

A New Novel

**GUN HAND**

By

**BENNETT FOSTER**

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Vol. CLXV      Contents for May 14, 1938      No. 1

## A COMPLETE NOVEL

**GUN HAND** . . . . . Bennett Foster . . . . . 6  
*Young Jeff Councilman could be trigger quick, if necessary, and he sure found it necessary when he took over that risky Webber lease for old Jake Armitage.*

## A NOVELETTE

**THREE CAME GUNNING** . . . . . W. Ryerson Johnson . . . . . 64  
*Could the Three Link parás hold the range against the hot lead holocaust Wack Moro's hirelings had let loose?*

## A SERIAL

**TROUBLE FIGHTER—Part IV** . . . . . Luke Short . . . . . 98  
*Bossell's drygulchers were ready to spring that death trap which meant certain doom to the wasters on the Ulberry grant, but Bossell's men failed to reckon with Jim Wade.*

## SHORT STORIES

**BAIT FOR BANDITS** . . . . . Carlos St. Clair . . . . . 41  
*Those three outlaws made Doc Dunlop take some pretty bitter medicine!*

**WHITE DEATH TRAIL** . . . . . James B. Hendryx . . . . . 52  
*When it came to fighting a man, Corporal Downey had no fear, but escape from the merciless White Death, of the frozen tundras was a different sort of battle!*

**GUNSMOKE RETRIBUTION** . . . . . John A. Saxon . . . . . 89  
*It was up to old Dan Murdock to prove that War Bonnet could still use a two-gun marshal.*

## WESTERN STORY FEATURES

**THE STARLIGHT TRAIL (Poem)** . . . . . Tom B. Stone . . . . . 51  
*The last great Roundup.*

**THE STORY OF THE WEST** . . . . . Gerard Delano . . . . . 62  
*Episode II in the new dramatic picture history of the West.*

## DEPARTMENTS

Where to Go and How to Get There . . . . . John North . . . . . 39  
 Mines and Mining . . . . . John A. Thompson . . . . . 87  
 The Hollow Tree . . . . . Helen Rivers . . . . . 119  
 Missing . . . . . 122  
 The Roundup . . . . . The Editor . . . . . 128

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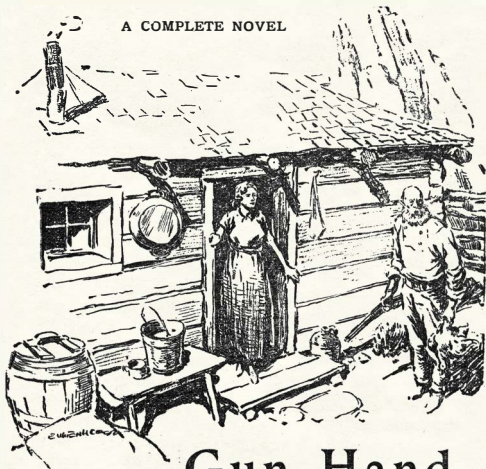
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# Gun Hand

## CHAPTER I

### JOB FOR A MAN

**J**EFF COUNCILMAN stood in front of the desk and twisted his hat around and around in his tanned, square-knuckled hands. His light blue eyes showed his worryment and his shoulders were slumped. Behind the desk Jake Armitage held his scrawny body primly erect and stared over his glasses at his rider, with the lidless, yellowish eyes of an eagle.

"What I want in a man is for him to be re-sourceful," snapped Armi-

tage, emphasizing the first syllable of the word. "Want him to have some gumption, an' git mad once in awhile."

"Yes sir," agreed Jeff.

"Yes sir!" Old Jake pushed his glasses up on his forehead. People in the Ponil country foretold the weather by the way he wore his glasses and when they rode high on his wrinkled brow there was blood on the moon and dirty times coming. "Can't you say nothin' but 'yes sir'?"

"Yes sir," said Jeff miserably.

Jake Armitage's puny fist thumped on the scarred top of the

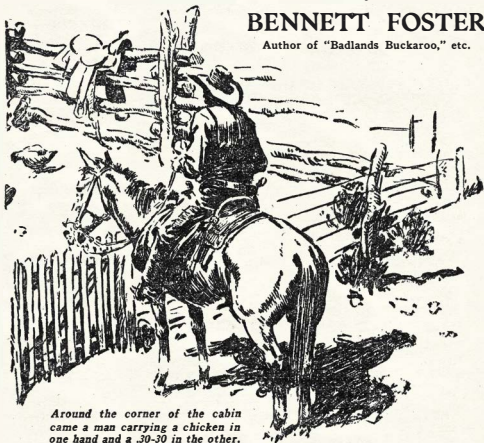


*He looked like a meek sort of jasper, that young Jeff Councilman, but danger's what tests a man, and danger aplenty was what awaited Jeff on that lonely Webber lease*

By

**BENNETT FOSTER**

Author of "Badlands Buckaroo," etc.



*Around the corner of the cabin came a man carrying a chicken in one hand and a .30-30 in the other.*

desk and the yellow eyes flamed. "Yes sir! Blast it! Yes sir! You—you—"

"Yes sir," said Jeff.

Anger overwhelmed Jake Armitage's vocabulary, and for an instant he was speechless, choking on the words that welled to his throat. Over in the corner, Rollie Brown,

Jake's foreman at headquarters, shifted uneasily and looking around for a place to spit thought better of it and swallowed the juice.

"Listen you—you—" Jake finally found his voice, "I ought to fire you."

The hat stopped turning in Jeff's hands, and a woebegone look came



into his eyes. "Yes sir," he said.

"But I ain't goin' to." Jake overlooked the interruption. "I ain't goin' to fire you. I'm goin' to send you up to the Webber lease. You git yore horses an' yore truck, an' go up there. You'll stay the winter in that camp an' I don't want you to be bellyachin' to me. I don't want you to come cryin' around an' askin' me what to do. You hear me?"

This time Jeff simply nodded, keeping his mouth shut. It was best not to talk to Jake Armitage when he was looking out from under his glasses.

"Well then, git!" Jake came up out of his chair. "Git along. You'll have a thousand steers up there to look after. I want a thousand of 'em to be there in the spring. Now git out!"

Dismissed, Jeff Councilman turned and walked miserably out of the office. Old Jake Armitage glared at the empty door and gnawed on his mustache. "Yes sir!" he muttered under his breath.

Rollie Brown waited for the storm to subside. Rollie had been with Old Jake a long time, ever since Jake had owned only the Ponil ranch and fifty head of thin-flanked cows. Rollie knew when it was safe to open his mouth. He waited until Jake had leaned back in the chair and had raised his boot heels to the battered top of the desk. "Ummm," said Rollie.

"Don't you 'umm' me!" snapped Jake.

"He's kind of young," said Rollie. "After all, he's just a kid."

"Kid fourteen years ago when he come to work for me," said Jake. "Time he growed up."

"The Webber lease is kind of tough for a kid," Rollie persisted. "That town of Cayuse ain't no bar-

gain, an' the rough country over west—"

"Shut up!" snapped Jake.

Rollie went right on. "An' I been a little worried—"

"You tryin' to tell me how to run my business?" growled Jake.

"No," said Rollie, "I ain't."

"Then git out an' git him started."

Rollie Brown got up. "Well," he drawled, "they're yore steers."

"Yo're danged right they are!" Jake Armitage fired the shot at his foreman's departing back. And Rollie, by way of repartee, banged the door shut.

Left alone in his office, Jake Armitage squinted his yellow eyes and stared at the wall. He looked at it for a long time. Then he nodded. They were his steers and Jeff Councilman was his man. Jake Armitage, who owned five ranches and ran fifty thousand head of cattle, who might have been a United States senator or the governor of his home state, but who preferred just to be Jake Armitage, got up from his chair and went to the window. Down by the corral Rollie Brown was talking to Jeff Councilman. Jeff was overhauling a pack saddle.

Jake Armitage nodded again. "Got to break him in some time," muttered Jake. "Got to git him rid of this danged 'yessir' business. Mebbe this'll do it. Anyhow I promised his dad . . ." Jake went back and sat down again.

## CHAPTER II

### THE WEBBER LEASE

IT took Jeff Councilman five days to reach the Webber lease. There was a hundred and fifty miles of riding between the headquarters on the Ponil and the mesa, and Jeff took his time. Two nights of the journey he stopped at Armitage ranches, and two nights he



made camps, and the fifth night he pulled into the camp on top of Cayuse Mesa and threw down with Bill Sheffield who was holding it down. Bill was glad enough to see him. Bill had had enough of the Webber lease.

"I'll stick with you a week," said Bill, "an' show you the country. Then I'll head for home."

Jeff agreed to that. He looked over the camp with Bill that evening, saw the stock of supplies and the feed in the barn and the wood that had been hauled in. The next morning they rode.

The Webber lease was on top of Cayuse Mesa. Sometime in the past wheat had been grown on the mesa and the dilapidated shacks and sheds of the nesters still dotted the leased ground.

Bill Sheffield and Jeff Councilman rode the west side and the north end, and came back along the east side of the mesa where the tableland broke sharply into rough country. For three miles along the east side there was a tight, four-wire fence.

"Wingate's place," explained Bill. "We ain't got that. Old Man Wingate died a year ago. I don't know if Armitage is goin' to lease it or not."

Where the tight fence turned and dropped over the hill, Bill halted. "We go from here on down to the lower fence," he said. "That's winter country. I got all the stuff on top now. When it gets to stormin' I throw 'em in the breaks."

"They make good shelter," said Jeff.

"They're the only thing that will pull you through the winter," said Bill. "Without them you'd have steers piled up until hell wouldn't have it. I got the fence up now but when it gets to be about November I'd take it down in a place or two

so they can go across into the roughs."

"Yeah," agreed Jeff.

Bill Sheffield looked at his companion. Jeff was smoothly built and there was perhaps one hundred and sixty pounds of him packed into five feet eight inches. A pleasant fellow, Jeff. He looked like a hand, but scrutinizing him with thoughtful eyes, Bill Sheffield had an idea.

"I've showed you the place," Bill said. "I reckon you can swing it. The ridin's all up to date an' every-thing's roses. I'll pull out in the mornin'."

"I thought you was goin' to stay a week," Jeff reminded him.

"Aw, you can swing it," said Bill. "I'll pull along."

"Well," agreed Jeff, "all right."

In the morning Bill Sheffield put his bed roll on a spare horse and prepared to leave. Bill was headed for the nearest Armitage ranch, the Seven S on Kady Creek, which was forty miles from the Webber lease. Bill bade Jeff Councilman good-by and pulled out. It was a dirty trick, Bill knew, but that didn't worry Bill. He had been on roundup with Jeff Councilman. Everybody with the wagon had given Jeff the dirty end of the stick and Jeff didn't complain. Bill rode off whistling.

Left alone on the Webber lease, with fences to ride, with a thousand J A steers to look after, with his own cooking to do, and with five green broncs in a string of twelve horses, Jeff Councilman looked around him. His blue eyes were sorrowful, and his compact shoulders sagged. By gosh, here he was!

Bill had not told the truth about the riding. Bill had said that it was all up, but it wasn't. Jeff found some fence in the horse pasture that was about ready to fall down. He found a water gap out on the little



creek that bisected the Webber lease. He discovered that there was a world of work to do.

Early and late, Jeff Councilman hit the ball, riding the green broncs for the most part, trying to give them a little education, trying to get the place in shape for winter, trying to hold it down. The end of September came, and the first of October. Jeff looked out of his camp door early in the morning, looked out across the rolling mesa top to where a deserted nester shack stood like a gaunt skeleton of a man's hope, and watched the marching skyline of mountains to the west. He was all by himself.

**T**HE big three-year-old J A steers did all right. They were on the thick grama grass where the nesters had not broken the land. The green broncs were beginning to be horses, and the work had eased off a little. Jeff found coyote tracks along the creek, and thought that he might have time to do a little trapping. A man doesn't get very far just on thirty a month and grub.

Jeff brought out six steel traps from his pack, oiled them, and delved into the pack again for the .32-20 Colt he carried when he ran trap lines. He had about three hundred dollars in the bank at Ponil that he had saved from his wages and what he made from pelts. He didn't know why he had saved it, because there seemed to be no particular use in saving money.

The next morning, riding along the east fence, looking for a good place for a trap, Jeff came to the tight wire of Wingate's fence. There was a gate right at the corner and that gate was down. Some cattle had gone through. Jeff turned his bay, Buster, through the gate and rode

on down. He would have to find the escaped steers and put them back into the pasture.

Riding down the break in the rim rock, Jeff followed the tracks as well as he could. There were eight steers on a bench under the rim and beyond the steers a spiral of smoke rose lazily. Leaving the steers to be picked up later, Jeff went on toward the smoke.

The smoke came from a cabin set under a sheer rock wall. There were corrals at the cabin and a barn, and Jeff rode toward it. Just at the fence he halted and opened his mouth to yell a greeting, but the call did not come. A shot sounded from behind the cabin.

Nervously, young Jeff Councilman reached for the Colt he wore at his hip, and quieted the frightened Buster. Around the corner of the cabin came a man carrying a chicken in one hand and a .30-30 in the other. He stopped at the corner of the cabin, his face turned in Jeff's direction.

"Well," snapped the man, "what do you want?"

Before Jeff could reply, another voice came. "Who is it, Amos?"

"Cow-puncher," answered the man at the corner of the cabin.

The door of the cabin opened and a very pretty girl with a tousled red head appeared. She surveyed Jeff Councilman briefly, smiled, and spoke.

"Get down and come in," she invited. "We're going to have chicken for dinner."

Somehow, moving in a daze, Jeff got his feet on the ground. The girl was still smiling as he came through the gate, but at the corner of the cabin Amos was scowling.

"Do you like chickens and dumpings, or would you rather have them roasted?" asked the girl. "We'll



need another chicken, Amos."

"He'll like 'em either way," growled Amos. "He's danged lucky to have chicken."

Jeff stared at the girl and at the man. The girl was just about breath-taking. But the man . . . Jeff had never seen a man like Amos. Amos was bald as a pickled beet and of approximately the same color. From his cheeks a bristly gray beard sprouted, but it was the man's eyes that made Jeff stare. One eye was bright and blue and canted toward the sun. The other, equally bright, was brown, and at the moment seemed to be fixed on a fence post. Still, from his uneasy feeling, Jeff knew that Amos was looking at him.

"Get another chicken, Amos," directed the girl, descending from the cabin porch. She said to Jeff: "Won't you come in?"

Jeff took a step. The girl went on talking. "I'm Sally Wingate. I've just moved in here. Who are you?"

"Jeff Councilman," said Jeff. "I'm holdin' down the camp on the Weber lease, for Armitage. I found one of yore gates open an' some of our steers had gone through—"

He stopped. A hen, a big white hen, had come around the corner of the barn and was plainly visible. Amos, turning a little, lifted the .30-30 and the gun cracked sharply. Jeff would have sworn that the blue eye was fixed upon him and the brown eye on the wagon drawn up in the yard. Still, there was the hen, flopping beside the barn, neatly beheaded.

"Huh!" snorted Amos. "Think I can't shoot?"

**S**ALLY WINGATE was friendly. She escorted the bewildered Jeff into the house and to the kitchen. She gave him a cup of coffee and prattled while Jeff drank.

She was, she said, the niece of the Wingate who had originally owned the place. She came from Illinois, and had just moved into the country. She loved it, and was going to get a lot of cows, "Oh, fifteen or twenty," she said, and stock the Wingate place.

Amos came in carrying the two fowls, plucked and drawn. He dumped them on the kitchen table and scowled at Jeff. Jeff finished his coffee.

"I got them steers up on the bench," Jeff said. "I got to put 'em back on top. I'm obliged to you, ma'am, but I reckon I'd better go. I—"

Sally Wingate showed her disappointment. "But I thought you'd stay for dinner," she expostulated. "I thought, out here in the West, that whenever a—whenever anybody came to a strange ranch he stayed with them. I thought you'd tell me all about punching cattle and everything. I saw your gun. Are you a gunman?"

Jeff Councilman had shot coyotes running, at fifty yards. He could roll a tin can and keep it rolling, but that was about all. He looked from the girl to the cross-eyed man for help. "Uh," said Jeff, "them steers—"

"Let him go," said Amos, morosely. "I like chicken. I'll eat what's left."

Sally Wingate escorted Jeff to the door. She was still talking, still trying to get him to stay. Jeff, blushing, had no words that he could use. At the door the girl stopped, but Amos went on with Jeff. Amos paused beside the fence while Jeff went through the gate and got Buster.

"Lissen," growled Amos, when Jeff led the horse out and prepared to mount, "don't you come bustin' "



down here no more. That girl's green, but I'm lookin' after her. Me! Cockeye Jordan! You hear me?"

"Yeah, I hear you." Freed of the incumbrance of Sally's presence, Jeff recovered his voice. "I come down to see about that gate up on top. It was down. . . ."

"I didn't open it!"

"Well—" Jeff was uncertain, "it was down anyhow."

"Then why don't you wire it shut? Good-by!"

For the first time Jeff showed a little spirit. "I'll do that," he promised. "So long."

For some reason, after he had picked up the steers and put them back through the gate, Jeff did not wire it shut. He went on along the fence and found a spot where anything going up or down must come through a break in the rim, and set his trap there; but when he rode back to the camp, the Wingate gate was still guiltless of being wired shut.

For the next three or four days, along with his work, Jeff managed to go past the Wingate fence. He told himself that he wanted to see how his traps were, and indeed, that was a part of it. But every time he passed the gate he hoped that it would be open.

On the fifth day, which happened to be Sunday although Jeff did not know that, he did find that the gate had been opened. It was not down, but it was not fixed shut in the way that Jeff had left it. Curiosity prompted him to stop and examine the wire barrier and, looking at the gate, his trapper's eye saw where a shod horse had gone through and angled off toward the rim. Further curiosity sent Jeff through the gate and along the dim trail of the shod horse. He found where the horse had been tied, and going to the rim

he looked directly down on the Wingate cabin.

The cabin was about a hundred yards away, straight down under the sheer descent of the rim rock. Standing there looking at it, Jeff experienced a fit of nostalgia. He wished that he had nerve enough to go down there and visit that girl. Still standing on the rim he looked down at his feet. There, just at his boot toe, was a cigarette stub. Stooping, Jeff picked up the butt and examined it. Whoever had rolled that cigarette was fancy. One end of the paper had been folded back before the smoke was rolled, thus forming a tip.

Jeff tossed the butt away and looked at the cabin again. Sally Wingate was outside, looking up at the rim. She saw Jeff there, called and waved. Jeff waved back. Then, blushing at his own temerity, he retreated to his horse and rode back to the gate and through it, and on home.

HE had been at home only an hour when a cheerful call brought him outside. Sally Wingate was there, mounted on a big, rawboned white horse, and she was carrying a basket.

"I thought as long as you wouldn't come to see me, I'd just come to see you," she explained after she had dismounted. "I brought you a piece of cake and a pie."

Jeff stammered his thanks and followed the girl to the camp. She made no attempt to hide her interest in everything concerning the little rock house. The bedroom off the kitchen was viewed. Jeff's house-keeping arrangements were examined and questions asked concerning them.

Sally exclaimed over a coyote hide that was hung in the rock barn, felt



of the soft fur and wanted to know how coyotes were caught. Little by little she pried Jeff loose from his shyness and uncertainty. Before he knew it or realized why or how, Jeff told Sally Wingate a good deal about himself, his work, and his ambitions. The girl's very eagerness pulled him out.

"I wish I were a man," said Sally when Jeff had talked. "I surely do. Tell me: Aren't you afraid to stay up here all by yourself? Suppose something happened to you?"

Jeff had never thought of that. "Why no," he said slowly, "I ain't afraid. I don't guess I am. Nothin' ever happens to me anyhow."

The girl, looking at Jeff's battered alarm clock, declared that her visit was over. She had to go home. Jeff escorted her out to the white horse and helped her mount, thanking her for the pastry. Sally waved away that thanks.

"I'm a good cook," she said complacently. "I'll bring you lots of things. And guess what has happened, Mr. Councilman: I'm not going to have to buy any cattle."

"No?" said Jeff.

"No. I'm going to have my place stocked without buying any. A man named Fudge came out from Cayuse yesterday and he's going to put a lot of cattle on my place."

"Lease it?" asked Jeff.

The girl nodded. "He's leased my place and all this land along below the mesa," she stated. "He's going to put a lot of cattle in there, he said. Good-by, Mr. Councilman, and come down and see us."

"Yes, ma'am, I will," Jeff agreed absently.

The girl rode away, looking back and waving several times. When she was gone Jeff went into the camp house and sat down. He had something to think about.

## CHAPTER III

### WARNING

THE next morning, early, he was up and had his horses in. Saddling Buster, he closed the camp door, and then mounting, rode east. Jeff had something to do in Cayuse and he aimed to get it done right away.

He reached the little town about eleven o'clock and went to the post office for his mail. All there was for him was a saddle catalogue, forwarded from Ponil, and a ranch envelope that contained his check. Putting these aside for future reference, Jeff went to Kuntz's store. Abe Kuntz, bald-headed and vulturine, was all smiles after Jeff had introduced himself.

"Sure," said Abe. "Anythink you want, we got it. Salt, feed, anythink. I know Jake Armitage for forty years an' he pays his bills. Always we supply his camp or his wagons when they come in. You just say what you want and sign the bill, an' take it mit you."

"That's fine," Jeff said. "I don't want nothin' but a can of bakin' powder an' about twenty pounds of sugar, right now. I'll pick 'em up when I come back. Can you tell me where a man named Fudge is?"

Abe Kuntz could give that information and did give it, staring curiously at Jeff the while. Armed with the proper distances and turnings, Jeff set out and wound up at a small frame building, a sign on which said, "L. Fudge, Real Estate." The door was open and Jeff went in.

Mr. L. Fudge was behind the desk, a pursy man with a full lower lip that he sucked up and then let fall. There was another man in the office, a big man that Fudge introduced as Murphy, after Jeff had given his name. Murphy wore a gun, there



was a star on his vest under his coat, and Jeff took him for what he was: a deputy sheriff.

"And what can I do for you, Mr. Councilman?" asked Fudge smoothly, scrutinizing Jeff with black, beady eyes.

"Well," Jeff was hesitant, "I'm ridin' for Armitage up on the Webber lease, this winter. We got a bunch of steers up there."

Fudge sucked his lower lip, and nodded. "I know," he agreed. "I made that lease for Mr. Armitage some two years ago."

Jeff felt relief. "Then that's all right," he said. "I heard yesterday that you'd leased the country below the top, but if you leased it for Armitage it's fine."

Fudge let his lip flip out. "But I didn't lease it for Armitage," he said. "I'm glad you came in, Mr. Councilman. You saved me a trip. I intended coming up to the mesa in the next day or two to talk with you."

There was a sinking feeling at the pit of Jeff's stomach.

"Yes?" he said.

Fudge nodded briskly and ran his fingers through the small forest of spikes that was his hair. "It has been the custom of the man Armitage kept up there, to use the top for summer pasture," he said. "When the storms come the fence is usually let down in a few places and the cattle drift through into the breaks. I've made that lease for Mr. Murphy and I'm sure he would object to the fence being lowered."

Murphy growled from his chair: "Yo're danged right I'd object."

"But Armitage always had that land," expostulated Jeff. "The lease ain't worth a thing without it. There ain't any shelter an'—"

"I'm sorry," said Fudge.

"I'll keep that fence up," warned

Murphy. "I got that country an' the Wingate place. You keep yore steers off of 'em."

Jeff felt like a man hit in the solar plexus. It looked to him as though he were up against it. "I guess there ain't a thing I can do," he said weakly. "I—well, so long."

"I'll be movin' some cattle up there in the next few days," Murphy stated. "Likely I'll have a camp down below you. Come around sometime."

"Uh—thanks," said Jeff, and left the office.

Murphy, when Jeff was gone, looked at Fudge and grinned. "Kind of a weak sister," stated Murphy. "I thought he'd make some sort of howl about it, but he's taken it just as meek as a lamb."

"What else could he do?" Fudge asked. "The lease is all in order and legal. I made it, I ought to know."

Murphy's pale blue eyes fixed on the pudgy man. "You ought to know," he agreed. "An' don't forget we're in these Bar O A cattle together, neither."

"I won't forget it if you don't!" snapped Fudge. "I'm looking for quite an increase in those three hundred steers."

Both men laughed and Murphy, first to check his merriment, spoke once more. "Ought to have a big increase even if steers ain't supposed to have calves."

Fudge grinned appreciatively. "Yeah," he said, "but these that we've got will show an increase just the same. Wait till the first storms hit and those J A's start driftin'."

**J**EFF COUNCILMAN, leaving Fudge's office, went down the street to the Commercial House, the one hotel of which Cayuse boasted. There, from the proprietor,



he borrowed paper and pencil, and sitting at a desk in the lobby went to work. He had a letter to write. He was thus occupied when Fudge came in. Fudge nodded cheerfully to Jeff, and walking to the desk, spoke in a low voice with the proprietor.

It took time for Jeff to scrawl his epistle. He had to tell Jake Armitage all about this trouble. Enlarging upon the necessity of the break country for winter, Jeff finished with the statement that if the breaks were not available, Armitage had better get the steers out of there. Sealing his note in an envelope he went to the desk to purchase a three cent stamp. The worldly man behind the desk offered to mail the letter for Jeff. With a brief, "Thanks," Jeff went on out and down to Kuntz's to pick up his supplies. When he was gone the man in the Commercial House strolled down to Leonard Fudge's office. Throwing Jeff's letter on the desk, he made drawing comment.

"Here's the letter that fellow wrote. You said you'd want to see it."

"Thanks, Tom," said Fudge, picking up the letter. "I'll do you a favor some time."

Tom grunted and went out. He was already indebted to Fudge.

Jeff got his supplies, put them on his saddle, ate dinner at the little restaurant, and pulled out. He had done his duty. Now it was up to Jake Armitage.

For two weeks Jeff stayed at the lease, leaving it only to go to town on Saturdays, and twice to visit Sally Wingate. Both times in town he found that there was no mail for him and he felt a vague uneasiness. At Sally's it was a different story. There he was welcome. Even old

"Cockeye" Jordan came to accept Jeff.

Jeff learned a good deal about Sally during those visits, but he learned nothing about Cockeye. Sally, he learned, had been brought up on an Illinois farm. Dan Wingate, the original owner of the ranch, had been her uncle. Sally was without parents now, without any kin. Cockeye seemed to stand in the place of friends or relatives. Jeff did not find out much about finances or about plans for the future, but it was nice to be welcome and to have someone to talk with.

On his second visit, after the second blank week at the post office, Jeff, talking to Cockeye and Sally, mentioned his troubles. He referred to them as Armitage's troubles rather than his own. Cockeye, smoking a pipe, heard the story through. Sally listened in silence. When Jeff had finished each made characteristic comment.

"What are you going to do, Jeff?" asked Sally.

"I don't know," Jeff answered. "I wrote Armitage—"

"Seems to me like you want Armitage to do it," grunted Cockeye. "Looks like it's up to you. Armitage put you in charge. Now you got to do yore stuff."

"But—" Jeff began.

"Oh, I know that you'll do something," interposed Sally. "I just know you will get along all right, Jeff. You're so resourceful."

That evening, riding back to camp, Jeff Councilman did some real thinking. Cockeye's comment and the words of the girl, remained in his mind. For the first time in his life Jeff Councilman took stock of himself and found big vacant spots.

Back in the camp, with his horse cared for and the lamp lighted, he put his feet on the table and stared



at the wall. He sat there a long time. Then, getting up, he found the boot jack and began to pull off his boots. When the first boot slid off, Jeff stopped, stared at the jack, and, apparently, addressed it. "Yeah," said Jeff, bitterly, "an' that's why you never amounted to a tinker's dam!"

THE next morning Jeff was in no hurry to leave the camp. Until ten o'clock he puttered around, doing chores, and now and then stopping to stare off over the flat expanse of the mesa. At ten o'clock he had company. "Cash" Murphy, the man Jeff had met in Fudge's office, came riding in with a thin man that Murphy introduced as Joe Rennick. Rennick said, in his high-pitched voice, that he was glad to meet Jeff and that they were going to be neighbors.

"Rennick's holdin' down my camp below the hill," Murphy said jovially. "I thought we might as well come up an' see how you were makin' it."

Jeff said that he was doing all right, and the three talked about moisture, grass, and water conditions.

"Speakin' of neighbors," said Rennick, "we went up to Wingate's place. I seen that girl up there. Ain't she a little dandy?"

It was not what Rennick said, but the way he said it, with his mouth twisted and a leer in his protruding eyes, that made Jeff sore. Still he could do nothing but nod agreement, and Rennick went on.

"If it wasn't for old Cockeye I'd spend my time up there, ridin' job or no ridin' job."

"I won't worry about you keepin' at work as long as Cockeye's there," stated Murphy. "That old devil

has killed three men, an' he's sure stuck on this girl."

"Yeah," agreed Rennick, "and have you seen her, Councilman?"

"I've been up there," Jeff said cautiously.

"Don't you go tryin' to beat my time," warned Rennick, laughing. "I seen her first. She taken to me, too."

Some of Jeff's horses, coming in to water, caused a change of subject. Jeff was glad. There was a strange feeling inside of him, an unpleasant warmth that he had never felt before. He did not know it, but for the first time in his placid life, Jeff was riled.

It may have been the anger or it may have been inspiration, but that afternoon, riding out over the lease, Jeff hit upon a scheme. He was beside a deserted nester shack when the idea struck him and he dismounted and looked the shack over. It was sixteen feet square, and the roof sagged. Still, the walls were fairly tight and there was a floor inside. Jeff came out of the shack, squatted down beside it and rolled a cigarette. With unseeing eyes he stared at the dilapidated shed behind the shack.

"Yes sir," said Jeff Councilman finally, crushing out his cigarette against a rock. "Yes sir, that'll just about do it."

He spent the remainder of the afternoon looking at the other shacks on the mesa top. Riding into camp, along the east fence, he stopped and stared at a long ridge near the fence. He nodded at the swell as though giving it his approbation, and then went on home.

So full of his scheme was Jeff that he had to talk to someone. He ate hastily at the camp, caught a fresh horse, then saddled and rode to Wingate's. There was a light in the

cabin under the rim when Jeff rode in. He called cheerfully, as one sure of his welcome, and dismounting, went toward the house. Before he reached it the door opened and Cockeye came out.

"What do you want?" demanded Cockeye, stopping inside the fence.

"I just rode over," said Jeff. "I got a scheme—"

"Sally's goin' to bed," Cockeye stated bluntly. "You got no business over here."

"Why, what's got into you?" Jeff asked, wonderment in his voice. "You—"

"There's been enough got into me to tell you to stay away!" snapped the cross-eyed man. "All you young bucks think you can come stragglin' in here any time of day or night, an' be welcome. You git out now an' go home."

"But—" Jeff began.

"No buts about it. I'm servin' you notice right now to stay away."

"But I just come over—"

"Git out!"

Something went wrong in peaceful Jeff Councilman. Something straightened his back and made the hair along the back of his neck rise up. "Listen, you old wart," snapped Jeff, "yo're danged free with yore orders. I'll take my tellin' from Sally an' not from you. Anytime you think yo're too big for yore pants, I'll put you in 'em."

It might have been a sheep roaring. Jeff and Cockeye were both surprised at the sudden outburst.

"Why you—" began Cockeye.

"Amos!" Sally called from the open door. "Come in now, please. If that is Jeff Councilman I don't want to see him."

"See?" jeered Cockeye.

Jeff, without a word, wheeled and went to his waiting horse.

## CHAPTER IV

### "GUNMEN CAN BE SHOT"

THE next morning, his chores done, Jeff saddled and rode to Cayuse. His first port of call was Kuntz's store where he made sure of his ground. Abe Kuntz waited on Jeff, and Jeff asked him a question.

"When I was first in here you said that all I had to do was to sign a bill and I could have what I wanted," he reminded Kuntz. "Is that right?"

"Sure, sure," Kuntz agreed. "Anything but money."

"I don't want money," Jeff said. "I just wanted to know. So long, Mr. Kuntz."

Leaving the staring Kuntz, Jeff repaired to that portion of Cayuse known as Stringtown. There, in a collection of adobe shacks, of battered and patched houses, Jeff paused. There was an old man drowsing against a wall in the late October sun.

"*Como esta, viejo?*" greeted Jeff.

"*Sta,*" returned the old man languorously.

Jeff launched into Spanish, which was a second tongue to him. The old man straightened against the wall, and listened. From the house against which the aged one leaned, a portly, bewiskered woman thrust her head. Jeff had never seen so much beard on a woman.

"Groceries?" queried the bearded one. "Groceries and clothing?"

"Si," Jeff agreed, "and for but little work."

The woman withdrew her head. Jeff could hear her voice, high and shrill, rising in a call. "Manuel! . . . Manuel!"

Jeff waited, grinning. He had lots of time. The woman with the whiskers, accompanied by a short,



On the wagon were five able-bodied Mexicans. "Señor," intoned Manuel, "we are here. We have arrive'."



thin Mexican, arrived on the scene. Others came, half a dozen men and women. They listened while Jeff explained what he wanted.

It was the bearded woman who made decision. "Si," she said strongly. "Tomorrow we will come. I, Carmencita, will go as cook. Manuel and Juan and Alfredo and Narciso—"

"Half a dozen will be plenty," said Jeff. "You got a way to get there?"

"Me," Manuel, the husband of Carmencita, swelled his chest, "I have a wagon."

"Bien!" Jeff nodded. "That will carry you and your bedding and those groceries that I will order. You must be at the mesa by tomorrow night."

"Seguro," answered Manuel. "Me, Manuel Patron—"

Jeff looked at the bearded lady, and Carmencita nodded. "They will come," she assured grimly.

Jeff smiled, and turning, went back to his horse and rode to Kuntz's store.

Kuntz was surprised at the order Jeff gave. Still he said nothing but wrote out the bill and presented it for Jeff's signature. Jeff scrawled his name. "There's a woman named Carmencita Patron goin' to call for this stuff," he said. "Know her?"

"Sure," agreed Kuntz, "but—"

"Never mind," drawled Jeff. "You're goin' to have a lot of business for about two weeks. I'll be in then. So long."

The days were shortening rapidly at that season of the year and it was after dark when Jeff rode in to camp. The next morning he was up early and at his work. He returned to camp earlier than usual, cooked and ate, and then wishing to stay close

to camp and still too nervous to remain quiet, he cleaned the rock house.

While engaged with that task Jeff came upon a strange thing. In sweeping the place he dislodged a cigarette stub from beneath the bed. This in itself was not at all queer for the rock house had sheltered many a cigarette smoker. But this stub was made with one end of the paper folded back to form a tip. Jeff had seen a butt like that recently. Thinking back, he recalled the incident and the spot above the Wingate cabin.

**J**UST at sundown a wagon came into the camp. Sitting on the seat, completely dwarfing Manuel, who drove, was Carmencita Patron. On the wagon were five able-bodied Mexicans, together with their bedding and the groceries that Jeff had ordered. Manuel stopped the wagon beside the house, and descending, with a grandiloquent gesture, announced his arrival.

"Señor," intoned Manuel, "we are here. We have arrive'. We—"

"I brought them!" stated Carmencita, obliterating her husband with a sweep of one big arm. "*Pelados!* Unload the bedding! Señor Councilman, where shall I cook?"

Jeff took the bearded woman into the rock house. "You cook here," he said. "You can sleep in there. I'll sleep in the barn. Fly at it."

"*Con mucho gusto,*" said Carmencita. "Manuel! Manuel!"

Jeff, lugging his bed roll out to the barn, heard her calling for Manuel, for Juan, and then for the *chilli*. Jeff smiled broadly. He liked *chilli* and it seemed to him that Carmencita was going to make a very efficient boss.

In the morning Jeff wrangled two teams of work horses. The camp

was blessed with two sets of harness and Jeff did not trust the wire-patched affair that Manuel called harness. Entrusting one of the teams to Manuel and the other to Juan, he paired the teamsters with Alfredo and Narciso, and took Antonio and Tomaso along. Carmencita, as a matter of course, climbed into the wagon beside her husband, and the crew pulled out for the scene of their endeavor.

That scene was one of the deserted shacks. Jeff put a crew to wrecking the shack and shed, and took another crew to another shack. Then, leaving them to their work, he ran in a steer, knocked it on the head and butchered it. Jeff knew that a man will work best on a full stomach.

By midafternoon the two shacks were pulled down and parts of them had been snaked to the long ridge by the east fence. By midafternoon, also, Jeff had decided that Carmencita was worth two men and had taken her from the cooking job and given it to Manuel. Tomaso and Narciso were put to digging post holes along the edge of the ridge, and the teamsters and their helpers went back for more material.

Manuel proved his worth as a cook. Carmencita, as chief teamster and boss, kept things stirring with her shrill tongue. One by one the five shacks and the sheds were torn down and hauled in to the ridge. One by one the walls went up, forming a tippy line. Jeff Councilman was building a high board fence along the edge of the ridge.

It took more than a week for the fence to become a finished product. When it was done and when the shed boards had been made into a smaller fence, not so high and not quite as long, some hundred yards to the west of the big fence, Jeff looked



with pride upon his brain child. He might not have any breaks to winter cattle in. He might not be able to put the steers into natural shelter, but here in this weaving line of shack sides and roofs and floors, Jeff Councilman had a shelter that a lot of steers could get behind if the wind blew.

Carmencita, standing beside him, looked at the fence and spoke Jeff's mind for him.

"*Bien*, no?" said Carmencita.

"*Muy bien*," agreed Jeff.

There remained the matter of payment. Holding a roan gelding that he called "Pie-biter" down to the pace of the creaking wagon, Jeff Councilman accompanied Carmencita and her crew back to Cayuse. There, at Kuntz's store, he stood at the counter while Carmencita and the wives of the others shopped and priced and cackled shrilly. One by one they carried their purchases to Jeff, and one by one Jeff signed the bills that the wondering Kuntz wrote out.

"Yo're goin' to have a lot of trouble over this," warned Kuntz. "You and—"

"You said that Armitage was good for anythin' I signed for," Jeff reminded him. "Well, I'm signin', ain't I?"

"Yes, but—"

"It'll be paid for," Jeff shut up the storekeeper. "I got enough money to pay for it myself, for that matter. Go on an' give 'em what they want."

Kuntz looked at Jeff Councilman. Somehow it seemed to him that Jeff's face was not quite so round, and that under the stubble his jaw was a little squarer. "Well—" said Abe Kuntz.

A sudden altercation checked the remainder of the sentence. Over across the store, Manuel and Carmencita were arguing vociferously.

"*Flaco!*" shrilled Carmencita. "*Ca-brón!*"

Leaving Abe, Jeff crossed to the scene of the impending trouble. Manuel was holding a gun, a Colt with carved pearl grips and gold inlaying on the barrel. Carmencita was attempting to wrest the gun from her husband, but Manuel held to it like grim death.

"What's the trouble here?" demanded Jeff.

"Thees gun," stammered Manuel.

"I weesh heem. I want heem—"

"No! A gun in place of thees peecture?" interjected Carmencita. "I weel—"

"Easy," ordered Jeff. "I'm payin' off in groceries or clothes. Not guns an' pictures. I told you that."

Crestfallen, Manuel gave up the Colt and Carmencita replaced the gaudy chromo that she had selected. Grinning, Jeff recrossed the store and joined Abe Kuntz once more.

HAVING paid off the crew Jeff realized that it was too late to go back to the camp that night, and the idea of a night in town appealed to him anyhow. Therefore he cashed his pay check with Kuntz, stabled the roan horse, and wandered down the street.

A barber shop that advertised baths attracted him. He went back to Kuntz's store, bought a whole new outfit of clothing, from shirt right on to socks, and seeking the barber shop again, reveled in a tubful of hot water. Then he relaxed in the chair for a shave and a haircut, and generally dissipated.

Leaving the barber shop with twenty of his thirty dollars unspent, he sought the restaurant and ate a hearty meal. Then, clean, fed, and with an accomplishment behind him, he sought diversion.

Jeff Councilman did not care par-

ticularly for whisky. Cards he liked but mildly, and the ladies not at all. But there was a pool room in Cayuse, a long, low-ceilinged, smoky place with four battered tables for pool, and two, equally battered, for poker. Jeff sought the pool room and after a sufficient length of time found a partner, a pimply youth with peaked cap, who beat him eight straight games of rotation.

While Jeff dissipated thus mildly, word traveled in Cayuse. Carmencita and her friends showed their new wealth to their friends. These in turn commented. News got around, finally got around to Leonard Fudge and to Cash Murphy.

It was Fudge who first got the report and thought of the possibilities of Jeff Councilman's finished project. Fudge hunted Cash, and they consulted together. Neither liked the thought of the board fence that Jeff had built.

The two, Murphy and Fudge, found Jeff just after he had lost the ninth game of pool. The pimply youth was idly chalking his cue and Jeff was sighting down his to see if some vagary in the straightness might not have caused his missing so many shots. Fudge and Murphy came in, saw Jeff, and made toward him.

"Want to see you a minute, Councilman," growled Murphy, letting the light from the ceiling lamps flicker on his deputy's star.

"Sure," agreed Jeff, and leaving the youngster with the pimples to toy with the cue ball, he followed Murphy and Fudge to the opposite side of the room.

"What's this I hear about you tearin' down the shacks up on the Webber lease?" demanded Murphy when the three were apart from the rest of the room.

"I built a fence out of 'em," volun-

teered Jeff. "Had to have some shelter for the steers."

"That's destruction of property, Councilman," Fudge announced. "The owners of those buildings can have you arrested and put in jail."

The idea was totally new to Jeff and his face showed it. Murphy and Fudge thought that they were making headway.

"I hate to tell you this, but you have laid yourself open to a suit for damages," Fudge continued. "Your actions up there are apt to cost your boss a good deal of money."

This was rubbing it in, for Jeff had already begun to wonder just how Jake Armitage was going to take his grocery bill when Kuntz sent it. "I'm sure sorry," Jeff said contritely. "Yes sir," Fudge pushed his advantage, "there is just one thing for you to do, Councilman: Get those buildings back on their original sites."

Jeff thought of those two lines of straggling fence. He remembered the work that had gone into them and he remembered, too, how much of a crazy quilt they were. It would be utterly impossible to patch those dilapidated shacks together again. Jeff shook his head. "It can't be done," he countered.

"Well then," Fudge was stern, "as representative for the owners of that property I'm going to institute suit against Armitage. You were his agent and he's responsible for your actions."

"Well," Jeff said doubtfully, "mebbe I can do somethin'."

"See that you do." Fudge looked at Murphy and the two withdrew. When they were out of the pool hall, Murphy spoke. "I don't see what good that did," he announced.

"We're going to have to destroy that fence," Fudge answered. "Burn it or get rid of it somehow. If he



can put those steers behind the fence when it storms—”

“They won’t drift,” Murphy finished. “I reckon we’ll burn it.”

“And when we do, Councilman will be glad it’s gone,” said Fudge. “We’ve thrown enough of a scare into him so that he won’t holler.”

“I didn’t think he had brains enough to figure out a scheme like that,” complained Murphy bitterly. “I sure didn’t.”

“Neither did I,” agreed Fudge.

**B**ACK in the pool hall Jeff had lost his appetite for rotation. He paid for the games, bade the pimply youth “so long,” and wandered out. He was sure in bad.

Going down the street Jeff meditated on his predicament. It was a sure thing that he could not rebuild those shacks. That was impossible. The fence just had to stay where it was. Armitage was going to be sore about the bill from Kuntz, and when Fudge started that suit against him the old man would just rave. It looked to Jeff Councilman as though the real thing to do would be just to haul his freight out of the country, get plumb away.

But if he did, who would look after the steers? Jeff shook his head. He had to stick. Might just as well stay and let Armitage scalp him now as later. The warm light from the Good Time Saloon beckoned, and Jeff went in.

Moodily he ordered whisky from the bald bartender. Moodily he drank it. The whisky was cheap, red, burned like fire, and was one-hundred proof. The bald bartender made it in a barrel in the cellar from grain alcohol, extract, and coloring matter. Jeff had another glass.

Down at the end of the bar there was a little group of men clustered together, talking, low-voiced. Occa-

sionally a laugh went up from the group. Jeff paid no attention to them, but they kept the bartender busy. Reflecting on the advisability of another drink, with the two he had already taken warming his stomach, Jeff heard a voice that he recognized. Rennick was talking, and the words permeated through Jeff’s gloom.

“I tell you,” said Rennick, “she’s a nice little piece. I’m camped right below Wingate’s an’ if I don’t—” The rest of the sentence was lost. Jeff pricked up his ears. They were talking about Sally Wingate. Slowly a flush of color came to Jeff’s smooth-shaven face. The Good Time Saloon was no place to talk about as nice a girl as Sally.

Trouble sat heavily upon Jeff’s shoulders. The wrath of Jake Armitage, the board fence, the whole thing pushed him down. Something inside Jeff, perhaps the whisky, said that he might just as well be hanged for a sheep as a goat.

“That Wingate gal will be settin’ on my lap an’ lovin’ me before the month’s out!” Rennick’s voice came tauntingly.

Somehow Jeff found himself staring into Rennick’s startled face. Somehow Jeff found that the men around Rennick were pushing back and that he and Rennick were alone in the middle of a little circle.

“That,” snarled Jeff Councilman in a voice he did not recognize, “is a blasted lie! Take it back.”

Something smacked against Jeff’s cheek and he staggered. He saw Rennick’s fist coming at him again, Rennick’s big right hand. There are two kinds of men: those that lead with their rights, and those that don’t.

Jeff Councilman had not had a fist fight since he was a kid, had not had any kind of a fight. Neverthe-

less he stepped inside the sweep of that traveling fist and his left hand, naturally, described a short arc. One-hundred and sixty pounds, five feet eight inches of Jeff Councilman, mostly shoulders and chest, were in the blow. And luck or instinct or the Providence that looks after men who have taken two quick drinks, put the poundage behind that left fist at the crucial instant. Rennick, struck squarely in the solar plexus, sat down, his mouth open and his lungs paralyzed.

"Keep yore filthy tongue quiet!" ordered Jeff. "Hear me?"

HE looked around then, beginning to understand what he had done. He was looking for a way out of the circle, but the men that formed it did not know that. They thought that those baleful, light blue eyes were scanning their faces, imprinting them for future reference in a vengeful memory. A lane opened for Jeff Councilman and he stalked through it and out of the door. Behind him the crowd closed in about Rennick. Voices came from that crowd.

"Kick like a mule!"

"You see the way he looked?"

"Man, if he got it in for me, I'd leave!"

The bartender put on the final touches. "He's got eyes like Bat Masterson," announced the bartender. "Regular killer's eyes. I seen Bat one time in Dodge, just after he'd downed two men, an' if ever I seen killer's eyes, that jasper has got 'em!"

Rennick recovered his breath again. Some of his friends had hoisted him to his feet and he was breathing, chokingly, still with his mouth open. "What—?" began Rennick.

"You got told to keep yore filthy

tongue quiet about that Wingate gal," stated the bartender coldly. "I'd do it if I was you."

Supported on either side, Rennick made his wabbly way to the door. Half carrying him, his two friends took him down the street.

Jeff Councilman, who had paused on the corner, saw the procession and fear assailed him. Had he hurt Rennick badly? He had hit him once and that was all, but Rennick had fallen. Jeff turned back toward the Good Time. He had to find out, had to know. Had he added trouble to his already overburdened shoulders?

Inside the Good Time the bartender mopped the top of the bar. Along it, the men who had seen the trouble, still talked excitedly. The door pushed open and Jeff came in. Instantly the talk ceased.

"I forgot to pay for those drinks," said Jeff, having trouble with his voice. To the listeners it had a menacing, harsh sound. "I come back to pay for 'em."

Jeff brought money from his pocket and put it on the bar top. The bartender waved it away. "They're on the house," he stated. "Anybody that moves as quick an' neat as you do, can have two free drinks. Rennick's still feelin' poorly. It'll be some time before he tries to square himself with you."

Jeff's money was on the bar, and Jeff felt better. If Rennick was still feeling poorly, then he was going to feel better shortly.

"I'll take half a pint then," Jeff said.

The bartender produced the little bottle, took Jeff's money and put it in the till. Jeff, with no more excuse for staying, pocketed his half pint and went out.

"You reckon he really come back to pay for the drinks?" queried a tall



rider after the door had closed. "You think—?"

"He come back to see who it was sided Rennick," stated the bartender positively. "Bat Masterson used to do that. He'd find out who the feller's friends was an' then there'd be a couple more funerals."

The tall rider shuddered. "I'm sure glad that I was here," he stated with conviction, "I sure am."

**J**EFF went to the hotel. He took his key and went up to his room and sat down upon the bed. Gradually a warmth, a sort of elation, filled Jeff Councilman. He uncorked the half pint and took a drink. He took another drink.

So there was trouble coming, was there? So Fudge was going to start a suit, and Rennick was going to get tough, and old Jake Armitage was going to raise the devil, was he? Jeff finished the half pint. All right, they could just do it! He, Jeff Councilman, the fellow that everybody took a fall out of, could take care of the whole works!

He had written Jake Armitage asking what to do, and Jake had not answered. Jeff had built a fence. He had done just the best he knew how and Jake would have to stand for it. As for Rennick—well, Rennick had gone down with just one punch. Jeff clenched his left fist and regarded it with surprise. Maybe he didn't know his own strength. Maybe he didn't . . .

The half pint took charge. Jeff blinked his eyes. Funny that he was so sleepy. Funny. . . . Leaning forward he blew out the light. Then, still fully clothed, he stretched out. His last conscious act was to pull up the quilt folded at the bottom of the bed.

In the morning Jeff Councilman woke up with a headache that was

a beauty, and with a dark brown taste in his mouth. He felt low, mighty low. Making his toilet in the room he had rented, he stumped down stairs. At the foot of the stairs Tom Green, the proprietor of the Commercial House, was sweeping the lobby. He looked up when Jeff's boots sounded on the stairway, stepped back and gave Jeff room to pass.

"Good mornin', Mr. Councilman," greeted Tom. There was something in his voice that Jeff had not heard in any voice before, a sort of awe, a marked respect. Jeff grunted his good morning and went on out, past Green.

At the restaurant he met with the same respect. The owner of the restaurant himself came to take Jeff's order, brushing aside the waitress. Jeff was grumpy and the restaurant man was circumspect. When Jeff's ham and eggs made their appearance the restaurant man hovered anxiously until the first mouthful had been swallowed, and then hoped that the meal suited.

"Anything wrong, just say so, Mr. Councilman. I'll have it fixed."

The eggs were good and so was the ham, but Jeff did not say so. The coffee was hot and black. Jeff grimaced with the heat of his first drink.

"Here," the owner of the restaurant reached out his hand, "let me have that. I'll have some fresh made. He took the cup from the wondering Jeff and hurried away.

After breakfast, down at Kuntz's store, Abe Kuntz came to Jeff as soon as he arrived. Abe smiled ingratiatingly. "Good mornink, Mr. Councilman," said Abe. "Good mornink."

Jeff could not understand all the greetings and service. He did not know the power of a bartender's

word. Jeff had slept late and the men who had been in the Good Time had circulated. From looking like Bat Masterson, Jeff had been promoted. The talk now was that Jeff was Masterson's bosom friend, and that the bartender at the Good Time had said so.

"Yeah," said Jeff to Abe Kuntz. "Good morning."

HE leaned against the counter, and Abe, rubbing his hands together, broached a subject dear to his heart. Abe had, a year before, ordered a pearl-gripped, gold inlaid, .45 Colt. The man for whom he had ordered it had left the country and Abe was stuck with the weapon. It was the very gun Manuel had so coveted.

"I got a gun I want that you should see," Abe began. "A fine gun. I would sell it cheap."

"I got a gun," Jeff answered. "A plumb good one." At that moment his head gave a peculiarly convincing throb and he scowled.

"Sure—sure." Abe backed away hastily. "Of course you got it a gun. But this is somethink extra special. Wait and I will show it to you."

Abe Kuntz hurried away, returning shortly carrying the box that contained the fancy Colt. "Look," said Abe, throwing open the box.

The gun was indeed a thing of beauty. Jeff could no more keep his hands from it than a kid can keep away from a Christmas tree. He picked up the gun.

"An' for sixty-five dollars!" exclaimed Abe. "Cheap!"

Jeff put the gun back into the box as though it were fragile. Sixty-five dollars! He couldn't afford that. He couldn't afford sixty-five cents.

"Nice gun," Jeff commented. "But them pearl grips would slide in a man's hand if his hands was

slippery. I guess I ain't interested, Mr. Kuntz. Now about them groceries—"

"Don't mention it!" Abe gesticulated with both hands, forgetting the Colt in the box. "You should not bother about the groceries. They will be all right."

Jeff sighed with relief. "Then I'll pull along," he said, and left Kuntz still holding the boxed gun.

When Jeff was gone, Abe Kuntz turned to a clerk who stood near by.

"You hear him?" asked Abe. "You hear him say the pearl grips would be slick in a man's hand if they was slippery? Slippery with blood maybe!"

"Gosh," said the awed clerk. "I reckon he was Masterson's deputy in Dodge City, all right."

Riding out of Cayuse, Jeff's headache got better. About halfway to camp Jeff felt really good. Climbing up the wagon road to the mesa top, he whistled a little and even when he crowned the first bench and saw the bright new camp of Cash Murphy off to his right, he remained nonchalant.

After all, Jeff Councilman was young, and he had had a lot of flattery for the first time in his life. And he had knocked a man down and had carried out a scheme. Jeff rode on into camp, saw that it was all right and went out into the pasture to run in a fresh horse.

At the exact moment that Jeff struck camp, Cash Murphy stood in Leonard Fudge's office and stared at the pudgy man. "He knocked Rennick down with one lick," said Murphy. "Rennick is still tryin' to make his insides work right. The bartender down at the Good Time says that this fella was with Masterson in Dodge City, when Dodge was tough. Do you suppose—?"

Fudge sucked his lower lip. "I'm

afraid that Armitage suspects something," said Fudge, letting the lip slip out. "He's sent this gunman in here. Maybe we had better call it off, Cash."

"Call off nothin'!" Murphy snapped. "Rennick is an artist with a hot iron. He can run those J A's into Bar O A's and never miss a shot. We've already got the little corral built. I'm not callin' it off!"

"But you'll have to go slow," warned Fudge.

"A gunman can be shot just the same as any other man," said Murphy grimly. "If I was sure—"

"I'm sure enough," returned Fudge. "Do you suppose Rennick would—?"

"The devil with Rennick!" growled Murphy. "I'll do it myself, an' I'll take no chances."

## CHAPTER V

### FIRE!

JEFF COUNCILMAN rode the east fence that afternoon. He found where some animal had sprung his trap, but the gates to the Wingate place were up and closed. Jeff looked longingly at the mesa rim a time or two. Dog-gone it! He wished . . . But there was no use wishing. Sally Wingate had said plainly enough that she didn't want to see him.

Jeff had finished his fence building about the first of November. Every day he inspected his handiwork on his rides and, having put behind him all idea of leaving the steers and also having accustomed himself to the fact that an inevitable reckoning was coming with Jake Armitage, Jeff took pride in his work. Indeed, as the month progressed, he began to wish that a storm would come, just to give the idea a trial. But the weather held clear and cloudless, as

New Mexico weather can hold in November, and the wished-for storm did not materialize.

With two weeks of November gone, Jeff, coming in from his day's ride, made his way straight across the mesa top. He had put out three strays that afternoon, animals that had gotten through the west fence. He had also repaired some wire.

Daily now as he rode, Jeff carried his .32-20 in a belt holster. He had traps out and was catching an occasional coyote and, once in a while, a skunk. A man might kill a coyote with a club or a rope, but he cannot so reason with a trapped skunk.

Jeff made camp just as the darkness came on. It was perhaps 5:30. He didn't unsaddle immediately for he was toying with the idea of going to Wingate's. Daily, Jeff thought of riding down below the rim, and, daily, he rejected the thought. Working at the barn, Jeff raised his head. The wind was blowing across the mesa from the north, a gentle breeze, and coming on the wind Jeff smelled smoke. Alertly he lifted his head. Smoke sure enough!

Smoke had no business to be coming across the mesa. Suppose that smoke came from Wingate's? Suppose some of the timber, the scrub oak and the piñon down below the rim, had caught? Jeff left his chores and went out and got on Buster. He set Buster to a run toward the north.

Traveling along the east fence, heading north, Jeff was bound to come to the board fence. He reached it and saw that his fears regarding Wingate's were groundless. The north end of the fence was on fire, blazing merrily. Jeff turned Buster and rode recklessly towards the blaze.

He almost reached it, not quite. Just before he struck the fence, Bus-



ter put both front feet in a hole and sent Jeff rolling. Jeff lit all sprawled out, the wind knocked out of him. He was dazed, but not so dazed but that he heard the spiteful crack of a rifle.

The reaction was instantaneous. Jeff had the .32-20 in his holster. There was a latch of leather over the cocking spur and the gun had not slipped out as he fell. Jeff got that gun free in a split second and unloaded the five shots that it held in a general easterly direction.

That done he scrambled to his feet and ran to the burning fence. He went around the fire, so close to it that he almost singed his hair, and behind the blaze he ripped off the sheepskin coat that he wore. Buster had run off, head turned sideways to keep the reins free. Jeff beat at the fire, using the sheepskin. He knocked away blazing coals and chunks of charcoal. Out to the west the rifleman took another chance.

Momentarily Jeff halted his fight against the fire. Obsessed with saving his brain child, he considered that rifle but an annoyance. Still he thumbed shells into the .32-20 and fired a shot or two before he went back to his fire fighting.

The sheepskin coat was ruined and the fire was still going strong. Jeff redoubled his efforts. He was not making much headway, but a detail of structure came to his aid. Part of the north end of the fence was made of galvanized iron, the roof of a shack that some ambitious nester had once called home. With the iron to help, and only the two-by-four structure that supported the iron, to burn, Jeff got ahead of the blaze. The whipping sheepskin smothered it. Panting, burned in more than one place, and dirty as a coal miner, Jeff paused. The fire was out.

JEFF stayed there until the last ember died. Then he went home. He had two miles to walk and his feet were sore by the time he reached camp. Buster was at the corral and Jeff's saddle had not been injured. Jeff was glad of that. He turned the horse out, and went into the shack. Then, remembering the rifle shots, he put a blanket across the window before he lighted the lamp. After that he pulled off his boots and, getting cold water from the bucket, soaked his feet. Jeff liked his boots tight, but these, he was beginning to believe, erred just a little on the side of vanity.

His feet soothed, Jeff looked for clean socks, a pair that were soft and cool. He had a pair of fancy clocked silk socks that were just the thing, but a search failed to disclose them. Barefooted, Jeff sat down on the bunk and swore. This was just a little thick: first somebody stole his socks, then his fence was set on fire, and somebody took a shot at him. Blast it! Patience is a good thing, an admirable thing, but patience won't go on forever.

Jeff Councilman's pale blue eyes narrowed. If the bartender at the Good Time had seen Jeff at that moment he would not have likened him to Bat Masterson. No, Wild Bill Hickok would have been the man. The peerless Wild Bill!

Down at the camp under the hill, Joe Rennick made a report to Cash Murphy. "I had that fence set on fire," Rennick said. "It was burnin' good. Then here come that danged Councilman. I thought he seen me an' I took a shot at him. Right then he threwed himself off his horse. I tell you he lit a shootin'! He run behind that fence, right through the fire, an' he shot from there. I never seen so much lead. He was usin' two

guns an' he wasn't missin' far. I shot once more an' then I high-tailed it."

Murphy grimaced. "I reckon that report was right," said Murphy. "He's a bad one. A regular hired killer. What happened to the fence?"

"It was burnin' some when I left," reported Rennick truthfully. "But I'll bet he put the fire out. A fence like that don't burn easy."

Murphy's eyes narrowed. "We're goin' to put a stop to that jasper," he said. "If we don't he'll be lookin' for us."

Rennick's shoulders shuddered convulsively. "He'll have a long ways to go to find me," the thin man stated.

"No, he won't. Yo're goin' to stay right here an' help with this. Now lissen: Old Cockeye Jordan run you off from Wingate's, didn't he?"

"Yeah, curse him!"

"I know. He run Councilman off, too. I was over there the day after you got in bad an' Cockeye was talkin' about it. Said he wasn't goin' to have no fresh jaspers around that girl."

Rennick grinned. "I talked some to Cockeye before he got ringy. Told him that Councilman was braggin' about how far he'd got with the Wingate gal."

Murphy nodded. "Anyhow," said Murphy, "Councilman rides that east fence every day. We checked on him often enough to know that. Tomorrow mornin' yo're goin' to open the gate to Wingate's. Councilman will see that an' he'll go down there to tell 'em to keep the gate closed. Yo're goin' to be around close to Wingate's lookin' after cattle, an' I'm goin' to be up on top with a rifle. There's a place up there where I can look right down on Wingate's cabin. I know. I been there."

"An' then?" asked Rennick.

"An' then Councilman is goin' to get shot—by old Cockeye Jordan for foolin' around with the Wingate girl!"

Rennick nodded slowly. "It'll work," he stated. "I'll come ridin' in an'—"

"They'll have been arguin' about the gate—"

"—An' I'll swear that Cockeye shot him."

"Everybody knows that Cockeye carries a .30-30." Cash Murphy squinted his eyes. "Everybody knows that he's killed three men."

"An' everybody knows that Councilman is a hired gunman," Rennick finished complacently. "It's funny though," he drawled after a moment, "that we didn't find no sign of Councilman bein' so tough that day we went up to his camp an' went through his stuff. You'd of thought that we'd 'a' located a extra gun or somethin'."

Murphy shook his head. "Not too funny," he answered. "It just shows that he's smart."

"Well anyway, we'll have Councilman out of the way an' we can go to work on them J A steers, storm or no storm."

Murphy shook his head. "We'll burn that fence an' wait for a storm," he objected. "That's what we planned, an' that's what we'll do. It's safer that way."

Joe Rennick yawned. "I'm goin' to bed," he announced. "I'll be up early an' open that gate."

"An' I'll be up early too," said Murphy. He sat on the edge of his bedding, thrown on the floor, and fashioned a cigarette. Joe Rennick, watching his boss, spoke, voicing curiosity.

"Why do you always fold back one end of your paper like that, Cash?"

"Makes a kind of tip for the

smoke," Murphy answered. "Hand me a match, will you?"

## CHAPTER VI

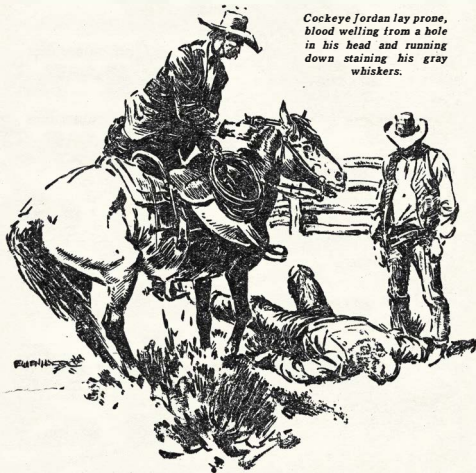
### WANTED FOR MURDER

THE only remedy that Jeff Councilman had for burns was lard. He smeared it on liberally before he left the house the next morning. The lard did not go so good with the sandy stubble that covered his cheeks and chin, and as he rode north toward the board fence, Jeff kept trying to lick a little from the corner of his mouth.

When he reached the fence he

scouted along the edge of the mesa before going to it. He saw where a horse had been brought across the wire, and he replaced the missing staples with his fence pliers and a supply of staples that he carried in an old boot top. Then he went over to the board fence, satisfied that there was no one lying in ambush along the mesa rim.

The damage to the board fence had been considerable, but not enough to impair its usefulness materially. One whole panel was burned but the galvanized iron had stopped the flames before they reached the major portion. Jeff's sheepskin, ruined



*Cockeye Jordan lay prone, blood welling from a hole in his head and running down staining his gray whiskers.*



now, and that iron, had saved his fence.

Making mental note of what was needed in the way of repairs, Jeff went on along the boundary fence. Where the tight, strong wire of Wingate's jutted into the pasture, he stopped. The gate at the corner was open. Jeff was glad of it. Here was the excuse that he needed to go down. Accordingly he put the gate up and rode on down the hill, following the twisting road.

When he reached Wingate's Jeff stopped at the fence. Cockeye Jordan was in the corral saddling a rawboned white horse, and he stopped his work when Jeff approached. Cockeye came out to the fence to meet Jeff and for a moment the two eyed each other.

"That gate was down," Jeff began, explaining his presence at the cabin. "I come—"

"Yo're welcome to come any time," said Cockeye. "I reckon I made a mistake about you, Councilman."

Jeff was taken by surprise, and Cockeye elaborated. "I been to Cayuse," he said. "I heard what you done there. The only mistake you made was not killin' that danged Rennick. I'd 'a' done that. Any time any man lays tongue to Sally he's got me to settle with. I'm seventy years old an' I worked for old man Wingate all my days, a'most. Sally's just the same as my kid. I'm thankin' you, Councilman."

"Why, then—" Jeff began.

Cockeye Jordan whirled, spread his arms and pitched down. As he struck the ground the sound of the shot came from the mesa. Jeff took a swift step forward, bending over Cockeye. In the house Sally Wingate screamed.

From the brush near the cabin a man came riding, and up on the

mesa Cash Murphy swore and levered in a shell. He had made the mistake so many make when shooting downhill. Cash had overshot.

Cockeye Jordan lay prone, not moving. Blood was welling from a hole in his bald head, running down in a little stream and staining his gray whiskers.

Rennick, gun out and menacing, threw himself from his horse. At a run he made for Jeff and Cockeye, then stopped short. This was not right. Jeff Councilman should have been on the ground.

Sally Wingate, running from the door, confronted Jeff. "You shot him," she cried. "You killed Amos!"

That was cue enough for Rennick. Menacing Jeff with his gun, he came on.

Up on the mesa Cash Murphy, seeing what was happening, took advantage of the circumstances. He had made a mistake and shot Cockeye, but he could use that mistake. He was a deputy sheriff. He would arrest Jeff Councilman and take him in to Cayuse. With Jeff in jail, accused of murder, his way was clear to do what he wished with the board fence and with the steers on the Webber lease. Cash Murphy scrambled for his horse, mounted, and started down the hill.

"Git yore hands up," snarled Rennick, bearing down on Jeff. "Git 'em high! I seen you when you downed him." The fact that Jeff's gun was still in its holster deterred Rennick not at all.

Sally Wingate was staring at Jeff with wide, horror-stricken eyes.

"You killed him," she said again. "He told you to stay away from here, and you killed him."

"That shot came from up on the mesa," Jeff said slowly. "I was talkin' to Cockeye. We were friendly. Cockeye—"

"You killed him!" There was conviction in Sally's voice.

"Just let yore left hand down easy an' unhitch yore gun belt," Rennick ordered. "Drop the whole thing!"

JEFF obeyed the command. He knew that Rennick would shoot, meant to shoot, was nerving himself for that. There was sweat on Rennick's forehead and his eyes were wild. Another voice came, causing all three of them to look around.

"What's goin' on here?" demanded Cash Murphy from beside the fence.

Cash had risked his neck coming down the hill. His horse was breathing hard. Cash held a .30-30 in his hands.

"Councilman killed Jordan," Rennick announced. "Shot him down."

"You see it?" demanded Murphy.

Rennick nodded, and Sally Wingate added her mite. "Amos had ordered him off the place," she stated. "I was in the house. I heard a shot and came running. Amos was on the ground. I—"

"How about it, Councilman?" Murphy's voice was hard.

"He was shot from the mesa," began Jeff. "We stood here talkin' an' somebody up above shot him down."

Murphy shook his head. "I was up there," he said. "I saw nobody. I heard the shot an' come. We'll take you to town, Councilman. I reckon you'll learn what they do to killers here. Watch him, Rennick."

"We've got to get Amos into the house," Sally began. "We've got to call—"

"Leave him alone!" ordered Murphy. "I'll have to bring a coroner's jury out here to see the body. I'm deputy sheriff. I'll take charge."

"But at least we can cover him up." Sally turned so that she could not see Cockeye where he lay.

Murphy nodded. "Get a blanket," he ordered. "You'll have to go to Cayuse with us, Miss Wingate. I know it's hard—"

"I'd go anywhere." Sally gazed stonily at Jeff. "I want to see the man that shot Amos, hanged."

It took them some little time to prepare to go. Sally brought a blanket and Murphy covered the prone body of Cockeye Jordan. One look at Cockeye's bloody head and Murphy knew that his shot had been good.

For the trip to town Sally rode the white horse that Cockeye had left in the corral. Jeff, hands tied, was put on his own mount, the roan Pie-biter. The little procession filed out from Wingate's cabin, Jeff in the lead. Rennick, carrying a Colt, came behind Jeff, and Sally Wingate and Cash Murphy rode side by side behind Jeff and Rennick.

Jeff was silent. There was nothing that he could say or do. He was a convicted man as he headed toward Cayuse, convicted and just about ready to be hanged for murder. Who would believe his story against that of Rennick and Sally Wingate? Jeff hung his head and kept his eyes on Pie-biter's neck, letting the roan set the pace. It was a long way to Cayuse, a long, long distance.

But the distance that Jeff and Rennick and Sally and Murphy had to ride, was short compared with that of other riders. Some thirty miles south of Cayuse two men kept their horses at trot and walk, breaking back to trot again. They rode good horses, these two. One was a wispy man who rode with his spectacles pushed up on his forehead, and the other was big and carried a bulging chew in his cheek.

"I still don't see," said Rollie Brown, as he pulled down to a walk,

"what comin' up here yoreself is goin' to git you, Jake. I could of fired him all right."

Jake Armitage peered out from under his glasses like an angry eagle. "Chargin' all them groceries to me!" snapped Jake. "Chargin' 'em. Blast him! I'll have the satisfaction of firin' him myself, if it's the last thing I do. Come on, shake it up! I want to get to Cayuse." The trot was resumed.

Jake Armitage had received Kuntz's bill.

**B**ACK in the yard of the Wingate cabin the long, blanket-covered figure stirred, moved again, and then the blanket was thrown back. Cockeye Jordan sat up and put his hand to his forehead. Bringing that hand away he looked at it and groaned. There was blood on his fingers. For a time, Cockeye sat there, tenderly feeling of his head. Then he called.

"Sally! Sally!"

There was no answer. Tentatively Cockeye tried to get up. After some management he made it. Staggering a little he went to the house. Once inside he sat down and felt of his head again. It was bleeding. Murphy's bullet had struck Cockeye just where that bald poll started back. But the slug had glanced.

Cockeye sat in the cabin and rested. He washed his head with water and tied a dish cloth about it, making a fantastic turban. He took a drink of liquor and then another drink. Then, strengthened, he went out into the yard. The tracks there, plain in the dust, told him that four horses had left for Cayuse.

Cockeye, painfully, head aching, went out into the horse pasture and lifted his voice. "Billy! . . . Come Billy!" Maybe that bay fool would come in. Maybe Billy, used to get-

ting a grain ration, would heed that call.

"Billy!" yelled Cockeye, and paused. Over against the rise of the pasture, a dark spot moved. Billy was coming in.

Cash Murphy put Jeff Councilman in Kuntz's warehouse when they reached Cayuse. There was a little room in the back where Abe Kuntz stored coffins and other bulky merchandise. It was the only jail that Cayuse possessed. Murphy shoved Jeff into the room and Abe Kuntz, closing the door, clicked the padlock.

Jeff, his hands still tied, heard the men stamp away. After they had gone he sat down on a coffin box. There was not a thing that he could do, not a blamed thing. Time wore along endlessly. Occasionally Jeff heard movement outside his prison, but he did not lift his head. This was the end of the tether for Jeff. Depression sat upon him, weighing him down. The room grew darker, dimming with the lowering sun, but Jeff paid no attention to that growing darkness. He hardly looked up when the door was opened and Murphy, with Rennick behind him, came into the storeroom. Murphy stood close beside the door.

"Got you Councilman," he taunted with satisfaction. "I've got you now."

Rennick grinned, and that sneering grin did something to Jeff. His lax jaw tightened imperceptibly, and his eyes, dull, gleamed a little.

"We'll have an inquest in the mornin'," stated Murphy, "then, by glory, we'll hang you. We ain't goin' to wait for no law."

"Yeah?" said Jeff.

"Yo're danged right," agreed Murphy.

He went out then, Rennick follow-



ing him, and the door closed. The lock had barely clicked shut before Jeff Councilman went to work. He was tied with a saddle rope. It was new and a little stiff and such a rope does not make a good thing with which to tie a man. Jeff's labors brought success. The rope slipped from his wrists. Flexing his hands, Jeff stood up.

There was a little barred window high in the wall. Standing on a coffin box Jeff looked out of the window. Gray dusk and a view of the littered lot rewarded him. Jeff got down from the box. All right, he could not get out the window. Then what? Why, then, when Murphy came again, or when anyone came, Jeff would make a try.

He walked halfway across the storeroom and stopped. Something grated softly against the door. There was a louder sound. Wood complained against strain. Then there came a snap. Jeff crouched, poised. The door inched open, a little at a time. Muscles tense, Jeff watched the moving door. Then a voice whispered:

"Señor!"

All the relief in the world was in Jeff's voice. "Carmencita!"

The door came all the way open. In the darkness outside the opening Jeff could see the bulk of the bearded woman, a smaller bulk beside her.

"Señor!" said Manuel Patron.

"Pronto!" snapped Carmencita.

Jeff went through the door. He stumbled as he cleared the opening and Carmencita's big arm kept him from falling. A man lay across the threshold.

"Senor Rennick," whispered Manuel proudly. "I esteal upon heem so quietly an' hit heem—" Manuel demonstrated.

"Manuel hit heem on the *cabeza*," finished Carmencita. "Come! Come

queek. You must get away." With one brawny, capable hand she caught Rennick's collar. A sweep of her arm and Rennick was inside the storeroom.

Manuel closed the door and fumbled at it a moment, then hurried to rejoin his wife and Jeff.

"I put the bar through so," said Manuel. "We did not break the hasp when we broke the lock."

"Come!" ordered Carmencita, hurrying Jeff along. "*Pronto! Pronto!*"

Reaching the rear of the warehouse Jeff and Carmencita paused at the big door there, which was open a crack. Carmencita stood beside the door listening, and Jeff awaited the next move. Manuel was not with them. When they had left the little strong-room, Manuel had disappeared.

"That Manuel!" muttered Carmencita. "That *flaco!* Fat head! He ees—"

Manuel's hurried feet pattered on the floor. Carmencita, without a word, slid the big door farther open and went through. Like a ghost in the night, Jeff Councilman followed her, and after them came Manuel, hurrying, panting, trying to keep up.

**B**Y devious ways Carmencita Patron conducted her prize and her husband through the alleys of Cayuse, eventually to arrive at the squat adobe that was her home. When all three were inside, when the door was closed and barred, when Carmencita had inspected, every crack around the window and Manuel had duplicated that inspection, then, and not until then, was the lamp lighted.

Jeff Councilman, blinking his eyes, stood and looked upon his deliverers. He spoke to them in Spanish, giving his thanks.

"Some day," concluded Jeff, "I

will repay you. Some day I will—”

Carmencita waved away that thanks. Not so Manuel, Manuel with his too-big coat buttoned and pulled tightly around him.

“Señor,” said Manuel, “say no more. I, Manuel Patron, arranged that this should be so. They were to hang you in the morning, *señor*, but could I, Manuel, allow that? No! A hundred times no. . . .”

Carmencita had been padding about the room as her husband orated. Now she touched Jeff's arm. “Come and eat,” she said.

Jeff sat down to *chilli*, savory and fiery hot, black coffee, and *tortillas*. He made swift inroads upon the supply, and as he ate he planned. He must leave Cayuse, that was certain. He must run away, for to remain would be suicide.

And why should he remain? Cockeye Jordan was dead. Sally Wingate thought Jeff was the killer, and he had no chance to prove differently. He would be fired from his job on the Webber lease as soon as Jake Armitage got that grocery bill. Why should he stay? And yet . . .

And yet he wanted to stay, wanted to confront Cash Murphy and Joe Rennick, wanted to face Armitage's wrath and fling defiance at it. And he wanted to see Sally Wingate once more . . .

“An' so,” declaimed Manuel, “I took the little iron bar and I said to my wife, ‘Come, we will open this prison. We will rip the walls. We will—’”

“The iron bar that you stole from Senor Councilman's camp,” sniffed Carmencita.

“What?” demanded Jeff, looking up from his clean plate.

“It is true.” Manuel hung his head. “I took the little bar that we used to tear down the buildings, but I foresaw need of it. I swear—”

Jeff was not looking at Manuel. He was staring at a length of rope stretched behind the stove. There were articles of wearing apparel hung upon that rope: handkerchiefs, a shirt or two and a pair of fancy clocked socks. “Did you steal them socks, too?” Jeff demanded, his voice harsh and unnatural.

“No, no, *señor*,” wailed Manuel, “those socks I do not esteal! Those are the esocks of Señor Murphy. For heem my wife does the washing.”

Jeff's eyes flicked to Carmencita, and that stolid lady nodded agreement. “Señor Cash Murphy,” said Carmencita.

Destiny hangs upon small things. A sunken road changed the course of empire and a pair of stolen socks put the iron into Jeff Councilman's soul. It is a long lane that has no turning. This was too much, just a little too much.

Jeff remembered his aching feet. He remembered the burned fence and the man that shot from ambush. He remembered the two charred cigarette butts he had found, one in the cabin, the other above Wingate's. And he remembered Cockeye Jordan's outflung arms and Sally Wingate's voice when she said, “You killed him!” Jeff Councilman got up from his chair.

“Give me a gun!” he demanded, staring at Manuel. “Give me a gun!”

“*Un pistola, flaco!*” shrilled Carmencita.

Like a man in a dream Manuel unbuttoned his coat. From the folds of his voluminous trousers he produced a weapon, brought out the pearl-gripped, gold-inlaid Colt. Manuel's reason for staying back in the store, for not immediately joining his wife and Jeff, was now apparent. Manuel had stopped to forage

a little. Manuel had really wanted that gun!

Jeff took the weapon. Looking at it he saw that the chambers were empty, and spoke one word: "Shells!" Reluctantly Manuel produced a brand new box.

Receiving the box of shells, Jeff broke the seal and stuffed the cylinder full. Then he put the .45 in the waistband of his Levi's and dropped the remaining shells into his pocket. "I'll be back," he said curtly, and moving across to the door he lifted the bar and pulled the door open. For an instant he stood there and then was gone into the darkness.

"Senor Councilman—" wailed Manuel after him.

"*Cerra la boca!*" snapped Carmencita, and Manuel was silenced.

Jeff Councilman heard neither the call nor the command. He was hurrying straight toward the main street of Cayuse, headed for the Good Time Saloon. His eyes were narrow slits and he walked with a slight suggestion of swagger, the big Colt swinging at his hip.

AND while Jeff Councilman strode along toward the main street, two men, one big, one small, left the dimly lighted doorway of the livery barn. "Now what?" asked Rollie Brown, spitting into the dust of the street.

"Now a drink an' then supper and bed," answered Jake Armitage. "Then tomorrow we'll go to the lease. And if I don't hang that kid's scalp to my belt, my name ain't Armitage."

"There's a saloon up the street a ways," said the practical Rollie.

"Come on then," ordered Jake Armitage.

Walking toward the saloon, neither noticed the bay horse that came

into the street, nor did they see the turbaned rider atop the bay. They were tired and they wanted a drink and food. The man on the bay was tired also, and his head ached beneath his dish-cloth turban. Nevertheless he sat straight in his saddle and the skinny hand that dangled beside him kept a firm, tight grip on a Winchester .30-30.

Old Cockeye Jordan had come to town. He was passing the Good Time as Jake Armitage and his foreman entered that hospitable door.

Cockeye kept right on until he reached the Commercial House. Sally would be there if she were any place in Cayuse, and Cockeye knew that she was in Cayuse. He left his bay, Billy, at the hitch rail, and ducking under the wooden bar went into the hotel. Behind the desk Tom Green started up with one wild yell: "Cockeye! I thought you was goin'—"

"Never mind what you thought," snarled Cockeye. His contrasting eyes seemed to whirl about the room. "Where's Sally Wingate?"

That question was answered by a scream at the head of the stairs. There followed a thud as Sally, overcome by emotion, fell in a dead faint. Cockeye dropped the rifle and went up the stairs, three at a time.

## CHAPTER VII

"HE'S MY MAN!"

JAKE ARMITAGE and Rollie Brown, entering the Good Time Saloon, stopped momentarily beside the door. The bald bartender was behind the bar, working right along to supply the demand. There was a crowd of men lining the mahogany and in the center of that crowd were two to whom the others seemed to defer and listen. One was plump, with spiky black hair and a



pendulous lower lip. The other was big and wore a deputy's star.

From somewhere in the crowd came a throaty voice. "Mr. Armitage—"

Jake Armitage looked for that voice and found its owner.

"Blast you, Kuntz!" snapped Jake. "What do you mean sendin' me a bill like that? What do you mean chargin' all that stuff to me?" He advanced as he spoke, and beside him Rollie Brown stalked forward, his legs stiff from the day's long ride.

Momentarily the attention of the men in the Good Time was centered on Jake Armitage and the big man with him. None saw or heard the door open and close ever so gently—none except the bartender.

"Great guns!" yelled the bartender. "It's him!" His bald head disappeared as he dived behind the bar.

Eyes turned to the door. Just inside the room stood Jeff Councilman, legs slightly outspread, face a mask, eyes just thin slits in the mask. Jeff's hands were resting on his hips and from the front of his Levi's, convenient to his hand, protruded the pearl grip of a heavy gun. Jeff rocked a little on the balls of his feet and in the Good Time a hush descended.

At one end of the bar a man moved cautiously. Jeff's voice was almost a whisper. "Don't!" he warned, and the man was still.

"Council—" began Jake Armitage wrathfully.

"Shut up!" Again that low, carrying voice, and Jake Armitage closed his lips. Jeff's eyes were fixed upon those two men at the center of the bar. To them he spoke, his voice still soft.

"One of you two," said Jeff. "One of you two."

Cash Murphy shifted nervously and then froze as he caught a glint

of blue behind Jeff's slitted eyes.

"I'll know in a minute," said Jeff. "Fudge, light a smoke!"

Nervously Leonard Fudge fumbled at his vest. His hand came from his pocket holding a cigar. Unthinkingly he half extended it and then checked the movement.

"Not you," said Jeff. "Murphy!" "Go to the devil!" snarled Cash Murphy.

"You fold back an end when you roll yores." Jeff's voice didn't rise or fall, was without inflection. "You make a tip on 'em. It was you, Murphy. You was up on top. You knew the place. You shot Cockeye, an' curse you, *you stole my socks!*"

Cash Murphy tried then, made his play. It was good and it was fast, but what chance did Cash Murphy have against a man with eyes like Jeff Councilman's—against a man who had a pearl-handled Colt cocked and ready in his belt? None at all.

Murphy got his gun out. He even got it part way up before the steer head on the pearl grips cut into Jeff's palm with the recoil. Cash Murphy fired a shot into the floor and dived down, face forward, almost cut in two by the three slugs that, one following the other, spouted from that fancy gun.

The shots broke the tension. Men surged forward, moving in on Jeff Councilman. They were halted, but not by Jeff.

"Hold it!" shrilled a voice. "Blast you, stand still! He's my man!"

**J**AKE ARMITAGE, moving fast, came to Jeff's side and with Jake came big Rollie Brown, cheek bulging with his chew and a gun in his competent hand. Jake Armitage, too, held a weapon. Jake swung it back and forth and Jake's voice de-claimed his ideas.

"He's my man," yelled Jake.

"He's a J A hand, an' by glory I'll down the man that tries to git him!"

The bartender had come up for air. The bartender had a bird's-eye view of it all, and it was the bartender that yelled once more.

"Cockeye! Ye gods! Cockeye!"

Cockeye Jordan was at the door, Cockeye Jordan with his rifle at his shoulder and a slender girl tugging at his arm. "Where's Cash Murphy?" grated Cockeye. "Where's Joe Rennick? One of 'em shot me, curse 'im. I'll—"

The slender girl beside the wild-eyed bald man screamed once and then ran forward. She threw herself at Jeff Councilman, seizing him, wrapping her arms about him. "Jeff! Jeff! They were going to hang you. I thought you'd killed Amos. I thought . . . Oh, Jeff!"

"We better," said Rollie Brown to Jake Armitage, "get 'em out of here, boss."

"Then git 'em out!" snapped Jake. "I got business. I got to find out what's goin' on here."

Big Rollie, holstering his gun, turned to Jeff Councilman and the girl. "Git on, Jeff," said Rollie Brown sternly. "Git on out, an' take yore girl. This ain't no place for a lady. Go 'long now."

Rollie moved toward the two. The fancy pearl-gripped gun thumped on the floor. No one saw the brown hand that reached out and swept it up. No one heeded the small and tattered Mexican that hid the gun beneath his too-big coat. They were watching Jeff Councilman half carry Sally Wingate out the door.

Rollie Brown closed the door behind them and then, striding ahead, made toward the Commercial House. "Bring her along, Jeff," ordered Rollie.

It was a full two hours later that

Jake Armitage and Cockeye Jordan reached the Commercial House. Rollie Brown, a coal bucket by his side, was sitting in the lobby, stiff and straight. Rollie had a gun laid across his lap.

"Where's Jeff?" demanded Jake Armitage.

Rollie nodded toward the stairs. "Up there with the girl," he stated.

"Ummmm," commented Jake Armitage. "I'm goin' to see him." "Set down," ordered Rollie. "Jeff's busy."

"I'm goin' to see Sally," announced Cockeye. "I'm goin'—"

"She's busy, too," interrupted Rollie Brown. "Set down. What happened since? I been watchin' things here."

"Jeff shore has been busy," said Armitage, enscorning himself comfortably. "Murphy an' Fudge was fixin' to steal J A steers an' run them over into Bar O A. They had a feller named Rennick to do the brandin'. Seems like Fudge leased that country below the Webber pasture that we been winterin' in. Him an' Murphy was in it together.

"We found Rennick back in a little room off Kuntz's store. Jeff had locked him there. Rennick give up head about the whole thing. Spilled it all. Jeff built himself a high board fence up on top for protection this winter. He had 'em all buffaloes around here. Got himself quite a rep.

"An' you was tellin' me he was too young to come up here an' look after things! You think I don't know my business, Rollie? Jeff's got it all fixed up. Fudge will go to jail, I reckon, an' so will Rennick. An' Murphy's dead. Too young! Huh!"

Silence descended upon the lobby of the Commercial House. Rollie Brown, in that silence, spat resoundingly into the coal bucket. He knew

when to keep still, Rollie did.

Upstairs in the little ladies' parlor of the hotel Sally Wingate stirred. There were two arms around her, strong arms that held her close.

"Will you ever forgive me, Jeff?" whispered Sally.

Jeff kissed her. "If you can stand me," he said. "I don't amount to much, honey. . . ."

Sally's return kiss stopped the words.

Down in the Good Time Saloon the bald bartender set out a drink. "Just like Bat Masterson," said the bartender complacently. "I told you, didn't I?"

In Manuel Patron's adobe shack Carmencita looked sternly at her husband, and under that glance

Manuel moved uneasily. "Well, perhaps I did not shoot Señor Murphy," said Manuel, "but I furnished the gun. See, *mi dulce corazon?*" From under his coat, Manuel produced the pearl-handled gun.

"*Tonto!*" snapped Carmencita.

Down in the lobby of the Commercial House Rollie Brown spat again, and Jake Armitage shifted his position. "I'm goin' up an' sec Jeff," Jake repeated.

Rollie grunted. Cockeye Jordan, blue eye staring at the desk, brown one fixed on the door, snapped two words. "Set down!"

"Who? Me?" demanded Jake beligerently.

"I'm lookin' at you, ain't I?" growled Cockeye.

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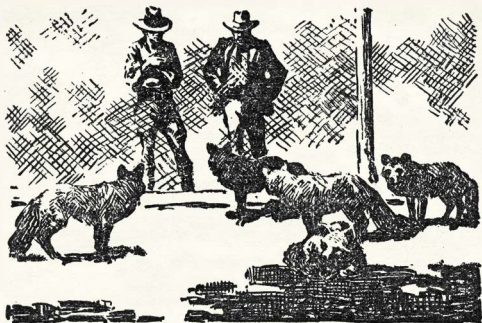
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# "PIC"

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# WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE

By JOHN NORTH

If any other readers are tired of giving all their wages to the landlord and the groceryman, John North will be glad to tell them where they can write for full illustrated descriptive information about this independent way of living in Southern California. Just enclose a stamp with your name and request.

**T**HERE never has been a time when the average man had so much cause to worry about his security as now. And yet, there never has been a time when he had such a good chance to provide for his future, if he will only take stock of his opportunities. Ver-

non G., of New Hampshire, has the idea.

"I'm tired of slaving in a factory," he says. "I've saved up a few dollars, earned the hard way, and I want to figure out how to get out of the cold country and buy me a little home that will help feed me as well as give me protection. I've heard



many favorable reports about the income or small-farm homes in California. Can you give me an idea as to what they are?"

I certainly can, Vernon, and I'd like to see every working man in the country investigate them. They've been carefully planned from every angle, from that of the economist to the agriculturalist and the architect. The results of these findings are the poor man's estate and his bulwark against want.

Let's take up a typical case in the San Bernardino Mountains, in a small town called Fontana. Out there the Chamber of Commerce has worked out a way of life that gives security to the man who wishes to settle down. These farm homes are planned to supply most of the man's food, a small income and a beautiful home, and all this for very little capital.

Here's a typical example: A man has a couple of thousand dollars and a trade, or has a small income. He goes out there to Fontana and invests about fifteen hundred dollars in a pretty little cottage surrounded by about an acre of ground. On this he has a small chicken house, holding maybe five hundred or a thousand laying hens which net him about a dollar each per year after their cost and upkeep are deducted. He has a garden on which he raises all the vegetables and fruit that his family

needs. And then on the other hand he may get a job for additional income.

Now, the county or town has co-operative sales organizations to help him dispose of the eggs and produce. The agricultural associations furnish free advice about planning the planting of his vegetable crops so that there is a constant supply with some left over to sell. Everything is so planned to fit the soil and the climate that anybody with common sense can just follow instructions and not go wrong, even if he never lived on a farm in his life.

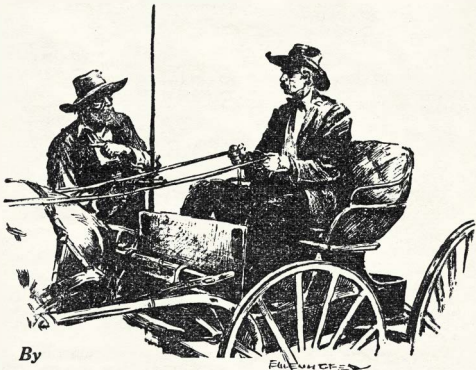
Now, if a man put his thousand or so in the bank at interest it wouldn't bring him enough even to pay rent in the city. But what does it do here? The money, plus the work he puts into caring for his farm brings him in practically all his food, gives him ownership of a Southern California bungalow, and earns him an income which, if worst comes to worst, will at least make him independent.

Where else in the world can a man become so independent of jobs as in a situation like this? The day is coming when a working man who doesn't absolutely have to live in a large city will not think of passing up this means of having his own individual home and the additional advantage of a food supply right in his backyard.

We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North supplies accurate information 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 enclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

# Bait For Bandits



By

**CARLOS ST. CLAIR**

Author of "Raider's Last Ride," etc.

**D**OC DUNLOP stopped his buggy at the Mule Creek ford and got down a little painfully. These long cold rides didn't help his rheumatism. He unlatched the check rein on old Doll's neck and led her to the water's edge. The horse was restless, though, and wouldn't drink. She blew through

her nose and rolled her eyes toward the dusky willows across the creek, and her ears twitched in a way they had when there was something she didn't like.

"Come on, Doll, get a hustle on," old Doc said mildly. "It's five mile yet to the lumber camp, and the message was that there's a man bad hurt up there. This ain't no time for foolishness."

Doll drank reluctantly, and when Doc had climbed to the buggy seat, the old mare wanted to turn around

---

*Old Doc was no match for his bandit captor but he could teach him a thing or two about fishing*

---

and go back the way that she had come.

"Don't exactly blame you none," Doc said, and his mind flashed back to a warm and cosy living room, a glowing fire in the big base burner, and Ma, white-haired and a little stooped, sitting before it with her knitting. He hated to leave her alone at night, since she had been having those dizzy spells, and had commenced to brood again about the boy that they had lost.

"Come, Doll, come," Doc Dunlop said, in a tone between coaxing and reproof. But finally, as a last resort, he had to rattle the whip stock in its socket before Doll would turn and cross the ford.

"Wonder what's got into her?" Doc mused, as the dripping wheels rolled up the bank on the other side. He had his answer from the bushes. The face of a man, black-jowled and leering, appeared there, and a rough voice said:

"Well, you sure been long enough."

A tall and lanky form appeared and slouched up to the buggy step. The man had an evil, vicious look, and the gun that hung loose in his hand did nothing to reassure old Doc. He forced a casual tone of voice, however.

"You from the lumber camp?" he asked. "What's that there persuader for? If someone's hurt, I'm as set as you are on gettin' there."

"There's someone hurt, all right," the man rapped out. "But it isn't at the lumber camp. We're headin' up another way." He gave his head a backward nudge, and setting a foot on the buggy step, growled, "Shove over there."

Doc shoved reluctantly, and the first faint chill of actual fear pricked along his spine. A case or two where doctors had been carted off to attend some wounded man who was fugitive

from the law came to his mind, and he remembered with a quick unease that these men had not come back.

For just one fleeting second, Doc considered refusing to go ahead. He might as well take his chances here where at least his body would be found. And yet, Doc thought, he had never in a lifetime's practice failed to answer a call for help. He had never considered race, creed, or station. Where he was needed he had gone. Winter's snow, summer's sun, flood or drought, or stretching miles—nothing had ever halted him.

Now, he gathered up the reins. "Which way?" he asked.

"Take them tracks that lead off to the right through that aspen grove. Can't take the buggy all way in, but we'll save shank's mare a little bit."

**I**T WAS a lovely autumn evening. Doc couldn't remember a nicer one. The setting sun turned the towering snow-crowned peaks of the San Juan range a bright vermilion, in startling contrast to the dusk that already hung among the trees where the old mare trotted. The sky behind the crimson peaks was barred with apple-green and gold and blue. And here, among more earthly things, rabbits scuttled across the road, and a woodchuck came from between some rocks to scold them noisily as they passed.

There was no familiar detail that old Doc missed. He loved them all, and sighed a little, knowing that he might never look on them again. It wasn't for himself he minded, though, as much as Ma.

Doc tried to put these thoughts aside with more cheerful ones. Maybe, after all, this man, and any others of his gang that there might be, would let him go when his work was done. Just because some doctors, abducted this way, had been

killed was no reason he would be.

Because he was by nature a friendly man, and now felt a special need for talk, he said, "This patient, now—he's hurt bad, eh?"

"If he wasn't, we wouldn't have sent for you," the man beside him answered in a surly growl. "Star-packer, down at Crested Butte, filled him full of lead. But we got even with the skunk. That's somethin', anyhow," he added.

Doc knew the sheriff at Crested Butte—Boyden Miggs, a friendly, fair-haired man, the same age as his own boy would have been. Now, Boyden, too, was dead—dead of an outlaw's bullet.

The news had not reached Little Mesa, when Doc had left there, just past noon. But by now, he knew, the whole countryside would be agog, and a dozen posses on the trail of this outlaw gang. That made the picture even darker for himself, Doc could not help but realize.

He could think of nothing more to say to the man on the seat beside him. They rode in silence, while old Doll followed mechanically the tracks which climbed the floor of the narrowing gulch. It was fully dark when at last she turned her head with an inquiring whinny.

The outlaw said, "Get out. We walk from here. Where's your kit of tools?"

"Under the seat," Doc told him. "That black bag there."

While the fellow fumbled beneath the seat, Doc released the check rein on old Doll's neck so she could graze. But when the outlaw came to stand beside him, Doc saw the look on the fellow's face and the way his hand caressed his gun, and in that instant knew the worst.

He knew that he would never come this way again, and to save old Doll, he told a lie. Although he

knew that she would wait just where he left her till some one came to drive her off, he said quickly:

"She'll graze a while, then head for home, if she ain't tied up."

"H'm," the outlaw grunted. "Well, that's better, mebbe, than a dead horse here to mark our trail. All right, come on. I got your bag. You take the lead, straight ahead up this here gulch. There's a sort of trail that you can follow. Be a moon by the time we cross the ridge."

Doc had depended more and more, with the passing years, on old Doll's legs to take him places. Now, depending entirely on his own, the going was very hard indeed. He had to stop for rest much oftener than the outlaw liked, but the fellow could hear Doc's rasping breath, if he couldn't feel his aching legs.

**T**HE MOON was riding high when they left the draw to cross a steep and rocky ridge. Doc fell and skinned his hands and knees, and once he had started falling down, it seemed increasingly difficult to keep his feet. He was almost done for, and figured he couldn't possibly last another mile, when he saw a dull glow in the trees ahead which gradually grew into the leaping, crackling orange light of a camp-fire built against an overhanging rock.

The man with Doc sent a shout ahead, and the figures of three men loomed black and giant-size against the light.

"Here's the sawbones for you," Doc's escort said. "Thought I'd never get him here."

Covered over with a blanket, a fourth man lay between the camp-fire and the rock, his face turned away from the company. Doc glanced at him, and for all his utter weariness and the fear that clamored



at his heart his voice had its usual bedside calm. "Water, please," he said. "I'll have to wash my hands. Limber them up a little, too."

He held his stiffened fingers, bloody from scraping on rocks, to the blaze. Two of the men stared owlishly, but the third, younger than the rest, Doc thought, in spite of the neglected growth of beard on his narrow face, took up a blackened frying pan and went with it to the stream. Returning, he squatted, silent as the others, warming the contents.

One man, a short, low-browed, bulbous-lipped fellow, who seemed to be the leader, said, "Get a wiggle on, Doc. Pete's sure bad off. Thought he mightn't last the night."

Doc moved his slowly thawing fingers. "Soap?" he asked, but at the leader's short, harsh laugh, he added hastily, "Never mind. Buddy, pour that hot water on my hands. May kill some bugs anyway. My bag?" he asked the man who had brought him.

But when the fellow set it down beside him, and Doc had reached mechanically to lift it, his fingers froze and he groaned aloud. "Good Lord," he said. "My fishin' kit. I plumb forgot about it bein' in the buggy. My doctor's bag, the stuff I need, is still under the buggy seat. Oh, Lord!"

Doc's anxiety was real, and it wasn't for himself. Every inch the doctor, he was thinking only of that still form against the rock.

The silence of the four around the fire was more grimly ominous than curses, but Doc scarcely noticed. "I'll see what I can do," he said. He wobbled tiredly as he walked around the fire, and an involuntary grunt wrenched from him as he forced his stiffened muscles to kneel beside the blanketed form. When he turned the

fellow over, though, he knew it didn't matter about the bag.

He rose and turned back toward the watching men. "I'm sorry. This man's been dead an hour at least."

The leader swore. But then he shrugged and said, "Well, we done our best. You was too dang slow gettin' here." There was no particular animosity in the words, nor was there any hint of magnanimity. Doc realized that what had happened mattered no whit, one way or other, is so far as his own fate was concerned.

**T**HE YOUNG man who had fetched the water was the first to break the following silence. "What now?" he asked, addressing himself to the short-legged man.

"We won't change our plans," the leader said. "We'll tackle the bank at Little Mesa, and after that we'll run for it. Be leavin' here inside an hour."

The young man said, "Okay." And then: "I'm thinkin', though, we'd ought to bury Pete. He was a white, straight-shootin' guy. If he hadn't taken that sheriff's bullet, some of the rest of us would have."

The leader swore again. "Blast you, Piney, why'd you have to think of that? I want to move on down tonight as far as them ridges back of town. Our best chance at the bank will be tomorrow mornin', with the sheriff and most of the local talent off to join posses from Crested Butte. Sort of a lousy trick of Pete to go messin' up our plans like this.

"But I tell you, Piney, you ain't much help on a hold-up job. You nearly queered us down at Roarin' Fork by gettin' nervous and pullin' your smoke machine too soon, and you never even fired a shot, when you'd ought to, down at Crested Butte. So suppose you take a lay-

off, see. Stay up here and bury Pete. Keep the doc to help you."

Then he added as a grim afterthought: "But we ain't goin' to be so nice, diggin' no graves, when it comes his turn. You get that, Piney?"

"Well, that's okay," Piney said. "And it isn't that I'm welshin', chief. I'd just like to see Pete planted right."

"All right," the leader growled. "But see that you have things cleaned up here and ready to hit the trail by noon. Tend to this old gazabo here, before you leave, and meet us at the usual place."

Doc thought, "I'm going to die all right. Of course, they couldn't let me go. I could give descriptions, be a big help to the officers. When this Piney, here, gets through with me he'll put a bullet through my heart, and leave my carcass for the crows to pick. Not that I'll mind so much myself—I'll be dying with my boots on, sort of, the way I always wanted to—but it'll be mighty hard on Ma."

There was nothing, though, that he could do about it. He watched in a sort of apathy, while the outlaws made ready to depart. They had horses tethered not far away, and it wasn't long till they were gone. Doc had noticed one thing, thankfully. They had headed off by a different route than the one by which he and his guide had come, and he had hoped that meant they would miss old Doll who would still be waiting where they had left her. Old Doll had many good years left, and she deserved a better end than these men would give her.

**W**HEN the other men were gone, the young outlaw, Piney, suggested that they rest for the remainder of the night, and do their digging in the morning.

Doc thought that that was kind of him, and even felt a moment's hope of winning Piney to his side. In the morning, though, Piney was so short and gruff, and kept regarding him with such a gleam in his narrowed eyes that Doc almost gave up that hope.

Still, he tried to win the fellow over, volunteering to make the breakfast coffee, and doing it in the best camp style—coffee and part of the water mixed and brought just to the boiling point, then half a cup of cold water added, and the mixture allowed to boil again. When this was settled with more water, there was coffee fit for a king to drink.

Piney drank three cups of it, but he spoke no word of approbation, and Doc was childishly disappointed. Ridiculous, he realized, in a man who was about to die. Still, that was one thing Doc had noticed—life was made up of little things of no great consequences at all. Little things that swung a man toward such safe and sane pursuits as his, or like Piney, here, to the bold adventurous paths which so often proved to be crooked ones.

With breakfast finished, they dug the grave, Piney doing three times the work that old Doc could, and acting more surly every minute. When they had laid Pete's body in the trench and covered it again, Piney broke his own long silence. Kicking at Doc's scuffed black bag, he asked, "What's in this here?"

Doc brightened just a little bit. "My fishin' tackle," he explained. "Always keep it in the buggy. Sometimes, when I have a case up here in the hills, and have to stick around a spell to see how the patient's comin' on, I have a chance to fish. Fishin's the finest sport there is. Once a year, I take a week, and me and

old Bilge-water Breen go campin'. It was Bilge who taught me how to make coffee that way."

Piney opened up the bag. "Ugh," he grunted. "Never tried it."

"Like to?" Doc said eagerly, before he realized how incongruous it was to invite an outlaw to go fishing.

Piney surprised him. "Might as well," he said. "I got plenty time, and it makes me nervous settin' still."

"There's two poles here," Doc said. "I'll rig 'em both. I can see the edge of a big pool, yonder, that looks like the fishin' might be good."

He rigged the poles, almost forgetting his predicament, till, looking up, he caught that stony, calculating stare of Piney's on him. The cold chills caught him again then, but he stood up resolutely and handed the outlaw his best steel pole, taking the old bamboo himself.

They crossed the stream on a fallen tree and walked up to the pool that Doc had seen. It was wide and deep, and there was an overhanging bank that would offer fine refuge for a trout. Doc showed Piney how to cast. But until he saw that swift, absorbing interest the outlaw took in this new craft, Doc had no other purpose than to pass his final hours as philosophically as might be.

**B**UT PINEY was a true-born fisherman. Old Doc saw that right away, and gradually a plan took shape in his gray head. As soon as Piney had the hang of things, Doc said casually, "I'll go back on the other side and fish down pool a little piece, beyond them willows. If there's a big fish lurking here, one of us'll be bound to catch him."

Piney, intent on a tangled line,

grunted acquiescence, and old Doc, trembling a little, retraced his steps across the fallen tree. He was going to try to get away, but though he was shaking with eagerness, he knew he would have to wait a while to assure the outlaw that all was well.

To that end, now, he yelled at Piney, and cast his line in the lower waters of the pool. He let Piney see him for a while, and then moved down behind the willows. A very strange thing happened then. As Doc dropped the "Professor" on his line gently down on the clear water, the biggest rainbow trout that he had ever seen swam lazily out from beneath the bank to look at it.

Doc knew, however, that the big trout's laziness was assumed, and that in a moment it would strike. With brief resentment at this ironical prank of Mother Nature's, he jerked the line out speedily.

While he reeled in, half regretfully, yet wondering, too, if this was the time to make his break, he heard Piney yell. "Hey, I sighted something. The biggest fish I ever seen came and swam around my hook. Lord, he's a monster."

A small smile flickered at Doc's lips. Scoundrel though the fellow was, he had the makings of a fisherman. And that tense excitement in Piney's voice was veritable music to Doc's ears. It meant the man would very likely be content to angle there for quite some time without noticing his companion's silence.

Doc called, "Well, play it cagy for a bit. He'll be back for another look. Keep that 'Coachman' on and drop it on the water easy, like I showed you. Let it ride down with the current toward that patch of foam. I'll stay down here."

Piney's answering voice was

husky with excitement. "Shut your yap. He was here again, and you scared him off."

Doc allowed himself another smile. It was a long-exploded theory that fish could hear voices on the bank, but now it suited Doc's purpose well that Piney should believe in it. It would explain his own ensuing silence. Very softly, now, Doc retreated from the pool, and started off on an angling course among the trees.

He wondered about the horses—Piney's and the dead man's—that must be hidden somewhere near. But it had been so long since he had been astride a horse, Doc decided that shank's mare was best. He didn't remember exactly, either, just how they had come in last night, but he thought he saw an open path leading eastward through the woods and went that way.

But now, capricious fate that for a while had smiled on him seemed suddenly to have turned her back. He hadn't gone a dozen yards, when he tripped in a tangle of mountain grape and went sprawling headlong across the trunk of a fallen pine.

He flung a guarding arm to break the fall and heard the bones in his forearm snap. Pain followed in such a swirl of blackness that he had to lie there for a while gasping painfully for breath. And when, at last, he tried to rise and went crashing to the ground again, he knew that his leg was broken, too.

He lay a long time, after that, a bruised and beaten old man. Drifting between consciousness and coma, he saw the high sun reach its zenith and begin to drop by slow degrees down the western sky. It had entirely disappeared behind the spires of the encircling pines, when his mind was fully clear again.

IT WAS now long past the time, Doc knew, when Piney was supposed to leave the camp. Doc could see the clearing from where he lay, but the outlaw was not in sight. Hope kindled again in old Doc's breast. Perhaps Piney had returned to find him gone, and failing to see him lying here had ridden off to join his band. That would mean he was now alone, and master, much as a man can be, of his own fate.

Piney had left the grub here, too. It was wrapped in a piece of canvas in the crotch of a tree where Piney had put it after breakfast. Given food and time to rest, Doc figured he could splint his leg and gradually work his way down to the place where they'd left the mare. Once in the buggy, he could count on Doll to get him home.

But then, Doc's roving eye discovered Piney's saddle against a rock where the outlaw had used it for a pillow, and he knew that Piney had not gone. He was probably still up there beside the pool. The man had shown all symptoms of a fishing crank, and Doc knew well how time could fly while you tried to lure some prize from its hiding place.

Disappointment wilted Doc into a crumpled heap again. For surely, now, Piney would very soon be conscious of the waning light and come hurrying back to finish the job he had been assigned.

To attempt to elude the fellow, now, was worse than useless, Doc realized. He could only wait, more or less resigned, for the outlaw to appear. But when the shadows lengthened and Piney still did not show up, Doc determined to investigate.

Each move he made threatened oblivion again, but he painfully hitched his way up the near side of the stream to a place where he could see the pool. And there was Piney,



on the opposite bank, standing at a sort of crouch with the now bedraggled fly that Doc had placed on his line that morning bobbing with the current toward the far end of the pool.

Piney looked up and saw Doc, too, but he only motioned for silence. The sight of Piney standing there had doused the last flicker of Doc's hope, leaving him cold, forlorn and sick.

Even Piney's enthusiasm, which had earlier seemed a saving grace, was going to work against him now. Piney would never catch that fish, and when he realized how late it was, he was going to be in a towering rage, and would very likely take it out on his prisoner.

And then the miracle occurred. With his moody gaze upon the man, Doc did not see the still water break, but he heard a terrific splash and caught a glimpse of a huge dark shape that cut through the air like a scimitar, then made a second silver gash in the pool's disrupted surface, and disappeared.

He realized that by some enormous fluke of luck the giant trout he had seen that morning had struck at the clumsily dangled fly. And Doc for a second could only think what a shame it was that there was a novice on the line who had not been able to hook the prize.

But then he gasped, for above the noisy clatter of the stream he heard the steady out-run of a reel, and knew that by some further prank of fate the rainbow was actually on the hook.

For a second, too, the outlaw, Piney, seemed paralyzed. Then, his dark face livid with excitement, he checked the reel, and stammering curses, began to haul in on the line. But even with the best of luck, Doc

knew, it would take a master hand to land that giant.

**D**EEP in his watery home, the king of Rainbows was tugging against the restraining line, churning the water to bloody foam. And on the slippery carpet of the bank, Piney was fighting desperately to reel the taut line in. He was fighting for a foothold, too, falling, scrambling up again, trying for purchase on a tree, but missing it, as the tautened line drew him closer and closer to the water's edge.

Then, very suddenly, he lost his footing, landing with a splash which must, Doc thought, have almost proved the finish from sheer fright of the already tormented trout. The taut pole flew from Piney's hands as he went down, swept a singing arc and caught among the willow branches, where the strained line snapped and the fish went free.

Piney came up spluttering, fighting for air, his eyes that had been so menacing before almost popping from his head, with the wildest terror in their gaze.

He looked at Doc and shouted, "Help!" as well as he could for all the water he had shipped—and even as he shouted he went down again.

Panic was in old Doc's breast. The man out there had disappeared for the second time, and he might not come up again. In the sudden horror of it, Doc yelled, "Piney. Piney." Not that that helped, unless, indeed, it had some part in bringing the man's scared face to the surface of the pool again.

At first, it seemed to Doc that he was powerless to help the man. There was no way he could reach him, and even if he could he would not have strength to pull Piney out. But now, while that face hung bob-

bing there for what Doc guessed was the final time, he saw how the man might save himself.

Directly in back of where he was, the long branch of a willow tree dipped its leaves into the pool. It was back of Piney where he could not see it, but he could reach it easily and with its help pull himself safely to the bank.

The words were on Doc's lips to tell him, when it came to him that with Piney gone he would have that fighting chance to save himself that he had been counting on before. Even if Piney failed to meet the other outlaws, Doc felt sure they wouldn't risk returning here. Alone, then, he could rest the night, search for the trail when it was light, maybe get home again to Ma.

With Piney living, there would be no chance at all. "It's me or him," Doc thought desperately, "as far as I can see it now, and I got to keep remembering Ma."

And yet to kill, to have any part in murder, was a thing Doc could not quite accept. His life had long been dedicated to saving others. He had seen death often, but never when anything he could do would prevent its coming. The habit of forestalling death was very, very strong.

These thoughts passed instantly through Doc's mind. And it was scarce a second from the time he saw the dangling branch until he shouted his warning words. "Piney—that branch behind your head—grab it! It'll fetch you out!"

And then Doc fainted. For a long time, after that, he was unaware of what went on. Once, from the thick black cloud in which he floated, it seemed that he felt a peculiar rhythmic jolting. And after that, a sound like buggy wheels pierced his consciousness for a second.

THE FIRST THING of which he was really aware was old Doll's whinny. Then he recognized the lighted porch in front of Jones's Mercantile in Little Mesa. He saw that he was in the buggy seat, propped up stiffly, and that both his arm and leg were in rough splints. A crowd of men were on the porch, their stares divided between himself and the driver on the seat beside him. Doc looked up, and it was Piney.

They lifted Doc gently from the buggy, and the sheriff came up and peered at them. "What happened to you, Doc?" he asked. "And who's your friend? He looks a suspicious lot to me like one of them outlaws that the cashier down at the Butte described. There was five of 'em held up the bank, and killed Miggs, the sheriff. They tried the same thing here today—exceptin' there was only three. We caught 'em, too, and sent 'em off to the county jail on the evenin' train. Now we're lookin' for the other two."

Things were still confused to Doc. Right and wrong were all mixed up, but he knew that Piney must not be jailed. From the very start, he had felt that Piney was different from the other men. And Piney had made a sacrifice, had risked just this, when he'd brought him home.

Doc thought that he might faint again, and he had to get Piney fixed up first. He had to say something that would convince these angry men, who had commenced to circle in, that Piney wasn't the outlaw they wanted.

It seemed like he couldn't think, at first, and then he had the very thing. "I reckon you're mistaken, folks," he said. "This here is Bill—my boy that ran away fifteen years ago. He didn't die, the way we heard. I had a letter sayin' he was

comin' home, and I went to meet him. Comin' back, I had a sort of dizzy spell, fell out of the buggy and broke some bones. Doll and Bill, between 'em, brought me home."

Piney started to protest, and then shut up. Everybody swarmed on him to shake his hand, say how glad they were Doc's boy was back. There was great excitement, but finally Doc was home, and Piney with him.

Doc didn't know what Ma would say. He thought she might give his ruse away, and he was worried. As it happened, though, Doc went into another faint and had no chance of finding out till the following morning.

**H**E WAS lying wide awake, when Piney came in very softly. Doc said "Good mornin'," and Piney, with a rueful little smile, answered: "Good mornin', pap."

"I guess it must have worked, then," Doc opined. "I was just a bit afraid of Ma."

Piney said humbly, "She took it great. She was fooled a little, just at first—really thought that I was Bill. Then I told her everythin'. I wanted to tell the sheriff, too, thinkin' you folks'd be in bad, but she wouldn't let me. She says, 'If Doc Dunlop says a thing, he's got his reasons. If you're Bill to pa, you're Bill to me.' So I let it stand."

He added with a sort of rush: "I

never would have killed you, Doc. In the two months I was with the gang, I never shot at any one. When the chief left orders to rub you out, I knew I was in a jam all right. I kept mullin' it over, all day long. Then you saved my life, and there was nothin' for me to do but bring you home. If it's any comfort to you, Doc, I'm through with the wild bunch, after this. I'll try to make the life you saved worth somethin', Doc. You see, I promised Ma I would."

Doc could smile a little then. "Well, it's turned out fine," he said, "like it generally does if you go ahead and do whatever seems right to you. Just one thing, Piney—or Bill that is—now you're home, you'll have to stay a spell. It wouldn't look right to go rushin' off."

Piney's face was red and his voice was muffled. "That's awful good of you," he said. "I'd like right well to do it, too, if it wouldn't put you out."

"No, it won't," Doc said. "And when these old bones of mine heal up, we'll go fishin'. There's a big old rainbow up in a pool I know about that I reckon you might catch, if I sort of show you the hang of it."

Piney couldn't answer then, but the grip of his hard young hand on Doc's was all the answer that was needed.

*In next week's issue—*

## CHAPS ON THEIR SHOULDERS

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# THE STARLIGHT TRAIL

By TOM B. STONE

WHEN that last great streak o' sunlight  
Fades an' dims the western sky,  
When the daubs from Nature's paint-pot  
From that palette set so high,  
Shade away in dusky dimness,  
Fade away in light so pale,  
That's when I'll come up a-ridin'  
Plumb acrost that starlight trail.

FOR it's when the last great roundup  
Circles through the corral gate,  
An' the rannies drop their irons  
'Cause the brandin' now kin wait,  
That the last remuda's herded  
From each rollin' plain an' swale,  
Then's the time I'll come a-lopin'  
Cross the whisperin' starlight trail.

COULEES darken, fires flicker,  
Twinklin' stars hang white an' high.  
Then I'll hear my pard a-callin'  
From that spread up in the sky.  
An' I know it's time to roam there—  
Mosey on across the vale.  
Singin' soft, I'll head for home there  
'Crost the shinin' starlight trail.



BRANDER

**C**ORPORAL DOWNEY, ace of the Northwest Mounted Police non-coms in the Yukon, glanced uneasily at the glittering, distorted sun, low-hung in the sky to the southward. There was an unfamiliar, unreal look to it, and an unnatural feel to the dead, still air. Before him stretched the unending windings of the river, flanked to the northward by high sparsely timbered hills, and to the southward by flat tundra and roll-

# White Death Trail

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

*Some claim the White Death is a myth, but it was a little too real for Corporal Downey of the Northwest Mounted*

ing lowlands, even more sparsely timbered.

At late sunrise the wind had died and it had grown steadily colder. For two days past his government map had been useless, vague dottings showing the supposed course of the river. His working map, hand-drawn in Dawson by a breed who had helped Stan Braddock pack his stock of trade goods and liquor to the new camp of Good Luck, had been doubted at Selkirk. Two men who professed to have been to Good Luck insisted that the breed had located the camp on the wrong branch of the Pelly. They drew Downey a new map. Another argued that the breed's map might be right, but doubted that anyone could cover the ground in eight days even on the hard, wind-packed snow.

An old Indian, who had trapped the country to the eastward a dozen years before, drew a crude map that



coincided with neither of the others. In disgust Downey had pulled out of Selkirk, leaving those knowing ones wrangling among themselves.

The dogs slowed. Even Topek, the lead dog, was traveling listlessly, his muzzle low to the unbroken snow. Tight-curved tails had lost their gimp, and breath-plumes frosted shaggy coats. Downey himself was conscious of a growing lassitude. He swore unconvincingly at the dogs, but the long-lashed whip remained coiled in his mittened hand, and the dogs paid no heed.

Somewhere on the heights to the left a tree exploded with the frost. Again Downey glanced across the rolling lowlands toward the sun. White specks danced before his eyes—specks that resolved themselves into false suns that danced their silent mockery in the ice-green sky above the cold dead waste of snow.

In a dull, detached way, he estimated that it was one o'clock. The conclusion seemed of no importance, and of no importance seemed the slow pace of the dogs as he walked on and on behind the sled. Vaguely his mind reverted to his maps—the breed's map, and the others. He shivered with a chill not born of the cold—for he realized that, to his dulled senses, the maps, too, seemed of no importance.

Pulling himself together with an effort, he cracked his whip and swore loudly at the dogs. His voice sounded curiously flat and unfamiliar, and the animals plodded on without increasing their pace, proud tails at half-cock. Downey, too, plodded on without bothering to coil his whip, the long walrus lash dragging behind him, his eyes on the unbroken snow that covered the river ice.

Since leaving Selkirk he had seen no tracks. No moose nor caribou—

not even a wolf or a fox had crossed the river. And this fact, too, seemed of no importance even though he was low on meat—for himself, and for his dogs. Tonight they would get the last of the frozen fish—then no more till Good Luck. Perhaps they would never reach Good Luck. The matter seemed of no importance beyond being a good joke on the dogs. Downey realized that he was chuckling inanely.

The lopsided, brassy sun touched the horizon and as the officer looked, the false suns leaped and danced—a dance of hideous mockery on the rim of the frozen world. "I've heard of it," he mumbled, striving to control his brain. "The white death—it comes in the strong cold—but it ain't the cold—the air goes dead, or somethin'—some of the old-timers claim it's a lie—but others claim a man dies or goes crazy. . . . Well, if a man goes crazy, or dies—what the devil!" A delicious lassitude permeated his brain—a pleasant, warming numbness—and he slogged on.

**T**HE leader swung abruptly from the river and headed up a small feeder that emerged from a notch in the hills. "Hey, you, Topek! Gee, Topek, gee!" But the leader paid no slightest heed to the command, and Downey grasped the tail-rope as the superb brute threw his weight into the collar, tightening the traces, and by the very strength and power of him, dragged his lagging team mates into a faster pace. "Whoa, Topek! Down! Curse you—down!"

Ignoring the command, the big dog plunged on, head up, ears cocked expectantly ahead. Tightening his grip on the tail-rope, the officer followed. He glanced over his shoulder toward the southward. The brief

March sun had set. No false suns danced crazily before his eyes—only long plumes of blue-green light were visible, radiating from a bright spot on the horizon to the zenith above his head.

His glance shifted to Topek. Topek, the best lead dog in the police service, deserting the trail, ignoring commands! What did it mean? Downey heard his own voice babbling foolishly: "Gone crazy—crazy with the white death—dogs and men both—they go crazy or die, if they don't camp. Or, maybe Topek knows a new trail—no one else knows this cursed country—maybe Topek knows. Might as well die up one creek as another. "Hi, Topek—mush!"

The high hills closed in abruptly, shutting out the weird light of the blue-green plumes. Naked rock walls rose sheer to jagged rims outlined high above against the sky. The canyon, a mere cleft in the living rock, was scarce fifty feet from wall to wall. The new snow was softer here—protected from the sweep of the wind by the high walls.

Dully, Downey realized that, despite the shifty footing, and the increased drag of the sled in the softer snow, the pace was fast. Drooping tails once more curled over shaggy backs as each dog threw his weight into the collar. Gone was the languor that had marked the brief daylight hours of travel. It was as though Topek had inspired his team—was inspiring Corporal Downey, too.

Slowly, but consciously, as one awakening from a horrible dream, the officer realized that the dangerous brain lethargy that had gripped him on the river was losing its hold. He shook his head to clear it of the last remnant of fogginess, and his voice rang sharp and hard through the narrow corridor as he shouted

words of encouragement to the dogs.

One mile—two—and the canyon suddenly widened to a hundred yards and terminated abruptly in a dead end—a sheer rock wall at the base of which stood a grove of stunted spruce.

"Firewood, anyway," the officer muttered, as he glanced about him in the semidarkness. Topek headed straight for the copse and disappeared, his team mates following, pulling the sled which came to a halt partially within the timber a few yards from where Downey stood. Rumbling, throaty growls issued from the copse, and the officer hurried forward to see the huge lead dog, his muzzle low against the door of a small pole-and-mud cabin, lips curled back to expose gleaming white fangs as growl after growl issued from the depths of the mighty chest.

Making his way around the sled, Downey was about to speak to the dog when the great brute settled back on his haunches, pointed his sharp muzzle to the sky, and howled. Loud and eerie the ululation rose and swelled, intensified and thrown back by the towering walls of rock until, as if at a signal, each of the other six dogs of the team followed the example of their leader until the horrid cacophony rolled and reverberated in an all-engulfing hullabaloo.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the deafening hubbub ceased, and at a word of command, the dogs sank onto their bellies, reaching out here and there to snap up mouthfuls of snow.

For some moments the officer stood peering into the gathering darkness. A neatly piled rank of firewood, an ax standing against the wall beside the door, a pair of snowshoes hanging from a peg driven into the wall, all spoke of occupancy. Yet—not a track was to be seen. No

one had passed in or out of the cabin since the latest fall of snow.

**P**ULLING the thong that raised the crude wooden latch bar, Downey pushed the door open and stepped into the absolute blackness of the room. Shaking off a mitten, he shuddered slightly as he groped in his pocket for a match. The interior seemed colder even than the outside air—seemed laden with a deadly chill that struck to the very marrow of his bones.

Closing the door, he struck the match and as the light flared he started back in horror at sight of the dead man who lay upon his back in the middle of the floor, his glassy, frozen eyes staring straight up into Downey's own. The match burned the officer's fingers, and he dropped it, plunging the room into darkness. Reaching for another, he scratched it and, stepping over the still form on the floor, held the flame to the wick of a candle stub that protruded from the neck of a bottle on the rude pole table.

When the flame burned steadily, flooding the room with mellow light, Downey thrust his hand, already stiff from cold, back into his mitten, picked up the bottle, and stepping to the dead man's side, stood gazing down into the marble-white face—the face of an old man.

An unkempt white mustache and a scraggly white beard, somewhat stained by tobacco juice, masked the lower half of his face. Thin white hair edged the brow, and as Downey stood staring in fascination into the frozen eyes, a peculiar sensation stole over him. He felt that the man wanted to speak—that behind those frozen eyeballs a spark of brain still lived—that the man had something to tell him, something of vast importance.

"Poor devil," muttered the officer, his glance shifting to the blue-black revolver that lay close beside the outflung right hand, and back to the ugly hole in the man's right temple. "He couldn't take it no longer. The North got him. The strong cold—or maybe the white death that some claim is a lie."

He turned abruptly away and returned the bottle to the table. "An' it'll be gettin' me, too, if I don't get a fire goin'. It's sixty below in here right now—or I'll miss my guess."

Stepping to the stove, he started in surprise. "Why the devil," he wondered aloud as he applied a match to the bark beneath the kindlings that showed through the open stove door, "would he lay his fire an' then blow his brains out without lightin' it?"

With the fire roaring in the stove Downey stepped outside, unharnessed his dogs, tossed them a frozen salmon apiece, and carried his own grub and the remainder of his meager supply of dog food into the cabin.

The room was beginning to warm. The candle flared and flickered, having burned to the bottle neck, and rummaging on a shelf, Downey found another and lighted it. Filling a pail with snow, he placed it on the stove, and turned his attention to an exploration of the tiny room. He found sufficient flour, tea, sugar, and salt to last a man at least two months. There was also an ample supply of desiccated vegetables, and a bag of beans. A plate on the table held several good cuts of caribou steak frozen to the hardness of iron.

Beside the cheap alarm clock on the shelf from which he had taken the candle, Downey found a small box containing a number of dynamite caps, and part of a box of rifle

ammunition, for which there seemed to be no rifle. He found no revolver ammunition, nor any box in which such ammunition had been packed.

Beneath the pole bunk he found half a case of dynamite and a coil of fuse. He also discovered dozens of samples of hard rock—quartz for the most part, many of the specimens showing flecks of free gold.

On the table, pushed back against the wall, was an Indian-tanned caribou skin from which had been cut several pieces of a uniform pattern, evidently for the purpose of fashioning the small pouches commonly used in the country as receptacles for gold dust.

In a corner, where they had been carelessly tossed, lay a pair of worn mukluks of the same size and pattern as those on the feet of the dead man. Downey noted with interest that on one of those boots dust had collected on the inside and out, while the other was nearly free from dust.

HE replenished the fire, dropped a pinch of tea into the snow water, and set the plate of caribou steaks on the stove to thaw. Again he turned his attention to the dead man, and again as he stared down into the frozen eyes, the strange feeling stole over him that the man wanted to speak to him—to impart some information of importance.

Dismissing the fancy with a frown of annoyance, the officer stooped closer. "Too bad, old-timer, that you can't talk," he muttered. "Prob'ly want to tell me how you missed out on the mother lode. But whatever it is'll have to keep a long, long time, I guess."

Examination of the wound disclosed powder marks on the surrounding skin, and its position indicated that it could easily have been

inflicted by a pistol held in the man's right hand. Blood had flowed from it, trickling down just in front of the ear, and had dripped from the stained white beard, freezing as it fell, to form a tiny red pyramid, or inverted cone, upon the floor.

"Done it when the strong cold was on," Downey muttered, "or that blood wouldn't have froze as it dripped. But not this spell of the strong cold. He hasn't left the shack since the last snow—an' that must be a week, or more."

Picking up the revolver, he noted that it was of .41 caliber, and that it held five loaded cartridges and an empty shell. "Funny he'd shoot himself with plenty of grub on hand, an' enough giant, an' caps, an' fuse to last him quite a while," he mused aloud, as is the wont of lone men. "Might be he got just one disappointment too many. But them old-timers is used to disappointments. They've got a sort of hopelessly hopeful faith that they'll hit it next week, or next month, or next year. It's what keeps 'em goin'—that faith in the mother lode."

Clearing a space along the wall near the stove, Downey stooped to lift the corpse. As he raised the out-flung right arm from the floor a low exclamation escaped his lips. He lowered the body, and for long moments knelt there—staring. For, gripped between the thumb and finger of that iron-hard right hand, was an unlighted match!

"A man can't shoot himself in the right temple with a gun held in his left hand," Downey murmured slowly. "An' he can't hold a gun in his right hand—when that hand is grippin' a match."

His glance strayed to the face of the corpse, and he started nervously. For, as a drop of grease slid down the length of the candle, the flame

flared, and in the flickering light the frozen left eye seemed to wink knowingly. The officer grinned into the glassily staring eyes. "I got you, old-timer," he said. "You sure put it acrost—what you wanted to tell me. This ain't suicide—it's murder!"

Arranging the body close against the wall, Downey turned his attention to a more minute examination of the room. An hour later he fried the caribou steaks, seated himself at the table, and ate a hearty meal.

"Things had a wrong look, in the first place," he mused. "What with a revolver, an' no extry shells for it. An' some rifle shells on the shelf, an' no rifle. An' that pair of mukluks—one all covered with dust, an' the other without no dust on it to speak of. But I guess, now, I've got the picture—someone comes along, an' the old-timer invites him in. He lays his fire, an' just as he's about to light it, the other shoves the revolver almost against his head an' pulls the trigger.

"Then he makes a quick search an' finds the old man's cache of gold in one of them mukluks—the one without the dust. There'd be seven pokes of it, accordin' to that caribou hide—maybe eight—ten thousand dollars. Then he beat it without lightin' the fire. He wasn't takin' no chances in bein' caught in this box canyon if someone should come along. A man can't never tell what he's goin' to run up against on one of these routine patrols."

**I**N the morning Downey inventoried the old man's effects, lifted his body to the bunk and covered it with a blanket, requisitioned a quarter of caribou meat to augment his meager supply of dog food, and struck off down the canyon. The strong cold persisted, but

the curious dead feel was gone from the air, and the dogs bent to their work with a will. Later in the day a light breeze sprang up and the temperature moderated considerably.

On the third day thereafter the outfit pulled into the camp of Good Luck, situated at the precise location the breed had indicated on his map. Stepping into Stan Braddock's saloon, Downey was greeted by Old Bettles and "Camillo Bill," two sourdoughs who had thrown in with the Good Luck stampede.

"Hello, Downey!" cried Bettles, "yer jest in time to have one on me! What the devil fetches you up to Good Luck? So fer, we've got along fine without no police."

Corporal Downey winked at Camillo Bill as he filled the glass Stan Braddock spun toward him with professional accuracy. "The Inspector sent me up here to see why two able-bodied men would be hangin' around a saloon in the daytime, instead of workin' their claim," he replied.

"Shucks, ain't a man got a right to celebrate his birthday?" grinned the oldster.

Camillo Bill laughed. "Bettles, he celebrates his birthday every month."

"Shore I do! Every month except Feb'ry. Why wouldn't I? It was a danged important day for me. I was born on the thirtieth—so every time the thirtieth comes around, I celebrate. What I claim is, a man overlooks a lot of bets if he don't celebrate his birthday only onct a year."

"Guess that's right," Downey agreed. "How's things goin'?"

"Oh, not so bad. Good Luck ain't no Bonanza nor Hunker. But she's a danged sight better'n a lot of other cricks men are stickin' to. Most of



the boys is takin' out a lot better'n wages."

"Heard any complaints? Any cache robbin', or claim jumpin' goin' on?"

Stan Braddock shook his head. "Nope. Here it is near April, an' we've gone through the winter without no crime that anyone knows of—an' I'd have heard it in here, if anythin' out of the way had been goin' on. Some of the boys is in here every night."

"They's been three deaths," supplemented Bettles, "but they was all of 'em common ones. A rock squashed one fella where it fell on him, an' the other two died of some sickness they got. There ain't no doctor in camp, but we figger it was their stomachs went back on 'em, er mebber their hearts. We buried 'em decent, an' saved their names an' their stuff for the public administrator. Two of 'em didn't have much, but one done pretty well fer hisself. It's all in Stan's safe, there—he'll turn it over to you."

"How many men do you figure wintered in Good Luck?"

"Couple hundred wouldn't miss it far," Braddock replied.

"Mostly chechahcos, I s'pose."

"Yeah," said Camillo Bill, "Good Luck's jest like all the other camps. What with the blasted chechahcos crowdin' into the country, it's gittin' so us old-timers can't hardly git enough of us together no more fer a decent stud game."

"Speakin' of old-timers," said Downey, casually, "who's the old fella that located in a box canyon about three days back down the river?"

"He must mean old Tom Whipple," Bettles opined. "This here canyon runs in from the north, an' dead ends a couple of mile up, don't it?"

"That's the one."

"Yeah, that's old Tom. He's kinda batty—like all them hard rock men—allus huntin' the mother lode. I know'd Tom first, must be fifteen, sixteen year ago, on Birch Crick, over on the American side. He wouldn't pay no 'tention to the placer stuff in the crick beds. Stuck to the hard rock—shootin' an' peckin'—peckin' an' shootin'—pryin' a little flake gold out of his samples with the p'int of his belt knife.

"He passed up all the good cricks—Forty Mile, Bonanza, Hunker, Dominion. We tried to git him to quit foolin' around amongst the rocks an' git in on some of the cricks, but it wasn't no use. He was old then—too old, I guess, to learn him new tricks. He'd look at us like we didn't have all our buttons—like he was kinda takin' pity on us, er somethin'.

"That blamed stuff in the crick beds ain't nothin' but float," he'd say. 'I wouldn't fool away my time on it. It's all got to come from the mother lode. Find the mother lode—that's where the gold is,' he'd tell us. 'An' the mother lode's in the hills—not in the crick beds.'

"There can't no one claim old Tom ain't got faith. He stuck to his idee when we was pannin' out two, three dollars to the pan on Birch Crick, an' up to seven, eight dollars on Forty Mile, an' then twenty an' a hundred on Bonanza. He watched us gittin' rich right in under his nose—but he wouldn't fool with it. An' he's stickin' to the same idee yet, up on the head of that canyon."

**A**DANGERED sight more faith than sense—that's what he's got, if you ask me," opined Camillo Bill. "Gold's where you find it, whether it's in the crick, er on the hills."

"Didn't he ever make a strike?" Downey asked.

Bettles shook his head. "Nope. Jest keeps on shootin' down rock, an' peckin' with his pick, an' pryin' with his knife. Don't cost him nothin' much to live. Never has nothin' to do with wimmin er licker—never blow'd an ounce in his life. Beans, an' tea, an' flour, an' sugar—a little chawin' terbacker, an' ca'tridges fer that old rifle of his—that's all he needs."

"But, keepin' at it long as he has, an' not spendin' no more'n what he spends, he'd be bound to have some dust cached away somewheres, wouldn't he?"

"Oh, chances is he's got some—probly enough to keep him the rest of his life, when he gits too old to fight the rocks. I doubt if he kin show ten thousan' in dust fer heaven knows how many years he's worked."

"You spoke of an old rifle," said Downey. "Would you know that gun if you saw it?"

"Shore, I'd know it. So would Camillo, here, an' Moosehide Charlie, an' Swiftwater Bill. It's a Marlin. He bust the stock, one time on Birch Crick, an' we wired it up fer him with some wire we ontwisted out of a chunk of cable. But—what you so int'rested in old Tom Whipple fer?"

"Didn't own a revolver that you know of?" persisted Downey, ignoring the question. "A .41 caliber six-gun?"

"Shucks, no! What would old Tom be doin' with a revolver? He allus traveled light. I seen him 'long about Chris'mas. Come up here draggin' a hand sled after a load of grub an' giant. I kidded him about not havin' no dogs, an' he claimed it cost too much to feed 'em, an' he didn't need none. Claimed he sold

off all his dogs two years back, when he located where he's at.

"There wasn't no Good Luck then—Tom had the country all to hisself. Claimed he's right up agin' the mother lode, this time, an' would never have to make another move. Told me he'd be into it, come spring, fer shore—an' then he'd show us what crazy fools we was fer muckin' around in the gravel.

"Pore old cuss, he'll keep on huntin' the mother lode till the last day he kin stand on his legs—an' allus it'll be jest ahead of him. If he'd throw'd in on the stampedes, like we done, he could 'a' had as much dust as the best of us—more, 'cause he's a hard worker, an' he don't never spend nothin'. It's too dang'd bad. A fella with faith like that ort to win."

Stan Braddock smiled, and set out a fresh bottle. "I don't look at it that way, Bettles," he said, as the glasses were filled. "A man like that wouldn't never be satisfied with placer gold—no matter how much he took out. He'd always figure he was a fool fer passin' up the mother lode. An' what good would a lot of dust do him, anyhow—livin' like he does? I'm tellin' you, he's a dang'd sight happier'n the most of us. He's got enough to keep him, an' he's got his faith—an' he'll have it till he dies. If a man knows he's goin' to be the richest man in the world next week, er next month, er next year, he's bound to be happy. What happens to him in the meantime don't matter. Ain't that so, Corporal?"

Corporal Downey nodded slowly, as he toyed with his glass on the bar. "Yes," he said, "I guess maybe yer right."

Men began to drift into the saloon, and Braddock became busy with bottles and glasses. The officer

turned to Bettles. "This last snow—when did it come?"

"'Bout a week ago. It snowed fer two days."

"An' before that you'd had a spell of the strong cold?"

"I'll tell the world we did! Worst I ever seen. She hit fifty below fer twelve days, hand runnin'." He paused and indicated a man who had just entered, a man who was limping painfully to the bar. "There's a bird kin tell you more about it than me. It ketched him comin' in—froze all his toes an' one of his heels. He's in awful bad shape, without no doctor in camp. Them toes had ort to come off."

"Chechahco?"

"Yeah. Claims he come in over the White Pass an' split off from his pals at Selkirk, when he heard about this strike."

Corporal Downey regarded the man intently as he hobbled to the bar and elevated a clumsily swathed foot to the rail. He was a large man, unprepossessing and unkempt, with a month's growth of beard. He called for whisky without inviting others to join him, and when Braddock set out the bottle, he filled his glass to the brim and emptied it at a gulp. He repeated the performance, and tossed a pouch to the bar.

"He ain't been able to do much work since he got here, has he?" Downey asked. "Ain't taken out much dust?"

"Shucks, no!" Camillo Bill replied. "He moved into Bill Davis's shack—it was Bill got squashed by the rock. Me an' Bettles went down there yesterday to see if we could do somethin' fer him, an' the stink in there was somethin' fierce. Them toes of his has started to rot. We offered to cut 'em off fer him—but the blasted fool wouldn't let us. If they was my toes they'd come off—if I

had to do it myself with an ax! But, that's the way with a bloody chechahco. They don't know nothin', an' never will. He cussed the devil out of us when we told him he'd be dead in a month with the blood pizen."

**C**ORPORAL JIM DOWNEY watched Stan Braddock pick up the sack the man had tossed onto the bar and shake a few yellow flakes of gold into the scales. "Kind of queer, ain't it?" he observed, "that a chechahco, jest in over the pass, an' not in shape to take out any dust after he got here, should be spendin' dust?"

Old Bettles looked up quickly. "Why—why—shore it is!" he agreed.

"Danged if it ain't," said Camillo Bill. "Where would he get it?"

"I believe," replied Downey, "that I know."

The man had turned from the bar and hobbled to a chair on the opposite side of the room as Downey slipped to the scales just as Braddock lifted the little pan to transfer the gold to the till. The officer thrust out his hand, palm up. "Pour it in there, Braddock. I want to have a look at it," he ordered, and when the man complied, he returned to where Bettles and Camillo Bill waited under one of the big swinging lamps. Eagerly, the three examined the yellow grains, as the officer prodded them about with a forefinger. "Ever see any stuff like it?" he asked, abruptly.

"Them flakes is sort of sharp edged," ventured Camillo Bill. "They don't show no water wear."

"That," replied Downey, "is because they didn't come out of a crick bed. They was pried out of rock samples—with the point of a belt knife, maybe."

"You mean," exclaimed Bettles,

his eyes suddenly widening, "that Old Tom—!"

The officer silenced him with a wink, and a glance toward the chechahco who sat sprawled in his chair, his eyes on his bandaged foot.

"Yeah," he replied, in an undertone. "Old Tom Whipple was murdered an' robbed in his cabin in that box canyon. It happened durin' the last spell of the strong cold—there was no tracks in the new snow. Whoever done it stole Whipple's dust, an' his rifle. The three of us'll jest sift down to this chechahco's shack, now. Besides Whipple's old rifle I think we'll find his dust, in caribou-hide sacks—six of 'em, besides the one the chechahco's packin' on him. An' when we rip 'em apart, I think we'll find that the pieces was cut out of a hide I fetched along out of Whipple's shack.

"We'd ort to find some .41 caliber revolver ammunition, too. Forty-ones ain't common. It's the gun the murderer left to make it look like Whipple killed himself. When we find them things, I'll arrest that bird—an' I'll have enough evidence to hang him higher than a kite."

"It'll be all right with me," growled Camillo Bill, as the three stepped out onto the hard-packed snow, "if we can't find no evidence whatever in his shack. Hangin's too good fer a cuss that would murder old Tom Whipple—which Tom had prob'ly took him in to save him from

the strong cold. I'd ruther see him left here to rot from his toes clean up to his chin!"

"How come you turned off up that canyon, if there wasn't no tracks in the snow?" queried Bettles, as Downey spoke to his dogs, which had lain down in the harness, wrapped snugly in their bushy tails.

"That was pure accident," the officer replied. "The air had gone dead. There was a peculiar feel to it, an' there was false suns dancin' in the sky. I felt sort of weak an' light-headed—like nothin' mattered—an' I guess the dogs felt it, too. Anyhow, my lead dog turned off up this canyon, an' I couldn't head him off. Like I said, nothin' seemed to matter—one crick seemed as good as any other—so I let 'im go."

Old Bettles nodded. "The white death reachin' fer you, eh? Some claim it's a lie—that there ain't no sech thing. But don't you believe 'em, Downey. I know."

"You tellin' me?"

"Where'd you git that lead dog?" the oldster asked, after a moment's pause, his eyes on the great brute that stood alert, awaiting the word of command.

"Down in Dawson, a year ago. Best lead dog in the country. It's funny he'd leave the trail fer a side crick."

"Not so blamed funny as you think," Bettles replied. "I know that dog. He's Topek. Old Tom Whipple raised him from a pup."





*Although the Indians were generally friendly to the trader, there was always the risk of encountering a band of young Indians "on the snort."*



# The Story of the West

*Told in pictures and text by  
the famous Western artist*

GERARD DELANO

**T**HE FIRST wedge in the opening up of the West was the fur trade. Already, in 1800, there were numerous fur forts established in the Indian country by the Hudson Bay and the Northwest Companies of Canada.

Up the Missouri, "the highway of the West," other traders and trappers were gradually filtering among the various tribes. Carrying with them stores of beads and other bright trinkets, the traders established themselves here and there at some point of vantage and through the winter months trapped and bartered with the Indians for fur. Then in the early spring, as soon as the rivers were free of ice, the furs were packed for transportation to market.

These men became ready masters of the Indian sign language, the universal means of communication among the various tribes. Many trappers even learned the language of the tribe to which they were attached. Often too these men took Indian brides and became honored members of a tribe.

For the most part these first traders and trappers were of French and Spanish origin. Hardy pioneers,

these, risking their lives in the great wilderness for the rich harvest of fur. Although the Indians were generally friendly to the trader, there was always the risk of encountering a band of young Indians "on the snort," their faces and bodies painted black or vermilion, ready for war, eager for a chance to secure some enemy's scalp.

Countless other dangers too were ever present. Many a trader, en route to the nearest river with his fur cargo, had his horse stolen and was left afoot on the boundless prairie. The rivers with their treacherous rapids were a formidable problem, and sudden floods and washouts a constant menace.

Armed at this time with only small-bore, muzzle-loading rifles and pistols which required considerable time to reload, men were almost at the mercy of the huge, lumbering grizzly. If a first shot failed to kill or even stagger the beast, the hunter had to take to his heels in an often futile attempt to escape a charge of the furious animal.

Hardy, brave, resourceful, were the men who played their parts in the vast drama of the opening of the West!

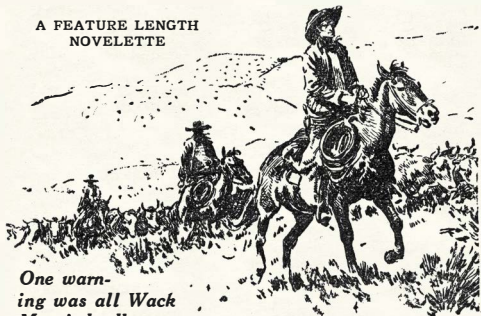
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ANOTHER THRILLING EPISODE IN THIS SERIES NEXT WEEK!

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# Three Came Gunning

A FEATURE LENGTH  
NOVELETTE



*One warn-  
ing was all Wack  
Moro's deadly gun-  
hawks ever gave . . . But one was aplenty  
when those Three Link pards called for  
Boothill show-down*

## CHAPTER I

### PREMATURE CELEBRATION

**T**HEY had something to celebrate so they knocked off in the middle of the hot afternoon and headed their cow ponies for the ranch house. At the top of a grama grass swell they slowed to a walk, all three of them, and looked back at their Three Link beefs feeding in the sun.

There was pride in their squint-eyed glance—the pride a man feels after he has worked and sweated and fought, and finally gets things shaped the way he wants them. It was three years to a day since they

had thrown in together and built up this herd of white-faces.

They were equal partners: "Frenchy" La Farge, big, kindly, and black-bearded; "Hackamore Pete" Hardy, an oldster, bent, bow-legged, and withered by rangeland sun and wind, but sound as a piñon pine knot; and young Harry Cleeland, lank and lusty, with an easy grin and a quick draw—said draw, however, never having been exercised on anything more animated than a flying tin can. Until this last week.

From the first their dream had been the same as any cowpoke's dream. But they hadn't let it stay a dream. They had pooled their

*Wack Moro waited tensely until the Three Link owners, Harry in the lead, rode up.*



By

**W. RYERSON JOHNSON**

Author of "Steel Trail," etc.

scant savings, their cow savvy, and their brawn. Three partners . . . three years . . . and now the Three Link brand was something of which to be proud.

Turning now from the herd, they rode on, under the warm and friendly sun, toward the ranch house which they had built with their own hands out of logs snaked down from the upper benches of the San Miguel Mountains. Off across the shimmering grassland a saddle of black cloud rode the San Miguel Range. But it didn't seem important enough for anyone to call attention to it.

Their barn loomed into view before their ranch house did, their new barn, the only one like it in the valley. It was built round, like the dome on a State capitol. The newness was still in the unpainted lumber, and the structure bulked large on the rangeland floor, symbolizing a subtle change that was spreading over the raw and rowdy West, a change called progress.

"This here barn, it shines out like a dang-ding lighthouse," old Hackamore Pete had insisted.

"Only not warnin' of no danger," Fingers La Farge had rumbled in

his big voice, "but more like a monument to our success."

Hackamore Pete's analogy was the closest. With the wind rippling the grass in tawny waves, hinting of shoals in this dry inland sea between the mountains, the barn was a better lighthouse than anyone could have known at the moment.

Racking in at their ranch house, the Three Link partners were greeted noisily by other Sweetgrass Valley cowmen who had arrived before them. It was a day for celebrating all around. Though the Three Link boys had bought the beer and had it cooling now in their sod cellar, there was more than a Three Link birthday to send up steam about.

Old Jeff Jardeen, who ran the neighboring Box Q spread, put it into words when he said jubilantly:

"Wack Moro and his passell o' cow thieves, we got 'em licked plumb to a frazzle!"

"Yeah," a puncher backed him up. "Scattered so complete there won't never another rustler dab a rope in Sweetgrass Valley."

"You said it, boys!" Harry Cleeland's sweat-grimed face broke into his famous grin as he stepped out of saddle and pushed through the milling cowmen to get to the sod cellar.

Hackamore Pete Hardy bowlegged along behind him. The wizened little cowpoke was grinning too. "The first beer'll be in honor of Sheriff Jim Bowey," he asserted, in his shrill voice. "It was Jim as led us agin' Wack Moro's sidewinders—"

**J**OSTLING cowpokes sent up a cheer for the sheriff, and Jim Bowey, roly-poly and red-faced, slow as cold molasses on the draw, but deadly at half again the range of an ordinary gunner, laughed in

embarrassment.

"Shucks, now, boys, it wasn't me," he protested. "It was history that put the kibosh on rustlin' in Sweetgrass Valley."

"What you mean, history?" Frenchy La Farge rumbled doubtfully.

"Well, the railroad comin' in, bringin' such varmints of civilization as nesters with their bob-wire and seed corn; them breakin' up the land, fencin' off the water—makes it as plumb difficult fer rustlers to rustle as what it does ranchers to ranch."

"Huh!" Frenchy snorted. "Maybe you're right, but anyhow you was the one to give history a twist on the tail when you organized us agin' the rustlin'. So like Hackamore says, the first drink's to you."

They were all laughing and crowding Harry Cleeland so close he couldn't pull the cellar door open after he had unlocked it. Frenchy La Farge's big arm swept wide, and his black beard jutted out as he threw back his head and roared, "Back, everybody!"

They sagged away enough that the door could be opened, and then Frenchy stood guard while Harry and Hackamore hop-skipped around in the cool cellar drawing the beer. Frenchy relayed the foaming tin cups outside.

"Wait till everybody's got his meat hooks on a mug," he bawled, "and we'll bottoms-up together."

Hackamore and Harry Cleeland butted outside with their own cups, and white-haired Jeff Jardeen, the oldest rancher in the valley, raised his beer high and toasted:

"To peace and quiet on the Sweetgrass range—and an unmolested increase of our beefs. And to Sheriff Jim Bowey. Drink 'er down, men!"

They tipped their cups. Every man got one good swallow. A few

took two before taste reflexes dagedered their throats. No one took more than two swallows.

Cups arched downward so fast that beer spilled in every direction. But no one moaned about the loss of the amber fluid. Lips were puckered and faces twisted as though each man had swallowed a green persimmon. A collective shudder struck through the range-garbed men, then their roaring protests beat upon the beer servers.

"You tryin' to poison us or what? . . ."

"It's bitter as bile! . . ."

Old "Salt-grass" Sanderson, from the Double S, took a twist on his mustache and said wryly, "The joke's in plumb bad taste."

The Three Link boys were grimacing the same as everybody else.

"Joke!" Harry Cleeland answered for them. "You think we'd spoil a whole keg of beer for a joke?"

"Somebody must of slipped up at the brewery," Hackamore gasped shrilly, "and kegged this beer afore it was finished."

"Nothin' left out of it could make it taste like this," Frenchy La Farge rumbled angrily. "It's somethin' that was put in it."

"There's another keg," Harry reminded.

Men crowded silently, expectantly, with dry tongues, while Harry tapped the second keg. They watched his face as he raised the cup to taste. Their own faces grimaced involuntarily as he jerked the cup away from his mouth with his features puckered in acute distaste.

"Same's the other'n," he muttered.

**A**N uneasy murmur rippled through the men crowded at the cellar door. There seemed to be a premonition of tragedy in the fact that now, celebrating their

triumph, the beer had turned bitter. Outside at skyline that black saddle of cloud which rode the San Miguel Mountains had swelled ominously. Still nobody noticed it.

Something closer by, however, caught Hackamore Pete's attention, and the hard-bitten oldster reached out his scrawny hand, the bony finger pointing.

"Ain't that somethin' stickin' under the tax stamp atop the beer keg?"

"Yeah," Harry muttered, "why yeah."

Thumb and finger jabbed down, and pinched out a piece of folded white paper that was wedged under the tax stamp. Harry unfolded it, and his eyes scanned the pencil writing.

"Well I'm a lop-eared maverick!" he blurted.

He passed the paper around. Men jammed close to make out the writing. Some cursed. All stared restlessly.

The note read, merely:

Hope you like your beer, boys.

But it was signed, "Wack Moro."

"That rustlin' gun-bully's got to our beer afore it was brought out here and spoiled it with some bitter vetch or somethin'," old Jeff Jarred sounded off angrily.

"The beer ain't the worst of it," Sheriff Jim Bowey said thoughtfully. "This note means Moro's not scared off like we thought. It's kind of as though he meant this beer to be a foretaste of bitterness to come to us. Looks like we got our fight to do all over again."

Sanderson from the Double S was crowding outside the cellar. He saw the way the thunderhead was building up over the San Miguels, and he called uneasy attention to it.



Harry Cleeland, whose eyes were younger, looked and said quickly, "It ain't all clouds. Part of it's dust hooped up by a bronc hard-pushed this way."

Men squinted against the slant of the late afternoon sun. Off across the sweltering range the dust separated from the clouds as the rider came nearer. Sheriff Bowey was the one to call the turn on the rider's identity.

"Shucks now, that's my own deputy. The big black he rides, I could pick it out the middle the night."

While they watched, the thunder cloud seemed to bloom out from over the mountains as though seeking to engulf the oncoming rider. A breeze started whispering uneasily through the feathery tamarisks which formed a thin windbreak for the ranch house. The first clap of thunder rolled over the valley floor at about the time the big black's hoofs drummed close.

Reining in and leaning from saddle, deputy "Slim" Wheelwagon let them have it even before anyone had time to ask.

"Wack Moro's back in town! Holed in at the Red Nugget, him and his beef-grabbin' gunnies. The talk's that he's brought in some new trigger men too."

The sheriff listened to them clamor for a while, rocking his roly-poly body on his high heels, his red face as impassive as one of the beer kegs. Then he cut in, "No use us gettin' excited. Shucks now, they ain't gonna try rustlin' ag'in. It'd be suicide fer 'em the way we got our valley patrol worked out."

"They ain't back in town for no good," a waddy muttered.

"Dang-ding it, let's go burn 'em out," Hackamore Pete urged excitedly.

"Now, men," the sheriff cautioned,

"be reasonable. You wouldn't stand a chance agin' them hombres in their own stampin' grounds. And anyhow a man's got a legal right to live and breathe. So long's Moro keeps his hellions in leash and don't let 'em go scrousin' over the range, runnin' off other men's beefs, it ain't rubbin' no skin off our noses, is it?"

"He bittered our beer, didn't he?" someone railed. "And you said yourself he likely meant it for only a foretaste of bitterness to come."

"Yeah, but he's braggin'. We got his hands tied so's he can't rustle. What else can he do? Nothin'!"

The rest of them weren't so sure. At the very least their celebration was a complete bust. The wind blew harder, bending the tamarisks and wailing around the ranch house, pushing the clouds along until they swallowed up the sun.

Then the rain came.

There wasn't a man-jack among them who had brought a slicker. With "Wack" Moro back in his Red Nugget hole-away, the ranchers felt constrained to get back to their herds. In the pelting rain they rode, scattering to the four directions of the valley, hunched in their wet saddles in grim discomfort.

## CHAPTER II

### "HOOF, HIDE AND HORN"

**I**N the back room of the Red Nugget Saloon in the drab little cow town of Clement's Crossing the scene was more cheerful. Wack Moro, tall, tight-muscled, impressive in his black coat with the ruffled shirt-front, and mauve trousers tucked inside black boots, sat back of the round-topped poker table he used for a desk. His long white fingers drummed on the table top—those fingers quicker than a man's eye with either cards or gun trigger.

There was a look of wolfish content on the sallow face of the saloon boss as he studied the hard-lipped gunnies who slouched across the table from him. Outside the rain drummed, but inside was peace and comfort.

Wack Moro drew his long white fingers slowly, tightly together. "Like that we've got 'em."

"Irons" Brokaw stirred restlessly. "I don't want to get caught anywheres in this valley with another rustlin' iron in my saddlebag."

"You won't be. We're through with rustlin'."

"All right, but what else is there?"

"That's what you're all here to learn. Time we're through we won't just have the beef in this valley. We'll have the land!"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"How do we get it?"

"By *not* rustlin'."

"Sounds locoed to me, Wack."

From outside sounded a scuffling of boots in the hallway. Someone rapped on the door three times, then once.

Wack Moro's dark eyes gleamed. "That'll be Spick Pasquel escortin' two gents that put up at the hotel last night—two gents with an idea. You listen to 'em. They'll tell you."

The man closest opened the door and the three crowded in and shed dripping slickers. The *mestizo*, "Spick" Pasquel, they all knew, of course. He had worked with them on their ill-fated rustling venture when the aroused cowmen of Sweet-grass Valley had dropped four men cold out of their saddles and sent the rest hell-hoofing into the San Mi-guels.

Wack Moro introduced the two newcomers to his men.

"Meet Chop Gore and Lead-spread Lascar," he said.

A cold hush cut through the room, and men stared with narrowed, burning eyes. These two were hooters known wherever cattle ranged. They worked together, and death always dogged their trail. It never caught up with them, but it nosed many a man who worked with them. And it was common talk in scattered trail towns and gold camps that a ticket to Hades awaited any man who strung along with this pair.

And yet there were always men who elected to travel with them—with good reason. They paved their way with gold. Death there might be, but gold there would certainly be. Dripping with blood, the most of it, but with the yellow glinting metal shining through.

Wack Moro made a speech.

"I called you all together to hear Chop and Lead-spread tell about a system they worked out to make money by *not* rustlin'. They cleaned up down in the Little Bend country and now they're ready to help us work it here. It's so simple you'll want to laugh at first, but with civilization beginnin' to crowd in on the West you'll see this plan's a natural. Wouldn't be surprised, years to come, to hear they transplanted this here idea to the big cities in the East." Wack Moro looked toward his new gunmen. "Tell 'em, boys."

**L**EAID-SPREAD" LASCAR did most of the talking. He was a gaunted-up, cadaverous-looking man whose pet smoker had always been a sawed-off shotgun. He spread his lead with blighting effect, sometimes from the front, but more often from behind, when a man wasn't looking.

The rain beat soddenly against the wooden building while Lead-spread Lascar talked, with "Chop" Gore grunting an occasional affirmation.

Gore was a squat, brutal individual, with beefy shoulders and chunky jowls. He had little blinking eyes, and at all times seemed sunk in a surly, animallike silence. Men on the dim trails credited him with having once hacked a man's head off with a single slash of a knife. It was a story that could be readily believed, and it had given him his name, Chop.

Men listened in silence while these two talked, unfolding a plan calculated to take another twist on the tail of history in Sweetgrass Valley. One thing was made glaringly plain, if there had ever been any doubt of it. Changes could come. Men could take up new ways of living. Order could supplant frontier confusion. Easier ways could be found for doing old tasks. But for all of this, so long as men competed for the good things of the world, fighting each other tooth and fang, then inside the law or outside of it there would always be ways for the ruthless ones to take from the fair-playing ones.

Lead-spread Lascar finished talking and his mouth closed like a steel trap.

"Talk up, men," Wack Moro encouraged sharply. "You've got the lay. How do you like it?"

Irons Brokaw was the only one with nerve enough to make mouth music. "Sounds good. There's only one thing. I like livin', and I've took notice that whoever travels with Chop Gore and Lead-spread travels fast but brief."

"Scared?" the Red Nugget boss insinuated harshly.

"Not specially. Just figurin' the averages. Even *they* can't get away with murder all their lives."

"They don't have to."

"How you mean?"

"It's what's pretty about this set-up. With the reputation Chop and Lead-spread's got, they don't have to kill any more. All they have to do is ride with us. Their reputation's enough. We clean up with likely never a shot fired. No danger to no one, and in a year we'll have this valley sewed up hoof, hide, and horn. How do you like it?"

"I like it," Irons Brokaw said.

So did the others.

"All right," Wack Moro said, "we start in tomorrow collectin'."



*Harry, Frenchy and Hackamore Pete sweated and fought together to build up the Three Link spread, and now—*

THE next morning three men rode over the range still sodden from the all-night rain. The sky was like a gray bowl clamped over the earth. There was menace in the weather, and in the swaddled plunk of hoofs in wet soil.

The three who rode were Wack Moro, Lead-spread Lascar, and Chop Gore.

They had a sizable number of calls to make and they rode hard. It was high noon when they left old man Jardeen's Box Q horse ranch and moved on to the Three Link range.

Lead-spread Lascar, gaunt as a night-riding ghoul, turned in saddle, and his bony hand waved back toward the shallow draw, lush with wild oats, which they had crossed.

"Slickest hundred head of horses I've sighted in a month of ridin'."

"And ours," Wack Moro gloated. "Without rustlin'."

Chop Gore shook off his cloak of sullen silence long enough to grin furtively. "Plenty of feed for 'em too."

Lead-spread Lascar caught his eye, and his thin lips twisted in a return grin. "Yeah. When the wild oats is all gone, there's that young green corn we sighted in the crick bottoms. Wonderful invention, irrigation."

Wack Moro looked sharply at them both. He didn't say anything, but he was like a sinister mountain cat, purring. Hinted at only by veiled words and sidelong glances, they had shared an unclean secret, these three. Unspoken, and yet the malignant import of the secret was alive in the minds of all.

They rode on, and found the Three Link owners boosting a herd of long yearlings to higher, dryer range.

Wack Moro acted as spokesman. He stood his horse near Harry Cleeland and said, "There's a new or-

ganization been formed for Sweet-grass Valley ranchers. We thought you'd want to know about it."

"I'm listenin'," Harry said.

"It's called the Sweetgrass Ranchers' Benevolent Society."

"Yeah," Harry let out slowly, "who's it benevolent to?"

"To all you ranchers. It protects you from—rustlers, for instance."

Harry's eyes squinted down. "We been doin' a pretty good job protectin' ourselves."

"Times change. Meet Chop Gore and Lead-spread Lascar. . . . Maybe you've heard of 'em. They organized the Southwestern Cattle-men's Protective Association down in the Little Bend. It was right successful. Had a big dues-payin' membership. Maybe you heard?"

"Yeah, I heard." Harry slanted under his sombrero at the leaden sky. "Looks like another storm blowin' up."

Wack Moro nodded. "The plumb deadliest storm that ever struck this valley."

Lead-spread Lascar, sitting to one side of the Red Nugget boss, horned in, "The society does more than protect from rustlin'. It works like insurance. It protects from all manner of loss to range, herd, or ranch buildin's."

"Sounds uncommon complete," Harry said dryly. "Maybe it even protects life, huh? You know, like life insurance?"

Chop Gore, his squat bulk heavy in the saddle on the other side of Wack Moro, said harshly, "I was just gonna mention that."

The Red Nugget boss was thumbing through a little leather-bound notebook he carried. "We've got you boys down for charter members."

"I'm practically spoutin' tears of joy at the honor," Harry stalled along, out of the tail of his eye

watching the progress his partners were making as they got the herd quieted and came riding forward. "How much is the dues?"

**L**EAD-SPREAD scratched with deceptive laziness at his stubbled cheek. "I knowed you'd be reasonable, younker. Wack, here, opined we might have some trouble with the Three Link. But I told him when it was fully understood that Lead-spread Lascar and Chop Gore was backin' the organization personal, you'd be glad of the chance to come in."

"How much is the dues?"

"It varies for different outfits." Wack Moro pretended to consult his little book. "The Three Link's down for five hundred a month to start."

"That's just to start, huh?"

"Yeah. Naturally the rate goes up as there gets to be more'n more to protect you from."

"Naturally."

"A good many's signed already. Now when it gets blown around that the Three Link's come in, the rest'll fall in line, you boys bein' leaders in the valley and looked up to considerable. We took all that into account when we made your dues so low."

"Five hundred's low, huh?"

"Sure it's low. Jeff Jardeen's Box Q is down for a thousand."

"Did Jeff join?"

"Not yet. But he will."

"The first thing tomorrow," Chop Gore blurted.

Lead-spread Lascar's bony fingers were still scratching reflectively at his stubbled chin. "Them's sure fine horses he's got. But without protection in this uncertain world, what good are they? What good's anything?"

"We're the collectors as well as

the organizers," Wack Moro said suavely. "You can sign the little book now, then we'll all ride to the house together and you can arrange about payin' your first month's dues."

Harry Cleeland nodded. "I hate to be bothered about dribbles of five hundred or a thousand dollars every month. I reckon it'll be all right if I pay the Three Link dues half a year or so in advance, won't it?"

A tension ran through the Red Nugget gunners. Harry hadn't let his voice get sarcastic, but what he said didn't exactly make sense, they were thinking. What he said next made even less sense. He was looking up at the overcast sky again. Hackamore Pete and big Frenchy La Farge had come on and were now ranged on either side of him, facing the extortioners.

Harry said, "Sure does look more stormy every minute." He sniffed noisily. "Almost smell the brimstone that's gonna be generated outa them thunder clouds before long." He sniffed again, and looked at each of his partners in turn. "On second thought, it ain't brimstone I smell. It's a polecat odor."

Frenchy and Hackamore raised their noses in the air and sniffed too.

"Polecat odor sure is penetratin', ain't it?" Frenchy said.

"It's 'way too strong for just one polecat," Hackamore declared in his shrill voice. "It's a three-skunk smell!"

Harry had kneed his horse in closer to Wack Moro's. "Lemme see that list of signers," he said.

His hand reached out as though for the book—reached and kept on reaching. His fingers, strong as the rope and leather and wire he worked with every day of his life, clutched Wack Moro's collar and pulled. The



fingers of Harry's other hand were cooperating. Bunched into a fist, they were hooking in as Harry stepped hard in stirrup and leaned far out of saddle to put a shoulder swing to the action.

**H**ARRY'S fist caught the Red Nugget boss alongside the ear. The combined fist-punch and hand-pull sent Wack Moro reeling out of saddle before he could draw his six-gun. He cursed as he fell, but he quit cursing when he landed on his back in the soggy grass with force enough to club the wind out of him. His horse reared, and pranced away, stiff-legged. Harry shifted his weight in saddle to take care of Lead-spread Lascar on the other side.

But Lead-spread was already being cared for. Acting only a shade less soon than Harry, Hackamore Pete had bucked his horse against Lead-spread's and hurled himself so hard at the professional gunner that they both went to the ground. They lit sprawled out and clawing, with hoofs beating a fearful rataplan in their ears.

On the other side, Frenchy La Farge had also made good use of the element of surprise. A single blow straight out from his massive shoulders had taken Chop Gore out of saddle like a skunk being clubbed from a ledge.

Before the squat gunner could blast, Frenchy leaped, spread-eagled, from his horse, and landed all over him.

Hackamore Pete was the only one of the partners who was having it tough. The sun-dried oldster had nothing to his advantage except surprise, and after that was over, Lead-spread Lascar's greater strength took quick toll. Those gnarled and bony fingers of the gaunt gunner dug in

and squeezed red into the veteran waddy's face. The red was turning to purple, and the eyes were bulging out like peeled grapes by the time Frenchy smashed the resistance out of Chop Gore with a last crumpling blow, and flung himself headlong to Hackamore's aid.

Frenchy figured turn-about was fair play and he clamped his own great hands on Lead-spread's neck till the ligaments on his fingers stood out in ridges. Lead-spread let go his choke-hold on Hackamore and pawed wildly. He couldn't do any good.

But somebody else could. A bullet came blasting, so close it trailed a wake of air against Frenchy's cheek. It was Wack Moro who, for an instant eluding Harry's grappling arms, had shot.

There was one more shot. But that bullet splayed wet dirt, because Harry Cleeland's booted foot kicked in and knocked the gun sailing. Then his fist thumped viciously in a split-second follow-up against Moro's jaw, and the saloon boss slapped mud with his whole long wolfish body.

That turned things right-side-up all the way around for the Three Link boys. The Red Nugget extortioners staggered to their feet as soon as they could, making blind stabs at the places where their holsters ought to be. But there wasn't even a hide-away left on them—the Three Link boys had seen to that.

Rain was coming down again, big spattering drops out of the gray sky. The gunners looked around for their horses.

"They're halfway back to Clement's Crossin' by now," Frenchy told them.

The rain freshened suddenly, closing them in with its sodden drumming. The partners swung into their saddles.

"You'll have a long wet walk, Moro, you and your gun-guards," Harry said, "but maybe you'll make it back to the saloon by mornin' if you brisk along."

Heads down, shoulders hunched against the pelting rain, the three who had come riding, demanding blood money, walked away, boot-slogging in mud.

Hackamore Pete's cackling laugh pursued them, and his shrill voice cut above the rain. "Sure is comical to see the organizin' committee of the Sweetgrass Ranchers' Benevolent Society so close to the ground. They can't afford hosses, looks like. Must be they ain't got many dues-payin' members in their Society!"

### CHAPTER III

#### MORO STRIKES

**A** CLAP of thunder rolled down from the cloud-swaddled San Miguel Mountains—and from then on the Three Link boys had their work cut out for them to quiet the cattle. After the worst of the storm, they finished their push to the new grazing grounds, then rode to their Salt Fork line shack to cook up a hot bite and get into some dry clothes. They laughed and wisecracked. It was that way during all the long ride home. Night came on as black as a pocket in a deep-drift mine. But the partners eased along jubilantly.

"We sure took 'em," Hackamore reviewed shrilly.

"Yeah, I reckon that busts the back of their benevolent society," Frenchy agreed. "Our worries are long-gone."

Lightning forked through the blackness far ahead. "It'll be pourin' rain at the ranch house," Harry Cleeland said. "We're even playin'

in luck there too—'bout our new barn, I mean."

"Yeah," said Frenchy, "if we'd stood the hay outside in ricks this season we'd of lost easy half of it, mildewin' in these unseasonable rains. The barn was hard work and I wasn't for it at first, but I'm now goin' on record I'm glad we built it."

"Dang-ding right!" Hackamore chimed in. "We'll be needin' every bit of that hay to pull us through the winter feedin'."

They rode on and when they crested a grassy hogback that in the daytime would have put them in sight of the ranch house, they stopped suddenly, the same fear stabbing each of them.

Far ahead down the slope where there should have been only blackness a red flame stained the night. It was a big fire. There was only one thing around here which could have made so big a one.

"Our barn's burnin' up!" Frenchy cried hoarsely.

"Lightnin' struck it!"

Heedlessly they galloped through the night. Their way became easier as they drew closer, because the flames from the burning barn ate into the night blackness like the fiery tail of a comet lighting up the heavens. Sparks from the seething caldron of flame sprinkled the sky all the way to Salt Creek, which was a mile away.

By the time the boys could get there all they could do was stand by helplessly and watch the barn burn.

"My first hunch was right after all," Frenchy rumbled in his big voice. "We should of stacked the hay in the open. We'd lost half by mildew, but it would have anyhow been too wet for the lightnin' to fire it."

The hoof-clop of horses hard rid-

den was borne to them through the night. They moved into the shadows and waited. But they needn't have been alarmed. It was only old Jeff Jardeen and one of his riders from the neighboring Box Q.

"Seen the sky all lighted up," Jeff said, tugging excitedly at his scraggly white beard. "Knowned what it would have to be. So we came ridin'. Lightnin' done it, I reckon?"

"I reckon," Harry Cleeland said.

"Bad luck's strikin' all around," the Box Q owner declared. "Some my hosses busted through into the green corn this evenin'. You'd think a hoss would have the common sense of a cow, now wouldn't you? But they ain't. They'll eat themselves to death every time on young growin' corn."

"You lose many, Jeff?" Harry asked sympathetically.

"Twenty-two of 'em bloated up like covered wagons, and with their hoofs to the sky. The vet'll maybe save the rest."

From out of the brooding night sounded a roll that was curiously like distant thunder. But it wasn't thunder.

"More company comin'," Hackamore said. "Sounds like a half dozen of 'em in a right big hurry."

**H**ACKAMORE missed it by one. Seven riders pounded into the light shed by the glowing embers of the fire-gutted barn—Julius Alkott and his two grown boys who ran the Two Bar S brand, and Salt-grass Sanderson and three of his riders from the Double S.

"We was all at Alkott's," Salt-grass said. "We seen the light agin' the sky and we come hellin', though gosh knows we had troubles enough of our own. Look's like we're too late to be much help here."

"What's done is done," Frenchy

said, and shrugged his massive shoulders. "You say you were jammed up too?"

"It's a tough-break night for everybody," Alkott grumbled. "I had a herd of white-faces go over a cliff and bust theirselves in Two Star Canyon—scared blind by the thunderstorm I reckon. And Salt-grass here, his crick dam busted in the flood water. All his storage water wasted and one o' his corrals swimmin' to the top rail."

"Only one thing good I can think of today," Hackamore squeaked dolefully, "and that's the way we put the ki-bosh on the benevolent society."

Mention of the society brought words to lip, like hornests buzzing.

"How many of you kicked in today?" Frenchy bellowed.

Denials beat upon his ears. "I didn't . . . I didn't. . . ."

"None of us didn't," Salt-grass said triumphantly.

"And none of us will!" Jardeen echoed.

"Dang-ding range pirate," Hackamore said. "Tell 'em how we beat 'em up today, Harry—Wack Moro and his two prize gun guards, and sent 'em packin'."

Harry told them. They listened avidly, savoring the details with hard glee.

Julius Alkott threw an arm around each of his boys and danced a bear jig. The older boy was embarrassed.

"Cut it out, pa. Cut it out!" he protested.

The younger boy, Jimmy, thought it was good fun. He was a sunny, smiling-faced youngster, probably the best-liked kid in this end of the valley. He laughed now and bear-danced higher than any of them.

"Well anyhow," Alkott declared, puffing, "that finishes Wack Moro and his protective association. After

the beatin' you Three Link boys handed him he won't dare show his face ag'in to any of us."

"I reckon," Salt-grass agreed. "This run of bad luck we all had to-night, I was halfway suspicious, but—acts of God, I reckon—"

Men chilled suddenly as from somewhere in the darkness about them a new voice corrected:

"Acts of the devil defines it more closer."

Silence clamped down, black brooding silence. There was only the crackle and spit of embers in the fast-dying bed of red coals that marked the place where the big round barn had been. And from far off, over the San Miguels, came the mocking roll of thunder.

"Who are you?" Harry Cleeland challenged the voice. "Come out from wherever you are."

THERE was a stir from the direction of a bulking clump of mesquite, and a tall gaunt figure stepped into the wan light shed by the glowing coals. It was Lead-spread Lascar. He walked with a loose-limbed swagger, and behind him another thin shadowy figure emerged—the Red Nugget boss, Wack Moro.

"Take it easy, men," Lead-spread cautioned. "You notice we ain't reachin' for our guns. That's cause we don't have to. We got gunners spotted all around here, coverin' us. I only mention it in case someone might get excited and start blastin'. We don't want any trouble. We're business men, not bandits. We're organizers and collectors for the Sweetgrass Ranchers' Benevolent Society. . . ."

He spread out his hands toward the red coals. "Nice fire you had here, boys. But wasn't it expensive, burnin' up all your winter feed? Too

bad. . . . I don't recollect if I mentioned it, but the Society protects agin' fires. . . . You talk a while, Wack."

"Sure." Wack Moro looked them all over slowly. "Fires ain't all," he said. "The Society also protects agin' dams bustin' wide open, and beefs high-tailin' over cliffs, and hosses eatin' themselves to death in young green corn. Things like that."

The silence which fell on his words was like something crawling in darkness, something monstrous.

"Pity you boys didn't think of these things when we called on you today," Lead-spread sneered. "We gave you a chance then to join up. You've had time to turn the matter over in your minds now though, and we're here to give you all another chance."

"The minute the lightnin' struck the barn," Wack Moro said, "why Lead-spread and me said, 'Let's take the Red Nugget huskies and go hole in at the Three Link Ranch, on account the fire'll doubtless attract the neighbors, and we can have 'em all together for a friendly confab about the Society and its advantages.'"

"Most of the boys in the upper valley have already signed," Lead-spread broke in. "You tell 'em why, Wack. I'm bashful."

"Sure. All we had to do was point out that two such capable executives as Lead-spread Lascar and Chop Gore was headin' the organizin' committee. They seen the advantages right away of joinin'. An' they've collected dividends already, 'cause nothin's happened to them. All the unfavorable 'acts of God' has taken place in this end the valley among you hold-outs.

"I might mention as an instance of how efficient the organization is, that we didn't walk far on Three Link property today after losin' our

hosses, before we contacted some of our 'field representatives.' The Society is high and low and everywhere and almighty. Amen. Lead-spread, circulate the little black book for the gents to sign."

"You blasted barn-burner," Hackamore cried shrilly. "It wasn't no lightnin' struck our barn. You burned it!"

"You," Wack Moro said bleakly, "have got no proof of that. You'll never have proof for anything. The Society works silently—while you sleep."

A note of sullen protest ran raggedly through the group of ranchers. "We won't sign your blood-money book," Julius Alkott snarled. "Not now or no time! We'll run you out of the valley, Wack Moro, like we did before."

"You got nothin' on me," Wack Moro sneered, "and you never will have. But you'll sign—and for double the dues you could have signed for this mornin'. That'll make sixteen hundred for you, Alkott. Every delay and the dues is doubled—that's the Society rules."

"I won't pay!" Alkott thundered, and the others backed him up in a roar of approval.

**T**HE Red Nugget boss moved closer to Alkott. The light from the red coals showed the gleam in his eyes, and his voice carried purring menace. "Did I make it clear to you this mornin' that the Society protects against life as well as property?"

"You can't hire enough gunmen to scare me, Moro—"

"You got a nice boy there, Alkott, nice smilin'-faced lad. How are you, Jimmy? . . . Reckon the whole valley'd mourn if anything happened to Jimmy—"

"You murderin' gulcher!" Alkott blurted.

"Take it easy," Lead-spread warned. "Remember we got our men lined on you from the dark."

Wack Moro spoke once more. "You got a little girl at home too, Alkott. I know because I had a report on it. One of my men's there now to protect her if necessary. She's only about three years old, looks like—not much bigger'n the doll she's took to bed with her. The doll's got a blue dress and the eyes used to open, but they don't now. I mention these details to show you I'm not makin' guesses. She sleeps in a crib so close to the window in the west wall that a hand could reach in and grab the little throat—"

"I'll sign!" Alkott cried. "I'll sign." His voice was that of a broken old man.

While he signed with fingers that trembled, Wack Moro said to Jeff Jardeen, "They tell me, old-timer, you've celebrated your golden weddin' anniversary this year. Hope you'll live to celebrate many more anniversaries, you and your wife. Old folks almost more than young folks can benefit by the protection of the Society. Your wife'll be right pleased, I bet, when you take her the news home that she's protected."

So Jeff Jardeen, fuming in his teeth, signed too. His gnarled hand shook so that his name was hardly legible.

Wack Moro supplied equally potent arguments for the others, and they all signed—all but the Three Link partners.

They were, in one sense, in a favored position. There was no one whom the Red Nugget extortioners could strike through to get at them. So they stood on their rights and told the gunners off. Everything the other ranchers wanted to say and

couldn't, the Three Link boys delivered in language salty and withering.

Moro and Lead-spread smiled coldly and promised them personal attention at an early date. Then to the signers, Moro said, "When we come collectin', you have the money ready to lay on the line."

He raised his voice and shouted into the night. "All right, bruisers, show yourselves, so's they'll see we ain't handlin' this only with words, but with the force to back up all we say."

A half dozen shadowy figures, Chop Gore, Irons Brokaw, and Spick Pasquel among them, detached themselves from the darkness around and converged on the group. They stood grim-faced and menacing.

"We'll be gettin' our hosses and ridin' now," Wack Moro said. "We won't be guardin' our back trail on account we know you all understand that if anything happens to us, the Society's protection will be withdrawn pronto from them loved ones at home that we mentioned to you about."

They trooped away then, and there wasn't a man among the valley ranchers dared raise a hand against them. The darkness swallowed them up.

**H**ARRY CLEELAND, his voice shaking from his rage, said, "You all know what this means? If they once start leavin' tribute from us they'll collect and collect till they collect our land. How many of us can afford to keep payin' the high 'dues'? None of us! And they don't mean for us to. It's only a slow way of rustlin' us off our land!"

"If this keeps up," Hackamore piped, "then Wack Moro'll own Sweetgrass Valley entire!"

"It's all right for you boys to

talk," Jeff Jardeen said desperately. "But you got only yourselves. There ain't a man of us but would fight if it was only ourselves. But when that scabby sidewinder strikes through our women and kids—"

"Yeah, I know, Jeff—you're right," admitted Harry. "They have to be considered first. But we might's well all sell out to Wack for whatever he'll take, and leave the valley tomorrow. Because if we once start buyin' him off, it'll never stop till we're rolled out stony broke."

"The law?" someone suggested doubtfully. "If we could get to Sheriff Jim Bowey—"

Frenchy La Farge put the set-up into words. "Moro's workin' under cover. We can't put a legal finger on him. If it comes to killin' he'll still hold to cover—a shot in the back with no one lookin', or else make it seem like an accident."

"We took the law into our own hands once—ran 'em out of the valley—"

"That's no good now. We're buckin' a different kind of deal. He won't come out into the open and we can't either. He's imported too many gunmen for one thing—"

"The devil with his gunmen!" It was Julius Alkott sounding off. The lean hard-bitten rancher stood with his long arms protectively clamped around the shoulders of his two boys. "Are we men or ground-holed gophers? I signed 'cause I was blackjacked into it. But soon's I get home I'm gonna see about shippin' my women folks outa the valley. Me and my two boys hold down the place. And when Moro's men comes to collect, they'll collect all right. But not gold. Lead!"

They were brave words, bravely spoken. And they brought a stirring of new hope to the hearts of beaten



men. Life was not futile. There was no wall so thick it couldn't be beaten down. New oppressions bred new methods of resistance, that was all. It was necessary only to think clearly, act boldly—

These were the reflections which quickened the blood of every man present—for one piercing instant. Then blighting tragedy brought an utter end to hope.

From out of the swaddling darkness the sharp report of a rifle sounded. There were men in the group who caught their breaths involuntarily as the heavy slug slammed close. But there was one who didn't catch his breath—one who lost it, instead. Lost it forever as his body was driven back under the driving force of gun lead, and crumpled to the earth.

It was smiling Jimmy Alkott who took the rifle slug. The youngster was literally shot out of his father's arms. His hands went up and his mouth opened to utter an inarticulate moan as his body rocked violently backward and dropped. Almost in the same second his father and brother were down on the ground beside his limp body. But there was nothing they could do. A cry of sheer agony escaped the lips of the older Alkott as he realized that his son was dead.

#### CHAPTER IV

##### "BOOTHILL SHOW-DOWN!"

**A**FTER the first stunned instant, with the echoes of that rifle shot crashing flatly, like malignant thunder, the valley ranchers boiled into action. Their shouts and their curses cut across the darkness, and their guns boomed in saffron flames as they triggered answering bullets in the direction of that lone rifle shot. But no more

bullets cruised in from the darkness, and there was no sound except the mocking echos of their own volley.

A few men stayed with the grieving Alkott. The rest swept forward, combing the darkness for the rifle killer. One by one they trooped back to where a father clasped the body of his dead son in the feeble light of fast-dying embers. They had found no slightest sign of the killer. It was evident that he had slipped away afoot, holding to the cover of rocky outcrops until he had reached a place at some distance where his horse had been tethered.

"This plumb settles it," Salt-grass Sanderson proclaimed hoarsely. "We'll ride immediate after them Red Nugget gulchers for a boothill show-down!"

Harsh voices seconded his determination. Then the grief-struck words of Alkott beat them down. "I've lost a boy tonight! Do you want me to go home and find my little girl dead in her crib? Do you, Jardeen, want to go home and find your wife ready for buryin'? Do all of you want to leave your women and youngsters to the mercy of them red-handed killers?"

Heavy silence met his words. He spoke again, and the age-old tragedy of dreams broken and lives cut down in their beginning was in his voice. "I'm licked, beat to a frazzle! I'm through fightin'. Tonight I signed, and tomorrow I pay off to their collectors—and bury my dead."

Again the silence. Then one by one the hopeless voices answered. "You're right, Alkott, there's nothin' else we can do . . . We're licked . . . We jus' have to pay and keep on payin' till there's nothin' left to pay, till Wack Moro owns the valley entire, and we're saddle bums, us and our women and kids. . . ."

They turned away then, the beaten ranchers of Sweetgrass Valley, scattering into the night. Fear rode with them as they made what haste they could through the darkness, hurrying to gather their loved ones close. The echoes of their hoofbeats rolled back mockingly.

The Three Link partners went wearily to their house. Frenchy struck a match and lit the oil lamp. The flame smoked at first in the damp air, then steadied, throwing oblongs of yellow light through the windows into the ranch yard. It was starting to rain again. Hackamore Pete stood in the doorway, pulling his slicker close, getting ready to plunge out and gather up an armload of wood for the fire.

His shrill voice sounded desperately. "Whatever the rest of 'em do, I know dang-ding well what I'll do. I'll lead the first Red Nugget gulcher that steps foot on our land!"

"What if twenty of 'em steps all at once?" Frenchy growled.

"Twenty or hundred, it'll be over my fallen lead-punched body that them range pirates gets any tribute from the Three Link—"

**O**NCE again that night the Red Nugget terror struck, as from out of the rainy darkness a rifle cracked and a bullet came screaming. . . . And Hackamore Pete Hardy, veteran little hard-bitten puncher, was slammed backward inside the ranch house door, hard hit by driving lead.

"Over my . . . dead . . . body," he gasped, as he slumped to the floor.

"Them murderin' devils!" Frenchy raged. He tore outside and went gunning for the gulcher, while Harry, working in grim frenzy, pulled Hackamore out of bullet line from the door and ripped away the

blood-soaked clothes to do what he could about dressing the wound.

Frenchy came stomping back out of the beating rain, turning his hands up hopelessly.

"Got plump away! Rainin' too hard even to locate tracks. What about Hackamore?"

The game little waddy was lying in the bunk, unconscious, breathing weakly. Harry turned up his own empty hands. "Can't say. Done all anyone could, cleaned up the wound. He lost a lot of blood."

From outside in the ranch yard came a noise which couldn't have been made by the rain. But it could have been hoofbeats muffled in mud.

Harry smashed out the light with a jab of his elbow. The broken lamp chimney jangled eerily on the floor as darkness fell like a velvet drape. With gun butt hard against the heel of his hand, Harry waited with Frenchy just inside the door, while outside sounded furtive slogging footsteps as someone moved up in the darkness.

In close the foot noises ceased and there was only the bleak pelt of the rain. Then a low voice came, and tension rushed out of Frenchy and Harry like water bursting through a dam.

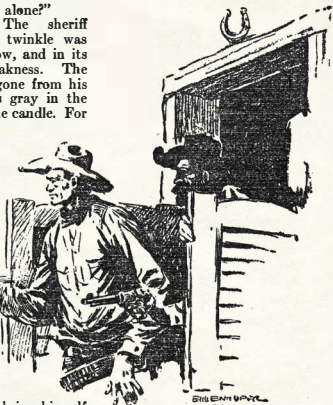
"You there, boys? It's me—Jim Bowey."

Harry rushed out and dragged the roly-poly sheriff of Clement County inside the ranch house, while Frenchy went on a hunt for a candle. The sheriff looked like a fat sparrow as he stood there in his dripping slicker. He listened silently while the boys sketched quickly the details of the Red Nugget terror which had struck that night.

"In town it's the same," he said heavily. "Wack Moro's imported him so many gunmen everybody's afraid to breath."

"You come on here alone?"  
 "Yeah, alone." The sheriff paused. The kindly twinkle was gone from his eyes now, and in its place was a gray bleakness. The healthy redness was gone from his face, and it, too, was gray in the flickering light from the candle. For the first time the boys noticed an unnatural bulge under the visitor's raincoat. "Alone," the sheriff repeated, tragically, as though the word summed

*"Heft 'em high!" Harry shouted as they crashed through the batwings.*



up things he couldn't bring himself to say.

"Slim Wheelwagon?" Harry questioned, a certain dread holding in his voice.

"My dep'ty," Jim Bowey revealed then, "had the whole back of his head blasted away—by a sawed-off shotgun."

"Lead-spread Lascar!"

"Sure, but nobody can prove it. Civilization or somethin' has come to the West. 'Pears like the days of face-to-face gun fightin' and 'honest' rustlin' is past. We're up agin' somethin' new. New and frightful."

**F**RENCHY waved his hand in grim questioning toward the bulge in the sheriff's raincoat. Jim Bowey opened the slicker and revealed his left arm in a sling.

"I got this in the same set-to where they killed Slim Wheelwagon," he said.

For a hushed moment there was only the drip of rain on the roof and Hackamore Pete's labored breathing.

"What're we gonna do?" Harry muttered hopelessly. "Wait till every last one of us is shot down?"

"What else can we do?" Frenchy countered fiercely. "It's a cinch we ain't runnin' away."

"One thing we could do," Harry said savagely. "We could go to town, the three of us, and blast as long as our lead and our eyesight lasted."

"That wouldn't be long enough that our livin' relatives could even brag about us," Frenchy retorted.

"Shucks now," Sheriff Bowey said,

"maybeso it would. I been thinkin'. Maybeso it would."

There was such a taut unnatural quietness about the sheriff's voice that they looked at him with hard curiosity.

He spoke again. "It's a plumb sure thing we got nothin' to gain by waitin'. They'll all be holed in at the Red Nugget tonight, outa the rain, celebratin' their outrages and drinkin' to further worsen ones. We're the only ones, us three, that haven't got out hands tied. Supposin' we was to fall on 'em like lightnin' outa the sky. We could do a heap of damage."

"Yeah," Harry agreed hoarsely, "we could."

"But wouldn't it make 'em take their spite out on innocent women and kids afterwards?" Frenchy rumbled.

"Not," the sheriff said tightly, "if we done our job thorough enough."

Harry's voice was hard, toneless. "There's three of us. How many of them?"

"Twenty-odd, I calculate."

"It'd be pushin' our luck all right."

"You got a better idea?"

"Nope. I like this idea fine."

"Me too," Frenchy said.

"We can leave a note at Doc Smocking's shack for him to come here and do whatever he can for Hackamore."

"Sure. Poor Hackamore. He'd admire to be in on this."

"We'd admire to have him too. That little mutt could shoot."

"Can shoot," Frenchy corrected harshly. "He'll be up and around again."

"Sure he will—sure," Harry agreed, but he had to force the heartiness in his voice, the same way Frenchy had.

"Shape up your irons," the sheriff

said, "and we'll be ridin'."

They worked with grim deftness, spinning cylinders on six-shooters, loading themselves down with every short weapon in the house, and filling extra cartridge belts.

Then they caught up their horses and into the wet night the three went gunning.

## CHAPTER V

### RED NUGGET DEATH

WHEN they reached Clement's Crossing it was late. The town was pitch dark except for the light spilled into the puddled street from the Red Nugget Saloon. Drunken shouts of hilarity and discordant music wafted out. The rain stayed with the three night riders as they eased out of saddle back of Ed Jenkins' blacksmith shop and felt their way in the darkness to the back of the saloon. A pencil of light streaked out from the door crack, revealing the glazed wetness of a mound of empty beer kegs.

Silently, like chunks of animated blackness carved out of the night, the three who had come gunning fell to work on the beer kegs. On the black ride into town they had talked and decided upon a rough plan of action.

It had been Frenchy's idea about the kegs. "Wack Moro, he bittered our beer! Now maybe, by gar, we can use his own kegs against him. How's this sound?"

What he outlined had sounded all right to the others. So now they worked, with the pelting rain drowning out whatever noise they made. Frenchy boosted Sheriff Bowey up on the low storage shed a dozen feet back of the saloon door, then Frenchy and Harry double-hefted all the empty beer kegs to the roof.

After that they searched around for loose boards. They didn't find any of the right length, so they pried some loose from the shed itself. The procedure took some time, but in the end they had fashioned a skidway from the roof of the shed to the door sill of the saloon.

They went into a huddle. "You ain't so hot on the draw, old-timer," Harry told the sheriff, "but when it comes to long-range bull's-eyes you can outblast any man in the valley—"

"So I stay by the beer kegs." Jim Bowey nodded. "That's the way I had it figured too."

"Frenchy and me'll practice our quick draws in front."

The sheriff nodded again, grimly. "I'll wait till I hear your shots."

They shook hands then all around. It was the most solemn moment of their lives. When three men gun-buck twenty it is something to shake hands about.

Around in front of the saloon Frenchy and Harry paused before the batwing doors and took a quick breath. The future of every man, woman, and child in Sweetgrass Valley was balanced in that breath. But it was Hackamore Pete that held most prominently in their minds—Hackamore Pete, who in all likelihood didn't have any further future on earth.

But if it was too late to help Hackamore, they could at the very least avenge him. They butted through the batwings like a tornado going through Texas.

"Heft 'em high!" Harry bawled.

"Every man in the house!" Frenchy roared.

Silence rolled in a taut wave to the farthest corners of the big room. At sight of these two storm-blown specters, crouched, eyes slitted, guns leveled, men stopped where they

were, some of them with cards or chips in hand, some with drinks halfway to their mouths.

It would have been easier for the Three Link avengers if they had come in shooting. They might have picked off enough of the leaders in a first withering volley to make the rest call quits. But they were too humane to drop a man who didn't have a chance for a comeback. So they took the hard way, and called warning.

They never collected guns.

They were bucking a virtual impossibility from the first. For two men to attack a houseful of men, and a goodly number of that houseful roaring drunk and callous of the consequences—

It was the volatile *mestizo*, Spick Pasquel, who started the fireworks. His elbows punched back as his hand drove for his gun. . . . He hadn't quite cleared leather when Frenchy's six-shooter, blasting loud under the low roof, cut him down.

FROM then on it was hell turned upside down and scrambled. From all over the room hands struck like rattlers. . . . Guns cleared holsters and blazed their leaden death. Like lethal hail the Red Nugget slugs tore air—and clothes—in the direction of the Three Linkers.

Harry and Frenchy didn't let the roaring barrage unnerve them. This kind of reception hadn't been altogether unexpected. Correctly reasoning that the liquor-fogged condition of most of the gunners wouldn't improve their aim, Harry and Frenchy stood up to the lead and drove back their own with devastating effect.

Irons Brokaw went down, along with several others more dangerously active than the rest. Then

Harry cleared a path to the bar. He made it there with Frenchy in a jerking zigzagging run. Holed up behind the massive bar they had a better chance. Frenchy knocked the bar lamp out with a flung whisky bottle, and their chances became better still.

From then on, according to their plan, they grooved their lead to the front of the room, laying down a zone of death in front of the batwings. The men crowded to the back of the room. But from there, urged on by Wack Moro's roaring voice, and by Lead-spread Lascar and Chop Gore, who so far had stayed in the rear, protecting their skins and waiting for a sure-thing shot, the Red Nugget mob surged toward the bar in a gun-roaring charge. Upward of twenty men there were—and two to hold them off.

It looked like curtains for the 'Three Linkers. But it was then that pandemonium really broke loose in the Red Nugget Saloon. There was a banging, crashing sound, and the back door splintered inward under the force of a rolling black Juggernaut which leaped inside and wobbled across the saloon floor in a rumbling, terrifying onslaught. It knocked men in all directions, like tenpins. In the howling confusion and uncertain light a second Juggernaut followed the first, rolling all the way through the room to the batwings in front—and it took that long for the men to realize that the objects were rolling beer kegs.

Cursing, shouting, shooting wildly, they lurched out of the doorway, colliding with each other, falling, getting up, and falling again. And Sheriff Jim Bowey, outside on top the storage shed, shoved another keg down the steep slide. It hit the saloon floor with terrific, wobbling

speed. Men leaped, billowing, to escape its bludgeoning menace. It cut a swath through them like a machete going through cane.

Through it all Harry and Frenchy kept grooving their shots. And now with the door opened the sheriff from his wet perch atop the storage shed was shooting too. His famed long shots were never more deadly than now. He would blaze a couple bullets, then roll down another keg, then shoot again.

For a few moments it seemed that the Red Nugget horde would go down in defeat. But Lead-spread Lascar changed all that. He was lurking just inside the back door. He watched his chance and leaped outside the doorway just after a keg had rammed through. He had his lethal sawed-off gun leveled. He blasted once into the night, then jumped back for cover. Outside Sheriff Bowey's voice sounded in a wild cry—and after that there were no more beer kegs bouncing in, and no more of those deadly long-range shots.

WITH the sheriff's flank attack silenced, the Red Nugget gunners swarmed down on the bar. Bullets cut a deathly crisscross through smoke-reeking air. Wood splintered, lead-gouged, drove in all directions. The attackers came on, reached the far end of the bar and took cover. Hunched down that way, they weren't doing any good. Chop Gore was reckless enough when he had to be. He stood up, and led a half dozen liquor-fired gunnies over the bar.

The dice came out the wrong way for him this time. Fatally wrong. Harry dropped him with a heart shot. In the reeking gun smoke two men fell over the squat killer's slumping body. The rest leaped



back to the floor and temporary safety.

With Chop Gore down the Three Linkers felt like congratulating themselves. The next second they had even more reason for elation. Lead-spread Lascar had taken a sneak along the outside of the bar. He leaped up suddenly, shoving his blighting sawed-off gun full in Harry's face. And Frenchy La Farge shot down the killer before the weapon could blast. The frightful gun clattered to the floor, and Lead-spread Lascar, professional killer, organizer and collector for the Sweetgrass Valley Ranchers' Benevolent Society, slumped heavily across the bar, dead from Frenchy's six-gun lead.

With these two gunners out of the way there were none of the big augers left except Wack Moro. He was nowhere in sight, but plenty of his men were. Shouting, shooting, they coordinated their energies in one last effort, swarming over the bar in numbers that the Three Linkers couldn't combat. Frenchy gasped and flopped sidewise to the drive of a bullet, and that left only Harry.

Driven from cover, Harry moved to the bar alleyway near the batwings. He had his back to the green-shuttered doors, so failed to see the man who pushed silently through them. It was Wack Moro who had slipped out the back door and gone around outside to put himself in this position of vantage.

Wack Moro's gun leveled down at Harry's back. There was an animal snarl on the thin lips of the Red Nugget boss. He had the last of the Three Linkers hung on his gun sights. The cost had been something to moan about, but here was the end now.

At the last instant Harry turned. He saw the death which threatened,

but realized instantly that there wasn't a thing he could do about it. He made a hopeless try, however. His gun swerved around. He was a mile and a yard too slow, of course. Wack Moro's trigger finger tightened. . . .

It was his last voluntary act on this earth. Inside the yawning back door of the saloon another storm-blown specter appeared—a frail form, gray-faced and swaying. But the man packed a gun, and his aim was steady. The gun spoke in pale flame—and Wack Moro, gun boss of Sweetgrass Valley, his own gun this time unshot, pitched to the sawdust floor under the splaying impact of three bullets.

Loud above the uproar in the room Harry's voice sounded as he stared in amazement at his deliverer. "Hackamore!"

THE wizened little ranny swayed, but his answering voice was strong. "Sure it's Hackamore! What'd you think—I was gonna lay with my toes up while you had all this fun? Let's finish 'em podner!"

Harry was hurling himself, heedless of everything, at the sawed-off gun which had dropped from Lead-spread Lascar's nerveless fingers. He got the gun, swept it wide in a covering motion. His voice cut across the barroom tumult. "The first one of you that shows a head above the bar, I'll leave him have it!"

Another beer keg came tearing through the open door with frightful force, and a shout sounded. It was a lusty voice, and one they all knew—Sheriff Jim Bowey's.

"I'm back at the same old stand," he bellowed. "Lead-spread never got me. I fell often the shed, that's all." He triggered a warning shot through the door.

Men all over the room commenced shouting, "We quit!"

With their leaders shot to death, with their enemies coming back to life and receiving reinforcements, with the beer kegs bouncing across the floor again—they quit. Under the deadly gun that had been Leadspread Lascar's they milled into the center of the wrecked room, their hands held high. Even Frenchy La Farge came out of it and staggered around the bar.

"I'm all right," he muttered to Harry. "Me and Bowey'll hold 'em off. You and old seven-life Hackamore collect the irons."

They put a rope-tie on the wrists of every one of the Red Nugget extortioners who was able to stand up. Then they herded everybody out into the wet street, splashed kerosene inside the saloon and set fire to it. But not before they had rolled out a dozen or so full beer kegs.

The fire caught quickly, and everybody had to move farther and farther back as the flames

leaped, crackling, into the black sky.

"This here is our torch of freedom," Hackamore declared wearily.

"It'll light up the country farther'n a burnin' barn would do it," Harry said grimly. "Ranchers'll be troopin' in from every direction. Then we'll have us a rat buryin', and all these, now, executives of the Sweetgrass Ranchers' Benevolent Society that can still stand on their feet, we'll shag 'em over the hills."

Day was breaking as the first of the ranchers came galloping into town. The rain was over and the sun for the first time in two days was bursting through the clouds. The Three Linkers and Sheriff Bowey were still on their feet, manning the beer kegs.

The draught flowed clear and foamy. "Push up your mugs, boys," Frenchy rumbled in his big voice.

"We're continuin' the celebration where we left off the other day," Harry said.

"And this 'beer," Hackamore piped, "ain't bitter!"

Coming Next Week \* \* \*



## PACK RAT KILLER

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# MINES AND MINING

By

J. A.

THOMPSON



**S**TAKING out a gold lode claim so that you can hold it for your own is not a difficult or complicated undertaking if you bear in mind a few simple regulations.

"This summer my partner and I are going to tackle gold prospecting in Idaho," writes Jim Sullivan, of Chicago, Illinois. "If we are lucky enough to find a gold vein in the mountains, what must we do to 'claim' it? How big is a lode claim? Should we register it after it is staked? Where? In other words we are green at the business. Anything you can tell us about staking a lode claim will be much appreciated."

To start off with, Jim, after you and your partner have congratulated each other on your find, and assuming that the find has been made on an unoccupied portion of the Public Domain—that means land owned by the United States government—get busy and erect a discovery monument at the site of the vein outcrop where the ore was originally found. A four-foot heap of large stones makes a good monument. Or you can erect a discovery post of wood, if you prefer. The pole should be about five feet tall, and four inches

each way at the squared top. The point is to have it substantial, something recognizable as the location mark of an ore discovery. Then get your location notice posted. This can be printed with a soft pencil on a board nailed to the discovery post. Or perhaps better, written on a sheet of paper and put into a tin can inverted over the top of the post, or buried in the center of a discovery monument.

But be sure and use pencil. It stands the weather better than ink. Regular printed location forms may be obtained for a few cents each in most mining camp towns and mining centers. With them all you have to do is fill in names, distances, date and add the signature of the locator, or locators. However, your claim is just as valid if you write out the whole thing yourself. The notice should read about like this:

"I, (name), herewith locate and claim the (name you have chosen to call the claim or mine) lode, running (give compass direction in which the vein lies) . . . (fill in number) feet from the discovery monument and (opposite compass direction) . . . (fill in number again) feet, and three hundred feet

on each side of the middle of the lode line. The discovery monument lies . . . (give compass direction and approximate feet or distance from some readily recognizable and permanent natural object in the landscape not too far away)."

Then date it and append the signature of the locator. In the case of partners, start off with "we" instead of "I", and each one should put his John Hancock to the bottom of the notice. The notice is then left in, at or on, the discovery monument.

It is a good idea when you are making out the notice to prepare two exactly the same so that there will be no divergence in distances, compass directions, etc. between them when you take the second one down to the district mining recorder (if there is one), or to the county recorder for filing. This puts the claim, date and its owners safely on record, and is nowadays required procedure in the Western states. A time varying from thirty to ninety days is allowed for this by the different states. In California it is thirty days, in Idaho, ninety. The filing fee varies between one and two dollars.

All right, but that discovery monument isn't all. You had better erect good corner posts or monuments at each corner of the claim and at least one along each length line about the middle, so that the boundaries of the claim can be identified by running a line from post to post. The discovery monument is of

course inside the boundary lines. Also make the end lines of your claim parallel. The length of your claim along the course, or assumed course, of your vein cannot exceed fifteen hundred feet. If your vein outcrop is crooked, as frequently happens, put additional boundary posts at each angle in the side lines.

A discovery shaft or tunnel going in ten feet from the surface as proof of an actual vein of ore-bearing mineral is another final requirement. Again the states allow varying time for accomplishing this. In Idaho it is sixty days.

And when you have done all that Jim, you own your gold mine just as surely as if you had laid cash on the line for it, provided you do at least one hundred dollars' worth of work (assessment work) on it each year in developing the vein, operating the mine, or otherwise legitimately improving the property. Of course you file an affidavit of this annual assessment work each year where your claim is recorded.

Finally, in case Jim forgets to cut this data out and take it along with him this summer, we are sending him direct an address from which a pamphlet on Idaho's mining laws may be obtained free of charge. All you other Idaho-minded prospectors, or about-to-become prospectors, who feel you would like a copy of this pamphlet also, just write in and ask us about it, inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope for the reply. Sit down and do it now, while it is on your mind.

We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.



# Gunsmoke Retribution

By JOHN A. SAXON

Author of "Gun Smoke Prodigal," etc.

**D**AN MURDOCK, marshal, sat in his office, staring at two old six-guns that lay on the desk before him. His gnarled hands touched them reverently. In the dim light of the oil lamp

bracketed to the wall, the guns looked aged, worn—like old Dan himself.

They had served him well for twenty years, those old guns, even as he had served well the people of the range town of War Bonnet. He

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*It was a hard choice old Dan Murdock had to make—to save his enemy's son or break his own daughter's heart*

---

knew that he had worn them for the last time, because tomorrow morning young Vic Turner would be marshal of War Bonnet and Dan would be bound by a law of his own promulgation—that no guns might be carried within the town limits. He had made the law stick for a good many years. Tomorrow he would have to abide by it himself.

From the front window of the little office he could see the flickering streets lights of War Bonnet. That town had been his life, his empire. And now he had been deposed.

He might have expected it with Lance Turner's climb to power. Outside of his civic pride, old Dan had but two emotions—his love for his daughter Madge—his hate for Lance Turner, the richest cowman in the county, whose power even now was beginning to be felt state wide.

No one but Dan and Lance Turner knew how the feud had started—and they never talked about it.

Back in the days when they were both youngsters in east Texas there had been a girl. She had chosen Dan over Lance, and Lance had never forgiven either of them. When Dan brought his young wife to the western edge of the state, Turner followed. It had been Lance Turner's hand that had helped wreck the budding cattle ambitions of Dan Murdock.

Even when Dan had taken the job of town marshal to support his wife and young daughter, the enmity persisted. Then Dan's wife died. Open hostilities between the marshal and Lance Turner ceased—but the current of hatred ran deep and strong.

"I'll bust you some day, Murdock," Lance Turner had promised as his spreads grew in area and his herds increased. "No matter how long it takes."

Well, Lance had kept his promise.

"War Bonnet's a law-abidin' town," he had told the trustees. "What we need in the marshal's office is youth, tolerance, understandin'—not a rannicky old gun fighter ready to heave lead on the slightest provocation. My son Vic, now. He's young, up-an'-comin', and has a future. If he is appointed marshal of War Bonnet—"

And Lance had prevailed. Tomorrow young Vic Turner, fresh out of college, as ignorant of the ways of the old West and its tough customers as a newborn babe, was to be the marshal of War Bonnet.

"Oh dad!" a girl called from the doorway of the little house adjoining the office. "Supper's ready. Come on, now."

He stood up, a weary sag to his old shoulders.

Well, he had Madge. He had his home. Lance Turner couldn't take either of them away from him.

He stood on the steps and looked at his daughter, standing in silhouette against the yellow light of the living room. How much she reminded him of Mary when she was—

Damn Lance Turner! He'd pay for this some day, blast his black heart.

"Comin', Madge," he said, closing the door behind him and walking slowly toward the house.

Somehow he had managed to keep Madge from finding out. Well, he'd have to tell her now. She'd know tomorrow anyway.

She kissed his grizzled cheek as he came in the house. Tall, slender, her light brown hair tied back in a simple knot with a ribbon, her print dress setting off to perfection the slim curves of her youthful figure, Madge Murdock was one of the prettiest girls in War Bonnet.

"Corn bread, you old rannihan," she said smilingly.



Dan sniffed appraisingly, sat down at the table. But he had no appetite and she sensed something was wrong.

"Madge," he said slowly, putting down his unused fork, "there—there's goin' to be a change tomorrow. The trustees—well, they've decided the town needs a new marshal."

There. It was out. Madge took it standing up. He knew she would.

"That's some of Lance Turner's work," she said bitterly. "He did it. He would. Who's taking over the job?"

"Vic Turner, Lance's boy."

He couldn't understand why her face blanched.

"Why," she blurted, "he didn't say anything—" Too late she realized what she had said.

"Madge," the old man asked, a slight tremor in his voice, "you an' Lance Turner's boy ain't been—been seem' each other?"

She was in his arms, instantly contrite.

"Oh, dad," she sobbed. "I'm sorry. I couldn't tell you. I knew how you felt about Lance Turner, but—but Vic doesn't share his dad's feelings. I know he wouldn't want the job. Mr. Turner must be making him do it."

Slowly Dan Murdock forced the lump out of his throat. "It's all right, honey," he said tightly. "I—I—you love him, don't yuh?"

She buried her face in his shoulder, nodded. "We didn't want to tell anybody, dad. We knew how you felt about Mr. Turner and how he hates you, but—"

"I know, daughter," he comforted her. "Yore gran'paw wasn't any too fond uh me neither, twenty year ago."

"And you're not angry with me—with us?" she asked, smiling at him

through her tears.

"Course not, child," he assured her, patting her shoulder. "Now I reckon I'll take me a little *pasear* down town."

But old Dan didn't go down town. He walked up the road a piece to where there was a high rock beside the trail, a rock that overlooked the white shaft of granite that marked the final resting place of Mary Murdock.

He sat there for a long, long time. "Well, Mary," he said finally. "I reckon he's done it. It took him twenty years—but Lance Turner's licked me."

I WANT you to know this is none of my doing, Mister Murdock," said Vic Turner, when he came into the marshal's office the next morning. "I'm sure though, that if I had not accepted the job, the trustees would have put in somebody else and I thought—well, I thought as long as—"

Vic Turner was hardly more than a boy. Dan remembered himself at Vic's age, twenty-five years ago. Hard, trail-wise, able to flash a gun with either hand—well, it had been different then. Times had changed.

"It's all right, Vic," the old man said, placing a friendly hand on Vic's shoulder. "Madge told me last night."

"And you don't mind?"

Dan lied bravely.

"I don't mind," he said. "But I'm not so sure about your father. We'll have to sort of put on a show for him—you and me—secret like. He'll be expectin' you to make a showin', lad, and I'll help you."

He picked up the brace of six-guns that lay on the table where he had left them the night before.

"There's an ordinance I've enforced for years," he reminded Vic.

"No guns to be carried in town except by lawmen. Remember that, an' if you run into me down town, make yore play. I'm a private citizen now."

"Well, I don't think it's necessary, Dan," said the boy diffidently, "but if you say so—"

"I say so," replied Dan tightly.

An hour later, Dan Murdock strode into the NUGGET SALOON, a dark, unfaded spot on his shirt where his badge of office had protected the cloth from the sun. The badge was gone, but the same old six-shooters swung at the oldster's thighs.

Eyebrows went up, but none of the hangers-on around the saloon said anything. Too many of them had encountered Dan's iron will before and come out second best. Besides that, most of the town liked old Dan. He had been strict, he had been hard, but he had been fair.

They knew that but for Lance Turner, Dan Murdock would still be marshal of War Bonnet. A damn fool stunt, most of them agreed, putting a kid like Vic Turner into such a job, but in a way Lance was right. The hard, tough old days of War Bonnet were past and done with.

"Hi yuh, Dan," someone shouted. "Have a drink."

There were plenty of things to talk about, old cronies to meet, old days to discuss. . . .

And then two things happened concurrently.

The swinging doors opened and a man strode toward the bar, a man at whose hips slapped two business-like Colts, slung low, and tied down.

**S**LOWLY old Dan put down his glass of beer. Out of all the men in the place, he alone recognized the newcomer—and well he might remember "Blackie" Dawson,

gunman, renegade, killer. It had been ten years since last he had laid eyes on the beetle-browed, swaggering, thick-shouldered man who had once scoured the Rio Grande from Piedras Negras to the Chirahuacas. Stories had drifted back of his death in Sonora, of his incarceration in a Mexican prison. Wrong—all of them, for there he stood, a little older, a little leaner, but looking just as deadly.

Over his shoulder Dan saw Vic Turner come through the door, his eyes searching for the marshal.

He had been a fool, thought Dan, to stage such a stunt. He had

"Oh, oh," somebody sotto-voced. "The new marshal."

Blackie Dawson was at the far end of the bar, closer to the door. Vic, making for Dan, didn't see him.

"Howdy, men," said Vic, striving for the dignity that went with his new office. "Howdy, Dan."

He did it rather well, considering.

"Dan," he said stiffly, "you know the ordinance. You had it passed yourself. You'll have to leave those guns with me until—"

Dan heard, but he was watching Blackie Dawson, and Dawson was in turn watching Dan.

Suddenly it seemed to dawn upon the renegade that although Dan wore guns he did not wear a star—that Dan Murdock was no longer marshal of War Bonnet. A cold half sneer crept across the lips of the badman.

"That's right, marshal," he cut in. "If yo're the law, make her stick."

For the first time Vic Turner realized that he had two men to deal with instead of one. A flash of something passed over the boy's face that made old Dan a little sick.

Vic Turner was afraid, and by his own act and suggestion Dan Mur-

dock had put him into a position where he was to be shown up as a coward before he had worn his new star a day. Having issued his edict to Dan, Vic, of necessity, had to include Blackie Dawson.

And old Dan knew what would happen. There was but one man to whom Blackie Dawson had ever given up his guns. That man was Dan Murdock.

"I reckon yo're right, marshal," said the oldster, his eyes still on Dawson. "I did have that law passed, an' I ought to obey my own rules. How-some-ever, there seems to be another gent here that's transgressin', an' I'm shore he'll be willin' to abide by the law as long as he's in town."

He was talking right straight at Dawson.

Once before Blackie Dawson had challenged the draw of Dan Murdock and come out second best. True, that was years back. Dan wasn't as young now as he had been then, but for that matter neither was Blackie Dawson.

"I allus aim to stay inside the law, marshal," said Blackie, his piglike eyes glittering as he watched Dan Murdock. "If that's the rule in War Bonnet, here's my hardware. I'll pick 'em up as I leave town."

He unbuckled his gun belt and passed the heavy Colts to Vic Turner.

So soon after Blackie Dawson that it was impossible to discern that the stranger was making the first move, Dan Murdock passed his guns over to the marshal, downed his beer and walked out.

Yellow, yellow, *yellow*. Lance Turner's kid was—afraid!

But why not? He had been raised in a different environment from Lance and Dan. The old days, the old ways were gone. Lance, Dan

and a few die-hards like Blackie Dawson—they were all that remained of an era that was no more. The law of the Colt was on the wane—fences of barbed wire that spread their fang-like tentacles across the broad prairies were cutting the open range into small pieces. The days of gun-rodged cow towns was over.

But Madge. Madge loved this boy. But for her he could sit back and watch that natural fear grow into a torrent of yellow cowardice that would engulf the kid and the father that Dan hated. But he couldn't do it. Madge, whom he loved with as much intensity as he hated Lance Turner—Madge loved Vic.

He stood, legs wide apart in the dusty street, a more urgent problem confronting him. What was Dawson doing in War Bonnet?

**S**UDDENLY he realized that unseeingly he was staring at the windows of the People's Bank across the street, and in that realization he had the answer. Tomorrow was pay-day for the Crescent Mines!

Yet Dawson had given up his guns. Well, what of it? Other guns could be had. He saw Blackie come out of the NUGGET, fork his horse and ride off, looking neither to right nor left. He seemed to sense the renegade's exultation. It was open and shut. A kid marshal who was afraid of the shadow of his own gun. Dan Murdock out—fired.

Dan watched Vic come out of the saloon, the four guns swinging over his left arm. Vic, headed for the jail, didn't see him. Dan followed.

Once in the little office at the end of the street the boy stood at the window. Discouragement was written on his face when he saw Murdock.

"Dan," he said, and his voice was husky, "I can't do it." His eyes met those of Madge's father, then wavered. "If it hadn't been for you just now, that man in the NUGGET—He looked like a bad one, Dan. I was—afraid!"

"Come, come, younker," said old Dan, clapping the boy on the shoulder. "Don't let these hoss-faced rannies get yuh. Course he looked tough—that's part of the game. He shucked his guns, didn't he?"

Vic shook his head. "You're not fooling me, Dan. He gave them up because of you—not on my account."

He dumped the guns on the table, started toward the door.

"I'm going down to the bank," he announced flatly. "Merithew asked me to come in and hang around a while at noon while he goes to lunch. They've got a big shipment of cash for the mines and he's alone." And with that, he was gone.

The chill of ice crept slowly through Dan Murdock's veins. So the old town of War Bonnet was peaceful, law-abidin', was it? Blackie Dawson would have the set-up all figured out.

Dan found an old shoe box on top of a cupboard, put his guns in it, wrapped the box in a newspaper. It was nearly twelve o'clock when he ambled slowly along the board walk near the NUGGET. The story of his disarming had flashed around town like wildfire. Dan Murdock had been relieved of his guns by young Vic Turner, the new marshal. Not only that but the kid had made a stranger in the place turn in his six-shooters as well. The kid was all right, he had guts. Lance could be proud of the boy.

In front of the Elite Barbershop old Dan came face to face with Lance Turner.

"Well, old-timer," said Lance with false cordiality, "what d'ya think of that kid of mine now? I jus' heard he made you an' another *hombre* fork over yore hog-legs."

Dan forced a grin that was as unreal as that of Lance Turner. A man five feet away could not have heard what either of them said.

"The wors' thing ever happened to Vic was havin' you for a father, Lance Turner," Dan said acidly.

"I told you I'd get you, Murdock," snarled Lance under his breath, "an' I did. Yo're out—an' you'll stay out. An' I'm warnin' you to keep that girl of yores away from my boy. I want nothin' with the Murdock iron on it—"

**S**MACK! The shoe box was under old Dan's left arm, but his gnarled right fist traveled like a flash of light to the chin of Lance Turner, the biggest man in the county—and Lance went down, stunned for a moment. Then he was up and consumed by a surging rage. His eyes were blazing.

"By God, Dan Murdock," he cursed, as a crowd gathered, "you'll pay for that. I'll swear out a warrant. I'll have you thrown in yore own lousy jail!"

"You mean Vic's jail, Lance," said old Dan, unmoved. "Yo're forgettin' you had me fired so you could put yore kid in there—not that he wanted the job—not that you care about him havin' it 'cept to show me up in front of the folks of this town. Well, you've done it, Turner. I hope yo're satisfied. But before you get through, yo're goin' to find out somethin' that will eat yore heart out nights. Yo're goin' to find out that yore own flesh an' blood is—"

He bit it short. The word wouldn't come to his lips. He

couldn't brand that boy—young, inexperienced, brought up in a different world than Dan and his father—as a coward. Madge loved him. He couldn't strike at Lance Turner and hurt his own daughter.

And then, into his range of vision drifted a figure that drove every other thought from his mind—the figure of Blackie Dawson. Dawson had come back. *And Dawson was carrying guns—other guns!*

Thinking old Dan was off guard, Lance rushed him, but cooler heads and quicker hands held him back.

"Take it easy, Lance," said Mike Rodney, the town barber, holding the angry man's arm. "You can settle this with Dan some other way."

"He struck me, damn him," mouthed the boss of the Circle T enterprises. "No man can do that and—"

Dan Murdock didn't even hear him. Blackie Dawson, believing attention centered on the fight, had slipped away again. Unnoticed among the fifteen or twenty men who had quickly gathered, Dawson had disappeared.

"Come on, fellas," shouted Al Triplett, the owner of the NUGGET. "Drinks on the house for everybody!"

It was a clarion call that never failed. Shoving, pushing, wisecracking at each other in an effort to break the tension, the men made their way inside. Old Dan was no longer a power. Old Dan was out. Young Vic was in the saddle, and the power of Lance Turner was behind his son. Lance had money, influence. Dan Murdock was just an old man who once was marshal of the town of War Bonnet.

In a moment the sidewalk was practically deserted. Dan walked across the street, stood with his

shoulder against the door of the War Bonnet Mercantile Company store. He felt weary, tired.

Dan knew Blackie Dawson hadn't gone into the NUGGET. Dawson was up to something with those guns.

Vic Turner was across the street in the bank, alone. Merithew had gone home for his noon-day meal. Vic could have, must have, seen the fight, and he hadn't interfered. Well, the boy was right. He shouldn't have interfered. His own father was involved, and the father of the girl he loved. Necessarily he would have had to take sides. . . .

Through Dan Murdock's lips slipped an oath.

Why should he be finding excuses for Lance Turner's spawn? The kid was yellow—twice now he had shown it—once by the look of fear that had crept into his eyes when he had faced Blackie Dawson, again when he should have taken a stand and didn't. . . .

Dawson! Where was Blackie Dawson? Those riders coming into town from opposite ends of the main street. Old Dan knew the technique of raiders. He knew every man in the county too, and those four horse-men, two on either end of the street, were Dawson's men. They were going to stick up the bank. His hunch had been right. They were going to stick up the bank and there was nobody to stop them but Lance Turner's yellow-bellied kid!

And his daughter loved that boy. . . .

**H**E COULD do it if he worked fast. There was a passage-way that led to a yard back of the bank, a back door that was seldom used. If he could get there before they— He jerked the guns from the box, strapped them on. What a God-given hunch that he

had brought them! With their heavy metallic tug at his hips he felt better.

The back door was locked. He pounded on it. "Vic! Vic!" he called guardedly. "It's me—Dan Murdock. Open up quick!"

Then he was inside, the door was shut, its steel-faced length bolted securely again.

Dan dropped behind a desk, looked to his guns.

"Stay near the counter, Vic," he ordered sharply. "Listen, but don't look back at me."

The boy's face paled, but he followed instructions.

"What's the trouble, Dan?"

"That man you took the guns from in the NUGGET," said Dan, keeping his voice to a whisper, "is Blackie Dawson—stick-up man, killer. He's got four more men in the street, Vic. They're goin' to hold up the bank. . . ."

It seemed to Dan that he could see the boy's knees weaken, stiffen again.

"Steady, lad," the oldster whispered. "I'm backin' yore play. It's yore chance to make good; yo're chance to prove to yourself, an' Madge, an' all the rest of 'em that yo're not afraid."

Dan saw Vic's shoulders square.

"I'm not afraid—now," the boy said evenly. "What shall I do?"

"Keep clear of the window at the money drawer when Blackie comes in. He'll come up to the cage. Answer his questions an' keep out of the line of fire. Look out—they're comin'."

**T**WO MEN on horses rode up to the front of the bank, dismounted. One of them was Blackie Dawson. The outlaw's companion stopped to tighten a saddle girth, purposely fumbled it for delay. Dawson came inside.

Fire raced through old Dan's veins, the fire of a man who loves a fight. . . .

Dawson, his shifty black eyes sweeping the bank from side to side, approached the window.

"I'm from the mine for the payroll," he announced, eyeing Vic calculatingly. "I'll sign for it an'—"

"Sorry, mister," said Vic, and his voice was steady. "I'll have to ask you to wait until Merithew comes back. . . ."

There'd be no warning, Dan knew that. With the speed of a striking snake, Blackie Dawson went for his guns.

"Duck!" shouted Dan, and stood up, his gun belching flame.

The double roar of exploding Colts in the low-ceilinged room echoed like thunder.

Old Dan half spun as the slug from Dawson's gun ripped into his left shoulder.

"Too high—Blackie," he jerked, and fired again at the already sinking form of the renegade. "An' this pays back—for Las Cruces!"

But Blackie Dawson did not hear. He was beyond all hearing long before his lifeless body slumped to the floor.

The man outside the bank spun, emptied his gun through the window, the glass falling in a splintering tinkle.

Vic Turner seemed to remember that he had a gun. He pulled it, blazed away. The man crumpled, went to his knees.

Across the street, the NUGGET boiled men, spewing them out into the street as though thrown from within by centrifugal force. Despite Dan Murdock's long-standing edict, there were guns in that crowd, guns that blazed defiance and death at the mounted renegades who had



been placed to cover the escape of Blackie Dawson and his men.

As the man outside slumped down, Vic Turner stood, the smoking gun in his hand, a tight, horror-stricken look upon his face.

"Keep yore chin up, kid," counselled Dan, from behind. "Not a word to a soul now. You were here alone and they jumped you." The rear door opened, closed.

"Dan," said the boy hoarsely, "wait. I—"

But Dan Murdock was gone.

**D**AD! You're hurt!" cried Madge as he came into the house.

"Tain't nothin'," he protested. "Just a scratch—little trouble down at the bank—"

She was getting bandages. She hadn't been a marshal's daughter all her life without knowing how to take care of bullet wounds.

"Vic's all right," he said, answering the unspoken question in her eyes. "He could of handled it himself. I had no business bein' there. Not a word to nobody about it, now. It'd get me into trouble. I ain't supposed to be totin' guns."

She faced him, squarely. "Dad. Vic was afraid—wasn't he?"

Doggone it, now how did she know that?

"Nope. He just don't figger like the old-timers. . . ."

A man was coming up the road on foot. It was Lance Turner. He came into the living room, took off his hat, sat down, unasked.

"Dan," he said, his voice unsteady, "they're cheerin' my boy down town for fightin' off them bank robbers. An' yuh know what that young scamp up an' told 'em? He said he couldn't have done

nothin' without the help of Dan Murdock. Not only that, but he told the whole bunch of 'em that he was resignin' the job of marshal, an' that if the trustees an' his father, meanin' me, Dan, didn't have brains enough to know the marshal's job belonged in the hands of Dan Murdock an' not him—then his father an' the trustees were a bunch of—'scuse me, Miss Madge—damn fools."

The thought of that boy standing up and taking his medicine like a man sent a queer thrill of pride through Dan.

"Well, what do you think about it, Lance?" asked Dan Murdock, bluntly.

The biggest man in the county shifted his feet uncomfortably.

"I don't see I got any call to be cussin' the trustees, Dan. I reckon I could call a special meetin' this afternoon."

Old Dan's brows lowered. "An' them kids, Lance," he said slowly. "You said—"

Lance Turner pointed down the road at the disappearing form of Madge Murdock.

"I reckon there ain't much we can do about it, Dan," said he. "Looks to me like it's already took care of."

He swung his hand in an expansive gesture.

"Dan, we'll make War Bonnet the greatest town in the state. We'll have it incorporated. We'll make you chief of police—everything's goin' to be all right."

But Dan Murdock's eyes shifted until they came to rest on a white shaft of granite barely visible against the canyon wall.

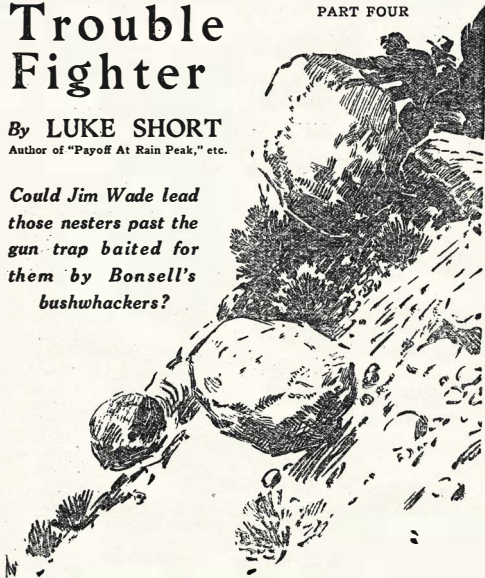
"Everything's goin' to be all right," he repeated after Lance Turner, and then added, so softly that the other did not hear, "Mary."

# Trouble Fighter

By **LUKE SHORT**

Author of "Payoff At Rain Peak," etc.

*Could Jim Wade lead  
those nesters past the  
gun trap baited for  
them by Bonsell's  
bushwhackers?*



### *The Story So Far:*

**M**AX BONSELL, ostensibly owner of the vast Ulibarri grant, double-crosses Jim Wade, his foreman, framing Wade for the murder of thirteen nesters slain by Bonsell's gun slicks. The murders occur while Wade is endeavoring to oust one of the nesters, Will-John Cruver, by peaceable means. Earlier Wade had rescued Ben Beauchamp, brother of Lily Beauchamp, a poor town girl, from Cruver's bullying.

Wade is arrested and lodged in San Jon jail, but escapes with the aid of Jack Cope,

saloon-keeper. Cope secretes Wade in his house and introduces him to Mary Buckner, rightful owner of the Ulibarri grant. Mary has been cheated out of it, however, by Bonsell, and her uncle, Harvey Buckner. Wade promises to help her recover her property. He has a plan by which he, Ben Beauchamp and Phil Scoville, a former Bonsell man, will start a fight between Bonsell and the remaining nesters on the Ulibarri tract.

The three raid the Excelsior, where Bonsell has five men, and shoot at Bonsell,



## CHAPTER XI.

### "TOO MANY FIRES"

hoping Bonsell will think nesters responsible for the raid and will make reprisals against them. Meanwhile the remaining nesters, hearing of Bonsell's plight, stage their own raid on the Excelsior. By a ruse, Bonsell escapes from the ranch house, and deserting his four men there, goes to the gun hands he has hiding in the hills. He orders them to round up the cattle of the nesters, who are busy with their raid back at the Excelsior, and drive the herds towards Mimbres Canyon. There the gunmen stampede the cattle over the canyon rim to a bloody and spectacular death.

Mary Buckner, visiting Lily Beauchamp, learns Lily loves Jim Wade. Lily, by inference, accuses Mary of risking Jim's life for her own selfish purposes. Mary, conscience-stricken, admits this to be true.

Will-John Cruver comes to Lily's house, drunk, and is ejected by Phil Scoville, who now boards there.

**J**IM WADE ascended Cope's stairs with dragging steps. He came up softly, as was his custom, but on the platform he paused, his hand on the door. He was a long time opening it, and even when he did, he seemed to turn the handle with reluctance.

Cope and Mary were in the kitchen, but Cope's sharp ears caught the sound of the opening door. Mary was behind him, and she greeted Jim with a smile that should have warmed him. It did not, however.

"You're hungry, aren't you Jim?" Mary asked.

Jim smiled crookedly. "I can't remember when I ate last, Mary."

Cope looked shrewdly at Jim and

knew that something was wrong, but he didn't speak of it. While Mary fixed supper, Jim smoked morosely in the tiny kitchen, and Cope, quick to step in the breach left by Jim's taciturn mood, gossiped in his gruff and rumbling voice.

But not even the food seemed to raise Jim's spirits. His gray eyes were clouded, and his face so haggard that Cope knew it could not be entirely from saddle weariness.

Finished eating, Jim shoved his chair back from the table and packed his pipe.

Cope said with broad meaning, "Don't you reckon it's time you went, Mary, and let Jim get some sleep? He's wore out."

Before Mary could answer, Jim looked up at Cope and said, "Let her stay, Cope. She might as well hear this now. Because it's finished."

Mary looked from Cope to Jim, and Cope avoided her eyes. "What's finished?"

It was Jim who answered her. "We had a fine plan, Mary. We couldn't tell you about it because"—he looked at Cope—"it was a little too rough."

"A plan? For what?"

Cope said gruffly, "How did you think Jim was movin' against Bonsell, Mary?"

"I—I didn't think he was," Mary said in a small voice. "From what I've heard, Bonsell's men and Cruver's are fighting each other. I thought we were waiting for Uncle Harvey's coming."

"They are fightin' each other," Jim said carefully, "because I set 'em at each other." He still looked at Cope. "But I'm finished with that. I can't do it, Cope."

Cope said nothing, and Jim presently told Mary what had happened so far, sparing himself no blame. His scaring of Bonsell at the Excelsior

had been a little too expert. With Cruver's surprise raid it had infuriated Bonsell to the point where he was burning and plundering the squatters' range like a man gone mad. Withholding nothing, Jim told her in blunt words of the beef drive which, in one savage onslaught, had practically destroyed the squatters.

"As close as I can figure it," Jim said tonelessly, "Bonsell left those four men to die in the house while he escaped."

"Isn't that what you wanted?" Cope asked slowly.

Jim nodded. "But not any more, Cope." He stroked the bowl of his pipe with his thumb, his eyes lowered, talking in a level, dead voice. "You see, I know the whole story now. I was there when those squatters—there were a dozen of 'em—rode up there to the rim of the Mimbres and saw what had happened. I saw them talk. I saw what that sight did to them, Cope. There was half a lifetime's sweat and blood for them piled in rotting flesh on the bottom of that canyon."

He raised his glance to Cope, and it was tortured, pleading for understanding.

Cope avoided his glance. "War is never pleasant, Jim. You know that."

"I thought I did," Jim said gravely. "But it takes a stronger stomach than mine."

**T**HIS was something new to Mary. She heard his story with expressionless face, inwardly appalled at what Jim was telling. Intuitively, she understood that it had been a desperate move on Jim's and Cope's part, the only move whereby they could conquer against these odds.

And now she was watching Jim

Wade's conscience work, reaching blindly for a justice that was not in the cards. The fight at the Excelsior had not been of Jim Wade's making, but it might have been, and Jim Wade understood that. And being the man he was, he shrank from more of it, a just man turning from an infamy that he could not bear.

But Jim was talking now to Cope. "I even followed them up to that sorry camp they made in the hills, Jack. They built a big fire and huddled around it like kids, numb from what they had seen. If any of Bonsell's men had happened to ride past there then, they could have killed the lot of them."

"They killed Mary's father," Cope said doggedly.

"I thought of that, watching them." He paused, and then burst out, "But they're so helpless, Cope! They don't know what they're fightin'! They don't even know how to go about it!"

He leaned across the table, talking earnestly, desperately, now. "I sat there at first, watching them, thinking. 'All I've got to do now is drop word to Max Bonsell where to find them. Then it'll be over!' And when I thought that, I was sick."

"They killed Mary's father," Cope repeated stubbornly.

"Yes," Jim murmured. "Those poor blind fools and the sons they've raised. Fifteen years ago, drunk with their own desperation, they murdered a man. They killed Mary's father. And for fifteen years its haunted them. But they've married and raised children, Cope. They've built places, even if those places were on the land they murdered a man to get! They've sweated and rode in rain and snow and gone hungry and watched their herds die in drought. They've buried their wives on that

land! They've saved and sacrificed to buy ten more cows next spring!"

He paused, regarding Cope's implacable face. "Cope," he said softly, "you know those men. You know them by name. You've lived with them, sold them liquor to cheer them up in those black times that every cowman knows. Would you put a gun to the head of a one of them and pull the trigger if you had the chance?"

"Only Cruver," Cope muttered.

"And he's only one. There's others. There's one old man that has the face of a saint. He's suffered. To look at him, you know the murder of Jim Buckner has never been from his mind these fifteen years."

"Aye. Mako Donaldson."

"Does he deserve a dirty bush-whacking at the hands of Bonsell?" Jim asked passionately. "He's paid his debt a thousand times over!"

"No," Cope answered. "He doesn't."

Jim leaned back and raised his glance to Mary. She wanted to help him, to cry out that he was right, but Jim Wade was blind to her tonight. He lighted his pipe in that stillness and began to talk again.

"Today I rode over to see where Bonsell was," he said quietly. "I found his camp. It was deserted. I began to think then. I trailed a pair of his riders, Cope. From a break in the timber above Mule Springs, I saw enough to know what's happening. I saw two men forted up in the rocks, one sleepin', the other on watch. They were waitin' for someone. To make sure, I traveled over to the old stage road that leads to the west slope. I saw two more men. Waitin'."

He smiled meagerly. "They've got this country bottled up, Cope. And when they see that this bunch of broken squatters are not goin' to

run, they'll hunt 'em down. In two more nights, Cope, an Excelsior rider will spot that fire. And what will be the end?"

Cope's tough old face was beaded with sweat, his eyes sad and touched with disillusionment.

"But they've got to go, Jim," he said patiently. "Pity or no pity, they've got to go. Men build rules for a game and they name those rules law. And the man that breaks that law has got to pay."

"But not that way!" Jim said swiftly. "Not hunkered down over a can of coffee, lost like a sheep in a blizzard. Not with a slug in the back! Not that way, Cope!"

"No, not that way. But what way?"

Jim only shook his head and smoked in silence, his face shaped by a sadness that made Mary's heart ache.

"When a man's young," Jim said softly, "he's got an answer for everything. A thing has got to be right or wrong, it can't be half-and-half." He looked over at Cope. "I'm not old, Cope, but I know this. Nothing is wholly right. Nothing is wholly wrong." He looked at his hands. "I've got to take those men out of the country," he added firmly.

Cope's head jerked up. "You have got to!" he repeated. "Why?"

"Because they can't get out by themselves."

"How do you know they want to go?"

"They've got to go," Jim said.

COPE smiled wryly. "Does it look like they want to go? Scoville pistol-whipped Cruver tonight for breakin' into Lily Beauchamp's house. He's down in my saloon, drinkin' up the nerve to hunt Scoville down. Does that look like they wanted to leave? When

they'll follow a man like Cruver?"

Jim's head jerked up. "Cruver's downstairs?"

Cope nodded. "And he'll be down there till he gets so drunk I throw him out."

Jim stared at the wall in front of him, something like hope flooding his face. Then he came to his feet, alert and smiling narrowly.

"Don't throw him out," he said suddenly. "Keep him here. Can you do it, Cope?"

"Yes. Why?"

Jim reached for his hat, which he had put on the floor beside the table.

"Because that's all I need. With Cruver out of the way, I can swing it. I can take them out of here."

"They'll cut you to doll rags the minute they see you," Cope growled. "They think you were in that first set of killin's, Jim." He came to his feet, steadying his massive body by grasping the back of the chair, too agitated to grasp for his crutch.

"They'll listen," Jim said quietly, "because they've got to listen."

"Jim," Mary murmured.

He looked over at her almost as if she were a stranger, but his face softened a little at sight of her.

"Don't go," she said. "Give it up! Jim, I didn't know what I was doing when I asked you to help me! I didn't know it would be like this! I'll go away, Jim." She came close to him, and her eyes were wide with pleading. "Do you think my land, any piece of land, is worth all this blood? I'd rather be poor all my life than have the grant at this cost. You can't go, Jim! You can't!"

Jim shook his head and said gently, "It's too late, Mary. None of us—you nor Cope nor I foresaw it. But if I don't go tonight, it'll be worse."

He looked over at Cope for one brief instant, then wheeled and



stepped through the room and left.

Mary stood immobile, watching him go, and then something died in her eyes. She stood there until Cope put his arm around her shoulder. It only needed that friendly touch for her tears to come. She turned and buried her face in his shoulder, sobbing until Cope thought her heart was broken.

"It's my fault," she said bitterly. "Oh, Uncle Jack, why didn't you tell me it would be like this!"

"I didn't know, child," Cope said soothingly.

"But they'll kill him! He'll go to them with kindness and they'll kill him!"

"That they won't," Cope said. "He walks with a proud walk, girl." He gently stroked her soft hair. "There's men and men, Mary. There's the kind that's born to die by the gun, and they're well dead. But there's a kind that's born to live by the gun, and out of all their violence there comes somethin' a man can build on. Jim's that kind. Men don't shoot at him, Mary. They listen to him."

Mary's sobs had ceased and Cope knew she was listening to him. He wished he could wholly believe what he had told her, for that old hope was almost dead in him. But he could make it live for her.

"I—I hope you're right, Uncle Jack," Mary stammered.

"Of course I am," Cope said gruffly. "Now dry your eyes, girl. We've got to clean up this table."

**J**IM rode hard to reach the squatters' hide-out before sunup. False dawn was just laying its gray touch on the land when he ground-halted his horse beyond the canyon mouth. There would be a guard posted halfway down this box

canyon, this death trap these men had chosen as their fortress.

He moved slowly, and soon picked up a landmark, a big boulder which the guard had chosen for his station. Jim had seen him last night. He circled the boulder, clinging to the soft dirt slope of the canyon side, and coming down behind it.

From there on, he faced the rock and walked boldly toward it, not troubling to smother his footfalls. When he reached the rock, he saw the blurred shape of a man prone at the base of it.

He stood above the recumbent man and a wry smile played over his face. The man was asleep. Jim knelt beside him and took the rifle from his side and then slipped his six-gun from its holster. Then he shook him gently.

The guard roused with a start. "What is it?" he asked swiftly, peering up into Jim's face.

"Let's go back to camp," Jim suggested mildly. "I want to talk with your boys."

"Who are you?"

"Jim Wade."

The guard made a lunge for his rifle, and Jim gently pressed the barrel of his gun against the man's chest.

"Not a move," he said, still mildly. "I only want to talk. Only I don't want you blowin' off your mouth before I get the chance. I'll have to hit you if you do."

The young puncher swore and climbed to his feet. The east was gray now, so that a man could make out the shape of a tree.

"Let's hurry," Jim suggested.

Walking a step behind the puncher, Jim followed him up the canyon bed until, rounding a shoulder of rock, they were in the camp. It nestled at the rear wall base of the canyon. A more perfect death

trap to defend could not have been chosen.

In the coming dawn, Jim could see a man stooped over a small fire, nursing it with sticks. The man was Mitch Boyd, and still bleary-eyed from sleep he growled a good morning to the guard without looking at him.

Jim walked over and scattered the fire with a kick, his booted foot missing Boyd by inches only.

Boyd jumped backwards, an oath on his lips, and then he saw Jim holding a gun on him, and his curse died.

"Nothin' like tellin' Bonsell where to find you, is there?" Jim drawled. "On this mornin' you could see camp smoke for ten miles."

Boyd's mouth dropped in amazement.

Jim gestured with his gun. "You two stand right here." The others were scattered in a loose circle about the fire in their blankets. Jim passed among them, lifting a gun where he saw it and feeling gently under blankets when he did not see one where it should be.

Finished, he stepped off to one side of the camp and said, "Better roll 'em out."

**B**OYD called, and the men tumbled out of their blankets. It was a full minute before the first man noticed the unnatural attitude of Boyd and the guard. He looked over in the direction they were facing, and then, after staring at Jim a full ten seconds, announced, "Well, I'm danged!"

The others looked where he looked. Slowly, they came to attention. One or two made covert attempts to look for their guns, and Jim let them look.

Boyd said suddenly, "If this is an-

other bushwhack, Wade, let's have it."

Jim only smiled. It was almost full light now, so that he could see every man. "Pull your boots on," he suggested. "I'll be here for some while."

He moved over to face them, picking Mako Donaldson out from the others.

"I caught your guard asleep," he announced quietly. Mako looked over at the young puncher, his eyes gently reproving.

"I took a look at Bonsell's camp last night," Jim went on. "It's empty. Like to know where his crew is?" Without waiting for an answer, he told them. They were impressed, even the young men, one of whom apparently thought so little of their danger that he had slept on guard.

"Want to know where your man Cruver is?" Jim continued. "He's drunk at the Freighter's Pleasure. He went into town to bully a girl last night and got beat up for his pains."

He fell silent. Mitch Boyd cursed Cruver in measured disgust. The others just looked helpless.

"You're a sorry lot," Jim said, "led by a sorry man on a sorry job. I spotted your campfire night before last two miles away. The only reason you're alive now is because Bonsell gives you credit for bein' a heap smarter than you are."

He pointed to the rim. "What's to stop Bonsell from plantin' a dozen men up there and killin' you all in your sleep?" His voice was sharp, and it cut like a whip.

Old Man Reed said, "What's to prevent your doin' it yourself, now, Wade?"

Jim was not taking time to make an appeal. He didn't care what these men thought of him, just so they

listened to him, and he went straight to the point. "Why should I shoot you? Didn't Bonsell turn me over to Haynes to take the blame for that first raid? What do I owe Bonsell, except a slug in the back?"

"What do you owe us?" Mako Donaldson asked quietly.

"Nothin'," Jim said bluntly. "But Bonsell wants you dead. And if I can fox Bonsell and keep you alive, I can make it harder for him. That's the kind of talk you want, isn't it?"

Mako Donaldson didn't answer, only regarded him thoughtfully. Jim looked around at these faces, all of them suspicious and resentful and a little angry. "What do you aim to do now?" Jim asked.

Mitch Boyd spoke up. "Wipe Bonsell out."

"How?"

"Find his crew and fight."

"You couldn't find his crew with a posse," Jim said mildly. "I tell you, they're scattered all over this country." He looked over at Mako. "What are you goin' to do, Mako? Ram around this country like a bunch of Ute squaws, leavin' a trail a kid could read, makin' camps like this camp tonight?" He paused. "You've seen a little in your time, Mako. How long do you think you'll last if you do that?"

"Not long," Mako admitted.

**J**IM shifted his attack. "What kind of a man do you think Bonsell is?" he inquired. "What would you do if I told you that Max Bonsell was in the Excelsior house the other night when you surrounded it?"

"Then he's dead," one of the younger men said.

"He's as alive as you are," Jim said. "You can't even lick a man when you have him down. When Bonsell saw he was surrounded he

left that house—went right through your lines. He shot a man of yours, then cut the cinches on your saddles so you couldn't ride for half a day. And then he piled all your beef up in Mimbres Canyon while you were braggin' to each other how tough you were."

"How do you know that?" Reed asked.

"I sat there not twenty yards from Cruver and watched the whole thing," Jim answered calmly. He saw the disbelief in their faces turn to sheepishness.

"I'm cold," a young puncher said. "Let's build a fire if we want to parley."

"There you got it," Jim jeered. "You're cold, so you'll build a fire and your smoke will be spotted. And in half a day you'll have Bonsell's men swarmin' down on you."

He looked contemptuously at the lot of them. "The trouble with you is, you've lived in this back lot all your lives, playin' poker together and talkin' mighty soft, on account of the whole bunch of you murdered Jim Buckner a few years back. You all know it, and you all hold it over your neighbor's head. You've never had a real fight, because you can't use guns. Turn you loose in a tough Texas county and the lot of you would be swampin' out saloons because you weren't smart or tough enough to run cattle."

His voice was savage with scorn. "What kind of slick-eared dude do you take this Bonsell for? Do you know he's payin' out over two thousand dollars a month for that fightin' crew of his? I know what they are because I've seen them—a killin', cutthroat crew that could brag of a hundred murders amongst 'em. He didn't hire 'em for protection, he hired 'em to clean this range for him. And they're a bunch of curly wolves

that can do it. They've partly done it already. And they're only waitin' for one more dumb move of yours to finish it."

Boyd blustered, "I'll fight any man in his crew and lick him."

"Nobody is questionin' your courage," Jim said quietly. "All I'm questionin' is your brains. I had to wake up your guard out here this mornin' so you wouldn't die of fright when you saw me in camp. You, Boyd, were buildin' a fire. You didn't have a gun on you, did you? I could have knocked you over like a sage hen. With another man, I could have killed the lot of you in your blankets. And I'm holdin' the whole lot of you now with just one gun!"

**B**OYD started to protest when Mako Donaldson said curtly. "Keep quiet, Boyd!" He turned to Jim now. "What you say is true, Wade. We aren't a match for Texas fightin' men. We're small ranchers, and when we got in trouble, we turned to Cruver."

"And he's drunk and doesn't give a hoot for the whole lot of you."

Mako nodded. "That's right. Now we're right where we started. What should we do?"

"What do you want to do?"

"Lick Bonsell, of course."

"But you can't do it. You admit that."

Mako answered carefully, resignedly, "No, it don't look like we could."

"And you haven't got fifty head of beef between you. You haven't got houses, barns, tools, wagons, not even food. You haven't got money. You don't own the land you're on. Even if you did you couldn't hold it against Bonsell's crew. What *have* you got, Donaldson?"

Mako was silent.

Jim said, "What's holdin' the lot of you here? You, Mako, you've got a son. Are you goin' to stay here and let him be hunted down and killed? You, Boyd. You got two boys. Would you stack them up against an hombre like Ball or Pardee or McCumber in a gun fight? You can't give 'em land when you die, nor cattle, nor a house. What can you give 'em?"

"Then you think we should pull out?" Mako said.

"If you can get out."

Boyd said, "Whaddaya mean, if we can get out?"

Patiently, Jim reiterated what he had said. Boyd might be sure that every road, old and new, every trail, even the cattle trails, would be patrolled once a day by Bonsell's riders. If they spotted the tracks of a dozen riders on any of these, Bonsell's men would follow. And when a man least expected it, Bonsell would strike.

"Then how can we get out?"

"Split up in pairs and keep to the rough country," Jim said quickly. "Don't build fires and don't stop ridin' for a week. Sift out of the country. Don't stop to fight, just run."

It was brutal advice, but as Jim gave it, he looked at the faces of these men and knew he had won. They were heartsick and broken already, held together, until now, only by Cruver's jeering arrogance. Without the driving temper of him, they saw their predicament in a colder and clearer light. They were defeated, and Mako Donaldson was the first to acknowledge it.

"I'll vote that way," he said quietly. "This is a devil of a country, haunted for every last man of us. I've fought it half a lifetime and it's brought me to this. I know when I'm licked."

Jim holstered his gun, then, and said nothing, but the gesture gave an impetus to the others. Boyd was the stubborn one, but he was arguing for the sake of argument, Jim knew. Mako took up the cudgels for Jim, and Jim squatted there, almost forgotten, as these beaten men gathered in a loose circle around Mako and Boyd and listened to the heat of their argument.

The sun laid its flat light on the land now, framing long shadows that still held the chill of the night. Jim rose and moved over into the sun, letting it warm him. He was standing that way, back to the sun, when the sharp flat explosion of a rifle blasted the morning stillness.

Jim whirled around and took a step backwards. "You built one too many fires, boys," he drawled. "This is it."

## CHAPTER XII

### FIGHT FOR THE RIM

THE squatters looked at Jim for a long second, giving a second man on the rim rock time for a clean shot. It caught Boyd in the back and drove him to his knees and then to his face.

Jim yelled: "Your guns, blast it, get your guns! Make for the brush!" Suiting words to action, he rolled behind a thick piñon at the edge of the camp.

Mako Donaldson, swearing softly, made the tree behind him just as three more rifles joined the shooting.

Jim felt his arm, and his hand came away sticky. But it was a poor shot and a clean wound. The slug had driven through the fleshy part of his upper left arm. Bandaging it swiftly with his handkerchief, he took stock of the situation.

A neater death trap than this could not have been found. Sooner or later, these riflemen up on the

rim would flush out down the canyon, and only a miracle would bring a man through that gantlet of fire. And Jim was not fooling himself. He was the man they wanted, the man they had shot at first.

The squatters were beginning to return the fire, but there was nothing to shoot at. The Excelsior slugs were searching out the trees now, and soon it would be too hot to remain here.

Flat on his stomach, Jim peered out from under the tree at the canyon rim. It wasn't steep, and it was salted with boulders which would afford some protection. A rush up it would be suicide, but not as quick a form of suicide as a run down the canyon. Four riflemen were stationed up there, and they were doing their shooting with vicious accuracy.

Jim turned to Mako, whose seamed face held a fatalism that he could not hide.

"Where are your horses?" Jim asked.

"At the very back of the canyon. In a cave there."

"Send a man up here to me, a good man."

Mako called back through the brush, and presently a young puncher came crawling on his stomach to Jim. He was in his early twenties, a sober-faced man whose eyes, just now, were wide with excitement.

"The rest of us have got to get out of here," Jim said, "but you're going to stay. Now listen to what I say. I've picked out four rifles up there, and there must be more, because four men wouldn't attack this crowd. They're tryin' to stampede us down the canyon, and the rest of that crew will be strung along it, waitin' to pick us off. Our one chance is to rush that rim and fort



As they charged out of the cave, the barrage of gun-fire started again.

up on the ridge beyond it."

"You'll never make it," the puncher said quietly.

"Maybe not. There's a little cover between this spot and the horses. We'll dash for them. Mako says there's shelter where they are. Is there?"

"Yeah. It's a cave, kind of, with an overhang of rock."

Jim nodded. "That'll give us time for my plan. But I want you to stay in the cave after we've pulled out."

"What for?"

"Because if we make that rim, we won't have a horse left under us. I'll try to make the ridge back of the rim and fort up there. When we've drawn them up surroundin' us, you

make a dash down the canyon."

"For help?"

"Help your grandmother!" Jim said savagely. "The only help you can get is in San Jon, and they wouldn't be back here before midnight. By that time—"

"Yeah, I know," the puncher said. "There won't be a man alive."

Jim nodded curtly. "You've got to get horses."

"How many?"

"About eight," Jim said. "That's more'n we'll need when we finish here. I don't know how you'll get 'em. Can you do it?"

The puncher nodded.

"When you get 'em, leave them to the west of the fight, some place where they're safe. When you've



done that, you've got to come back to this cave for the saddles and bridles we'll leave. Can you do that?"

Again the puncher nodded.

"Then saddle those horses and make your way back to us afoot. If you can't get through, then build a fire on a height of land over to the south to tell us you're ready. When we see that fire, what's left of us will pull out for the horses, headin' due west of the ridge. You've got to pick us up somewhere out there in the dark and take us to the horses." He paused, watching the puncher's face. "Can you do it, mister?"

"Sure," the man answered immediately.

"Then we'll rush the cave soon's the word's passed around." Jim turned back to Mako and told him to pass the word around to break for the cave. Mako did. Then, when Jim figured that time enough had elapsed, he raised up on one knee, rammed his gun in his belt, and broke free of the brush. His course was zigzag, from shelter to shelter. A rifleman on the rim tried to search him out, but Jim didn't give him enough time to sight.

Ahead of him, he saw the wide high opening of the cave yawning darkly in the rock. It was a huge pocket eroded by the wind, big enough to shelter a dozen horses with ease.

**W**HEN Jim achieved it, he quieted the horses while the others, one by one, either made the cave or did not. He did not want to watch them, to see that grim fear on their faces, for this was only the beginning. When the last man came through safely, they made a count. There had been eleven men. There were eight now, only one of them hit besides Jim.

In the still shelter of the cave, with only the stamping of the restless horses to interrupt him, Jim told them his plan. He laid no blame on them for the attack, since what was done was done. But he explained a simple choice: either they could saddle up and try for the canyon mouth, running the fire of a dozen guns that were certain to be there, or else they could make a daring and fast try for the rim and the ridge beyond, with only these four riflemen to harry them.

They voted for the ridge at once. They listened to Jim like children, and when he saw their blind faith in him, he could hardly make himself go on.

Every man, he announced, was to fashion a hackamore of his lariat, leaving saddles and bridles behind. He himself would lead the rush for the rim. Once outside the cave, they would turn up the slope, swinging under the necks of their horses, Indian fashion. It would give them the necessary half-minute protection, if they were lucky, until they achieved the boulders, and from there on it was every man for himself in the fight for the ridge. The first men up must silence the two rifles on this side of the rim. Every man must carry all the ammunition he could, for this would be a siege.

The firing outside had stopped. The Excelsior crew could afford to hold their fire until a last futile dash for the canyon mouth took place. In case the squatters didn't come out before dark, there would be dynamite to take care of them.

Mako's puncher remained dismounted. When the others had made the hackamores and mounted, bending down because of the low ceiling, Jim pulled out his gun, looked around at them, and then

gave the signal, putting his spurs to his horse.

At sight of them boiling out, fire from the rim opened up again. Jim, slung under his horse's neck, put his mount up the slope. Another rider passed him and, just short of the rocks, had his horse shot down. Jim saw him fall free and make the shelter of the boulders, rock splinters whipping up around him.

Jim's horse only lasted a second longer, but once he had made the rocks, he pulled up his rifle and started to throw lead at the opposite rim. Under his scorching fire, the rifleman withdrew and the other riders had a better chance.

Three of them, fighting their lunging horses up that treacherous slope, in and out of the rock maze, almost made the rim before their horses were killed. The others, afoot, advanced swiftly, the racket of their gunfire a clanging bedlam in these rocks. Jim saw that they were converging on one rifleman. He chose the other, almost directly over the cave. Passing from one rock to another, he soon saw that this man had not discovered him, but was shooting over his head at the others.

With careful haste made necessary by the situation, Jim circled wide, coming up to the right of the sniper. Then, almost at the rock rim, he cut back toward the man.

**T**HE sniper was settled in a little pocket where he could command the valley, his gun was pointed southeast. Jim approached from the north. Crouching down against the rocks, he was not ten feet from this man. To achieve the pocket, however, there was a six-foot wall of sandstone that he had to mount.

Gun in hand, he got his wind back, then swung himself up on the scarp.

The man was lying on his stomach, sighting his rifle. Jim's gun butt scraped loudly on the rock, and the man whirled at the sound.

It was McCumber. For one part of a second, he looked at Jim, and then he swiveled his gun around, shooting wide from his hip in his haste for the mark. Jim, half his body over the edge, gun in hand, thumbed back the hammer and McCumber swayed. Surprise showed in his eyes, and then Jim, hanging there, emptied his gun at him.

McCumber went over backwards. Swiftly, noting only the livid bruises and cuts on the man's face, a reminder of that night at the Star 88, Jim seized the gunman's rifle and shells and ran for the ridge. The other rifleman was silenced now, but the two on the opposite rim were lacing out at them.

The ridge was flat-topped, perhaps thirty by forty feet at its peak, and was sprinkled with big boulders. Jim reached it first and counted the others that came over the rim and up the slope on the run.

He counted five men—Mako Donaldson and his son, and four young punchers. Then no more came. They had lost three men in the canyon, three more on the slope, and there were now six of them to make the fight from here on. Not a horse had lived through the storming of the rock-rim.

Mako Donaldson, fighting for breath, hunkered down behind a rock, while Jim took stock of their ammunition. There was enough to hold out till dark, he judged. He posted his men so that they had full command of all sides of the ridge, rearranging the smallest boulders so that they afforded protection. The ammunition was pooled in the center of the cleared space. There also was a canteen which Jim had

thought to bring along on his belt. Hunger would punish them, thirst too, but they could hold out till night. If help didn't come then, it didn't matter.

Mako watched Jim with grave, tired eyes, and then Jim sat down to smoke.

"Funny," Mako said at last. "Of all of those that murdered Jim Buckner, there's only me and Will-John Cruver to tell the tale."

Young Donaldson said bitterly, "Ain't we paid for that, dad?"

"I reckon," Mako said. "All but me. And I'll pay too."

Everything was quiet now. It was a sunny spring morning with only a faint smell of powder in the air to give a clue to what had happened. Not a man of the Excelsior crew was in sight, but Jim knew they would come. Bonsell was out to finish his job, and with Jim Wade as his quarry he would not stop till every man was dead.

Jim considered the situation. The slope of the river was clear of trees, and the biggest rocks which would afford a man protection had rolled down to the base of the slope. Five men could hold the place forever, given enough food and water. Maybe they'd have to, he thought calmly.

Five minutes later, a rifle cracked out, and the slug ricocheted harmlessly off a boulder. Two other guns joined in.

"That's the beginnin'," Jim said quietly. "Don't shoot till you're sure of a man. Remember, this ammunition has got to last till dark." He smiled. "Settle down to it, boys, or this may be where you'll be buried."

**H**OLDING their fire, they watched the Excelsior riders surround the ridge. Seldom did they catch sight of a man, seeing only a swift-moving patch of his

shirt, or the sun-flash of a gun. There was nothing to shoot at, yet a solid ring of riflemen was being thrown around the base of the ridge.

Presently a lone rifleman opened fire, and others slowly joined in. And Jim came to realize, then, how well their fort had been chosen. Without bothering to return the fire, and with eyes glued to cracks in the boulders, the squatter crew waited, safe behind their wall of rock. When an Excelsior rifleman became a little too eager and showed himself, a slug would scare him back to cover. As long as daylight lasted, they were safe.

There were a dozen men shooting at them, the bulk of the Excelsior crew. But Max Bonsell was not going to waste men trying to capture a place that was impregnable in daylight. Darkness would afford him his opportunity.

The day dragged on, and by noon the rocks were warmed to an oven heat. The men sought what little shade there was and tried not to remember that they were hungry and thirsty. The futile rifles hammered at them all day long, the slugs whistling harmlessly off into the blue.

Toward dark, Jim considered the situation. There was no moon to-night, which was to Bonsell's advantage. But the situation was not entirely hopeless. He marked off the rocks on top of which each man of the crew was to take his position. The same darkness that afforded Bonsell cover would allow them a certain freedom in showing themselves. Ammunition was distributed and then Jim outlined his scheme.

"If we're goin' to get out of here," he announced, "it's got to be tonight. And we've got to sneak through that bunch of gunnies to get to the horses. Now if we return shot for shot all through the night here, it's goin' to

look suspicious when our fire drops off as we sneak out of here. But if we don't shoot much, if we let them carry the fight to us and hold our fire till the last minute, they'll sort of get used to our not firin'.

"There'll be long waits, minutes at a time when we don't shoot a gun. We've got to get 'em used to that. Once that's done, they won't think it's funny when we stop shootin' to leave."

When full darkness came, they took up their positions on top of their rocks. They were much more exposed here, and in danger of skylining themselves for targets, but it was necessary risk.

They waited, guns silent, while a desultory fire was kept up by the Excelsior outfit. More than anything else, Jim wanted to bait Bonsell into thinking their ammunition was exhausted.

It was a strain, peering down into that darkness where everything was a slight variation of gray. A man's nerves started to crawl, and he would jump at the merest sound.

Two full hours after dark, however, they were rewarded. Jim was watching on the side sloping into the canyon, simply because this was the side on which an attack would be least expected. For minutes now, he had been watching a shape down the slope that was just a little darker than the night. He thought he saw it move.

Then faintly, there came to him the clink of a spur on rock.

When he was sure it was a man, or many men, he whispered to Mako, "They're sneakin' up my side."

"Want help?"

"No. Stay where you are, but pass the word around. It may be a trick to get us all over on this side. Just forget about me and watch your own territory."

THE rifles below kept hammering away—and the dark blot grew larger on the slope. Jim watched it grimly, not moving. He was beginning to make out shapes now, but he made no move to raise his rifle. He didn't want to make a mistake now.

At last, however, he could distinctly make out the forms of the attackers. They were more than halfway up the slope, and just beginning to fan out.

He picked out the leader, took careful aim and fired. He saw the man go down, and heard his rifle clatter on the rock. The others fell on their faces, trying to hide. But Jim turned upon them, lacing shots low, so that rock splinters were kicked up in their faces.

It was all over in a minute. Jim heard one of them call something, then there came a pounding of footsteps and the sliding of rock. He raked the slope with swift shots, and then all was silent again.

Immediately, Bonsell tried another plan. It was the old Indian way of fighting, taking advantage of each piece of cover, and carrying a running fight up the hill. Evidently his men were set for it, for as soon as the first attackers were driven back the second wave started.

This move was more effective. Instead of using stealth, this swift charge was designed to overwhelm them. A defender could only settle on one attacker, and while he was throwing shots at him, three others would advance up the hill.

A kind of panic seized the squatters. Jim could tell by the number of their shots that they weren't aiming, but were, rather, shooting out of sheer desperation. There were no men climbing his side of the slope, but he did not crawl over to join the

others. He dropped down to the floor of the ridge, put his shoulder to two of the smaller boulders, and teetered them over the edge.

The big rocks made a terrifying noise in the dark. The hollow booming thunder of their descent gained in volume as they picked up speed, until the very ground shook. Then came a crash among the trees, and a prolonged ripping of smashed brush and broken trees raised to join the noise of the gunfire.

The Excelsior crew didn't mind the gunfire. They could tell where their enemy was by the spot of his gun flash. But rocks were different. You could hear them, but you couldn't see them, and every one sounded as if it was headed toward you.

Jim worked violently, pushing whatever rocks he could find, taking no aim. He calculated on the sound and invisibility of the stones to spread a terror through these men that guns could not.

And he was lucky. He rolled one large one over the side, then turned to hunt another. He had barely found it when he heard a man's agonized scream rise above the clatter. It lifted in a long, piercing wail, trailing for three seconds in the night, and then it ceased abruptly. The sound sent a shiver down his spine.

And then the fire from the slope slacked off. He heard a man cursing wildly down at the base of the ridge. That would be Bonsell, taunting his men, driving them forward.

But they were cowed. Slowly, their gun flashes receded down the slope, showing less often as the Excelsior crew, afraid to make a target for a boulder, held their fire.

Jim watched breathlessly, and heard old Mako Donaldson chuckling. And then he lifted his glance,

attracted by a dim point of light far to the south. As he watched, he saw a small fire flare up, burn for seconds, then die.

There was the puncher with their horses.

Jim, seizing the moment, gave swift orders to his men. "Get down here and roll rocks—every one you can find! Gang up on them! Get some big ones rolling down every side!"

As they worked, he told them of seeing the fire. "We'll drive these gunnies so far back in the brush, they won't come out for an hour."

HE put his good shoulder against a big boulder and the others threw their weight against his. The rock teetered, settled back, teetered again and went over. The noise was monstrous. The huge rock went crashing down the slope in long shattering leaps, a trail of sparks marking each place it hit.

A wild yell "Look out!" arose from the base of the ridge, and then the rock hit the first tree. It broke it off with the sound of rifle shot, and then plunged on. Tree after tree went down before its thunder, and for a full half minute afterwards they could hear it smash its terrible course until momentum was gone.

Then they set to work with a will. There were no answering gun shots now. No man down there wanted to offer the flash of his gun as a target for a boulder.

When they had moved every boulder that was movable, Jim gave swift directions.

"Cut off down the west slope. Every boulder we find on the way, we'll push down. Come on, and be quick about it!"

Max Bonsell's shout had come from the south side of the ridge. Jim

felt certain that he had been forced to withdraw his men straight back out of range of the rocks, rather than order them to dodge. They made their silent way down the west slope now, shoving whatever boulders came in their path. There was no gunfire, not a sound except the thunderous rumble of the boulders.

Once at the base of the hill, screened by the piñons and cedars, the six of them marched swiftly in Indian file, and ducked into the first arroyo they found. Its sand cushioned their footsteps. After they had walked for what Jim judged was five minutes, they rested, and he sought a height of land. Once there, he sat down to wait.

Presently, another small fire showed up for a moment straight ahead of them, and died almost as suddenly. But it was enough.

Fifteen minutes later, a voice softly hailed them. It was the puncher.

"The horses are waitin' just over the ridge," he announced.

There were eight horses. And there were seven men to ride them. Jim hadn't calculated badly.

When it came time to mount, Jim gave them the last bit of advice he was ever to give them.

"In your place, I'd hit for the mountains, and never stop ridin' till I was through them. And once through, I'd scatter."

"To where?" Mako Donaldson asked.

Jim didn't answer, for he knew how a country, however hostile and bitter, can grow into a man, become part of him. And this was the last time these men would ever see this range, or ever claim it for home.

Mako stepped into the saddle and regarded Jim musingly. "And you, Wade," he said, "what's left for you?"

"I'll stick," Jim said. "I've got a score to settle. I'll settle it for you, too."

"It strikes me we wouldn't be here to ride if it wasn't for you," Mako said, and Jim made a deprecatory gesture that went unseen in the darkness.

"I'm an old man," Mako said, "and I don't like to die in debt to a man. But I reckon I'll have to." He put out his hand and Jim shook it. "Thanks, friend," Mako said.

Jim shook hands all around. None of these men, close-mouthed and inarticulate, tried to thank him. It was understood, and that's the way he wanted to have it.

When they were gone, he listened until the last sound of their retreat gave way to the dim rattle of gunfire in the east. Bonsell was making another attack, and this time he would carry the ridge—to find it empty. It was time to ride.

He mounted wearily and headed for San Jon. He had partly corrected a mistake that would have ridden his every waking hour the rest of his life, he thought.

## CHAPTER XIII

BUCKNER

SCOVILLE was mending a bridle, sitting out on the back steps of Lily's house and letting the sun warm him. He was whistling softly, a token of a good breakfast just finished and peace in his heart.

He saw a man ride up the alley, turn, and pause at the rear of the blacksmith shop. Scoville didn't know him, and he regarded him idly as the man leaned over the horn of his saddle and exchanged words with Tom Beauchamp. He saw Tom gesture toward the house. The man dismounted, left his horse, and ap-



proached the house with a stiff rolling gait that told of many hours in the saddle.

When he was close, Scoville nodded civilly. "Howdy."

The man didn't answer. He had a narrow head, and one of the squarrest jaws Scoville had ever seen. The blond beard-stubble on his cheeks couldn't soften the line of that jaw, and he had close-set eyes that announced to the world that he didn't give a hoot whether anyone liked the set or his jaw or not.

"I come from Cope's saloon," he said curtly. "They told me I'd find a man by the name of Peters here."

Peters! That was the name with which Cope had signed his letter to Buckner! Scoville looked up at the man, and he didn't like him, didn't like anything about him, not even the suggestively low set of the twin guns on his thighs.

"Yeah. Maybe you will," he answered.

"You Peters?"

"What if I am?"

The man looked about him and then said one word in a lowered voice. "Buckner."

Scoville spat carefully. "I'd heard it rumored that Buckner was a fine figure of a man. And if you're a fine figure of a man, cowboy, then my taste runs to women."

The man's eyes veiled over. "I'm not Buckner."

"That's what I think. I was just tryin' to tell you."

"Buckner's outside of town, down in the bottoms."

"That's fine," Scoville said.

"He'd like to talk to you."

"What's stoppin' him? You know where I am, don't you?"

The man's feet shifted slightly, his impatience mounting. "If you'd get on a horse, we'd be out there in ten minutes."

Scoville spat again. "You've forgot somethin', haven't you?"

"Like what?"

"Like money. You know, what you get drunk with, what you buy horses with, what puts fat in the head, like yours."

The man still held his temper. "If you want money, talk to Buckner."

Scoville leaned his elbows on the step above him and turned his face up to the man. "What's your name, mister?"

"Warren. Ray Warren."

"Well, Ray Warren," Scoville drawled, "you look like a man that's seen the elephant and heard the owl hoot. You must have been in a store, once in your life anyway. You know, in a store you buy somethin' and give the man money for it. It's a custom."

Warren said, "I told you Buckner will talk about that when we get out there."

"That's just it," Scoville said. "Did you ever see a storekeeper follow a customer home, then set down and talk about the price of what he wants to buy? You see, I'm the storekeeper in this case. You're the customer. You come to me—with money."

"How much?"

"A couple of hundred to start with."

"I ain't got it."

"Go get it. I don't sell to broke people."

Warren regarded Scoville a long moment, a look of cold disgust on his face. "Ever hear of a customer tellin' a storekeeper what he thought of highway robbery over a counter?" he asked softly.

"Can't say I have."

"I heard one threaten to beat the devil out of a storekeeper once, just

because he didn't like the way he talked."

"And I saw a storekeeper take a customer apart once, just to see what caused that loud noise inside him. Know what it was? It was just a lot of hot air that smelled like a skunk and barked like a coyote and had a long woolly tail tucked under its legs, like a sheep."

Warren's face didn't change. "I'll be back," he said.

"Oh, don't bother comin' if it's any trouble," Scoville said innocently. "I won't miss you."

WHEN Warren had gone, Scoville's face relaxed into a grin. He heard a noise behind him and glanced up at the door. Lily was standing just inside it, her eyes dancing with laughter.

"Did anybody ever tell you," she said, laughing, "that your manners in public aren't much different from a terrier dog's?"

Scoville grinned and said, "No, ma'am," and Lily came out to sit with him.

"You see," Scoville drawled, "for nearly a week now me and Ben have been sweatin' out there on the grant. We've burned charcoal and buried it for them fake corner markers. We've dug up the old corners and smoothed 'em out and toted those stone markers over to put in the new charcoal. We've sweat and got dirty and cussed and ate cold grub and rode until I near to wore my saddle out. I reckon we're due for a little fun, so I might's well have it with this jughead."

"He looked like a rough customer," Lily said, a little worry creeping into her eyes.

"Yeah," Scoville said carelessly. "Every time I see one of them steely-eyed gunnies walkin' around on his hind legs with a I-dare-you-to-do-it

look in his eyes, I just can't help twistin' his tail."

"Be careful, Phil," Lily said suddenly. "If he works for Buckner we can be sure he's just as crooked as his boss. After he's got the information from you that he wants, he'll probably turn on you and pistol-whip you."

Scoville looked up at her, his eyes surprised and hurt. "Pistol-whip me? That stuffed Stetson? Why lady, I'll tie him in a knot and pin him on your hat, if you give the word."

Lily looked fondly at him. She understood that beneath his levity there was a real contempt for men like Warren, and that these men stirred up a fearless hatred in him. Moreover, he was a better man than they were, as his handling of Cruver proved. Other times, his real gentleness showed.

Warren returned in a half hour and Scoville was still mending his bridle.

At sight of Warren, Scoville grinned. "If he trusted you with two hundred bucks out of his sight, he's a bigger sucker than you are for not runnin' away with it."

Warren unsmilingly handed him a stack of gold pieces. Scoville pocketed them and went out and saddled his horse.

Buckner's camp was down the river, a couple of miles off the stage road.

Scoville sized up the man before he dismounted along the cottonwoods. Buckner was an impressive-looking man, and not all his impressiveness stemmed from his rich black suit, now covered with dust, and his fine hand-tooled boots. He had a thin and sensitive face, untanned by wind or weather, and his hair was white and thick.

This was what Mary Buckner's

father looked like, Scoville thought. Only Mary's father would have had eyes not quite so calculating, and his chin would have been a little firmer. Also, he would not have had that arrogant impatient cast to his face, or if he had, he would have apologized for it with a smile. Harvey Buckner did no such thing.

He said, "You're Peters?"

Scoville got down. "Sometimes," he drawled. "Sometimes not. It depends on who I'm talkin' to."

"Are you the man who wrote me this letter about Bonsell?"

Scoville wanted to be cross-grained. He was going to enjoy this. "Depends on who you are," he said. "I didn't catch the name."

Buckner looked faintly irritated. "Buckner, of course. Harvey Buckner." He held up the letter. "Answer my question. Are you the man who wrote me this letter?"

"Depends," Scoville said. "I ain't seen the letter yet."

Buckner walked over and handed him the letter. Scoville looked at it and said, "I might have."

"Well, I've paid you good money for information. I want that information."

"You only paid me a little less than half. It'll cost you another three hundred to get what you want."

**B**UCKNER looked over at Warren, who shrugged. Then, without protest, he opened his shirt to disclose a money belt. He took it off and dumped its contents on a blanket, which flanked a cold fire. From the pile of gold coins, he counted out another three hundred dollars in gold eagles and passed them over to Scoville.

Scoville, unwilling to pass up the chance to tender an insult, picked three coins at random, tested them

with his teeth, and then pocketed them.

"All right. What do you want to know?"

"You said Bonsell had changed the boundaries of the Ulibarri grant. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"Because I done the work myself."

Buckner's eyes narrowed. "How did you do it?"

"Buried charcoal in a pit and put the old stone in the middle of it, like the old corners was fixed."

"You mean it looks like the old corner?"

"As near as I could make it."

Buckner was quiet a moment. "How much land was taken off?"

"Along the west boundary, I reckon it was close to ten miles. Same on the north."

Buckner looked at him shrewdly.

"You're lying, Peters."

"All right, I'm lying."

"Aren't you?"

"That's what you said. You ought to know. Of course, a man with brains might think of havin' me show him."

"I intend to do that," Buckner said absently. "But on the face of it, it sounds like a lie. Bonsell wouldn't dare do such a thing. How could he get away with it?"

"You ever see the old markers?" Scoville countered.

"No."

"Then if you never saw the old markers, how would you know that they'd been changed?"

"Why, the records of course."

"All right. But when a man has that much land, he just takes it for granted. He don't run to check the corners. He just asks his foreman to show him. An estimate is good enough."

"Not for me."

"No, he didn't figure it would be good enough for you," Scoville said. "Bonsell said you'd suspect your own mother of givin' you lead quarters for the Sunday school collection."

Buckner flushed. "He did, did he? Well, what's to stop me from prosecuting him?"

"Blackmail," Scoville said mildly.

It gave him a feeling of pleasure to see the caution creep into Buckner's eyes. "Blackmail?" he echoed. "What kind of blackmail?"

"He never said. Only he told us if you got salty about it, he always had somethin' he could threaten you with." That threat, Scoville thought, being his real identity.

Buckner considered this a long moment, and Scoville could almost see him weighing his chances. Could Max Bonsell gather definite proof that he was not James Buckner? The answer was no, Bonsell couldn't, and it showed in the confident smile Buckner displayed.

"Now, my man, come along," he said in a businesslike way. "I want to see the forged corners."

"It'll take a day's ride."

"Of course it will! Are you ready to ride?"

ALL that day they rode west, since San Jon was located just over the middle of the south boundary. It was a strange ride, one in which Scoville had a chance to gauge the mettle of Buckner. He found him a close-mouthed man, not disposed to talk of his own affairs.

On the other hand, Buckner wanted to know of the affairs of the Excelsior. He was amazed to hear that it had been burned down, but he received the news of the destruction of the squatters' cattle with obvious pleasure. Of the fight on the ridge and the flight of the squatters,

he knew nothing simply because Scoville did not know of it himself.

They camped at dark "close to the corner," as Scoville put it, and Scoville slept peacefully, since he would be of use to them until they knew the exact location.

Next morning, bright and early, Scoville led them to the corner marker. It lay atop the tallest ridge in sight. A great deal of work had been put in here by Ben and himself. Trees had been grubbed out by their roots, until the ridge was absolutely bald. Four tall cairns had been built and in the center of them was yet a taller one. Under this lay the charcoal and buried in it was the marker of soft sandstone, inscribed in Spanish after the corrective survey in the early 1800s.

Buckner looked at it and remarked, "This is certainly fresh looking. Not much attempt to disguise it."

"One good rain and it would look a hundred years old," Scoville said. "Just wash the dirt away, and give that pile of brush time enough to dry out so it'll burn. If you'd waited a month longer, you couldn't have told it from the old one."

"And where is it?"

"Over that next line of hills."

Scoville pulled out his sack of tobacco and rolled a smoke, waiting for what was coming. Buckner looked at the ground carefully.

"This is skillful up to a point," he said. "As I remember it, the record of the original survey says that on the southwest corner, the marker lies on a butte, the south face of which is of black malpais. I don't see any malpais."

Scoville shook his head. "No, you're wrong. It says a butte of white quartz formation in the survey

*(Continued on page 124)*

# The HOLLOW TREE

Conducted by HELEN RIVERS



**W**HEN Spring comes can the wanderlust be far behind? We think the answer is definitely "no." This balmy weather just kind of gets into your bones and makes you want to pull up stakes and take off for parts unknown. Mr. McDonald has the right idea and we wish we were fortunate enough to be able to take him up on his offer. But since we can't, we pass his letter on to you. And lucky, we think, is the one who finally goes along with him.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am thirty-eight years old and desirous of traveling for my health through Ari-

zona, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico. My health has been impaired during twelve years of service in the United States Navy, in which time I have touched about every port in the world. I intend making a long camping trip and would like to hear from people who could give me some information about those states mentioned above. I would also like to have a companion to go with me, and would be willing to pay two-thirds of the expenses if I could contact the right person. I would like to hear from them soon and promise to answer promptly.

BOBBIE McDONALD,

U. S. Veterans Facility, Company #1,  
Togus, Maine.

How about a whole stack of cheery letters for this lonesome widow?

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a constant reader of your magazine and wonder if you would do a poor old woman a favor. I am sixty-nine years old and live all alone in the big city of Chicago. I lost my husband some time ago and since then the world has seemed so dreary, I thought perhaps there were other men and women as lonely as I who would like to correspond with me. I have plenty of time on my hands for letter writing, but have no one to write to or talk to so I'll be watching for some letters.

ROSE KELTING,

642 West 71st Street,  
Chicago, Illinois.

A Pen Pal in every port of call is a large order, but we're sure it will be filled.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

My main reason for writing to The Hollow Tree is the same as thousands of other readers—Pen Pals. I want plenty and no country is excepted, but I would like some from the United States. I am interested in all forms of sport and can take part in most of them. I'm also planning a world tour—working my way, of course—and I'll want

friends in almost any port of call, so come on, all you Pals, and write to me.

LAWRENCE ALLEN.

22 Victoria Parade,  
Goulburn, N. S. W., Australia.

And here's a plea to all you lovers of music.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Can you find room to slip in a word for a tragically lonely nurse from the West Virginia Hills? My work keeps me very busy, but every so often I have "time on my hands" in which I compose music. I would like to correspond with those of you who know and understand music and love it as I do. I would especially like to hear from people in New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Hollywood, but I promise to answer all letters. I am a blue-eyed blonde, five feet five and twenty-one years old. Before I close I must say a word for the best magazine ever. Western Story certainly has "what it takes."

GEORGIA PITZENBERGER.

Russellville, West Virginia.

This week we make room for a lonely bachelor.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I wonder if you have a place in the merry "Hollow Tree Gang" for an old bachelor. I am free, white and forty. I am mostly interested in Indians and prospectors and so I'm sending this S O S for Pen Pals from the Southwest. I will do my best to answer all who write. J. D. CRITTENDEN.

R. F. D. #3,

Greenville, South Carolina.

Outdoor sports are this sixteen-year-old's pet pastime.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am sixteen years old and a bit tomboyish. I love all outdoor sports such as tennis, swimming, bicycle riding, basketball, skiing and skating, which is my favorite. I have traveled through Iowa, Illinois, Ohio, Wisconsin and many other places and will tell you all about them. I would like very much to hear from the following states: Texas, Wyoming, Florida, and also from Scotland, Canada, Alaska and The Philippine Islands, but I will answer letters

from anywhere, so come on everybody and write to a lonely sophomore.

ELAINE McFARLAND.

102 Elm Street,  
Bay City, Michigan.

It's been a long time since we've heard from one of our favorite countries—Denmark.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I have been a steady reader of your splendid magazine for years while living in Canada. Now that I'm back in Denmark I'm not able to get it regularly, but I read every one I can get. I am a Dane, born in Copenhagen, but have traveled a lot in foreign countries and speak English well. My hobby is collecting stamps and I have many fine duplicates which I will trade with anyone, anywhere who cares to trade with me. I promise to answer all letters.

AAGE JENSEN.

Vesterbrogade, 2 YBIII,  
Copenhagen, Denmark.

Does anybody need a woman to help with the work on a ranch? If so, just write to this widow.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I wonder if you could help me? I am a widow with two children and would like to get in touch, if possible, with some one needing help, preferably on a ranch in Montana or Colorado. I suffer from hay fever and want to plan on getting away from Iowa soon. I have a boy fifteen who also has it, but he is a good worker and we can make ourselves useful in many ways and would certainly appreciate it if some one would give us a chance. I will answer any questions about myself.

MRS. VIVIAN RINNER.

Murray, Iowa.

Another Canadian friend puts in a call for Pals.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I think your magazine is swell and I have read it for years. I am twenty-seven years old and like swimming, baseball, boxing, camping and fishing and last but not least—corresponding with people. I am also considering starting a stamp collection. I have always wanted to visit the States and may get around to it in the

near future. I will gladly exchange snapshots with any one who so wishes.

WILLIAM G. CLIFF.

131a Mutual Street,  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Letter writing is Ellen's chief hobby so you're bound to get a prompt response from her.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

You published a letter for me in 1931 and I am still corresponding with four of the people with whom I got acquainted. Now I would like very much to make some more Pen Pals over twenty-five years of age from all over the world. I save match folders and collect stamps, but my biggest hobby is writing letters. I will tell you all I know about Oklahoma and Missouri and what I don't know, I'll find out. So come on, folks, and fill my mail box.

ELLEN COLEMAN.

16 E. Latimer, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

And a lonesome cowboy from New Mexico is looking for some Eastern Pen Pards.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Here's another lonesome cowboy looking for Pen Pards. If it wasn't for Western Story Magazine, I'd probably just pine away and die. I live on a large ranch three miles from the Isleta Indian Reservation and speak both Indian and Spanish although I am American. I'm sixteen years old and would like to hear from anybody, especially from the East. I can tell many

interesting things about cattle, horses and ranches. I will answer all letters and exchange snaps, so come on, pards, and fill up my mail box.

RALPH HURMOND, JR.

Peralta, New Mexico.

You'll all have to go some to keep up with this gal's musical accomplishments.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a young girl twenty years old. I love all sports and would like to hear from boys and girls from all over the world. Through your column once before I gained a very close friend in England to whom I have been writing for a year now. I play the drum, piano, harmonica, ukulele and even a cornet! I will answer all who write to me and exchange photographs.

NORMA CLAFLIN.

103 Alexander Street,  
Framingham, Massachusetts.

Want to hear all about earthquakes? Well, here's the boy that can tell you.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am sixteen years old, six feet tall, and would like to correspond with some Pen Pals in all parts of the world. I live ten miles east of the Continental Divide and can tell all about our earthquakes and famous winter sports. I am a very good athlete. You write 'em and I'll answer 'em.

JACK ROBERT.

211 W. Syndale, Helena, Montana.

It is a natural impulse and it is a good impulse to desire to wander and to roam. Not too much, of course. But the desire to go places and see things should be and is in all of us—in all of us who amount to anything, at least, for traveling educates us, and changing our geographic location often is of great benefit to health, mind, and economic well-being. A wise man once said, "A rolling stone gathers no moss," but a wiser man, we think, added, "but a standing pool stagnates."

If you are one who would travel, it is a mighty good thing to have man's best asset along the way, and at your destination. We mean, of course, friends.

If you would like a friend or friends in a certain section, write to Miss Rivers, and she will put you in touch with readers who want to correspond with folks in your part of the world.

It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

Address: Helen Rivers, care The Hollow Tree, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



# MISSING DEPARTMENT

**STOVER, ZALLIE, ZIP, GENE or T.**—They left Bellevue, Texas, in 1915 for Thos. New Mexico. Their mother's name was Nola Furgerson Stover. Zip, if you see this, please write to me for the sake of "auid lang syne." My mother's name is Alice Godfrey Myers. Mrs. Grace Costner, R.F.D. No. 1 South, Ukiah, California.

**WEAVER, JIMMIE**—Jimmie, please write to Sibyl Weaver, 162 South 23 Street, Paris, Texas.

**MICHAELS**—I would like to get in touch with my father, mother or sister Rose. I was born at Everson, West Virginia, in 1900 and Rose was born two years later. I do not know my mother or father's first names. My mother's maiden name was Flowers. Between 1900 and 1903 I was sent to Our Lady of Victory Orphanage in Buffalo, New York. If any one knows of their whereabouts please let me know. William J. Michaels, Veterans Administration Hospital, Newtonton, Connecticut.

**SIMMES, HUBERT**—Left home in Hot Springs, Arkansas, on September 20, 1937. He is 5 feet 2 inches tall, has black hair and brown eyes. Jack-of-all-trades but especially packing house work. Your wife is very ill and wants to hear from you. All is forgiven. If you see this, or if any one knows where he is, please write to Mrs. Katie Simmes, 151 E. Grand Avenue, Hot Springs, Arkansas.

**SMITH, NELSON N. A., and JACK L. MYERS**—They are my two half brothers. Nelson Smith was last heard from in 1928 in Calexico, California. He is 36 years old and 5 feet tall. Jack Myers was last heard from in 1928 in Calexico. He is 42 years old and has light hair and blue eyes and is about 5 feet 8 inches tall. May be in Mexico. Any information will be greatly appreciated by Mrs. Ed Turbow, 307 South Wasona Street, Lamesa, Texas.

**"GRANITE HILL MINE"**—Friends of long ago: Jennie, Millie, Joe, Walter, Howard, Mabel, Florence, Frank, or any of the old gang that lived at dear old Granite Hill in 1904-1906, please drop an old friend a line. Would like to know where you are, Jennie Kittoe. The last time you wrote to me I was living in Arizona and you were living in Nampa, Idaho, and were married to a man by the name of Knowles Shaw. Please write to me, Jennie, I have never forgotten our Granite Hill days. Write to Mamie in care of Western Story Magazine.

**WANTED**—Any information about my son who disappeared nine years ago when he was staying with my wife's mother, Mrs. Martha Whitmore. On the tenth of January he was twenty years old. He has light hair and blue eyes. He has a sister, Mrs. Pules, living in Missouri City, Missouri. Any one knowing of such a person please write to Mr. John B. Walker, Mercy Hospital, Durango, Colorado.

**ADAMS, BERT and ED PRESSELL**—They are both about fifty-five years old and were last seen by me in Indiana. Neither one is wanted by the law. Just relatives want to get in touch with them. Please write to Mrs. Bess Lockridge, Paris Crossing, Indiana.

**CARDELL, RAY and JESSIE BARNES DILLARD**—They are my cousins and I haven't seen them in about twenty years. Any one knowing their whereabouts please write to Mrs. Helen Edwards, R. No. 1, Henderson, Texas.

**HALEY, HENRY VAIL**—Lived in Indianapolis in 1926. Manufactured Haley's M. O., a mineral oil preparation. Also lived in Chicago and left there to start manufacturing a Bodd Weevil control. Is supposed to have gone to Alabama. I would like to know his present address, if living, or any information about him. Write to C. L. B., care of Western Story Magazine.

**MADDEN, LEE ROY**—He is seventeen years old. Last heard from in Washington where he was living with his grandmother, Mrs. Hudson. His father is Joe Madden. His mother died in 1920 in Phoenix City, Alabama. Will appreciate any news about him. E. E. Speaker, Box 229, Bay Harbor, Florida.

**DEAL or DIEHL, AMON ROBERT**—He is my father and is about fifty-three years old. Last heard from he was in Cimmarron, Kansas. Anyone knowing his whereabouts, please write to his son, C. J. Deal, Submarine Base, Pearl Harbor, Honolulu, T. H.

**JACO, DELMA JUDKINS**—She is my sister and was last heard from in Nashville, Tennessee, twelve years ago. She is thirty years old and may be using the name of Judkins which is her mother's name, or she may be married. Believed to be somewhere in California. Jerse Jaco, Box 52, San Pablo, California.

There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

While it will be better to use your name in the 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.

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(Continued from page 118)

records. This may be a little over ten miles from the real marker, but it's the only butte of white quartz formation we could find around here. That's why we picked it."

Buckner looked up swiftly. "No, my man, *you're* wrong. It says a butte with a black face. Have you seen the survey records?"

"Bonsell has, hasn't he?"

Buckner nodded. "But he's got it wrong if he says it speaks of a butte of white quartz."

Scoville took the cigarette from his mouth and laughed. "If I had to bet between your memory and Bonsell's, I'd bet on Bonsell's. He never forgot a place he ever saw, a face he ever saw, or a name he ever read. And I can't be mistaken because he picked this place out himself. The translation said, 'From this butte of white quartz, a line was run ninety miles due east to—'"

"Only eighty miles," Buckner prompted.

"Ninety miles."

"Eighty miles! Say, whose land is this, yours or mine?"

"Listen," Scoville said sharply. "I ain't feeble-minded. I'm repeatin' what Bonsell said—and he said that. You got a charter for this land, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"Can you read Spanish?"

"Of course."

"So can Bonsell. He can speak it. And Bonsell said that charter, translated, meant that the grant was ninety by forty miles."

Buckner looked at him in open amazement. "You mean Bonsell told you that?"

"I said it, didn't I?"

"But translated it says eighty miles, not ninety miles."

"You got it with you?" Scoville countered. "I know Spanish."

"You fool, do you think I carry it with me?"

"I dunno. That's what I asked."

"I don't," he said. "But I can find out when I get back to town." He looked around him again, smiling. "Well, this butte business will prove a forgery. Bonsell got a look at those survey reports along with the charter one night. Apparently, his memory isn't as good as you suppose."

SCOVILLE shrugged indifferently, willing to let the matter drop. He had done what Jim Wade asked him to do, and that was to try and find out if Harvey Buckner had the charter with him. He did have, but just where, Scoville didn't know.

Buckner turned to Scoville. "What did you say your real name was?" Scoville's hand dropped to his gun, and he whipped it up before Ray Warren could make a move.

"Scoville," he said. "You can tell that to Bonsell if you want, just in case he denies it. Watch him when you give the name." He waited.

"What's the gun for?" Buckner asked.

"I'm just careful," Scoville answered. "I've got five hundred dollars on me, and that curly wolf that rides with you would kill a man for white cigarette papers if he decided he didn't like to smoke brown ones. I'm lightin' a shuck. Anything else you'd like to know?"

Buckner smiled. "Nothing, thank you."

"You're good and welcome," Scoville said. "If I can prove to you that Bonsell's a crook and has been cheatin' you, it's worth a heap more than the gold you gave me. So long."

Backing away, he led his horse down the slope and into the brush and rode off. Neither Warren nor Buckner made any attempt to follow him. He wondered if Buckner believed all this of Bonsell, and judged that he did. That done, there was only one thing remaining. He must



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try to find out where Buckner had the charter.

He waited until he judged the two of them had left, then swung back and picked up their trail. They were headed for town, riding at long mile-eating trot, back-tracking themselves. Every so often, on a height of land, he would pull up and glass the country. Ahead, not more than a mile, Buckner and Warren were riding east.

Scoville settled down to following them. In mid-morning, he saw where their tracks split, one heading north, toward the hill hide-out where Scoville had told Buckner Bonsell's crew was holed up, the other heading for San Jon. On the next ridge, Scoville saw that it was Buckner who was riding for town and at a faster pace than formerly.

Once Scoville was sure of Buckner's destination, he circled out, and, alternating between a walk and a trot, struck for town. It was a steady, mile-eating pace, and he knew that he would reach San Jon before Buckner.

Presently he struck the San Jon road, and just outside of town he stopped and pulled his horse back in the brush, watching the road.

In fifteen minutes, Buckner rode by. Following at a safe distance, Scoville saw him ride into the plaza and pull up at the tie rail in front of the bank. Buckner went inside, was there ten minutes, than came out. He walked over to Kling's Emporium, came out with a package, got his horse, put him up at the feed stable and then went over to the hotel, just as the town was lighting up for dark.

Scoville tried to piece all these moves together and decided he couldn't unless he knew one thing. He went into the bank and asked a clerk, "Did a big tall gent with a lantern jaw leave some papers here yesterday to be called for by another man—by that gent that just went out?"

The clerk said, "We aren't allowed to give out that information."

"I know. I don't care about the papers. I just think I recognized him. Might be by the name of Warren?"

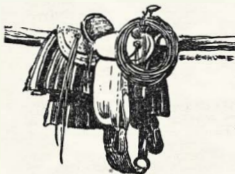
The clerk relented and said he thought that was the man's name.

Scoville left, grinning. A little guessing might tell a man that the first thing Warren had done yesterday was to take the charter and other papers and ride in to the bank to put them in safekeeping for Buckner, who did not want his visit made public until he had talked with "Peters." That was borne out by the fact that Buckner had camped out last night, away from the town, whereas he was staying in the hotel tonight.

His trip to the bank was to verify the survey words and the charter, and his trip to the store was probably for a clean shirt. He had no baggage, no place else to hide the papers, or he would have carried them with him. And he would not carry them with him because it was too dangerous.

Scoville smiled a little as he waited for full darkness. Then he could tell Mary and Cope and Jim Wade something that would please them, please them mightily.

To be continued in the next issue.



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**Police Special Model 66:**  
Swing-out cylinder, hand ejection, special front latch; 8 shot; double action. Sturdy construction; fine lined steel; in 32-32/20 and 38 cal. 3 1/2" & 4" barrels; wt. 30 oz. Special price \$8.75

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DID YOU make \$50 last week? Does your job offer you real future? If not, why not place a line 500 nationally advertised products with one chance. Big earnings for you every week. Small investment. Get FREE book giving FACTS!

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Caused by Gastric Hyperacidity

If you are one of those men or women who have "tried everything" and given up hope of relief we urge you to try this effective, yet simple inexpensive way at home. Pain and distress relieved from the start. Numbers report they were saved from expensive operations. If after meals and at night you have pain and distress from Gas, Acid, Sour Stomach, or Ulcers due to gastric hyperacidity write for valuable booklet with information as to guaranteed trial offer.

**TWIN CITY VON COMPANY, DEPT. 279, St. Paul, Minn**



## The Roundup

SOME time ago we promised you all we'd print the fine poem our friend Jack Douglas, from San Bernardino, California, sent us. Here it is—

### THE PETER PAN MINE

Out here in California  
In the county of San Ber Du,  
There's a hill called Turtle Mountain  
Whose secrets are known to few.

To the south is a rocky pinnacle,  
I've named it Cathedral Peak;  
To the north is a mesa of sandstone  
Of colors and shapes unique.

Two thousand feet above the desert floor,  
The water comes out of the ground;  
God's gift to the thirsty animals,  
That come from miles around.

Just east of this Desert Oasis,  
I've staked my mining claim,  
And there, I will build a cabin  
To protect me from winter rains.

My noisy friends are the coyotes,  
Now and then a mountain lion;  
The rabbit and quail are a nuisance—  
Except when you want to fry 'em.

Those graceful nimble mountain goats  
Keep out of a shooting range;  
I'd like to get just one to eat,  
Even goat meat would be a change.

My other pets are the rattlers,  
Tarantulas, and the centipedes;  
And one I don't like, the scorpion,  
He's a traitor among the breeds.

Some more that are mostly harmless,  
The lizard and all his tribe;  
The gila monster is a bluffer,  
He hisses, then runs and hides.

I love all the beast and bird life  
And not because they are game;  
But the fact, that they share with me,  
This retreat, I call my domain.

The name of this claim is the Peter Pan,  
Let's hope that it Pans out;  
And not live up to its fancy name,  
For then it might Peter out.

The Peter Pan sounds like a mighty fine stake to us, Jack Douglas, and we all hope it pans out the way you want it to. And don't forget to drop us a line when you find pay dirt.



# Free TO MOTORISTS WITH OIL EATING CARS



## Why Pay Up to \$151.37 for New Rings and Reboring?

If worn rings and cylinders cause your car to be an oil and gas eater—before you spend a lot of money, try Ovrhaul. Give it an opportunity to do for you what it has done for thousands of others. Here are costs of new rings and rebore on a few 1935 models: Chevrolet \$56.00; DeSoto, \$62.50; Dodge, \$59.20; Ford, \$56.00 to \$55.00; Cadillac, \$151.37; Packard, \$112.50.

## ENDORSED

By Member of  
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Let us send you L. H. Stull's complete report which shows that the compression of a badly worn 8-cylinder motor was increased 12.4% and brought back to within .28 points of its original new car efficiency. Such results conclusively prove the economic superiority of Ovrhaul.

## MONEY-MAKING TERRITORIES OPEN

For Salesmen and Distributors Who Act Quick!

Sales of Ovrhaul have been phenomenal. Hundreds of Salesmen and Distributors in the United States and abroad. The biggest money-maker in years. National magazine, newspaper and radio advertising carry the message of Ovrhaul to over 15,000,000 car owners. The market has barely been scratched. To wide-awake men we offer opportunity—an opportunity which may never come your way again. A fast selling, repeating article, fully protected by U. S. and foreign patents. Saves motorists millions of dollars. Exclusive territories still open—but you must act quick if you want in on this.

**PHONE, WRITE OR WIRE TODAY!**

Let us send you free sample which every salesman is furnished for demonstration. Let us show you—with their permission, ACTUAL earnings of our distributors. Let us show you how you can start in this business NOW—before all territories are assigned. The market is there—we have the product—are you the man? Let's find out. Write, phone or wire today.—B. L. Mellinger, Pres. OVRHAUL CO., E-918 Los Angeles, Calif.



If Your Motor Wastes Oil and Gas—If It Has Lost That "New Car" Power, Speed and Quiet, Send Coupon Below For Free Sample of Miner's Amazing Mineral Discovery

## SAVES OIL SAVES GAS

Nearly a half-million motorists have used this revolutionary method of cutting oil and gas waste caused by worn rings and cylinders. Savings up to 50% reported. Give your car new power, pep, speed and quiet with this amazing mineral discovered in the Rocky Mountains. Awarded A.T.L. Seal of Approval.

## TAKES PLACE OF NEW RINGS AND REBORE!

Quickly placed through spark plug openings and at a fraction of the cost of new rings and rebore, this amazing mineral fills in and plates worn rings and cylinder walls. Ovrhaul gives your motor increased compression. Cuts oil consumption, increases gas mileage, adds new power and speed, with other substantial benefits of new rings and rebore. Ovrhaul has been thoroughly tested and proved by impartial laboratories and great Universities in the United States and abroad. Proved harmless to finest motors.

## INSTALLED IN 30 MINUTES!

Ovrhaul works on the mineral plating principle—No special tools needed. No car tie-up. No danger of raising motor by grinding cylinder walls—works in while you drive, saves you time and money. Gives you months of extra car use. A single application lasts up to 10,000 miles.

## SAMPLE FREE!

If your car is wasting oil and gas, before you spend up to \$150 on for new rings and rebore—send your name and address on the coupon below for a free sample of this amazing mineral which expands up to 20 times when heated, and full details of a real money-making opportunity. Air mail reaches us over-night.

## Free SAMPLE COUPON

B. L. Mellinger, Pres. (Paste on Postcard and mail)  
Ovrhaul Co., E-918 Los Angeles, Calif.  
Without cost or obligation, rush me FREE SAMPLE. Also show me your big money-making plan.

Name.....

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**BROADCAST** thru your radio **TALK - SING - PLAY**

**BROADCAST** your radio on genuine comedy through your own the hour-long and weekly entertainment from the best of radio stars, practice recording, singing, radio editing, etc. Join a "Hot Record" or a "Hot Value"

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Made especially for home use, guaranteed to give you the best results. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only microphone that can be used in operation.

**Price Only 25c**

**DELUXE MIKE**

For home use, guaranteed to give you the best results. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only microphone that can be used in operation.

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**CHAMELEON 25c**

**AWPET**

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Did you ever see a lizard that changes color? This is the only lizard that does so. It is a real wonder. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only lizard that can be used in operation.

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**FRENCH PHOTO RING**

A beautiful ring, with a French photo, is a real wonder. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only ring that can be used in operation.

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Yacht caps, made especially for home use, guaranteed to give you the best results. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only cap that can be used in operation.

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How to build a radio, how to build a television set, how to build a radio and television set, etc. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only book that can be used in operation.

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**& Fun Licenses**

How to get a marriage license, how to get a fun license, etc. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only license that can be used in operation.

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How to use an X-ray, how to build an X-ray, etc. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only X-ray that can be used in operation.

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How to use a projector, how to build a projector, etc. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only projector that can be used in operation.

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How to use a telescope, how to build a telescope, etc. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only telescope that can be used in operation.

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How to use a midget sport radio, how to build a midget sport radio, etc. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only midget sport radio that can be used in operation.

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How to throw your voice, how to build a voice, etc. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only voice that can be used in operation.

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How to use a ventrilo, how to build a ventrilo, etc. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only ventrilo that can be used in operation.

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How to tap dance, how to build a tap dancer, etc. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only tap dancer that can be used in operation.

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How to use boy electronics, how to build boy electronics, etc. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only boy electronics that can be used in operation.

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How to use a pocket radio, how to build a pocket radio, etc. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only pocket radio that can be used in operation.

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How to use a midget radio, how to build a midget radio, etc. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only midget radio that can be used in operation.

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How to use a crystal radio, how to build a crystal radio, etc. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only crystal radio that can be used in operation.

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How to use a magic radio, how to build a magic radio, etc. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only magic radio that can be used in operation.

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How to use a deluxe model, how to build a deluxe model, etc. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only deluxe model that can be used in operation.

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How to use a deluxe model, how to build a deluxe model, etc. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only deluxe model that can be used in operation.

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How to use Rollomica, how to build Rollomica, etc. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only Rollomica that can be used in operation.

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How to use ladies' panties madly, how to build ladies' panties madly, etc. It is a real program at home, parties, club affairs, etc. It is the only ladies' panties madly that can be used in operation.

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YOU NEED THIS NEW KIND  
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HERE, at last, is a tire so utterly different in action that, at the first sign of a skid, it turns the wet road under your car into a "dry" surface.

In exhaustive road tests made by the largest independent testing laboratory in the country, against regular and premium-priced tires of America's six largest tire manufacturers, no tire tested, regardless of price, came up to this new tire in non-skid action.

For safety's sake, ride on Goodrich Safety Silvertowns. See your Goodrich dealer or Goodrich Silvertown Store now.

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WITH MEN WHO KNOW TOBACCO BEST

*It's Luckies  
2 to 1*



**H**ERE ARE THE FACTS! Sworn records show that among *independent* tobacco experts, Lucky Strike has *twice* as many exclusive smokers as have all other cigarettes put together. These men are auctioneers, buyers and warehousemen. They deal with all, but are not connected with any manufacturer. They *know* tobacco and they smoke Luckies... 2 to 1!

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