes.

IRONCLAD ALIBI

BY HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

DEL LUNDY saw Sheriff Pete Judith picking his way along the plank catwalk that ran around the top of the shipping pens, and he moved over so that there was room for the

lawman to sit down at his side. Half of Elk Lodge was here, it seemed, watching the Wagon Rod crew put its fall beef aboard the cars.

"Nice-looking stuff," Pete com-



Lundy sprang toward the weaving figure and struck hard enough to kill.

mented with interest. Though he was still a young man, the bite of the rising clouds of dust, the bawling steers and the shrill cries of the men carried him back to days when he had sweated in these same railroad corrals for Quade Lannigan's outfit.

"Yeah, it grades up pretty nice," Lundy agreed without enthusiasm.

Pete thought he knew what the other had on his mind. "Too bad you didn't get to handle this bunch, Del," he said.

"Lannigan didn't like my proposition," Lundy volunteered. He bought cattle and wool on commission for a Chicago firm, in addition to his hay and grain business. "He thinks he'll do better this way. I know different, but you can't reason with the drunken old fool. I've had trouble every time I've done business with him. Maybe I'm better off that I didn't get his stuff."

He was just putting up a brave front, for he had counted on making a deal with Quade Lannigan. The commission would have enabled him to straighten out his tangled financial affairs which were far worse than he had given anyone reason to suspect.

Through the dust, Lundy could see Lannigan, a red-necked arrogant tyrant, at the chute, tallying the count that his foreman bawled out. Lundy had never liked the man, and as he gazed at him now hatred thinned his lips.

"Coarse, drunken swine!" he thought, watching Lannigan tilt a bottle to his lips during a momentary lull in the work as one pen was emptied and he waited for his men to run back the gate to the next.

"The way they're going at it, they'll be through by evening," Pete observed. His interest was no longer confined to the work. His

roving eyes had discovered two strangers among the onlookers. Their hard-bitten faces suggested something to him, and he was instantly curious. "Don't look now, Del," he said, "but when you get a chance, take a squint at that pair across the way. See if you know who they are."

Lundy stole a furtive glance at the strangers.

"I can't help you, Pete," he said. "I never laid eyes on them before. What are you thinking?"

"Nothing particular," the sheriff said in his slow, easy way. "They may be perfectly all right. But you know how Lannigan is at shipping time. He'll be rip-roaring drunk by evening, and so will his crew. They're all here, even the cook, and they'll be in town all night."

LUNDY nodded. Pete was only putting into words what he himself had been turning over in his mind as he sat there. Lannigan wouldn't deposit his money at the bank. He didn't trust banks. Nor would he drink himself under the table.

Judging his capacity to a nicety, Lannigan would continue his carousing until he was just able to climb into his saddle under his own power and then head for the Wagon Rod, a gun in his fist and as dangerous as a rattler until he was a few miles, one side or the other, of Frenchman's Creek. By that time his head would be on his chest. Sound asleep, he would leave it to his horse to take him home. Through the years it had become a routine with which Elk Lodge was thoroughly familiar.

"That's a lonely road," Pete remarked reflectively. "It would be mighty easy to knock Lannigan off, with all that money on him. I've

often wondered why it never happened."

"He's too doggoned ornery, I guess," Lundy muttered. It wasn't what he was thinking. Easy, Pete had said. It would be, if a man wasn't under suspicion and had a credible alibi. "Going?" he asked as Pete got up.

"Yeah. I'll see what I can find out about those birds during the day. Maybe they're just a couple of punchers drifting south from the Piegan country for the winter."

Lundy nodded. Suspicion was a funny thing he thought. Here was Pete, asking himself questions, scenting trouble, simply because these two men were strangers. Maybe they were horse thieves or rustlers; maybe there wasn't a wrong bone in their bodies. On the other hand, if you got to know a man over a period of years, and took a liking to him, he'd be the last person in the world you'd suspect if something happened.

"That's the way it is with Pete and me," Lundy told himself. "If Lannigan gets tapped on the head tonight and relieved of his money, Pete wouldn't think of accusing me unless I left some evidence for him to find."

Lannigan would have better than ten thousand dollars on him when he headed for home tonight. Lundy tried to put all thought of it out of his mind, but it was a lodestone so powerful that he found it difficult to focus his attention on anything else. In the end, he caught himself contemplating the robbery in detail. He owned a small ranch in the Bitterroot Hills. He hadn't kept anyone there for several years, finding it more profitable to lease his range to one of the big spreads. But he spent considerable time there, shooting grouse and sage hen or keeping

the house in repair. It wasn't too far from Wagon Rod.

"It could be done," he mused. "I could give out that I was going up to the ranch, and then turn off up Frenchman's Creek and wait for Lannigan to come along. I could be at my place two hours later."

But such an arrangement left too much to chance, and Lundy was quick to see it.

"That won't do," he decided, his face dark with brooding. "It would be different if I could prove that I was somewhere else when the robbery was committed. This way, I'd be apt to get caught."

No other consideration held him back. Needing the money desperately, hating Lannigan, he had no moral scruples about it. Up to now, he had led an honest life. When he had money, he spent it liberally, lived like a gentleman. He had friends. On the other hand Quade Lannigan had no friends. He lived like a pig and buried his money in the ground. A cursing tyrant, brutal, miserly when sober, he was despised even by the men who worked for him. Lundy had only to cast up the account to find full justification for the step he was considering.

"No one would feel sorry for him," he argued. "Pete would sure do his duty, and he's smart. But I'm smart, too. I'll think of something."

NOON came and Lundy was still sitting there. He climbed down from his perch and started back to town, but before he got away, he came face to face with Lannigan. They glared at each other, and Lundy would have gone on, but the old man blocked his way.

"What the devil are you showin' such a long face about?" he growled. "I'll sell my stuff where I please! I won't have no blood sucker like

you livin' off me if I know it!"

Lundy's eyes burned with contempt. "I don't want any words with you, Quade," he said tensely. "You handle your business the way you please, and I'll do the same."

Lannigan thrust out his jaw beligerently.

"Why, you doggoned little dude, are you tryin' to tell me off?" he roared. "I've a mighty good notion to kick the daylight out of you for that!"

Lundy's blue eyes glinted coldly. Robbery, he told himself, wouldn't be enough. He wanted to bash in the head of this coarse, bullying cur, and he longed to do it here and now. But a flash of caution stopped him. A row with Lannigan would be remembered. He couldn't afford that, not with what he had in mind.

"Get out of my way," he said.

Lannigan let him go, but he sent a mocking laugh after him. "Small pot, soon hot!" he jeered.

The incident clinched the matter in Lundy's mind. By the time he reached his shabby office the last lingering doubt was gone.

"I'd go through with it now if I knew I was going to swing for it," he muttered, seething with indignation that was so deceptively self-righteous that he felt more like a martyr than a criminal.

Through the window he saw Lannigan ride up to the hotel, fling himself from the saddle and march into the bar, noisy, offensive.

"Like a hog at a trough," Lundy thought.

He ate at the hotel, but he decided to wait until Lannigan had returned to the shipping pens. He had plenty to engage his thoughts, and as his anger cooled he applied himself to evolving a plan that would put him in the clear. He found it more easily than he had supposed.

He would go to his ranch, as he had first contemplated, but on the way, he would stop at Gass Duford's sheep camp. Gass and he were good friends and they often had deals together. What more natural than that he should stop for a talk with Duford?

But instead of going straight to Duford's place when he left town, he would turn off when he reached the north fork of the Shell, follow the stream for half a mile to break his trail, and then cut across country to the Wagon Rod. He'd go straight to the house and wait for Lannigan to show up. That business would take only a few minutes. He'd get back to the Shell in a hurry and stop, as he had advertised, for a chat with Gass. He could go on to his own place then, bury the money and spend a day or two shooting grouse or chicken. If the news of what had happened to Lannigan did not reach him up in the hills, he would return to town and be properly surprised at the story of the robbery.

LUNDY went over the plan step by step and could find nothing wrong with it. Only one thing troubled him: he had to be sure that no one else had designs on Lannigan that night. He was thinking of the two strangers. He had laughed at Pete Judith's suspicion of them, but now it was a matter of sober concern to him.

Pete relieved his mind on that score a few minutes later, for as he ate his dinner the sheriff walked into the dining room and took a chair at his table.

"I was wrong about those boys," Pete remarked. "They told a pretty straight story. They're Wyoming bound. Got winter jobs waiting for them down in Cody."

"I hope you're right," Lundy said with undiluted honesty. "When are they leaving town?"

"They've pulled out already."

Lundy let it go at that. He knew it wasn't necessary to point out that the two men could circle back north if they were so minded. Pete would think of that when news of the robbery reached him. It would be his first thought. "I couldn't ask for a better break," Lundy told himself. He felt safe enough to say: "I'm going up to the ranch for a day or two. Bill Hoffman says there's more game than usual this fall."

"So I hear," Pete agreed. "I wish I were going up with you, Del. When you leaving?"

"This evening, after supper. I've got to see Gass. I'll spend an hour or two with him on my way up. We made some money on hay last winter. With the options I've got, we ought to do even better this year."

"It depends on what kind of a winter we get," the sheriff observed.

Lundy nodded. He was on record now. Shrewd, intelligent, he knew it would be a mistake to say too much.

During the afternoon Lundy dropped into Chris Brown's hardware store and bought several boxes of shells. He didn't need them but there was a reason for the purchase. If a man bought shells, it followed that he was going hunting, and he was always asked when and where.

It was only a minor detail, but Lundy wasn't overlooking anything. Calm, confident of success, a strange sense of exhilaration took possession of him. It was as though he were playing a game—putting together an intricate puzzle.

A few minutes after five, the work done, the Wagon Rod crew raced past Lundy's office. Quade Lanni-

gan rode by a few minutes later.

"I guess I can get moving," Lundy murmured.

Turning the key in the lock, he went to the livery barn and got his horse. An early supper, and he was ready to leave. Pete Judith waved a hand at him as he rode out of town. Lundy headed north at an easy pace.

"I'll give that polecat three hours to get tanked up," he said, thinking of Lannigan, "but I'll be ready for him if he shows up sooner than I figure."

North of town, Lundy met a Mule-shoe rider and exchanged a friendly word with him. After that, he encountered no one until he was within three miles of Gass Duford's sheep camp. Again he stopped for a word. This time it was Dutch Weidler, a hay rancher.

"I guess you're goin' up to see Gass, huh?" Dutch queried. Eyes narrowed, he waited for his answer.

"Yeah." Lundy felt a warm glow of satisfaction steal through his body. If he ever needed to prove that he had gone straight to Duford's place, he knew he could do it now.

Dutch confided that he was going over to spend the evening with his brother on the Little Bull. He had a question or two to ask about the price of hay. Lundy answered at length, though the subject held no interest for him now.

"Well, so long, Del," Dutch said and rode off in the deepening twilight.

Lundy continued on his way. He knew he was safe as far as Dutch was concerned; the Little Bull was far to the east.

Fifteen minutes later, Lundy reached the north fork of the Shell. At this time of the year the river was only a shrunken, boulder-strewn shadow of its normal self. Half-

way across, Lundy swung his horse upstream.

It was tough, slippery going. Realizing that a lame horse meant disaster, he let the animal set its own pace. Even so, it went to its knees once, and Lundy held his breath until it recovered.

HERE in the bottoms, it was blacker than midnight, the willow brakes rising in a solid wall on either shore. Lundy didn't mind; he knew where he was, and the eerie hooting of an owl only made him smile.

"Far enough!" he decided finally. A few minutes' search showed him an opening in the trees. He sent his horse up the bank at once. It was still a good eight miles to the Wagon Rod house. Suddenly impatient to be there, he started to rake his mount with the spurs. He checked himself, however, before the rowels bit into the dun's sleek hide.

"No!" he chided. "I've used my brains up to now. I'll continue to use them. If I get there before the moon comes up, it'll be time enough."

The fact that he could discipline himself, use his head, made Lundy more confident of success than ever. He wasn't any thick-skulled range thief, dependent on the undeveloped intelligence of a child. He knew that breed, and he didn't wonder that they were everlastingly tripping themselves. He didn't intend to end up that way.

Alert, wary, Lundy rode on. He was in sight of the dark, silent Wagon Rod house before the moon gave notice of its coming. Lundy had been here often enough to know his way around. Avoiding the road, deep in dust, that led up to the door, he swung around by the barns. His gun ready for an emergency, he reached the cottonwoods that cast

their dark shadow over the corrals. Here Lannigan would have to pass within a few feet of him. He had nothing to do now but wait.

Presently the moon crept up over the eastern tip of the hills and the shadows under the cottonwoods deepened. The dusty ranchyard became a silvery, wind-pocked lake. A man could see a long way. Lundy had come prepared. Taking out a dark silk handkerchief, he tied it over his face so that only his eyes were showing. He knew he might have a long wait, possibly an hour, but he settled down to it with a patience that surprised him. But when the hour had passed and a second dragged slowly by, doubts began to assail him. Maybe Lannigan had misjudged his capacity and got so drunk that he was unable to ride home. Maybe he had been stuck up by someone else.

Lundy winced at the thought. "Nerves bothering me or I wouldn't be thinking such stuff," he murmured. "He'll be along. I'll give him another fifteen minutes."

He knew he dared not wait much longer or his carefully planned alibi would fall apart.

A few feet away a shaft of moonlight filtered down through the trees. Lundy moved over to it and was about to pull out his watch when he suddenly froze to attention, ears cocked. Unmistakably he caught the soft *plod plod* of a horse.

"Coming!" he muttered. "And taking his grand old time, the skunk!"

He saw Lannigan then, hunched over in his saddle, sound asleep. Straight to the corrals the horse brought him. Lundy could see the tough little bronc arching its shaggy head inquiringly and wriggling its back as though to tell its rider that

he was home. Lannigan half raised his head.

"G'wan!" he growled.

When his mount refused to move, he stared about him with fogged eyes and seemed finally to realize that he was home. He tried to get out of the saddle and after three or four clumsy attempts, managed to hit the ground on his feet.

Lundy was upon him before he had taken half a dozen steps. With all the strength in his thin shoulders he brought his gun barrel down on Lannigan's head.

IT was a smashing blow. The rancher's surprised grunt seemed to pop out of his mouth. His knees sagged. Lundy expected to see him go sprawling. But his hat, or maybe just the thickness of his skull, saved Lannigan. If the blow failed to sober him, it at least gave him sense enough to realize that he was being stuck up. His answer was immediate. Snarling like a wounded animal, he flung himself at his assailant.

Lundy was ready for him. This time his gun laid Lannigan's head open, and the rancher went down like a poled ox. With his boot Lundy rolled him over on his back, and all the hatred he bore Lannigan was in his face as he stared at him.

"You had this coming to you, you swollen, sodden pig!" he growled.

He found the money in Lannigan's belt. Ripping the belt off, he crammed it into his pocket. A minute later, he was riding away. Every second counted now. Although the night was still young, for Lundy's purposes it was late, almost too late. Before he had gone a hundred yards he had lifted his horse to a gallop, and he held that pace until he was back at the Shell.

He didn't give Lannigan another thought; his only concern was to

reach Gass Duford's camp in a hurry. It wasn't necessary for him to retrace his way down the river. By striking straight across, he could be at Duford's place in a few minutes.

With the moonlight to help him, he got across the river and fought through the brakes to the road. His horse was steaming. There was no hiding the fact that the animal had been run hard.

"It'll be all right," Lundy told himself. "Gass will be indoors. I'll barge right in on him and he won't notice the bronc."

A bend in the road brought him in sight of Duford's place. Not a light showed.

"Hang it!" Lundy grunted. "He's gone to bed already! That'll make it seem later than it is."

He considered going on without stopping but decided against that. He had made his plans, and he would stick to them, even though it meant explaining how he had met Dutch Weidler within a few miles of the camp early that evening.

Leaving his horse at the rack, he hammered on the door and called out to Duford. Getting no answer, he tried it again, and with no better results.

The door was not locked. Lundy pushed it open and called a third time. The silence remained unbroken.

"Not here," he exclaimed, angry and disgusted. "The one time I need him I find him up the hills or off visiting."

This was only a surmise, based on the fact that Gass seldom stirred far from home.

Confronted with the unexpected, Lundy's thoughts began to race. With Gass absent, his alibi was shot to pieces. If he—

"That's silly," he corrected himself. "I've got it! I'll leave a note

for Gass and pull out of here before he shows up. I'll say I waited around over an hour for him. That'll make my story check with Weid-ler's. Dutch's word will be just as good as Duford's."

He found a piece of paper in his pocket. Flattening it out on his saddle, he wrote a hasty note:

Why don't you stay to home? Waited around for you all evening. Going up to do a little shooting. Will stop on the way down.
DEL.

He marked it eight-thirty. It seemed to cover everything.

Without bothering to strike a light, Lundy stepped into the house and placed the note on the table where Gass would be sure to find it. That done, he was in as big a hurry to get away as he had been to get there.

AN hour later Lundy reached his own place. He was well satisfied with the way things had worked out. Getting a shovel, he dug a hole in the corral and buried the money. He turned his horse into the inclosure then and the weary animal rolled in the dust.

"That does it," Lundy smiled. "No sign of my work left at all."

He made himself a pot of coffee and got out his pipe. The night was mild. For an hour he sat outside, smoking, his thoughts all of the future. He realized that he couldn't touch the money taken from Lannigan for several months. He didn't mind waiting; it would be there when he needed it.

Up on the bluffs in back of the house, a dog coyote trotted out into the open and bayed at the moon. It gave Lundy a pleasant sense of isolation. When he turned in for the night, his sleep was deep and untroubled.

He was up early, as a man would be who was here to shoot sage hen. At this time of the morning the birds would be moving in to water. Later in the day they would be hard to find.

He had a look in the corral before starting off.

"Fine," he thought. "It would take even me a little time to find the spot."

He was back at noon burdened with no less than a dozen young hens. He rather expected to find Pete Judith awaiting him. But the sheriff was not there, nor did he put in an appearance until late the following day. Lundy stepped out of the house and called a greeting as Pete rode down the draw.

"So you're all right," Pete said. "I was a little worried about you."

"Worried?" Lundy grinned. "What is it, Indians or an earthquake?"

"It's bad enough," Pete replied, sober-faced.

Lundy's flippancy faded. "What do you mean?" he asked, sure of what was coming.

"Some of the Wagon Rod boys found Lannigan out in back of the house early yesterday morning with his head bashed in and his money gone. Doc Cleveland says it would have killed anyone but Quade."

"Well, that's news," Lundy declared with shocked surprise. "But I'll be honest with you, Pete; I haven't any sympathy for him. As you said the other day, he's been asking for this a long time."

"Yeah, I know," Judith murmured, taking a seat on the steps and getting out his tobacco. "You haven't seen anyone, I suppose."

"No, I've been here alone." Lundy gave the sheriff a glance. "What about that pair we saw at the ship-ping pens?"

"They may have swung back," Judith admitted. "I thought of that, of course. How did you come up, Del?"

"By way of the river and Duford's place," was the ready answer. Lundy was confident, easy in his mind. "I met Dutch Weidler just below the ford."

"Yeah, I know," Pete nodded. "Dutch told me he had bumped into you."

Lundy's eyes sharpened with an obscure interest. Judith had got around to asking Dutch questions in a hurry, he thought. It was like a bell touching off a secret alarm in his mind.

PETE was idly drawing cattle brands in the dust with the end of a match. "How much time did you spend with Gass?" he asked without looking up.

Lundy was ready with the truth. "I didn't see him at all," he said. "Gass wasn't home. I hung around an hour or more and then came on up here— Why do you ask?"

Judith continued to play with the match. "I was hoping you hadn't done more than look in."

"I don't get you," Lundy murmured, more puzzled than he let on. "You know I always spend a lot of time there. I left a note—"

"I read it," Pete declared woodenly. "You marked it eight-thirty. What made you so sure of the time?"

"Why, the clock on the wall—"

Judith shook his head as though regretting some secret conclusion. "It's strange that you could have gone by Duford's clock," he observed quietly. "The mainspring is broken. The clock hasn't been running for two weeks."

Lundy felt his throat tighten with a quick stab of fear. "Maybe it wasn't the clock— I don't know.

It isn't important. I may have glanced at my watch."

"In the dark?" Pete was quick with his question.

"What do you mean?" Lundy demanded indignantly. "Do you think I sat there all that time without lighting a lamp? I made myself to home as I always do. I played solitaire for a while and thumbed through some of Gass' old magazines— But why all the questions, Pete? Why are you so concerned about me?"

"I'm not concerned about you, Del." Judith's words were measured, grave. "I'm thinking about Gass Duford. He was murdered night before last."

"What!" Lundy gasped. "Murdered? In a flash he realized where he stood. With the blood draining away from his face, he stared at the sheriff. "Pete, what's the meaning of all these questions?" he exclaimed. "You think I had something to do with it." He groaned at the thought. "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, I certainly didn't kill him! I don't know anything about it. How was he killed?"

"He was shot."

Lundy wet his dry lips. "This knocks me flat," he admitted heavily. "I don't know what to say. It must have been those two men, Pete. They must have got him after I left."

"Gass was killed at three minutes past eight," Pete said quietly. "His watch stopped when he went down. According to your story, that's the very time you were there." He drilled Lundy with a long glance. "How do you explain that?"

"Why it must have happened before I got there. What other explanation is there?" Lundy knew he had need of his wits now. "When I said I hung around for an hour or

so, I was just guessing at it. After all, Gass was my friend. I had no reason to kill him."

Judith got up, his lean face grim and resolute. "That's not a very satisfactory answer," he said. "You admit you were there long enough to play cards and read magazines. Why didn't you see the body? It was there, lying on the floor all the while."

Lundy stared at him with popping eyes, helpless, transfixed.

"I'm sorry," Pete said, "but you haven't left yourself an out. The evidence is all against you— If there's anything here that needs your attention, you better see to it, Del. I've got to take you in."

DEL Lundy sat there stunned, desperate, all his cunning and cleverness at an end. He knew he was trapped; that he could not hope to win free, though he had an alibi that was ironclad as far as the slaying of Gass Duford was concerned. It meant confessing that it was he who had robbed Quade Lannigan.

"No, I won't do it," he thought. "I won't admit anything. They'd send me up for five years at least."

But he only had to consider the alternative to realize that he dared not remain silent. The bitter and ironic justice of having to acknowledge his own crime to escape the

consequence of another of which he was wholly innocent was lost on him.

"Come on, Del," Judith urged. "We have a long way to go."

"Wait!" Lundy burst out. "I've got to talk to you, Pete! I . . . I've lied to you from first to last. I was at Duford's place only a minute or two. I wrote that note outside on my saddle and put it on the table without striking a light. It was after ten—not eight-thirty. I . . . I guess you know why I wanted to make it appear that I had been there so much earlier."

Pete Judith nodded thoughtfully. "There's only one answer to it. What did you do with the money, Del?"

"I buried it—there in the corral."

"Get the shovel," Judith told him. "We'll dig it up." His manner said that he found no pleasure in his success. "I feel as bad about it as you do. You might have got away with it if Dutch hadn't decided to settle his grudge against Duford just when he did."

"Dutch?" Lundy gasped. "Do you mean to tell me he killed Gass?"

"Yeah. He's admitted it."

"Blast you, Judith!" Lundy cried, shaking with fury. "You tricked me! You knew all the time that I had nothing to do with the murder!"

"Of course," Judith agreed, "and when you began lying to me, I had the answer to the rest of it."

THE END.



Spike crawled toward the claim—everything depended on his getting down into the shaft without being seen from the cabin.



POLECAT PAYOFF

BY M. HOWARD LANE

THE country down here was beautiful. Green hills swept away from the wooded trough of the Hassayampa River Valley. Wild turkeys gobbled in the oaks, and the horseman jogging down the slanting trail to the bench above the river startled a doe and two wobbly fawns who tried to imitate their mother's graceful leaps as she sought deeper cover.

Spike Allison grinned at the sight, and rubbed his snub nose. It had been a long time since he had seen deer or anything else except men in stripes. He had spent the last two and a half years in Arizona's Territorial Prison, a victim of his own kind heart.

He had bought a horse from a down-at-the-heel gambler who had stopped off at Spike and old Bed-

rock Ramsey's Hassayampa claim, with a hard-luck story. And the first time red-headed Spike rode the horse into Prescott, Sheriff Nat Wineman had clapped him behind bars. The animal, it seemed, belonged to a rancher down Wickenburg way.

As the sheriff had pointed out to a jury that had no use for horse thieves anyway, Spike Allison could easily have left the placer claim long enough to steal the horse. The lawman had also pointed out that homely men were never as dumb as they looked, and therefore Spike could easily have made up that story about the gambler. Bedrock Ramsey had corroborated his young partner's testimony, but Bedrock's reputation had been against him. He was too fond of the cup that cheers

to be a reliable witness. So Spike had gone to jail, and nobody but Bedrock had particularly regretted it.

During the two and a half years that Spike had served of a three-year sentence, Bedrock had written faithfully, telling of how he was saving all of their gold and not spending it on *Shepherd's Delight*. Spike felt now as though he knew just as much about their claim as if he'd been here all the time.

Staring over the top of the shack, two hundred yards ahead, he could see the gaunt frame of a windlass high on a second bench. Bedrock had the idea that the bench had once caught and held a goodly share of placer gold. So he had started to dig a shaft to bedrock. His last letter had mentioned that he was getting close to the jackpot and might have a big surprise for Spike when he got home.

Spike was close enough now to halloo the cabin. He did so, and his voice came floating back in echoes that somehow had a mocking sound. Nobody appeared in the cabin doorway. Spike wrinkled his brow. He swung down from the crowbait horse he had bought with money the warden had given him on leaving, and stamped through the open door of the cabin.

Bedrock wasn't here, but everything else was just as Spike remembered it. A bunk against each end wall. Some old magazines gathering dust in a corner. The rickety old cook stove with a couple of shelves above it holding groceries.

Spike moved to the stove and lifted the lid. White ash lay against the grate, but when he poked the ashes he found live coals beneath them. Bedrock hadn't been gone for more than twelve hours, Spike decided. He spied the last letter he

had written Bedrock tucked under a corner of his partner's pillow, and he also discovered two empty quart bottles of Wickenburg's Snake-head Special. Stooping, he picked up one bottle, sniffed it. The aroma still lingered.

"That old cuss has done gone to Prescott on a spree," Spike said philosophically. And yet somehow that didn't seem just right. His last letter to Bedrock had told when he expected to arrive, and it was strange that the old prospector wasn't here to welcome him.

Spike moved back outside, six long feet of perturbed man. Something was wrong and he couldn't put his finger on the trouble. A little reluctantly he climbed his crowbait again.

LA TE afternoon was casting the shadows of false fronts across the dust of Apache Street when Spike jogged into Prescott. The first person he saw as he passed the stage station was one man he didn't want to meet—Sheriff Nat Wineman.

The lawman came bustling down the steps, sun glittering off the silver star pinned to his open vest. Spike pretended that he didn't see the sheriff. But even with his head turned the other way, he couldn't help but hear Wineman's bawl.

"Hey, there, Allison, I want to talk to you!"

Spike felt his big ears start to burn.

"Come on over here," Wineman yelled. "You hear me?"

Spike gave up, and turned the crowbait to the hitch rail in front of the stage office.

"Everybody else is going to hear you too," he said plaintively.

"Don't give a hoot if they do," the sheriff bellowed. He was a little man, and he tried to make up for it

by talking loud. "My life's an open book for any man to read."

"Any voter!" Spike corrected.

Wineman had the grace to drop his voice a trifle. "I got a letter from the warden, saying they were lettin' you out on parole, account of good behavior. The date was two weeks ago. It don't take no two weeks to ride from Yuma to here. Whereat you been?"

Spike kept his voice unruffled. "Ridin'," he said easily. "Pickin' me up a tan on the way."

The sheriff looked suspicious. "You ain't got a gun about you?" he asked.

Spike answered him with a wide grin. "Now, Nat," he said reproachfully, "you ain't going to get me tossed back in jail so easy."

"Mebbe you're wrong about that," the sheriff said darkly. "Whereat is that partner of yours?" He had to thunder the question because the afternoon stage from Wickenburg was rolling into the station behind them.

Spike hardly heard the rattle of the coach and six. Something like a fist had knotted hard in the pit of his stomach.

"Where is Bedrock?" he repeated slowly. "Why, Nat, that's just what I was going to ask you."

"Me!" Wineman bellowed. "Now you looky here, young feller; I'm asking the questions."

"Then you better give me something to bite on before you ask any more."

The sheriff calmed down again. "It's like this," he said gruffly. "Bedrock ain't been seen since his last spree a week ago, and he didn't take no liquor home with him. I checked on that with the barkeep up at the Gold-dust, and I rode down to your claim yistiddy and couldn't find him."

Spike remembered the bed of live coals in the stove, and the empty whiskey bottles beneath Bedrock's bunk. The knot got tighter in his stomach, but he showed the sheriff a bland face.

"So you figger I got back here a few days ago," he said, "and mebbe tossed Bedrock in the river so's I could claim all of our danged claim. That's what you're thinkin', isn't it?" Spike gave the lawman a hard look. "You'd never have such thoughts if I hadn't been stuck in the pen for buyin' a wet horse!"

The sheriff moved his feet uneasily. "I ain't a-figgerin' anything of the sort," he blustered. "I'm just a-askin' if you know what's done happened to Ramsey—"

ARE you referring to Bedrock Ramsey, by any chance?" a voice asked.

Spike had seen the speaker stop on the boardwalk behind the sheriff. He and another man with him had dust in the creases of their long black coats. Apparently they had just arrived on the Wickenburg stage. Spike looked them over more closely now.

The one who had spoken was a big, soft-faced man, save for his mouth, which was a thin, down-curving slit. The hombre standing alongside him wasn't so big, and his clothes didn't fit him very well, and they looked like they'd been bought in a hurry. Both of the men, Spike judged, were somewhere in their forties.

Wineman had turned at the question. "Yeah," he said bluntly, "we're referring to Bedrock Ramsey. Do you know where he is?" he added sarcastically.

The soft-faced man nodded. "Why, yes," he said calmly. "In Tucson."

The shock was almost too much for the sheriff. He had to hook his elbows over the hitch rail to steady himself.

"In Tucson," he gasped. "How in tarnation did the old sidewinder get there?"

The big stranger laughed. "That's quite a story," he said cheerily, "so perhaps I'd better introduce myself before telling it. Sam Lockwood is my name. And this is my partner, Seth Towers."

The sheriff began to look interested. "You going into business here?" he asked cordially.

Spike knew Wineman was thinking about votes again. He wished that the lawman would shut up and let Lockwood do the talking.

"This red-topped young feller here"—Wineman gestured at Spike—"is Bedrock's partner, Spike Allison."

Lockwood ducked under the rail and came up beside Spike's horse. "You're just the chap I'm looking for!" he said heartily, and held up his hand.

Spike took it. The man had a good firm clasp. So firm that Spike could feel blisters that had broken and pocked the skin of the man's soft palm.

"Why you lookin' for me?" he asked.

Lockwood reached inside his coat and drew out a slightly soiled envelope with Spike's name scrawled across it. The handwriting was Bedrock's all right. The way the old-timer wrote when he was drunk.

"With your permission, gentlemen," Spike drawled. He opened the envelope. The note read:

Kid, I have done sold the claim to a couple of fellas name of Lockwood and Towers. They rode through the Hassayampa three, four months back, but I wouldn't sell then account of I wanted to get to

bedrock on the bench fust. Figgered if I was right we'd clean up and if I warn't that I could sell and we'd hit the jackpot anyway.

Waal, the gold warn't at bedrock, so, seein' as you give me the right to sign for both of us while you was away, I done sold out.

Meet me at the Comanche House in Tucson and we'll split the pot.

Spike handed the note to Wineman, who was so curious that his eyes were popping.

With a smile, Lockwood handed up a bill of sale. Bedrock, it stated, had received five thousand dollars cash for the claim.

"Satisfactory?" Lockwood asked jovially.

"More'n that," Spike breathed.

"We thought it would be," laughed Lockwood. "I imagine you'll be wanting to hit Tucson soon as possible to help your pard spend that dinero. Why don't you hop the return stage to Wickenburg this afternoon? You can make connection with Wells Fargo there, and not lose any time."

Spike looked down at Lockwood admiringly. "If Nat ain't got any objections I shore will do that," he said gravely.

The sheriff looked as though he would be more than pleased to see the redhead far from his territory. "You just go right along, son," he said heartily, "and say hello to Bedrock for me."

Lockwood glanced at the coach, which had changed horses and drivers, and was ready for the return trip to Wickenburg. "If the stage wasn't right ready to leave," he said jovially, "I'd buy you two boys a drink. But I guess we'll have to postpone that, eh?"

"Yeah," Spike said. "Too bad."

"I'm not going anywhere," Wineman chuckled. "I'll have one with you gentlemen!"

SPIKE said good-by and headed for the big livery barn across the street. "You put a big bait of oats in this crowbait, and curry him down, Eb," he told the old liveryman.

"Why for you wasting a feed bill on this nag when you're going to Tucson?" the hostler wanted to know.

Spike grinned. "You've sure got big ears, Eb," he said softly. "Don't you be surprised none to see me back here, soon. And don't you tell anybody I'm sleeping in the haymow."

"Waal, I swan!" The liveryman scratched his gray head. "Did Yuma do this to you?"

"Yuma didn't do a danged thing to me," Spike retorted, "except teach me to mind my own business."

He crossed the street, climbed over the wheel, and settled himself alongside the stage driver.

"Now don't you get surprised when I hop off a mile or so outside of town," he told the man.

The driver had known Spike Allison before. "Been drinkin' that Coffin Varnish again, I see!" he said with certainty.

Spike slipped from the stage to the top of a cut-bank wash about a mile and a half out of town. It was dark when he hiked back into Prescott. His tongue felt as dry as the soles of his boots, but he kept his eyes religiously away from the Gold-dust. This was no time to sample the pleasures of Shepherder's Delight.

"Eb," he told the liveryman solemnly, "you've mebber never eaten two suppers in one night, but you're going to tonight. Leastways you tell the Chink that, and when you come back bring a steak about as thick as your wrist."

Eb squinted over the top of his glasses. "Who's goin' to pay for this?"

Spike grinned. "Charge it to the feed bill," he drawled. "Mebber I'll save lots of dinero tomorrow."

"And mebber you won't!" the liveryman grunted.

There was that possibility too. Spike thought it over that night in the haymow. The sweet odor of straw was all about him as he lay there, but all he smelled was skunk.

"Yep, skunk," he muttered. There had been live coals in the stove, whiskey bottles under Bedrock's bunk, and blisters on Lockwood's hands. It all added up to something sinister.

"That hombre's been doing some unaccustomed work mighty recent," Spike muttered. "Like mebber diggin' a grave!"

He thought about Claire Ramsey, Bedrock's daughter, and was glad that she was far away in some fancy Chicago college for young ladies. Then he quit wondering about things and fell asleep. However, after a breakfast charged to the feed bill his thoughts were jerked back to Bedrock's daughter as he rode the crowbait through the doorway of the big barn.

THE morning stage on this spur line from Wickenburg had just pulled in, and passengers were alighting. One of them was a slender, graceful girl who held her skirts daintily, showing fancy buttoned shoes as she stepped down. She opened a little parasol, and the morning sun striking beneath it seemed to make sparks fly from her auburn hair. All in all, she looked as though she had just stepped from a band box, instead of having just completed a sixty-mile ride across dusty deserts.

Spike took one look at her, and tried to duck back into the livery, but he was too late.

"Spike," the girl cried. "Why,

Spike! Who are you trying to hide from?"

She was coming across the street then, still with her skirts held up about her shoe tops. Snatching off his hat, he climbed out of his saddle. His face got red as his hair.

"C-Claire," he stammered.

The girl's smile was radiant. She had a mischievous, piquant face, and she had to stand on tiptoes to slip her arms around Spike Allison's surprised neck. Then her red lips were against his and Spike's knees felt just like they did after he'd sampled the pleasures of Sheepherder's Delight once too often.

Claire stepped back after a moment, but the kiss had been an uncommonly long one, and her cheeks seemed a little more pink than usual, too. "This is a surprise finding you in town," she exclaimed a little ruefully. "I had planned on riding out to the claim and surprising you and dad."

Spike thought fast. "I'm shore glad you didn't!" he finally blurted. "As you know, I . . . I just got back from Yuma, and your dad is about the worst housekeeper in the world. Why, I wouldn't want any woman to see the shack the way it is now. I was just fixin' to rack along and clean it up."

"How's dad?" Claire asked. Spike felt as though her blue eyes were boring right through him.

"Why . . . why, he was just fine when I left him," he told the girl, and that wasn't a lie. Bedrock had been fine two and a half years ago!

Claire put a finger to her cheek, and tilted her head. "If you'll promise not to tell him I'm here, I'll take a room at the hotel, and rest until tomorrow," she decided. "I am kind of tired."

Spike sighed with relief. He smiled at the girl. "Why, Claire,

that will be just dandy," he said heartily. "I'll have the house slicker'n a skinned cat by tomorrow. Now I got to hurry. There's been a . . . a skunk hidin' under the place, and my first chore will be to smoke it out."

"But dad wrote me that the terms of your parole kept you from wearing or using a gun," Claire said.

Spike looked at her. "There's more than one way to scotch a skunk," he said gravely.

ALL the way back to the Hasayampa, Spike wondered why he had lied to Claire, and just what he was going to do about it. She would be down here the next day.

"And I just got to have things cleaned up afore then," Spike muttered.

There was smoke curling from the chimney when he came jogging from the trees bordering the bench. Two hang-headed broncs stood with dropped reins in the dooryard. Spike nodded with satisfaction. Watching from the haymow, he had seen Lockwood and his partner, Towers, pull out of town soon after dawn.

Evidently one of the pair had his eyes on the open door, because the moment Spike rode from the trees the hefty Lockwood appeared in the opening. Spike waved his warped old Stetson at the man, but Lockwood did not return the greeting.

Spike jogged on to the shack, a loose, completely relaxed figure. He loosed his best grin on Lockwood. "Howdy," he drawled.

Lockwood grunted. "I thought you were on your way to Tucson."

Spike looked sheepish. "I was," he admitted, "but I picked me up a bottle of Coffin Varnish to celebrate me 'n' Bedrock's good luck. Dunno just how it happened, but I woke up this morning back in Prescott.

So, seem' as I was still here, I decided to mosey down and pick up a few of my belongings."

Lockwood hesitated momentarily. He was wearing a plaid shirt, drill breeches, and high-laced boots this morning. Also a cartridge belt and Colt .45. He looked like a dude except for the gun which seemed to belong right where it was resting. Spike rubbed his own empty shank reflectively.

"Well, climb down and come in," Lockwood invited grudgingly. "Hope it won't take you long to get your gear together. Me 'n' Seth are anxious to get busy, and we don't like strangers hanging around."

"I never did, either," Spike admitted cheerfully. "But don't worry about me lingerin'. I'm mighty anxious to see Bedrock."

Lockwood followed him into the cabin. Spike noticed that his letter to Bedrock was no longer under his old partner's pillow. He noticed that Towers, bending over the stove, also had a gun on his hip.

Spike started to amble around. He took a moth-eaten old lariat from a peg on the wall. Then he noticed a tattered flannel shirt hanging on a peg above the bunk that had once been his. He had long arms, but he seemed to have trouble reaching the shirt. Losing his balance, he sprawled on the bunk. The mattress felt hard and lumpy beneath its sheaf of blankets.

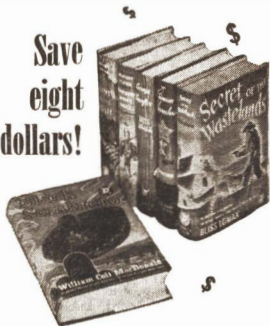
Shakily Spike pulled himself back to his knees and gave Lockwood, who was watching him, a wry grin.

"That danged Coffin Varnish sure makes a man wobbly," he said.

"Hurry up and get out of here," Lockwood said irritably. "I told you we didn't want strangers hanging around. Next thing you'll want to bunk here and sleep it off."

Spike grabbed the shirt, and crawled off the bunk. He straightened, the lariat in one freckled paw,

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the old shirt in the other.

"Thanks, boys," he said genially. "Wish you lots of gold in the pan!"

Outside Spike looked toward the bench claim behind the shack. Framed against the clear blue of the Arizona sky, the gaunt uprights of the windlass reminded him of a gallops tree. A long ladder leaned against the windlass frame. It had been in the same position yesterday, the redhead remembered. He was glad to see that it hadn't been moved, but he wasn't glad to see the pair of buzzards that coasted lazily above the shaft.

He climbed on his horse and turned back the way he had come. Behind him he heard Lockwood move to the door, and a spot about the size of a silver dollar started to burn between his shoulders. It was just where a bullet might strike.

Spike tried not to think about that, but it felt good just the same when the shadows beneath the trees that cloaked the walls of the canyon closed about him. He breathed a long sigh and, dropping out of his saddle, tethered the horse behind a clump of brush.

The lariat he had brought from the shack was forty feet long. It was all Spike took with him when he started dodging back through the trees toward Bedrock's bench claim. Through an occasional break in the timber he caught glimpses of the cabin. Smoke still climbed from the chimney, and as Spike drew closer he caught the aroma of frying bacon. It made his mouth water. Then he looked at those buzzards again, and the moisture turned to ice in his mouth.

The grass was tall on the second bench. Spike went through it on his belly, and an Indian couldn't have done a smoother job. The windlass straddled the shaft. Spike noosed

the lariat firmly about one support and paid the rope into the shaft. With a loop of it caught about his leg, he let himself down into the darkness. Suddenly, when he seemed to have descended about twenty feet, his searching toes touched a booted leg.

SPIKE shuddered. He wanted to strike a match, and then he decided against it. It might be better to remember old Bedrock the way he had last seen him.

Suddenly pebbles came bouncing down one side of the shaft. The lariat followed swiftly, hard coils knocking Spike's old sombrero from his red head. He stood perfectly still, not even feeling the slapping sting of the rope about his head and face.

"How do you like the weather down there?" Lockwood's mocking voice inquired.

"It don't smell as much like skunk as it did when I was up top with you hombres," Spike answered promptly.

Lockwood didn't seem to mind the insult. He laughed. "Think it might make a nice grave?" he asked.

"It's too deep!" Spike told him promptly.

"Now ain't that a shame," mocked Lockwood. "How does this feel?" A shovelful of loose earth came tumbling down the shaft, peppering Spike like spent buckshot. He thought of Claire. She would be riding this way tomorrow, and Lockwood and Towers would still be here. The knowledge seemed to draw a red curtain of fury and desperation across Spike's mind. But the second shovelful of earth that came trickling down cleared his brain.

"You're a couple of pretty smart jiggeros," he admitted, looking admiringly up at the pair of heads peering into the shaft. "But you're not

the only smart ones. You see, I read a little sign around here yesterday before I started for Prescott."

"Just what do you mean by that?" Lockwood asked suspiciously.

Spike chuckled with more confidence than he felt. "Well," he drawled, "there were coals in the stove not more'n twelve hours old. Which meant Bedrock hadn't been away long. So I figured he was in Prescott—which was wrong. Things smelled even skunkier after Wine-man told me Bedrock hadn't been in town for a week, and hadn't taken any liquor home with him. I remembered there was fresh-smellin' whiskey bottles lying under his bunk here. According to the labels on those bottles, the liquor was a brand they make up in Wickenburg for fool miners who like red pepper and rattlesnake juice in their brew. So I figured somebody from Wickenburg had brought Bedrock that Snake-head Special. I could also tell, only I didn't let on to you, that Bedrock had been drunk as a lobo coyote when he wrote that note to me, and signed that bill of sale."

"How'd you know that?"

"Because when the old cuss is sober, he can write like this here copper-plate printin' you see. But when he gits himself full of rotgut his handwritin' looks like a six-year-old held the pencil. Also, when he has a few drinks he's got about as much sense as a four-year-old. So you could talk him into writin' notes to Satan himself. That's another reason I didn't stay on that stage which was going to Wickenburg."

Spike paused long enough to let all that sink in. He could see Lockwood and Towers bending more attentively than ever over the mouth of the shaft. At least he had made them stop that infernal shoveling. However, if his fool tongue made

one slip they would start in again and not stop!

Spike wet his lips. "Nother reason I didn't go to Wickenburg was because I felt pretty certain by then that something drastic had happened to my pard. So, if my hunch was right, I had two reasons for stickin' around. First off I wanted a chance to take care of the skunks that filled Bedrock full of rotgut, then beefed him. And, second, I figured said skunks wouldn't have gone to so much trouble if Bedrock hadn't let it slip that he'd really hit the jackpot here. So half of the dust he got was mine, and the other half belongs to his daughter, Claire. Course I'll give her most of my share too, but she'll never know that."

"You sound like you think you're going to get out of there alive," Lockwood laughed.

"I am!" Spike said calmly. "You want to know why?"

"I sure do!" Lockwood didn't sound quite so sure of himself.

SPIKE grinned in the darkness. "I'll tell you," he said. "Last night I got a piece of paper and envelope and wrote down everything I could think of that made this business smell like skunk. I left said letter with the liveryman, and if I'm not back in Prescott by tomorrow morning, he's going to hand it over to Nat Wineman. Nat's a vote-gettin' sheriff, but he's a man-gettin' one too. And if you bury me here along with my pard you'll hang for sure."

The leathery-faced Seth Towers spoke for the first time. He said in querulous tones: "We ain't going to hang any higher for two killin's than for one!"

Spike hadn't counted on them taking this line of reasoning. He held his breath.

Lockwood saved him. "You're right at that, Seth," the man said, "but if we should happen to mosey to Prescott with a note from Allison here saying to give us that letter, mebbe we'd save ourselves a peck of trouble. You know there's more gold in that hole than Bedrock took out. That's why we framed things so we could come back."

"I ain't so sure this gent wrote anything," Towers said stubbornly.

Spike wished fervently that he had written down his suspicions.

"If he had things figgered so close," Towers went on, "why did he come stickin' his fool freckled face back here this morning without the sheriff to back his-play?"

"Because," Spike said promptly, "I needed a corpse to prove you fellers were skunks and killers, and I also had to have you show me what you did with Bedrock's clean-up."

"Waal, you found your corpse," Lockwood drawled, "an' I suppose we showed you where we hid Bedrock's dust."

"My old mattress was uncommon lumpy!"

A surprised curse followed that thrust. "You're too danged smart, Allison," Lockwood growled. "I'm dropping a ladder. You climb out of there, and write us that note to the liveryman, and we'll split the clean-up with you. After all we don't want to be hoggish."

"No," Spike said, "you sure don't. You're willin' to sink more shafts for more clean-ups. That's why you rode back to Wickenburg and hopped the stage for Prescott. So's to make it look like you'd come in legitimate from Tucson. Only you should've taken more care in buyin' Towers' monkey suit. Anybody could see it had been bought in a hurry. Course, too, you read my

letter to Bedrock sayin' I'd be home yesterday, and you figured I'd light out for town when I didn't find my pard around. You're mighty smart jiggeroos. But me, I'm smart, too."

While Lockwood thought that over, Spike knelt beside his dead partner. "Bedrock," he said softly, "I sure hate to lose you, but if I can square things with these polecates who bushed you, it'll help a little bit!"

The ladder bumped hollowly against stone at Spike's feet.

"What you mean you're smart, too, redhead?" Lockwood asked suspiciously.

"Why, nothin' much," Spike told him, "except that I like it down here."

Lockwood cursed. "You mean you ain't coming out and write that note?"

"Nope," Spike said cheerfully. "If you want me you'll have to come get me."

He had been quietly busy while he talked, building a loop in the riata, and arranging it to span a rung of the ladder about six feet above bedrock.

SILENCE followed his declaration. Then Lockwood cursed again.

"Blast you, redhead, I'm getting tired of your shenanigans," he snapped. "Now you move back away from the ladder and light a match to let us know where you're at. You keep right on lightin' matches until Seth gets down there. If he notices one wiggle out o' you, you'll get a slug right through the belly, and we'll take our chances with the sheriff!"

"Don't you worry about me wig-gling!" Spike told him. "I'm not ready to die just yet."

With the riata paying out gently

between his fingers he did exactly as Lockwood ordered. A thumbnail scraping match head, he made light. Staring up, he saw Seth Towers start slowly down the ladder, a gun in one hand. He came down the ladder sideways, to keep his eyes on the matches that showed Spike's position. The matches kept flaming, and Towers seemed to gain confidence, coming down more rapidly.

Spike jerked the rope when Towers' foot slipped through the loop. The man's chin cracked against a rung with stunning force as he slipped. He hit like a limp bundle of rags alongside Bedrock's body.

Moving fast, Spike rearranged his loop and was back in his original position almost without a break in the relay of matches he was using. He saw Lockwood's big head poke anxiously over the rim of the shaft.

"What's the matter down there, Seth?" he demanded.

Spike started mumbling in tones that he hoped would sound like two men carrying on a low-voiced conversation. Then his clear, cheery voice rang up the shaft.

"We've both done decided to stay here," he drawled, "while you ride to Prescott. Course we won't ske-daddle with Bedrock's clean-up while you're gone, or anything like that. An' if you should happen to do it yourself while we're down here it won't matter much because we'd tell the sheriff when he comes tomorrow that you killed Bedrock and stuck us in this hole to starve."

"Why, of all the double-crossin'—"
In a spasm of fury, Lockwood fired down into the darkness of the shaft.

Spike ducked. The slug went *chug* into a timber above his head.

"Now you've done it!" he exclaimed. "You've killed your own pard. Got him right between the eyes. I can feel the hole!"

Lockwood chuckled nastily. "You're going to feel one in the

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same place if you don't climb out of there pronto!"

"No, I'm not," Spike said emphatically. "Nobody gives a hoot if you kill a dozen polecats like Towers. But me, I'm a marked man. The sheriff is going to start looking for me if Eb gives him that letter."

Lockwood cursed helplessly.

TELL you what," Spike suggested. "Mebbe you'd like to come down here and prod me back up at the point of your gun."

"Think I'd be fool enough to do that?" Lockwood raged. "An' you settin' there with Towers' .45, ready to pot me the minute I start down that ladder!"

"Me?" Spike chuckled. "Why, I'm always co-operative. Here's Towers' Colt if that's what you're worrying about. The warden at Yuma allowed as how I wasn't to have anything to do with firearms for six months or so, and I'm not going to break my parole." He followed his words by hurling Towers' weapon up the shaft. He heard it thud to the ground outside.

Lockwood seemed surprised. "Danged if you ain't a queer one, redhead! Cuss you anyhow, I'd let you rot there if I could pull this ladder back up."

"But you can't with me pullin' against you," Spike chuckled. "Nope, if you want me you got to come get me."

"Go back and set down where you was," Lockwood snapped, "and keep matches going. If you don't I'll plug you shore, account of you've worn my patience to a frazzle."

The big man wasn't fooling. He wouldn't hesitate to shoot; Spike was

certain of that. He kept matches going as fast as he could thumb them alight as, step by step, Lockwood came down the ladder, Colt glistening in one hand.

In his right hand, Spike held the end of the riata. Lockwood was getting closer to the loop. Now one more step. Spike jerked, and prayed. The gun thundered. Then Lockwood's soft chin hit a rung of the ladder, and his head snapped back. When he lit beside Towers, he was out as completely as his partner.

Thoughtfully Spike rammed the big man's Colt inside the waistband of his pants, and allowed himself the pleasure of a sigh. "Bedrock," he said, "your grave is cold, but you can't feel it. These jiggeros kin. They're going to have plenty time to repent their sins before I amble back with Nat Wineman. Only thing is, I wish there was some way I could break the news to Claire. Life is going to be pretty danged lonesome for her without her dad. I wish I could—"

A voice, half between a sob and a laugh, answered him. "Oh, you big red-headed galoot," it said, "climb out of there before I have heart failure. Didn't you know I realized something was wrong the way you acted this morning? And didn't you think I'd follow you here? I've been lying in the trees not thirty yards away, and I heard about everything that was said. I heard you talking those two men into climbing down with you, but how in the world did you trap them without a gun?"

Spike gulped. He started to climb. "Why, doggone, Claire," he stammered, "it . . . it don't take a smoke pole to scotch skunks!"



Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

THE art of dueling is today mostly a thing of the past, but a century or two ago it was considered the only honorable way for two gentlemen to settle their differences. In every foreign royal family, and in the homes of many early Americans, could be found a beautiful, velvet-lined walnut case, containing a matched pair of single-shot dueling pistols, first of the flintlock type, and later of the percussion variety. In use, the challenger would present the matched pistols fully loaded to the individual being challenged. The latter had the privilege of selecting either one. The matter of matching the pistols was done with a view to handicapping no one.

In my files, I find a very interesting record entitled, "The British Code of Duel—With Reference to the Laws of Honour and Character of Gentlemen." This was published in London in 1824, and dedicated to his royal highness, the Duke of York. It runs as follows:

"As war has prevailed in all ages and countries, notwithstanding the councils of the wise and the deprecations of the good, is termed the *ultima ratio Regum*; so has duel, and may equally be called the last reasoning of men. While war is justifi-

able, duel cannot be quite unlawful.

"A state justly wages war when no other means can be found to repel aggression; an individual, where he has no other resource. In ancient times one employed warriors as well as the other; and to this day (1824) age and sex have their champion in a near relation, but he at the same time becomes the principal. Duel is now confined to a question between two individuals, regulated by the counsel of two others, selected on each side from among their closest friends.

"Duel exists singularly in the British empire at present; prevailing throughout the higher orders of society, including legislators, and generally recognized; it is indirectly proclaimed contrary to law. Neither principals nor seconds contemplate either a breach of the public peace, nor the crime of murder, any more than *felo-de-se*.

"If bound by the British magistrate to preserve the one, or rather not to meet his antagonist in the

British dominions; each party releases himself from his bond by simply crossing the English Channel: if the conflict takes place and one fall, and the survivors are tried for murder, the jurors virtually recognize the laws of honour; and if these have been fulfilled, pronounce acquittal. Not to dilate, it is evident that propelled on the one hand by opinion, and but negatively repelled on the other by legal power, the principle of duel retains its full force, and while holden to be without the pale of law, possesses the most positive laws.

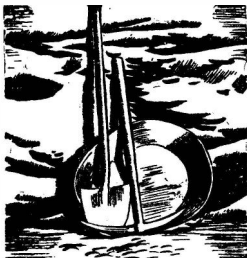
"Such being the character of duel, and such its state in this country, it follows next to enquire whence its practice derives the power by which it is continued? What are the laws by which that power is directed; and what is the extent of the influence of the power, and the jurisdiction of those laws? These enquiries the reader will find everyone prepared to answer by the simple word 'honour'! For, as was observed by an intelligent writer a century ago, 'Honour is a familiar expression in the mouths of persons of any condition; yet there are many who have very wide conceptions of it.' It is necessary therefore, to the present purpose, to enter somewhat into its definition.

"The requisite sensibility that naturally accompanies every truly noble mind, and the vivid perception, not to say scrutiny, produced in the community by which distinction is conferred, renders it essential in the distinguished, to be, in the words of ancient chivalry, 'without fear and without reproach.' Hence the in-

fluence under which duel still prevails against every discouragement, and will in all probability continue to prevail till the dissolution of present society.

"The laws by which everything connected with honour is directed, generally designated as the 'laws of honour,' comprise a variety of the most important statutes and ordinances since the period shortly after the Norman Conquest, when England began to settle in civilization, and the lights of antiquity were, though dimly, seen; the patents of nobility, institutes of knighthood, and offices of state; statutes regarding the subject, down to the arrangement of precedence and the regulation of armorial bearings; form prominent parts. These all set out, in some way, the grounds on which the honor of office is granted, and thus preserve in the memory of the possessor the qualities required to its just possession. Among them will be found the laws of battle. To the whole may be added that universal *lex non scripta*, the common law of Good Breeding, as it is still called, significantly of hereditary dignity; and which materially marks the grace, courtesy, and general good manners—the minor, as well as the major virtues—to be expected from those born of honourable progenitors, in contrast distinction of such as, being without those advantages of birth, are not expected to possess its accomplishments—the argument of *contra bonos mores* (good manners and morals) well known, still operates in cases positively tangible by the law."

● This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

Nor all mining claims are of the same kind and type. Each kind covers its own variety of mineral deposit, and affords the prospector title to his discovery, plus absolute protection in enjoying the fruits of his find. Therefore some general knowledge of the mining regulations should be included as part of the equipment of anyone contemplating a prospecting venture. It may save a lot of irritation and misunderstanding later on.

B. R., of North Salem, Indiana, realizing there is little use in setting out to prospect without some preliminary information on the size of mining claims, and where they can and can't be staked wrote in recently asking if we would give him and other tenderfoot metal hunters "some facts pertaining to mining claims in the West."

Gladly, B. R. In the first place mineral claims can only be located under Federal mining laws on un-

occupied portions of the public domain. That is on open land, not otherwise privately owned or held. Land belonging to private citizens can only be entered and prospected by consent of and agreement with the owner. Without such consent and formal agreement mineral discoveries would become the property of the legal title holder of the land anyhow.

Claims also can usually be staked, or leased on State lands. The regulations concerning such claims are governed by the different State laws. So if a mineral hunt on State lands is going to be engaged in, the mining regulations of that State concerning its own lands should be consulted before setting out. Copies of these and other State mining laws are on file, as a rule, at any county seat in the State. Printed summaries may frequently be obtained free, or at nominal cost from the individual State mining bureaus.

Under all circumstances before a person can stake a claim, actual discovery of a valuable mineral must be made. No specific amount of the mineral is necessary, as long as some of it is found on the land included in the claim.

The two main types of mining claims are lode (vein) claims, and placer-deposit discoveries. Lode claim locations cannot be made until actual discovery of a vein has been made within the limits of the claim. In other words merely finding a piece of float, or loose, ore-bearing rock and hoping to locate later the vein from which it came won't do. You can't stake a lode claim and hold its enclosed property while you are prospecting for any vein that might be uncovered within its boundaries. The vein has to be found first.

A lode claim may extend not over fifteen hundred feet along the vein.

It may not be more than six hundred feet wide, and so measured that not over three hundred feet are on either side of the vein at the surface. For example, four hundred feet on one side, and two hundred on the other, though totaling only the legal six hundred feet, is not permitted. If, because of an adjoining claim or for other reasons, two hundred feet is all that can be staked on one side of the vein, the allotment for the other side is still no more than the three-hundred-foot maximum. Failure to understand this might result in erroneous claim staking. Moreover, the end lines of each lode claim must be parallel.

Placer claims, or deposits of sand and gravel carrying valuable metallic minerals, usually gold, although sometimes placers of other metals such as tungsten or platinum may be found, are twenty-acre tracts. In surveyed territory such claims should conform to the regular legal land subdivisions. This makes for uniformity of claim boundaries, and makes each individual claim easily identifiable by reference to regular section, range and township plats. In unsurveyed territory placer claims embracing the allowed area—twenty acres—should be as nearly rectangular in shape as possible, with end and side lines parallel, even if there is a jog or turn in the pay streak.

If a placer location includes a vein, the placer locator must state this when he records his claim. Otherwise the vein may be open to staking by someone else.

In addition to lode and placer claims prospectors may stake what is known as a mill site. Mill sites are to provide land for the erection of buildings required to mill ore from a lode mine. They are five acres in size. The land staked as a mill site must be shown to be non-mineral in character, and not contiguous to a lode claim being worked by the same staker. Prospectors, miners and mining companies are also allowed to use timber growing on their claims or other mineral lands, provided it is used entirely for camp needs and mining purposes. Such timber may not be cut, and sold.

Under the U. S. Federal mining laws only citizens or those who have formally declared their intention of becoming citizens and have taken out their first papers can locate and hold mining claims. No license is required to prospect on the mineral lands of the unoccupied portions of the public domain in the United States.

To P. L., Columbus, Ohio: The White Horse mining district in Nevada lies on the east slope of the Wilcox Mountains in southeast Washoe County about nine miles west of Wadsworth. It is one of Nevada's old-time mining sections. First prospected in 1860, back at the turn of the twentieth century readily worked placers in many ravines cutting into Olinghouse Canyon produced thousands of dollars for small-scale placer miners.

● 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, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.



The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

Eleanor hasn't had much success in her efforts to get answers to the letters she's sent you Pals, but she's not holding it against you. She's hoping that when you see her letter in print your conscience will prick you and you'll write her. We surely hope, Eleanor, that your wish is granted and that you'll not only hear from those Pals to whom you've already written, but from plenty of others, too.

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am writing to you to see if you can help me get a few Pen Pals. I always read your section in Western Story, and although I have answered eight pleas, I have not received one answer. They all promised to answer everyone who wrote to them, but didn't answer me. I hope the ones I wrote to see my plea here and decide to write. Everyone is welcome. I love football, baseball, basketball, tennis, swimming and bicycle riding. I promise to answer all promptly and will exchange snapshots.—Eleanor Hussolini, 426 Willard Street, West Quincy, Massachusetts

From Alaska comes this plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a lonely soldier in a lonely country. I like to write letters, so won't some of you boys and girls write to me? I enjoy all winter sports. Will exchange snaps and promise to answer all letters.—Cpl. Norman Stieger, Btry. F-75 C. A. (a. a.), Ft. Richardson, Anchorage, Alaska

Pvt. Wheeler will be a true friend—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I've often read your Hollow Tree, but this is the first time I've ever written for Pen Pals. I am nineteen years old and my home State is Massachusetts. My hobbies are collecting picture post cards and writing letters. Come on, everyone, write and get yourself a life-long friend.—Pvt. George Wheeler, Company E, Third Engineers, Schofield Barracks, Territory of Hawaii

Irene collects old-time songs—

Dear Miss Rivers:
How about some Pen Pals throwing a little ink my way? I am a lonely girl of eighteen and my hobbies are collecting old-time songs and writing letters. I promise to answer all, so come on, Pals, from far and near and write to me.—Irene Taylor, 1121 S. E. Rhone Street, Portland, Oregon

Calling middle-aged Pals—

Dear Miss Rivers:
My family and I have been devoted readers of Western Story for years and truly enjoy the contents from cover to cover, including the letters in the Hollow Tree, of course. But most of the letters seem to be from young people. I am a widow, fifty years old and have four children, two boys and two girls, and we are real Pals. I love to write and receive letters, and enjoy meeting people, traveling, reading, and have several hobbies, collecting stamps, snapshots, old books, poems, et cetera. Would love to get letters from folks everywhere. Am a very good correspondent and will try very hard to answer all letters. Came to California from the State of Washington and love it.—Mrs. Ione G. Dicus, 1327 West 11th Place, Apt. 2, Los Angeles, California

Western gals, heed this joint plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:
We are two lonely soldiers stationed at Ft. Sam Houston and we would like to hear from anyone between seventeen and thirty, especially girls from the Western States. Charley is nineteen and Homer is twenty-three. We will answer all letters and will exchange photographs with all who wish to.—Pvt. Charles Clark and Pvt. Homer Cox, Service Company, 9th Infantry, Ft. Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas

Josephine is lonely—

Dear Miss Rivers:
May I join the Hollow Tree? I am nineteen and would like to hear from boys and girls between nineteen and thirty, but will answer all letters. I like all sports and collect stamps and picture post cards. I'll exchange snapshots with anyone who writes to me. You lonely

boys and girls, and you lads in the navy, please write to a lonely girl. I promise to answer everyone.—Josephine Brewster, Twisp, Washington

Harry likes Army life—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-four years old and would like to hear from boys and girls about that age. I have been in the army now for seven months and like it very much. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snapshots with everyone who writes.—Harry Banker, Company A, 1st Q. M. Battalion, Fort Devens, Massachusetts

Dealsa will answer everyone—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like you to publish this request. I'm a lonely girl nineteen years old living in a small town. I want to hear from all over the world. All let someone please write to me. I won't drop me in all outdoor sports and snapshots with all who write. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snapshots with everyone who writes.—Dealsa Dancy, 512 E. Johnson Street, Clinton, Illinois

A ranching partner wanted here—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Can you spare a place round the Hollow Tree for a long-time member? It was in 1921 when I first joined your band and became a confirmed W. K. reader. I've ridden many a mile and punched many a cow. I've raised some top-notch stock. It is the only SO. I ran my own brand on a little two-by-four spread in New Mexico for a few years, but I'm back working at forty-and-four once again. I'm writing to you now, Miss Rivers, to see if you can help me locate a partner or two as an investor for an A-1 ranching proposition that I know of. I know this ranching business from border to border, cattle, horses, mules—raising, breeding, buying, selling and feeding. As to the partner, all I ask is that he or she has enough dinero so that with what I have we can operate on a scale just big enough to keep down the overhead expense. I'll rod the spread as foreman or run it on a fifty-fifty basis, if the partner wishes. Incidentally, I'm married to a darn good cook, am twenty-eight years old, of British descent, and have an honest reputation.—W. J. Kinley, General Delivery, Denver, Colorado

Write to this lonely shut-in—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am thirty-two years old, a divorcee, and am in a sanatorium at present. I am at times and would like Pen Pals. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snapshots with everyone who writes.—Jean Hibyan, Sassaquin Sanatorium, Ford, Massachusetts

Don't let Henry down this time—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I must agree with the soldier in the Canal Zone who writes and says you so-called Pen Pals are a washout. Every time I receive my copy of Western Story I answer from one to three of these so-called Pen Pals and do not receive any answers. But if those soldier boys in the Canal Zone see this in print and write me, I'll not let them down. I'll answer promptly.—Henry Quade, 540 Burwell, Bremerton, Washington

Outdoor sports appeal to these two gals—

Dear Miss Rivers:

We are a pair of lonely girls who would like to write to folks, old and young, all over the world. Our favorite sports are skating, swimming, dancing and bicycle riding, and we like all other outdoor sports. Jean is fourteen years old and Olie is thirteen. We promise to answer all letters and exchange snapshots with everyone who writes to us lonely girls from Kansas.—Jean Cole, 218 South Juliet, and Olie May Dugan, 413 Vattier, Manhattan, Kansas

And here's a cowboy from down Argentina way—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Like all others, I'm out for Pen Pals. Is there any room in your Pen-Pal circle for my name? I'm eighteen and live on a ranch in Argentina and I enjoy all sports, especially hockey and tennis, and I like riding. Would like to hear from anyone who cares to write and I promise to answer all letters. Will exchange stamps and snaps from this country. Get going, all of you, and let me hear from you real soon.—F. Campbell, Estancia "El Bermejo," El Lapallar, Chaco, Republic Argentina

Ola prefers the boys in uniform—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Will you please print this plea from a lonely girl who wants true Pals? I've tried answering some of the letters in the Hollow Tree, but haven't had any replies, and I've tried the Hollow Tree, but didn't get my letter printed. So, here I am, trying the good old Hollow Tree again. I am twenty-two years old and would like to hear from boys and girls from sixteen to thirty. I would also like to hear from CCC boys, soldiers, sailors and cowboys. Everyone who writes to me will get a reply. My hobbies are collecting picture post cards, songs, and little bottles. It will help anyone with their hobbies if I possibly can. Pen Pals, do give me a break just this once and write to me.—Ola Ballard, Rt. No. 1, Hickory, Oklahoma

Byron will tell you about the navy—

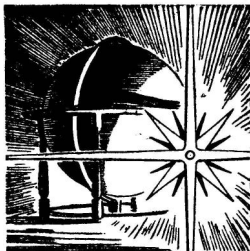
Dear Miss Rivers:

Being new in the navy I naturally desire some friends which I hope your splendid column will help me obtain. I prefer girls and boys living in the Pacific coast States, but will be glad to correspond with anyone. I am eighteen years old, and here's hoping I get to tell some of you all about Texas, my home State, and the navy.—Byron Moore, c/o Postmaster, San Diego, California

Joyce is interested in the West—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am fifteen years old and would like to hear from boys and girls from all over the good old U. S. A., especially those living in Texas, Arizona, and other Western states. My favorite sports are swimming, roller skating, baseball and hiking. My hobby is collecting pictures of cowboys. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snaps, so hurry, all you boys and girls, I'll be waiting!—Joyce Heilman, 629 E. Pleasant Street, Freeport, Illinois



Where to go and how to get there

BY JOHN NORTH

MONTANA used to be a hard-to-get-through State, but that is no longer true. A fine, modern road system has worked miracles in making the matchless beauty of Montana's mountains, streams and woods accessible both to home folks, and to visitors from the four corners of the United States. The result is that the "Treasure State" is fast becoming one of the nation's favorite outdoor playgrounds.

Montana always had the raw materials. Towering peaks, tall pines, flashing streams, crystal-clear blue lakes, and summer sunshine. But the places were remote, many of them reachable only at the end of arduous pack trips. Highways have made these places available to the average tourist and auto traveler without spoiling their primitive splendor.

"Like a lot of Americans," S. G., of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, wrote us recently, "I look forward every year to an outdoor vacation in July or August. I pile the family, which consists of my wife and our two boys into the old bus, and head for parts unknown; that is for parts unknown to us. It gives us a chance to see America, and get in a grand holiday at the same time. For this year we have been considering Montana. What about road conditions there? Are there many camping grounds? Is there much back country left that is still accessible only by trail—just in case we wished to get real venturesome?"

Montana is a big State, S. G., and though good roads now network most of the main scenic attractions, there are between the two National Parks, Yellowstone and Glacier, and in the parks themselves literally millions of acres of virgin wilderness that can be reached only by trail. The highways and national forest roads traverse only a small portion of the sixteen million acres and more of these snow-capped mountains, and rocky crags dotted with hundreds of meadows, open parks and Alpine lakes, and lined with countless mountain streams.

For the camper and auto camper both the State and National forest services are building improved camp grounds just as fast as is humanly possible and funds permit. These camps are of varying design from small camp sites for families who want seclusion to larger, centrally located camps intended to accommodate larger groups. In the twelve National forests of Montana, there have already been completed some fifty-eight camp grounds where safe drinking water, fuel, tables, benches, stoves, garbage pits and other camp facilities are provided. The only

requirements for the use of these camp grounds are care with fire, and observance of the ordinary rules of camp cleanliness.

Most of this great backbone of Montana mountain vacationland is in National Forest Reserves, but these healthy, invigorating timbered sections are by no means the only feature attractions of the State. In eastern Montana, around Glendive are the Badlands, a weird region of barren buttes and stone pillars carved by ages of wind and rain into a jumble of mysterious shapes, many of them as vivid and as vari-colored as a schoolboy's paint box.

Also in the eastern section of the State at Fort Peck is the famous Fort Peck dam on the Missouri River. It is the largest earthfill dam in the world, and will eventually create a lake one hundred and eighty miles long almost in the heart of the Badlands country.

Don't forget to take along your fishing tackle. With some thirty-two thousand miles of fishing streams in Montana's National forests, hundreds of lakes, both large and small, and countless irrigation reservoirs, the variety of fishing offered ought to please any type of fisherman.

The fly enthusiast can tempt the wary trout with his Royal Coachmans, and Gray Hackles. The troller, and the man who prefers to cast his favorite artificial bait for bass, can get plenty of thrills fishing in the larger lakes and reservoirs. As for that other class of fishermen, the horizontal anglers who get their

deepest satisfaction from sticking the butt end of a pole into the ground, and leaning back until their head rests in their clasped hands on the grassy sward—they, too, will find their kind of fishing in Montana. Particularly at the edge of some small lake, or along the banks of the slower streams, where they can gaze up at the sky and listen to the birds twitter to their hearts' content.

If you come into Montana from the south through Yellowstone National Park and Wyoming, a fine, scenic trip over good roads would be first up to Livingston where a real Western roundup and rodeo is held each year on July 2nd, 3rd and 4th. Thence over Bozeman Pass to Bozeman and west to Butte, the famous mining city in the center of one of the world's greatest copper-producing areas. From Butte take the road to Missoula by way of Deer Lodge.

Then go north through Polson and skirt the west shore of Flathead Lake to Kalispell. From Kalispell it is forty-four miles to Glacier National Park, a primitive region of high mountain crags, ice sheets, lakes, tumbling mountain streams and vast forests. A paved road past Lake McDonald will bring you over the mountains and down by St. Mary's Lake to the east side of the park. You can then return by an entirely different route, via Browning, Great Falls and Helena, the capital of the State. Or you can go from Great Falls to Billings by way of Lewiston and Roundup.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



Missing Department

DALE, FRANCES JEANETTE—She left home on February 17, 1941, and has not been heard of since. Her grandmother and aunt have tried every means to locate her, without results. Her grandmother is very ill and would like to hear from her. Frances is eighteen years old, five feet six inches tall, weighs about one hundred and fifty pounds, and has blue eyes and blond hair. If anyone knows her whereabouts, please write to either Mrs. Leslie Thilette or Mrs. Frank Parks, 401 Haven Street, Washington, North Carolina.

MIDGETT, ANNIE and ROBERT—These two children were supposed to be taken to a Salvation Army home at Pine Bluff, Arkansas, when they were small but never arrived there. Their mother was very ill when they were taken away and has been crying to trace them ever since. Annie is thirty-five years old now and was only eight when her mother last saw her near De Witt, Arkansas. She had blond hair and blue eyes. Robert is thirty-three years old and has brown hair, light-brown eyes and a dark complexion. If anyone knows their whereabouts, please write to me.—Mrs. Sarah Jarman, R. R. No. 2, Box 80, Baxter Springs, Kansas.

NOTICE—I would like to get in touch with my father's family. My father's name was Joseph Clive Manning and he died in 1919. My mother's maiden name was Leslie McClure. She and my father were married in Goose Creek, Texas. I would like very much to hear from any of my relatives.—A. C. Manning, U. S. Navy Hospital W-A, Pensacola, Florida.

CARL, EARL McKINLEY—On April 26, 1938, he left for California with a caravan of cars for a firm in Saginaw, Michigan. At Akron, Ohio, he left the caravan and wrote to his wife that he was trying to get work in the mines there. Then he wrote from Riverview, West Virginia, and that was the last we heard from him. He is forty-four years old, five feet six inches tall, has blue-gray eyes, light complexion, and light-brown hair with a tinge of gray. He has tattoo marks on both forearms, an anchor on one and a loving cup on the other. He also has a slight limp. If anyone knows his whereabouts, please get in touch with us or tell him that his mother is sick and needs him, and to write to her.—Mrs. Alice J. Carl, c/o Violet Wallace, Midland, Michigan.

KEY, THEODORE—He is my father and I would like any information as to his whereabouts. Also any information about my half-brothers and sisters, Eddy, Fred, Willis, Eva and Ada. Also Cleve and Pearl Stroud who I heard were in Ohio.—William C. Key, R. R. No. 1, Malden, Missouri.

● There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

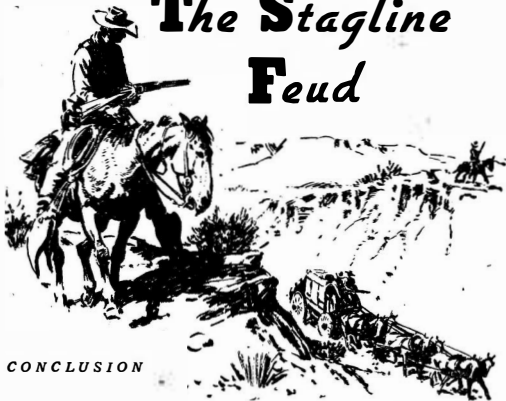
While it will be better to use your name in the notices, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" 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 anyone who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

The Stagline Feud



CONCLUSION

BY PETER DAWSON

The Story So Far:

The stage to Goldrock brings as one of its passengers Frank Justice, a young puncher needing the job which Paul le Soeur, owner of the Stagline Co., had offered him by letter. The night Frank arrives in town, Le Soeur is mysteriously murdered.

Next morning Frank learns that he has been left a half interest in Stagline, the other half going to Le Soeur's daughter Belle. He is dumfounded; he and Le Soeur had met only once when Le Soeur had helped him buck the crooked game of a gambler named Matt Phenego.

Phenego had settled in Goldrock several years before, and he and Le Soeur had resumed their feud, the gambler buying Mountain Stages and engaging in a bitter freighting war with Stagline. Belle le Soeur and Ed Brice, Stagline's manager, are in favor of accepting Phenego's offer to buy the company. When Frank refuses to consent to the sale, Brice angrily quits and

says he is going to take Phenego's offer of a job.

By putting up his half interest in Stagline as a bond, Frank succeeds in getting freighting contracts with several mines which had formerly given all their business to Phenego. Belle offers to put up her half interest, also, but before she can sign the papers she disappears from her home.

Frank trails the girl to Jimtown, a deserted mining camp. Seeing a light in what had once been a saloon, he enters and is braced by four hardcases. In the fight that follows, Frank kills two of the tough hands, then is creased by a bullet. Unconscious, he is taken by Roy Moreford, the leader of the hardcases, down into the deserted Oriole Mine where Belle le Soeur is being held prisoner. Moreford had been hired, apparently by Phenego, to keep the girl there until Friday to prevent Stagline from carrying out its new contracts.

A sudden rock slide floods the mine and

results in Moreford's being killed. Belle and Frank are rescued, however, and brought back to Goldrock. Then Frank prepares to make the bullion shipment, realizing that the moment is fast approaching for a final reckoning with Matt Phenege.

CHAPTER XIX

THE HOLDUP

Two hours after the Combination's buckboard had brought Belle and Frank down from Jimtown to Goldrock, three riders headed out of town along the rutted canyon road. Riding at a steady lope, they covered the nineteen miles to Hank Williams' station at The Narrows in a few minutes over an hour.

Williams, a sound sleeper, was wakened only as they left the corral behind the windmill and pounded away in the darkness. He took his .45 from under his pillow, pulled his pants on over his night shirt, and went out to the corral. By the light of his lantern, he discovered three sweat-streaked ponies jaw-branded with Mountain's wagon-wheel mark. He saw that his brown gelding, the black mare and the paint were missing.

"Why in thunder didn't they sing out?" he grumbled, as he rolled into his blankets again. He was puzzled over the errand that was taking three of Mountain's crew down the road riding relays at this early morning hour, but it didn't keep him awake.

At Mountain's station along the dry wash across from Stagline's corrals at Baker's Crossing two hours later, the three riders came in with the dawn. Tolbert, the hostler, was already up and forking hay down out of the barn loft into the big square lot below, where a dozen horses were beginning to feed. He hailed the trio familiarly, saying he'd be right down.

One of the men came out of the saddle and stood behind the barn

door and clubbed him with a six-gun as he came out. While this one dragged Tolbert a couple of rods away from the barn, the other two disappeared inside and presently emerged to cut fresh horses from the bunch in the lot.

They left the lot gate wide when they rode away. Before the sun topped the low foothills to the east they reined in and looked back across fifteen miles of desert.

"Here's hopin' you dragged him far enough away to save him from gettin' cooked," one of them drawled. A black plume of smoke with a rosy glow at its base marked the Baker's Crossing station.

"Wonder why we didn't burn Williams out back there," another queried.

"The word would have got to town too quick," the man who had spoken first replied.

"Ain't we goin' to touch off the Stagline camps?"

The third rider spoke up now, curtly. "We had our orders, didn't we? They were to put the touch to our own barns, not Le Soeur's. And we're bein' paid to do what we were told."

"Maybe we're bein' paid *not* to burn Stagline out," said the skeptical one.

"Suits me fine," grunted the third, and they went on.

AT Lonesome, they had to use their guns. Ray Simpson and Fred Echols, who ran the station across the road from Stagline's, refused to give them a change of horses. Echols was foolish enough to go for his gun when one of the trio started for the corral. He got a bullet through the shoulder, and Simpson was a trifle late in dodging the gun barrel that beat him into unconsciousness. The Lonesome sta-

tion's barn caught quicker than the one at Baker's Crossing, for it had no roof.

Eight miles out from Lonesome, the three riders passed a Mountain coach headed in for the hills. They answered the driver's cordial hail, but didn't stop when he seemed to want to talk.

Dead Horse came next. Ruling, the hostler, wasn't anywhere around. "Probably rode in to Alkali for grub," one of the three opined as he and the other pair set about changing saddles for the fourth time in the last six hours. They touched off both the barn and Ruling's shack before they went on. And, as before, they left the corral gate open.

By ten they were in Alkali, having a drink in the saloon. At ten thirty they boarded the morning local, headed west. They had sold their saddles.

Back at Lonesome, Fred Echols bound up his shoulder and roped the last horse to leave the corral by the blazing barn. There wasn't a saddle that wasn't being turned to cinders, but he found a broken bridle, repaired it, and put it on the horse. After dragging his partner, Simpson, in out of the sun, he managed to get on his horse and burned up the road toward Goldrock. Sight of the black funnel of smoke that marked the Baker's Crossing station made him hold the pony to its fast run.

At Baker's Crossing he found Tolbert lying still unconscious in the yard. He ignored the hostler and rode past him and out past the now caved-in barn to the bunch of horses gathered at the windmill trough. He managed to catch one and get his bridle on it. Then he headed on up the rutted road to Goldrock to report to Phenego. From a higher tier of the hills he could look back and see

Dead Horse station ablaze far out across the desert. That sent him on at his dogged pace, and gave him further proof that the three Mountain crewmen had been bought off by Stagline.

CLIFF HAVENS had his orders, which were to take his men well below The Narrows, to pick a likely spot and wait there for Stagline's bullion coach. No one but Phenego had suspected that Justice would try to run the gold down today. But Phenego's hunch had been strong. Immediately on learning of the rescue at the Combination, he had put a man up the street to watch Stagline's gate. This man had come to the hotel to wake him an hour before dawn and report the arrival of Shannon's guarded buckboard. Then Phenego had summoned Havens and four more of his men, and told them what to do.

The sun was streaking the top of the canyon's sheer west wall as Havens took the down trail Richter had ridden to meet Hoff the day before. The five riders cut through the clearing where Hoff had waited with the stage, and were presently coming out of the brush into the main trail.

Three miles below they came to a spot that looked about right to Havens. Here the canyon's high walls sloped up, not sheerly, from the narrow bed, almost completely filled by the width of the road. A big rotting outcrop flanked the road closely at a shallow turning. There was cover up both slopes, other outcrops behind which a man could hide, a few stunted piñons and cedars.

Havens sent a man around a higher shoulder of the left slope to leave the horses. Before this man was back, the other four had pushed the rotting crown of the outcrop from its broader base, and blocked

the road effectively with knee-high slabs of broken rock and a mound of rubble.

"That ought to stop 'em," Havens said, as the dust of the falling rock settled. He was breathing hard from his exertion, for it had taken the combined strength of the four of them to overbalance the heavy section of rock. Havens took out his bandanna and mopped his perspiring face. He looked up the near slope, then motioned to a nearby bushy piñon.

"Reno, you can belly down behind that," he told Reno Nelson. "That'll give you the closest shot. Wait until they stop, then shoot down one jug head. Don't any of the rest of you try for the horses. We'll need 'em to haul out the gold after we finish with their crew."

After showing the others the places they were to take, Ben Roerick in back of a higher outcropping, Dennis on a ledge that jutted out forty feet above, Haggerty behind a boulder on the opposite slope, Havens said: "I'll be here, close to the road." He indicated the broad base of the outcropping they had pushed the rock down from. "As soon as Reno shoots, stand up and cover the driver. When you see me step out into the clear, walk down to the stage. We want to be close and have every man under a gun before we cut loose." His bruised face shaped a crooked smile. "And I get Justice. Don't forget that!"

In another three minutes this stretch of canyon bore the same desolate and deserted look it had twenty minutes before. Except for the scream of a jay in the top of jack pine toward the top of the far slope, there was no sign to betray the presence of Havens and his men.

The sun's shadow lowered along that far slope, tipping the jack pine

with a lighter emerald. The jay stopped his raucous call. A rider came along the trail, paused a moment to survey the mound of rock blocking his way, then angled out and around it, and finally out of sight.

FRANK felt easier when he caught his first sight of Ned riding the canyon's east rim twenty minutes after the mud wagon left the lower end of Goldrock's street. A few minutes later he had a glimpse of Yates on the opposite rim.

"There they are," he told Fred Cash, sitting on the seat alongside him.

The oldster nodded. He eased the pressure on the reins, and the teams settled into a faster trot.

They changed horses at the meadow below The Narrows, Cash explaining to Bob Aspen the reason for their early trip. Aspen wanted to get a rifle and join Harmon in the mud wagon, but Frank ruled that out.

Two miles lower along the trail, Frank again saw both Ned and Yates on the rims, riding a little ahead. The sun was taking the chill from the air now, and Cash was having a hard time keeping the fresh relay animals at a slow pace. Frank noticed the way the oldster's glance kept swinging from side to side, studying the slopes ahead. It brought back the worry he'd felt at having to expose one of his men. Harmon, Ned and Yates were safe enough; but Cash, the only available driver, wasn't. Frank had soberly considered driving himself, but in the end had ruled that out, for it was all-important to have an expert on the reins if an attempt was made against the stage.

Frank's hunch was that that attempt would come soon, if at all, for here below The Narrows the road

was twisting and the slopes, boulder and tree dotted, offered good cover. The heavy steel plates bolted on the coach's inside added enough weight so that the swinging of the thorough braces was smooth and even. This slow pace called for a lot of brake on the down grades, and Cash rarely took his boot from the long brake arm. More than once the hickory brake shoe was smoking on those long descending stretches of trail.

The blood letting in the Oriole seemed to have taken little out of Frank except that he lacked the high-running excitement that ordinarily seemed to lay a coolness along his nerves when he knew he was facing hidden danger. He felt no excitement now, only concern for the men who were in this with him. Somewhere in the last two-days he had lost the keen edge of his wariness. Regardless of what he felt sure was coming, his hand was steady as a rock and he eyed the cover beside the trail with no crowding instinct to flinch.

They made a wide turning in the trail and Frank saw the mound of rock and rubble that littered the road ahead. "This is it, Fred!" he said flatly. "Can you swing around it?"

"Easy," Cash answered, and started lifting his whip.

Crack!

At the precise moment of the rifle's explosion, Frank saw the off leader's feet go from under him. The animal fell in an ungainly forward roll. His hoofs, luckily, slashed the air away from the other lead animal as the mud wagon rocked to its abrupt stop. A moment later the horse was dead, and Frank was seeing Cliff Havens, his six-gun leveled, stepping from behind the broad outcropping forty feet ahead.

"Don't go for your iron, Fred!" Frank said in a low voice. He slowly lifted his own hands, and the oldster did likewise.

HAVENS was obviously surprised at this unlooked-for surrender. Frank, on the side of the seat toward Havens, heard the Paradise man breathe a startled oath, then call: "We've got 'em! Come on down!"

Looking up the slope, Frank saw first one man, then another, and finally a third step out into sight. He recognized only one, Roerick. He let his glance stray even farther upward and had a far glimpse of a shape moving in behind a ledge up toward the rim. Then his attention was riveted below as Phenego's men closed in on the mud wagon. He could feel the gentle roll of the seat under him as Harmon, inside the coach, shifted his position.

Now Frank's nerves felt raw-edged and frayed. Havens' gun was centered on his chest. Behind him, he felt Fred Cash suddenly begin to tremble. He tensed, expecting Havens to fire at any moment, yet hoping Harmon's gun would speak first. It all depended on Harmon now; none of them could make a move until the blacksmith did.

Then he saw the derisive and scornful look that crossed Havens' face and knew that he was being given a few more seconds of grace.

"Holy smokes, we looked for a scrap!" drawled Phenego's man, gloating over his easy victory.

The settling stillness was suddenly wiped out by the blast of Harmon's shotgun. Roerick was pounded back a step, spun around and sent sprawling. Havens' glance swept instinctively over to Roerick; and in that split second, Frank moved.

As two of the Paradise men

opened up on the mud wagon, Frank lunged back hard against Fred Cash, driving the oldster's wind from his lungs and toppling him off the seat. Bullets rang from the sheet-iron lining of the coach as Frank's hand stabbed down to holster. Two more guns spoke, one close, the other from above.

A concussion of air fanned Frank's cheek as he wheeled toward the Paradise men. He triggered his gun again and saw his bullet catch Dennis in the chest. Dennis went down. Then, swinging his weapon on Havens, Frank heard the brittle crack of Ned's rifle speak from the opposite rim. Havens lunged aside and clamped a hand to his ribs. Ned's bullet had evidently grazed him, for he threw one wild snap shot at Frank before he glanced quickly up the opposite slope and dove in behind the protection of the outcropping.

Frank's glance swept around in time to see Nelson disappear behind a nearby boulder. Then, below Frank, Fred Cash's old cap-and-ball pistol sent a flat report echoing up toward the rim. Looking to the opposite slope, Frank saw the fifth Phenego man, Haggerty, go to his knees under the impact of Cash's slug. But Haggerty was only wounded and lifted his gun again. At that instant Harmon used the shotgun's other barrel. The buck-shot tilted Haggerty over backward. As Frank vaulted down beside Cash on the mud wagon's off side, the Paradise man's body rolled the ten feet down to the foot of the slope in a smother of dust.

There was a two-second silence, what seemed a long interval of time. Then Yates' rifle sent racketing echoes down from close above. A high piercing scream came on the heel of the rifle's explosion. Nelson,

caught from above, staggered out from behind the boulder up the slope, walked unsteadily a few steps, then suddenly folded face downward to the ground. He didn't move after he had dropped.

All at once the two rifles up on the rims, both Ned's and Yates', laid a scattered uneven fire down into the canyon. Frank counted nine shots in all. Then, from farther down the near slope sounded the beat of a pony's rattling hoofs. That sound receded quickly and was lost in a muted echo down the road.

From the far slope, Ned called down: "Havens got away."

Frank stepped out from behind the coach, warily, his gun half lifted. Then he saw that there was no further need for caution. Three bodies were sprawled on this near side of the rutted wagon road, Haggerty's across the way making a fourth. Havens had managed somehow to dodge the bullets Ned and Yates had thrown at him, and had made good his escape.

In less than three minutes, Ned and Yates came riding up on the mud wagon. Ned's battered face took on a crooked grin.

"You sure called it," he said to Frank. "Anyone hurt?"

"No. But it ain't Frank's fault!" Cash growled. "Or maybe it is," he added. "The lead was sure flyin' up there." He was standing hunched over, rubbing his chest, for his fall from the driver's seat had knocked the wind out of him.

"We can throw this horse into harness and go right on," Ned said.

"No, we can't," Frank said. Their glances came around to him. His even drawl went on: "This mornin' while you were down the street, I unloaded the gold into the hay wagon. Steele doesn't know it, but

he's sittin' on sixty thousand dollars' worth of bullion."

CHAPTER XX

BULLET RECKONING

YOU mean—" Ned's jaw dropped open and he couldn't go on for a moment. "You mean we've got it all to do over again?"

"I didn't want to have to hold on too long if the odds went against us," Frank said. He was bleakly eying the sprawled shapes on the slope above the road.

"How about Havens?" Ned asked quickly. "He'll circle back to the road. What if he runs into Steele and stops him?"

"How would he know Steele's carrying anything but a load of hay? Don't worry, it's safe enough." Frank nodded to the stage. "We'll go back and meet him. And," he added significantly, "we could pick up a shovel or two at the meadow."

They had taken the harness off the dead horse and were putting Yates' animal in the traces when Harmon stood suddenly in a listening attitude.

"Someone comin'," he drawled.

The others heard it a moment later, the sound of a horse coming fast up the trail. Ned reached in the door for his rifle and climbed the low bank to the left of the road to crouch down behind the outcropping that had sheltered Havens. Fred Cash picked up the reins and stood by the off front wheel, looking downward toward the near bend. Harmon and Yates went in behind the stage, leaving Frank standing beside the open door, warily scanning the down trail.

Shortly, a man riding a lathered roan horse rounded the mound of rock blocking the trail. His left arm was thrust through his belt, and

they could see a brown smear of blood that stained that shoulder of his dark coat.

He reined in sharply at sight of the mud wagon and for a moment appeared about to turn back. Then Yates stepped out from behind the stage.

"Howdy, Echols," he said. "What run into you?"

Fred Echols' wary expression eased somewhat. "A bullet," he said in a clipped, hard voice. Then his shuttling glance took in the bodies on the near slope and he stiffened visibly. "Maybe I ought to ask the same, Yates," he said.

"We've had some of the same trouble," Yates admitted, adding, "and with part of your crew."

Echols' face was a study in bewilderment. He shook his head finally. "This is gettin' beyond me," he said. "This mornin', three of our Goldrock crew hit the camps down the line, and put the torch to 'em. That's how I got this." He lifted his good hand to the stain on his shoulder.

"Why would your own crew be burning their own stations?" asked Frank.

"Search me," Echols said. He nodded to the carcass of the horse lying in the road, to the nearby bodies. "What happened here?"

"Phenego tried to stop us. We're carrying gold," Frank told him. "You're on your way to see Phenego?"

Echols nodded. "Not that it'll do him any good to know," he said grimly. "I reckon I'll mostly want to see a sawbones. You goin' to let me through?"

"Go ahead," Frank said. "Stop at the meadow and have Bob Aspen saddle you a fresh horse."

"Much obliged," Echols said, and it was obvious that he was relieved to find that he could go on.

FRANK was all at once impatient to get up the trail and meet the hay wagon. He went across to Ned's horse, swinging up into leather. "I'll go on ahead and find Steele," he told the others. "You can meet me above."

A quarter hour later he rode past the meadow as Bob Aspen was leading a horse from the corral for Echols, who waited near the tent. Steele was bringing down a light load and should be somewhere between The Narrows and Stagline's meadow, Frank decided. This morning before the stage left, he had suggested that the rancher borrow an extra team from him so as to make a quicker trip, and the man had readily agreed. But as Frank climbed up along the trail and saw no sign of the hay wagon, a slow worry began nagging him.

As he came within sight of Hank Williams' Narrows station, he saw the hay wagon standing beside the hump-roofed barn, Steele pitching hay up into the loft. Driving boots into the pony flanks, Frank pounded in off the trail at a run.

Steele saw him coming and thrust his fork deep into the hay and mopped his perspiring face with a bandanna. As Frank came up, a guilty look crossed the rancher's face and he called down: "Sure sorry about this, Justice. But Williams offered me forty dollars for this load, and I couldn't pass it up. I'll get you another down day after tomorrow."

The back door of the stone shack below banged and, looking down there, Frank saw Williams heading up toward the barn carrying a shotgun. So he deliberately drew his gun and held it with his arm resting on the horn of the saddle. Seeing that, Williams stopped abruptly. He stood there undecided a moment,

then laid his shotgun on the ground and came on.

"That's mine!" he called angrily as he approached. "I've laid out good money for it."

"Forty dollars is a pretty stiff price, Williams," Frank drawled. He was paying Steele only thirty-two for the long drive down to Baker's Crossing station.

"That ain't none o' your business!" Williams flared.

Frank smiled wryly at the pulse-slowng thought of what might have happened if the rack had been unloaded and the gold discovered. Williams didn't understand that smile and a darker anger gathered on his face as he snarled: "Ain't my money as good as yours?"

"Sure," Frank agreed, "so let's begin biddin'." Steele, my price is fifty dollars."

"Fifty!" Williams bellowed. "See here, you can't—"

Steele was obviously uncomfortable at being the spark that had kindled this flaring argument.

"I didn't aim to cause a ruckus, Justice," he said. "It was only that I was gettin' a bit extra. I didn't think Yates would mind waitin' an extra two or three days."

Frank wasn't looking at the rancher, but at Williams. "Well," he drawled, "do you want to raise the ante, Williams?"

"At fifty dollars?" Williams became mute in the grip of his anger and turned suddenly and trudged back down toward his shack.

When he stopped to pick up the shotgun, Frank called: "I wouldn't, Williams!" The station owner glared back at him a moment, but in the end went on without his shotgun.

"I'll have it loaded in a hurry, Justice," Steele said. "I oughtn't to have let you in for this."

"Forget it," Frank told him. "And

don't bother loadin' again. The boys are waitin' for you with the stage down at the meadow."

Steele was puzzled. "Waitin' for me?"

Frank nodded, unable to keep from smiling. "For you. They want to run that gold on down to Alkali. It's buried down under your hay there, where I put it this morning."

He had to laugh at the bewildered and alarmed expression that crossed Steele's sun-blackened face. His nerves, tight-drawn with weariness and fatigue these last hours, needed something like that to ease their strain.

PHENEGO listened to Cliff Havens' story with a slowly gathering look of impotent rage coming to his rugged square face. He rose and paced the office's short length with a choppy shoulder-heavy stride. When Havens had finished, the saloonman looked down at him scornfully, noticing particularly the small stain of blood on his shirt near his belt.

"You get nicked and take to your heels!" he grated savagely. "Your whole blasted tribe turned yellow!"

Havens knew when it was best to keep quiet. Now was one of those times, for in a temper like this Phenego was merciless and cruel, better not prodded.

Phenego gave a grunt of disgust and turned away. When a knock came at the door, and it opened on a house man, the Paradise owner snarled: "Can't you see I'm busy?"

The house man nodded back over his shoulder. "Fred Echols is here to see you. Something important."

Some of the rage drained out of Phenego. "What does he want? Why isn't he on the job?" Before his man could answer, he snapped: "Don't stand there with your mouth

hangin' open! Send him in!"

He listened to Echols' story without once interrupting. But the news had its effect, for his rugged face paled before the awesome account of Mountain's ruin. After Echols had finished speaking, he stared floorward a long moment, seeming to study the high polish on his boots.

Finally his head jerked up and he asked sharply: "Cliff, who knew about this? Who would sell me out, hire my own men to burn me out? Who would have the hunch that I'd be so crippled after that try for the gold that this other would come close to wiping me out?"

Havens shrugged, searching for a reply and not finding it.

"Did your men talk?" Phenego asked sharply.

"They didn't have the chance," Havens said. "We went straight to the stables and right out the road. None of us spoke to a soul on the way out."

"Justice might have found out we were to make a try at him," Phenego muttered. But there wasn't enough time for him to buy off Brice's men. His own crew couldn't have done it. They were all with him, you say."

"We knew it and Brice knew it," Havens said thoughtfully. "Who else?"

Something Havens had said made Phenego abruptly stiffen. His look was one of bewilderment for a moment, until it went impassive before some unnamed thought.

And just as suddenly his hand lifted in under his coat and came out fisting a pearl-handled .38 Colt's. Havens sat a little straighter in his chair. But Phenego had no thought now for either of his men. He opened the gun's loading gate and spun the cylinder, inspecting the loads.

Thrusting the gun back into its

spring holster, he went to the door. About to go out, he paused a moment and looked back at Havens. "Cliff," he said, "do me a favor."

"Name it, boss."

"If you see Justice before I do, tell him something for me. Tell him I hate his guts. Tell him it was me that pushed half the Jimtown rim in on him last night. But it wasn't me that killed Le Soeur or had the girl hidden away. Walk right up to him and tell him it wasn't me. Can you remember that?"

Havens nodded and Phenego went out across the empty dance floor and into the crowd by the bar. Customers respectfully made way for him. On the street, others turned and eyed him a moment after he passed. He remembered idly that he'd left his hat behind and promptly forgot that as he stooped under a tie rail and cut obliquely over toward Mountain's high runway. A heavy wagon's team nearly ran him down. He wasn't aware of it.

He found three men loafing in Mountain's waiting room. He told the clerk at the back desk, "Send 'em away," nodding toward the men at the front of the room. Then he went into Ed Brice's office. It was empty.

He was turning to leave the room when a heavy step crossed the outer office. He moved swiftly behind the half-open door and drew his gun.

WHEN Brice came into the room, Phenego pushed the door shut and, before it slammed, said: "Drop your belt, Ed!"

His voice and the sudden sound of the door closing made Brice wheel sharply around. His hand froze at his thigh as he saw the gun lined at him and the rock-hard set of Phenego's face. Yet he didn't move until the saloonman repeated: "Shed it, I said!"



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Brice reached around and uncinched the low-hanging shell belt and let it and his holstered gun drop to the floor.

Phenego motioned to the chair behind the desk. "Sit. We'll need some time to talk this over."

"Talk what over?"

Again a nod of Phenego's indicated the chair, and Brice moved around the desk and sat down.

"It goes a long way back, Brice," Phenego said. "As far back as that first Stagline holdup, when Le Soeur lost the Wells Fargo money."

Brice's face remained impassive. Finally Phenego said: "You might as well spill it. I know all but a few details. You had that stage stopped; I didn't. You'd have been the only one outside Le Soeur and Chapin that knew the chest was on the stage."

A slow change came to Brice's look. "All right," he drawled, "it was me."

"Go on from there."

Brice frowned. "On to what?"

"To why you killed Le Soeur and hung it on me."

There was a further easing of Brice's expression. He even smiled faintly, tolerantly. "You've made some close guesses, Matt," he drawled. Then he eyed the gun momentarily, noticing that it didn't waver. "Why did I kill Le Soeur? Because he had me in there that night to ask me about the holdup. He was suspicious, maybe he knew the truth. I shot him. It was right after I'd taken you up the back hotel stairs to your room. So I went back and put the empty shell in your gun and put your boots back on."

"And I was sure I'd killed him!"

Phenego breathed, only the tautness of his heavy lips betraying the fury that was building in him. "So was Jim Faunce."

"You were both supposed to think that," Brice said dryly.

"You cut Le Soeur down even when you were going to marry the girl!"

Brice shrugged. "There was no way she could ever find out."

PHENEGO'S thumb tightened on the gun's hammer, so galled was he by Brice's casual manner. In that moment, he came close to shooting Brice, but caught himself in time; there were other things he wanted to know.

"You didn't stop with that. You went right on. Why?"

"Nothing more would have happened if Justice hadn't put his oar in. I'd been hoping you might sell me Stagline, maybe both outfits, once you bought out Le Soeur. The only reason you went into this business was to beat down Le Soeur. So I thought you'd sell once he was out of the way. I was going to use the Wells Fargo money to give me a start, and borrow the rest. Then Justice hung on and I saw it was to be a fight between you and him. So I let you go at each other."

"Along with a push or two from you to keep us interested," Phenego said bitingly. "It must've been Moreford that stopped Richter and got the Wells Fargo wallet, since he's the one that carried the girl off."

Brice tilted his head in the affirmative, leaning forward slightly in his chair, elbows on knees. "Moreford and two men he picked up in Jimtown," he admitted. He nodded to the small safe in the far corner of the room. "It's all there, all the Wells Fargo money, except Moreford's share, which wasn't much."

Some inner amusement put a mirthless smile on Phenego's face. "So today you brought over three of your crew to burn me out, workin'

on the hunch that Justice's outfit would be cut to ribbons when my men held up the bullion stage."

"I was hopin' Havens would get Justice. It was a pretty sure thing, Phenego. Yesterday I stopped in at Stagline to see what they were doing to get the girl back. I saw Harmon bolting steel plates into the inside of a stage and knew the gold was being shipped out. It looked like it might be a close fight, with you maybe gettin' the worst of it."

"And I did," Phenego drawled. His cold fury was heightened by Brice's bland manner, by the almost boasting way the man told how he had laid his plans. "But there's one hitch. Justice wasn't cut down. His crew cut mine to ribbons, and he came off without a man hurt." Phenego paused to relish the sudden wary expression that came to Brice's eyes. "It's a shame he isn't gettin' the chance to square things with you! I almost had that chance last night and didn't know it."

Brice's glance sharpened. "What chance?"

Phenego smiled. "Haven't you wondered who pushed the rim in on the Oriole?"

"You did?" Cold fury was on Brice's face. He'd been half crazy with worry over Belle last night.

The sudden deafening blast of the gun Brice always kept hanging from a nail in the knee hole of his desk jarred Phenego's solid frame backward. Phenego's gun exploded wildly ceilingward as he gave a choking gasp. His head dropped. He tried to bring his gun back into line. Brice shot again, his bullet ripping a hole through the thin veneer of the desk's front face. He smiled disdainfully, twistedly, as he saw the broad expanse of Phenego's shirt front stir under the impact of the slug.

At this range Brice couldn't miss. Phenego, with a superhuman effort, once more tried to lift his gun as he tottered on knees that were beginning to buckle. Once more Brice fired, then again as Phenego fell. Brice stood on his feet. He looked down over his sights deliberately and sent his last bullet into the dead saloonman's brain.

Out in the runway, close to the office's inched-open side window, Jim Faunce turned away and went soundlessly back to the street. His face was chalky, a nausea was gripping him. The last thing he heard as he came to the head of the runway was Brice's voice, calling, "Go on back to work! I'll take care of this," to two men who had started across the rear yard, attracted by the sound of the shots.

CHAPTER XXI

GUN BATTLE ON THE ROOF

THE night before Jim Faunce's instinct for self-preservation had sent him to the livery-barn loft rather than to his room to sleep. He hadn't rested much, for the fight with Stiles had left his thin frame sore to the touch in a dozen spots and his face swollen and bruised and aching. But, stronger than the physical battering he had taken, was a mental unrest that made it impossible for him to sleep. He didn't regret the break with Phenego; quite the opposite, for it had bolstered his new-found self-respect. But he was well aware of the manner in which Phenego dealt with a disloyal underling and acted accordingly. He lay behind the bales of hay at the front of the loft and when he dozed his gun was in his hand.

He had been up before dawn. He paid a furtive visit to his room, which he rented from a family that

owned a house backing on an alley close in to the stores. Gathering together his few belongings, he rolled them in his blankets and left the house without waking the owner and his wife in the front bedroom. At Slater's corral, he settled his bill with a sleepy hostler, saddled his chestnut gelding, and tied on his blanket roll. He had half decided to leave at once by way of the Alkali road when he changed his mind. No use in a man starting a ninety-mile ride on an empty stomach. He rode the alley to the lower end of the street, where the pound of the stamp mills was an ever-present jarring sound, and there ate a big breakfast of beefsteak, potatoes, coffee and pie in a restaurant he only occasionally patronized.

At the restaurant Faunce overheard two men discussing Shannon's rescue of Belle le Soeur and Frank Justice. Then, as he came out onto the street again, Stagline's mud wagon had passed him, with Frank Justice alongside Fred Cash on the driver's seat. He knew at once that the bullion was headed out; knew also that he wasn't yet ready to leave Goldrock.

Curiosity was strong in Jim Faunce, almost as strong as his willingness to run the risk of staying in the camp to see the outcome of a feud he had taken part in. And in staying he wasn't going to tuck his tail and slink along the alleys like a whipped cur dog. He went back to the alley where he'd tied his chestnut, and loosened the saddle cinch. Then he made for his office and spent an hour sorting through some papers, something he wouldn't have thought it wise to do an hour ago.

He was loafing in a doorway two doors above the Paradise shortly after midday when Cliff Havens rode up the street and went into the saloon. He saw the blood stain on Ha-

vens' shirt, and in that small sign had his first fragment to a pattern of trouble that presently started taking shape before his understanding eye.

IT was some twenty minutes before Fred Echols also turned in at the Paradise rack on a tired and sweat-caked horse. This was the wrong time of day for Echols to be in Goldrock unless something of pressing urgency brought him. That much Faunce understood, and he read into it his own meaning.

Shortly, when Phenego emerged from the saloon, hatless, his face set doggedly, he passed almost within arm reach of his ex-marshal without seeing him. Faunce fell in a few paces behind and, when Phenego cut across the street and entered the door of Mountain's waiting room, Faunce leaned against a convenient awning post and waited. Presently he saw four men leave the waiting room, one of them Adams, Brice's clerk. He read something ominous into Adams' going off duty at this hour and, on impulse, crossed the street and sauntered into Mountain's runway.

He was familiar with the arrangement of the rooms inside the flanking building and walked on his toes as he approached the side window to the office. Its top sash was open a good two inches, and as he came up he caught Phenego's full-bodied voice saying: ". . . need some time to talk this over."

"Talk what over?" Faunce heard Brice ask tonelessly.

So he had stood there, listening to the unfolding of a mystery that had been, to him, no mystery until now. He'd misjudged Phenego, he saw at once. Compared to Brice, the Paradise owner had been a much misunderstood and maligned man.

Brice's gun cut loose with such

suddenness that Faunce involuntarily shrunk back against the wall. He left the runway and recrossed the street quickly, wanting to put as much distance as he could between himself and Mountain's office. Gaining the opposite walk, he threw a look back over his shoulder and saw Ed Brice come into Mountain's street doorway. He pushed through the crowd, anxious to put himself out of Brice's sight, yet having to stop and look back at the man.

Brice stood there, a tall and solid shape, glancing casually up, then down, the street. He took tobacco from his shirt pocket and rolled a smoke. In the act of putting the cigarette in his mouth, he suddenly stiffened at something that had taken his attention down the walk. Then he flicked the unlighted cigarette out onto the walk and turned in out of the doorway, stepping back out of sight.

Faunce's glance followed Brice's. He was a full ten seconds seeing what had caused the abrupt change in Brice. When he did see it, he caught his breath in a swift intake.

Down in front of Morgan's Elite, Frank Justice stood talking with Belle le Soeur and Sam Osgood!

FRANK had reluctantly turned in off the street a few moments ago as Sam Osgood hailed him. He hadn't wanted to talk with Belle or the lawyer, but it was a meeting he couldn't avoid.

When Faunce spotted him, he was telling Osgood: "It's on the way down. Ned and the others are taking it through. We were stopped, but it didn't amount to much."

Osgood read his own meaning into Frank's words. "Anyone hurt?"

"Not a scratch."

"Shouldn't you have gone on with them, Justice? I didn't look to see you back so soon."

"A little unfinished business,"

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Satan—or Satan's henchmen?

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Frank drawled, and his look was enigmatic.

But Belle read something into that look and said in a hushed voice: "You're going to see Matt Phenego!" Her dark eyes showed alarm and worry.

Frank saw that he must tell her, even though he knew it would add more worry to that already there. "No," he said, his eyes giving a cool betrayal of his faint smile. "Brice."

"Ed?" Belle looked stunned, bewildered. "Why?"

He looked down at her with the last trace of his smile gone. "There's one thing I must know, Belle. He meant a lot to you that first day. What about now?"

"What are you trying to tell me, Frank?"

"Moreford worked for Brice." It hurt him to put Brice's guilt into words so bluntly, but it had to be. "I suspected it last night. Now I'm sure."

Belle closed her eyes a moment, her face going pale. Osgood reached out and took hold of her arm, giving Frank a quick and angry glance of accusation. Then the girl was staring intently up at Frank.

"Isn't there any other way?" she asked. She had seen the thonged holster low at his thigh a moment ago, and now knew why he was wearing it.

"There's no other way," Frank said tonelessly. Then, nodding briefly to Osgood, he added, "Take care of her, Sam," and turned and started on.

"Frank!"

Belle's call stopped him. He faced her again and looked down into her eyes and felt a sudden strange resentment in the strong hold this girl had over him. Then she was saying, low-voiced: "Brice is the man you spoke of last night, isn't he? He—" Her voice faltered be-

fore she went on, "He killed dad, didn't he?"

"I'm not sure, Belle. I'm going to find out."

The brightness of tears was in her glance. Yet she tried to smile as she murmured: "Of course you must see him. But I need you, Frank. Come back." She turned back to where Osgood waited.

FRANK stood motionless a moment, awed by the thing Belle had done. In her few words he saw a barrier moved aside, the last barrier standing between him and Brice. If he had known this morning that she no longer loved the man, that the emotion drawing her to him last night ran deeper than that holding her to Brice, he wouldn't have delayed this meeting. He would have seen Brice this morning. But that didn't matter now. What did was that some deep instinct in Belle had somehow prepared her for Brice's guilt. She was letting Frank go on to face the man she had once loved, perhaps even try to kill him. As he went along the walk, a tall and grave-faced man, the trust she had put in him quieted the restless edge of doubt that had been plaguing him.

That doubt had been of Belle alone, of her attitude toward Brice. For, down the street a few minutes ago, Frank had had final proof of his suspicions. Fred Echols, turning in at Doc Ralston's house to have his bad shoulder looked at, had spotted Frank riding in past the stamp mill and had hailed him and come out into the street to talk to him. He had mentioned the interview with Phenego, and the saloon-man's strange behavior after his cryptic questioning of Havens.

"You'd have thought he was set-

tin' out to kill a man when he took out his iron and looked at it. Then he left," Echols had said.

"Where to?"

"No one seemed to know. I didn't wait around to find out. This shoulder's givin' me holy Ned."

"You say Phenego seemed to know who had burned him out?" Frank had asked the man.

"It looked that way to me. He was askin' Cliff all them questions, and all at once hauled up short, like he knew."

"Try and think, Echols," Frank had insisted. "What did he say, exactly?"

Echols had frowned, thinking back. "He asked Havens if he was sure his men hadn't talked, sure they hadn't let the word out that his whole crew was going down to stop your stage. Havens said they hadn't. Phenego said you might have burned him out, only that you wouldn't have had the time to hear he was makin' play for the gold, and then buy off Brice's men. Then Havens said something about him and Phenego and Brice bein' the only ones that knew what the play was. Then's when Phenego seemed to know. I can't figure what hit him so sudden."

Perhaps Echols hadn't known the answer, but Frank had. In Echols' words he had found the proof he needed, not only that Brice was the only man who could have burned out the Mountain stations, but that Phenego had stumbled onto the truth. Unbelievable as it must have been to Phenego, he hadn't hesitated. Frank knew he had gone straight from his office to see Brice.

His impatience at being stopped by Osgood and Belle hadn't been due entirely to his not wanting to face the girl at a time like this. He had

wanted to get up to Mountain before Phenego left so that he would face both the men he had been fighting since the night of Paul le Soeur's death.

So now his stride quickened as he came in sight of Mountain's ramp four doors above.

He was that far when he met Jim Faunce.

THE marks of last night's fight with Ned were on the marshal's face. But something else was there, something that made Faunce pale and touched his eyes with a guarded look.

Then Faunce was saying: "Brice is cocked, saw you comin', Justice. Phenego's dead."

Frank waited for him to go on, the news of Phenego's death failing to surprise him. When Faunce didn't speak, he drawled: "You've been stingy with your favors, Faunce. Why do me this one now?"

Faunce's swollen lips managed an unamused smile. "Who cares why? But this is on the square, Justice!" Then, as though he'd said enough, he added a brief, "See you later," and started on.

A steely grip on his arm stopped him. "I don't trust you, Faunce," Frank said, and pulled him in beside him. "We'll double up on this," he drawled, and started on up the walk, pulling Faunce along with him.

Strangely enough, Faunce made no move to break away. It was as though the man had known he must play a final part in the violence he had helped shape, and didn't even resent what Frank was doing.

They didn't speak until they were within two strides of Mountain's doorway. Then Frank pushed Faunce on ahead, not roughly.

"You first," he said.

He thought Faunce might pause in that outer doorway. But the man went straight on into the deserted waiting room. Frank's glance shuttled from wall to wall, finally settling on the counter at the back. He said, "We'll have a look behind that," and his hand was brushing holster as Faunce went back there.

No one was behind the counter, so Frank nodded to the half glass door to the back office. Grudging admiration was blended with his strong suspicion of the marshal as Faunce stepped calmly to the door and pushed it open.

The back office, too, was empty except for the crumpled figure lying on the floor. The color left Faunce's face as he looked down at Phenego, at the pool of blood by the dead man's head, and he breathed with strange intensity: "Justice, you've got to make this stick!"

Frank stepped past him so that he could see into the room's side corner, giving Phenego's body only a brief glance. The back window that looked out onto the yard and the rear line of sheds stood invitingly open. He had drawn his gun, and was edging in alongside the window when he happened to see something that brought him to an abrupt halt. It was the flat-pointed shadow of this building's roof cast midway the length of the yard by the lowering sun. What took his eye was a momentary break in the roof's smooth shadow line, a break that was gone a second later, but that had clearly outlined a man's head and shoulders.

Brice was on the roof! He had left this window open purposely, hoping Frank would climb out through it and begin a search of the yard, and give him a chance to use his gun.



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nego's bullet-riddled body lying below was a warning to Frank not to offer himself as a target.

So he catfooted the narrow runway to the street end of the attic, kneeling there to work loose the two nails that held the window's dusty sash in place. They pulled out easily, as did the sash. He laid it to one side, then leaned out the window and looked above.

The roof's ridge was a scant three-foot reach above. He took off his boots. Then he hunched out through the small window, ignoring the long drop to the walk below. As he caught a hold on the ridge pole with his left hand, he drew his Colt's with his right. He came slowly erect, facing the long empty reach of the roof.

Brice wasn't in sight.

Frank threw his weight forward onto the roof. From his waist up he lay flat, his legs hanging back over the edge. He had wormed forward half a foot, his glance riveted back along the ridge, when Brice's tall shape came suddenly erect, throwing a gun into line with him.

SO sudden and unexpected was Brice's appearance that Frank, his gun hand reaching to the side to steady himself, couldn't move for a split second. Then he hurried the forward swing of his right arm, knowing that Brice had expected him to do exactly what he had done, that the man had probably stood looking in the open window at the back of the attic as he climbed out the front.

He knew he couldn't get his gun into line in time and threw his long frame in a convulsive sideward roll, regardless of the weight of his legs which threatened to drag him over the edge. A terrific blow in his right shoulder pounded him back even farther as the hollow blast of Brice's gun exploded against the now faint

noise from the street. He felt no immediate pain in his right arm. But, as he rolled belly down again, he couldn't move it.

Brice's gun was dropping on Frank once more. He could see the sardonic smile on the man's face even across the fifty-foot space that separated them. Once again he threw his body into a roll, crossing his left hand over his body to take the gun from his other numbing hand. This time he thrust out a knee and pushed in a foot farther from the roof's edge. The second explosion of Brice's .38 marked the exact instant he felt a searing burn across his hip.

He finished his roll on his knees and bent sharply to the side as he arced up his gun. Their shots came simultaneously. He was barely aware of the bullet's air whip past his neck as he saw his own knock loose a splinter from a shingle directly in front of Brice. He knew that the slug glanced upward, for Brice's wide shape moved back a lurching step and bewilderment touched his face.

Kneeling there, Frank took time to sight his second shot. Through the thin blue fog of acrid powder smoke he saw Brice go down. He got to his feet and staggered back along the roof slope until he looked down onto the flat roof. Brice crouched there, bent at the waist as though in prayer. A grimace of pain twisted his face as he swung his weapon into line with Frank.

The two explosions made one prolonged roar of sound, the echoes beating back from the face of the sheds at the rear of the yard. Frank's gun spoke a near second before Brice's, and the slam of his bullet into Brice's wide chest turned the man's weapon so that the answering shot went wide.

Brice was driven backward in a broken sprawl. His big body rolled with the flat roof's down slope. He clawed out with his two hands, letting his gun fall, trying to catch himself. He failed, and his body turned



over the roof edge in a leg-up fall. There was a moment's awful stillness before the dull thud of his ground-striking body came up to Frank.

By that time Frank was on his knees, his legs having gone weakly out from under him. He heard calls from below, a shout out on the street. He hung his head and his reeling senses steadied. He managed to get to his feet again, although he had to stand with legs widespread to keep from falling. He pulled his right arm across his body and managed to push his thumb into his belt so that the arm had some support. He started back across the

ten feet of roof to its back edge, planning how he would sit down and lower his legs first to the flat roof below.

A man came out of one of the yard's back sheds and called something which Frank failed to understand. Another joined the first, and they ran across the yard and out of sight under the line of the back roof. He grunted savagely as he tried to put one foot in front of the other. There were closer voices now, voices that made him stand spraddle-legged and lift his gun again with the knowledge that Brice's crew might be taking the fight up where Brice had left off.

It was Sam Osgood who came through the attic's back window and onto the roof. Jim Faunce was close behind. Faunce gave the lawyer a warning look as they came up on Frank, for the latter's gun had swung around to cover them. Faunce saw the dull unrecognizing stare in Frank's eyes and snatched at the .45 swiftly—not an instant too soon, for the hammer snapped down on his thumb, its striking pin cutting the flesh of his thumb to the bone. He threw the weapon aside in time to catch Frank as he tottered forward.

They carried Frank down to Brice's office and laid him on the floor, where someone had thrown a coat over the grisly sight of Phenego's body. By the time Belle came in, Osgood had found a bottle in Brice's desk and Faunce had cleared the room of the crowd of curious onlookers attracted in from the street.

The raw bite of the whiskey made Frank gag and open his eyes. He stared dully around a moment, until his glance rested finally on Belle. Slow recognition warmed the look in his gray eyes and brought a smile that eased the lined pain on his face.

He said, in a surprisingly strong voice:

"This about winds it up, doesn't it?"

"Yes, Frank," Belle murmured. "Or we could call it a beginning."

His hand lifted to gently close on one of hers. Looking up at her, seeing the unmasked emotion in her oval face, he breathed: "A beginning." He was silent a long moment as he studied her. "I like the sound of that. We'll make it a sure-enough partnership this time."

Osgood, standing over by the desk, intercepted a nod from Jim Faunce that showed him the door. They left the room together, Faunce closing the door softly.

"That medicine ought to last him until the sawbones gets here," Faunce drawled. "Meantime, there's some things you ought to know, Osgood; some things for you to tell Justice."

THE mud wagon was some three miles short of Baker's Crossing when Mountain's in-bound Concord rolled into sight around a lower bend.

Ned reached out and put pressure on Fred Cash's reins. "Here's where I leave you," he said.

The oldster gave him a startled look. "Where you goin'?"

"Back to see what trouble Frank's got himself into." Ned swung aground before the stage stopped rolling. Yates and Harmon were looking out the door to see why they had stopped. Ned gave them a grin. "Don't you three decide to hop a freight with that stuff."

"You go to the devil," Cash called down testily, keeping a straight face.

A new driver was on the seat of the Mountain Concord, a man Ned didn't know. It was agreeable to him to take on a passenger, so Ned climbed up with him. As the Con-

cord pulled on past the mud wagon, Yates called, "Say hello to her for me, Stiles," and smiled broadly at the look on Ned's face.

Ned admitted he'd been thinking as much of Helen as of Frank when he acted on that sudden impulse to take the stage back to Goldrock. He knew he should have seen Helen before setting out on the drive this morning. That feeling of guilt strong in him, he was impatient at the steady trot of the three teams as the Concord rolled up the trail, although the pace the driver held his teams to was steady and fast.

Later, the relays were being changed at The Narrows in the last few minutes of daylight when Ned saw a rider on his way down out of the high-walled mouth of the upper canyon. Recognizing Jim Faunce, he climbed down from the seat and sauntered over to the rutted road as Faunce approached.

When Faunce had reined in twenty feet away, his battered face set impassively, Ned couldn't help but smile.

"That was as sweet a fight as I ever bought a hand in, Jim" he said.

FAUNCE'S expression relaxed out of its tightness. "Same here," he said, and made a good attempt at matching Ned's smile.

Ned was after information. "Anything happen up there before you left?"

Faunce pretended to deliberate. "Nothin' much," he said finally. "Brice used a gun he'd hooked under the cross drawer of his desk to gut-shoot Phenego."

"Phenego!" Ned said explosively. "What the— Did it kill him?"

Faunce shrugged. "Maybe the first slug didn't. But Brice used four more, the last through the head."

Ned whistled softly. "Does Frank know about it?"



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"He may, by now. He was passed out when I left. Chloroform. Ralston had to probe for a bullet in his shoulder."

"What's the rest of it?" Ned demanded impatiently.

"Justice chose Brice. They shot it out on the roof of Mountain's office. Brice's funeral is set for tomorrow afternoon. That reminds me. You could take care of sending some flowers in my name."

Ned eyed this new Jim Faunce with a growing respect. "Is that all?" he asked.

"Just about. It looks like you might have to side Justice as best man as soon as he's on his feet. He's picked himself a wife, and as far as I can see she don't object much." "You're headed out?" Ned asked quietly.

Faunce nodded. "This country's gettin' too crowded."

"We could use a man like you at the yard."

"Hu-huh," Faunce drawled. "You can have it, the town and all that goes with it."

When Ned said, "Here's wishin' you luck," the former lawman lifted a hand and rode on.

Some ten minutes later, alongside the driver on the seat of the coach, Ned was saying: "I've got twenty dollars says you can't make town in an hour flat, mister."

The driver gave him a startled look, then reached for his whip. "Make it thirty and it's a deal."

"Thirty it is."

The whip's lash snaked out and exploded between the rumps of the leaders. Its echo traveled on up the corridor of The Narrows, blended with the rattle of the iron-shod wheels and the ring of double-tree chains. Ned settled back against the seat, wondering how soon Frank Justice could return him that favor of serving as best man.

THE END.

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